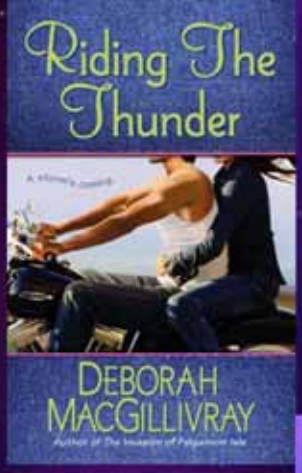
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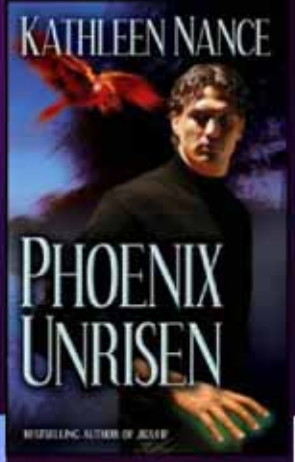
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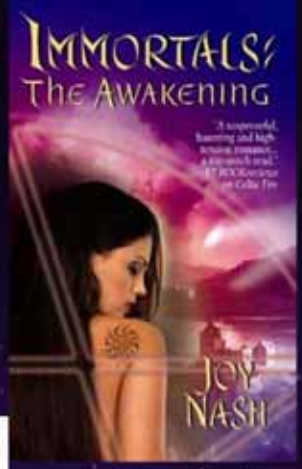
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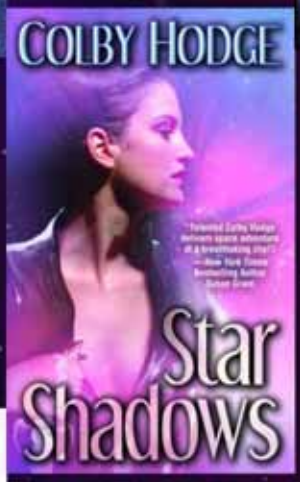
JOY NASH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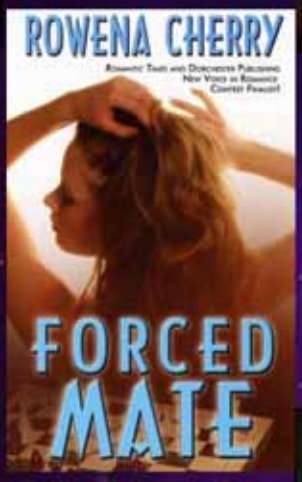
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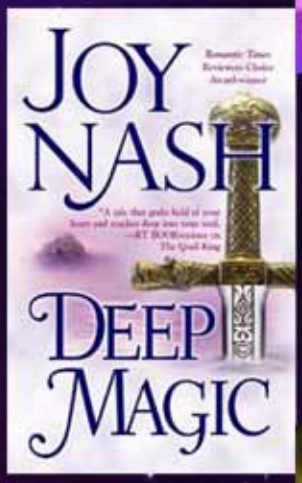
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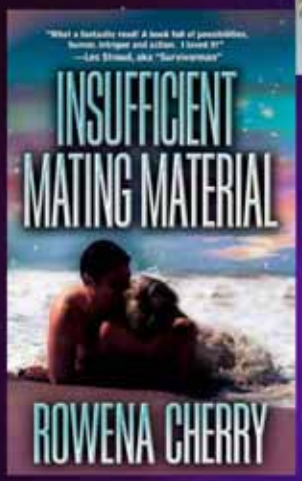
NINA BANGS
One Bite Stand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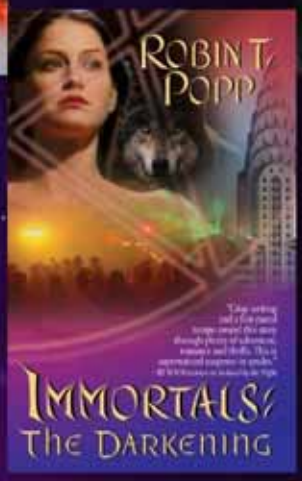
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IMMORTALS: The Darkening

CATHERINE SPANGLER
SHADOW FIRES

First Chapter Collection

Lovespell Paranormal Romance Authors

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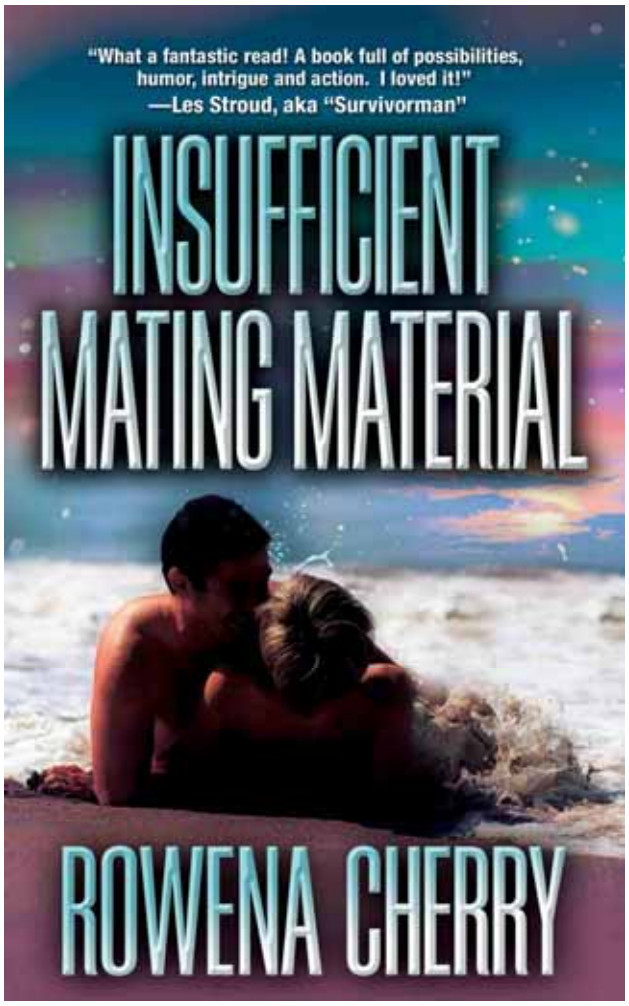

INSUFFICIENT MATING MATERIAL
by
Rowena Cherry

INSUFFICIENT MATING MATERIAL *takes up where* ***FORCED MATE*** *ended, with Djetthro-Jason (Jethro-Jason) severely beaten, about to undergo surgery to change his face and identity before his shotgun wedding to the frivolous Princess Martia-Djulia (Marsha-Julia).*

No one gives a thought to how Martia-Djulia might behave when she realizes that it's not her unsuitable lover, Commander Jason, but a stranger being frog-marched up the aisle, and her surprising reaction sets off a firestorm of rumor… and rattles a murderer who thought he'd gotten away with an ancient crime.

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ISBN 978-0-505-52711-0

PART ONE: INSULT AND INJURY

EARTH DATE EQUIVALENT: JUNE 30TH 1994

CHAPTER ONE

Tigron Empire of the Djinn ARK IMPERIAL, Operating Theater Damn them! Prince Djetthro-Jason eyed the masked males and the unpleasant array of implements they were preparing to use on him.

I haven't told them everything, and I'm not about to. No way am I going to invite anyone to take a laser to my privates. Ahhh, Fewmet!

The "battlefield analgesia" was wearing off. During the duel that he'd begun as Commander Jason and ended —defeated— as Prince Djetthro-Jason, he'd felt almost no pain despite the damage Tarrant-Arragon had inflicted.

Now, his massively bruised thigh throbbed heavily, his neck muscles ached, and his jaw… it hurt even to think about his jaw. Perhaps worse —but less so by the moment— was the damage to his alpha-male machismo as he lay strapped down, stark naked, in his enemy's operating theater, preparing his mind for surgery without anesthetic. Also for "the fate worse than death" which was to come.

If Tarrant-Arragon had observed Great Djinn tradition, the duel they'd fought less than an hour ago ought to have been to the death.

Why hadn't Tarrant-Arragon killed me then and there? To the victor went the Empire, the Ark Imperial, and gods-Right to any female he wanted… and we both want the same female.

Damn it! Even if he wanted to stop, I should've fought on after he'd crippled my leg and shattered my bloody jaw. Why didn't I? What's left for me?

What indeed?

I'll be the Djinn equivalent of a broken thoroughbred stallion put out to stud. It's fairly obvious why Tarrant-Arragon made an excuse not to finish me off.

The Great Djinn are nearly extinct. In twenty years' time, Tarrant-Arragon's and Djinni-vera's children will need true-Djinn mates, all entitled to the silent D- prefix to their royal Djinn names. That's why!

When the "fate worse than death" had been spelled out, it had been sheer bravado to mumble that he wanted to marry Princess Martia-Djulia.

Maybe I do. Maybe I don't.

It hurt how much he still wanted Djinni-vera, who'd been the last Djinn virgin in all the Communicating Worlds —and beyond— and betrothed to be his, until Tarrant-Arragon abducted

her by force and took her virginity.

What consolation would it be to have Tarrant-Arragon's sexy, fashionista bitch of a sister in his power and in his bed instead?

Djetth winced at the savagery of his thoughts about Martia-Djulia. Shards of pain shot along his broken jawline. Hell's Teeth! If he and Martia-Djulia were going to make a go of it, she'd have to have a shorter name. Maybe Marsh. Or Jewel….

"Well, Djetthro-Jason, are you ready to be carved up for your new identity and your new life as my little sister's glorified love slave?"

From somewhere out of Djetth's line of sight, Tarrant-Arragon taunted him, stressing the part of Djetth's real name that he'd used until his cover as "Commander Jason" was blown and he was overpowered and arrested.

Djetth did not turn his head. The pain in his face and head was intolerable enough without moving.

"Ahhh, I do believe that Our Imperial surgeons are ready to take out that distinctive jagged scar on your cheek," Tarrant-Arragon crooned. "And screw up your jaw."

What else might they do while he was under the laser and the knife? While his face was open, might they carve out a sensory gland or two? Implant a tracking device? Use his broken jaw as an excuse to weld a mask over his head?

Prince Djetthro-Jason would be a latter day "Man In The Iron Mask" if they realized how closely he resembled Crown Prince Tarrant-Arragon. Which he would, without his scars, his colorful contact lenses and his long, blond-dyed hair.

Djetth glanced at the treacherous, turncoat 'Rhett, who'd been his bloody useless "second" at the duel, and who was still hanging around.

What for? Damn him. 'Rhett was way too much the intergalactic statesman for his own —or anyone else's— good.

If the patient lost consciousness, Tarrant-Arragon could decide that the chances for galactic peace would be better if Djetthro-Jason were neutered… one way or another. Given the secrets 'Rhett knew, 'Rhett might agree.

"No—" Djetth groaned with the unexpected agony of trying to speak. He wanted to refuse anesthetic again. How he wished there was somebody present whom he could trust!

A door swished open.

"Does he have to be in such pain?" The cause of all the trouble spoke from the doorway. She sounded on edge, as if she felt his pain telepathically.

Djinni-vera! No longer his Djinni. By conquest, by the irrevocable exchange of vows, and finally by her own choice, she was Tarrant-Arragon's.

By All the Lechers of Antiquity, how he loved her! At that moment. For coming. Mentally Djetth qualified his thoughts. Djinni-vera might not love him now, but she was honorable to the core. Tarrant-Arragon wouldn't dare do anything dastardly in front of her.

As she glided to his surgical table, Djetth looked at her wildly, helplessly, with mute appeal, hoping that she would read his mind and help him this one last time.

Djinni-vera's amethyst eyes widened as if she had Heard him and understood. Her gaze averted, she reached out and dropped a gauzy white cloth of some sort over his monstrously inappropriate erection.

To others, her action might have looked like public modesty on her part. Djetth assumed that Djinni had read the part of his mind that was worrying about his striking tattoo that only showed up in the dark or when suitably excited.

Thank you! he thought. Please help me. Stay.

She nodded, and took his fettered hand with her undamaged left. "You've been macho about this too long, J-J. Why won't you let them put you to sleep?"

"Careful, my love," Tarrant-Arragon said, moving possessively to her side. "You can never call him J-J again. Nor may you use any of his other damned traitor's aliases. Not J-J, not Commander Jason. Traitors cannot be seen to survive their attempts on my life. Commander Jason is officially dead, and everyone —including Martia-Djulia— must believe it. From this day forward, he's Prince Djetthro-Jason."

"What a mouthful…" Djinni began, then her changing expression told him that she must have read a thought-pun he couldn't resist. "Djetth!"

She frowned sternly.

"I know you Great Djinn males can't help thinking of sex all the time. But, it's not helpful, Djetth. As long as you have your saturniid gland, you're dangerous."

Not dangerous to you, kid. You won't ovulate while you're pregnant, and probably not for a while after that, he thought back at her.

Her mouth twisted in a wry smile.

"You'd be safer if you let them remove it."

Some aspects of Royal Djinn maleness one would rather die than surrender, he rejoined, hoping she would not read his darker thoughts.

"Martia-Djulia would be better off if you couldn't have the rut-rage again, too…." As she

spoke, Djinni tossed her head as if shaking off a bothersome fly.

Djetth wondered if Djinni had unexpectedly Channeled someone else's reasoning. Djinni couldn't possibly know how savagely Martia-Djulia liked to be served in bed.

"I saw Palace footage of you having the rut-rage with Martia-Djulia." The little mind-reader's voice rose in protest at the thought he hadn't meant her to sense.

You saw? You saw what, exactly? His thought question was a ploy to distract her from thinking about the rut-rage, but no sooner had he asked than he dreaded how detailed her reply might be.

"What you might expect, given that the camera was behind a mirrored ceiling, and you were on top," she retorted, keeping his tattoo a secret. "Tarrant-Arragon fast-forwarded you, because you went at it so long."

"Not that long," Tarrant-Arragon murmured maliciously, probably to remind them that he was listening to Djinni's half of the conversation.

"Long enough," Djinni said. "Djetth, you might already be a father."

"Granted, that is remotely possible," Tarrant-Arragon sneered while appearing to examine a wicked looking lancet. "Let's hope you weren't that thorough, Djetthro-Jason, or your firstborn would have to be—and remain—a bastard. Unfortunately, my slack-wit of a sister can't keep a secret. If Martia-Djulia thinks Commander Jason got her pregnant, the rumor will be all over Court before we get home, and before she hears that her lover is dead."

Djetth felt an inexplicable distress at the idea that he could never claim this theoretically possible child as his own.

"Shall we begin?" Tarrant-Arragon's too perceptive eyes ranged over Djetth's body, lingering for an instant on the cloth covering his penis. Not for the first time in his life, Djetth thanked the Great Originator that Tarrant-Arragon had lost the power to read minds.

"I am staying with him," Djinni announced, gripping his hand tightly.

Djetth was careful not to wrap his fingers around hers or to respond to Djinni's comforting touch in any discernable way. Touching the Heir Apparent's Mate was yet another act of high treason punishable by death.

"Very well, my love. You may stay as long as you keep your gaze on his face." Tarrant-Arragon's lips curled into a sneer. He had certainly noticed the hand-holding.

"Djetthro-Jason, I'll ask you for the last time: Have you declared every identifying mark on your body that my sister might recognize? Every scar…?"

"Yes!" Djetth snarled back, one eye on Djinni to see whether her face betrayed his lie.

Head turned, distracted by Djinni and the explosion of pain in his face from speaking aloud, Djetth forgot that his neck was exposed where 'Rhett could reach it. He felt a cold, numbing touch of 'Rhett's fingers on his most vital acu-pressure point, strove to turn his head, and couldn't.
'Rhett is using Djinncraft to put me to sleep! Damn 'Rhett and his secret agendas!

The growing paralysis had not yet reached Djetth's eyes. As his vision dimmed, his desperate gaze met the cool green, inscrutable eyes of his bastard cousin and half-brother, 'Rhett.
He'd be lucky to wake up with a new face, a new and dangerous identity. If he woke up.

Read more:

http://www.rowenacherry.com/excerpts/excerpts_imm_p.php

INSUFFICIENT MATING MATERIAL ISBN 0-505-52711-1

Award-Winning Finalist in the Fiction and Literature: Romance category of the National Best Books

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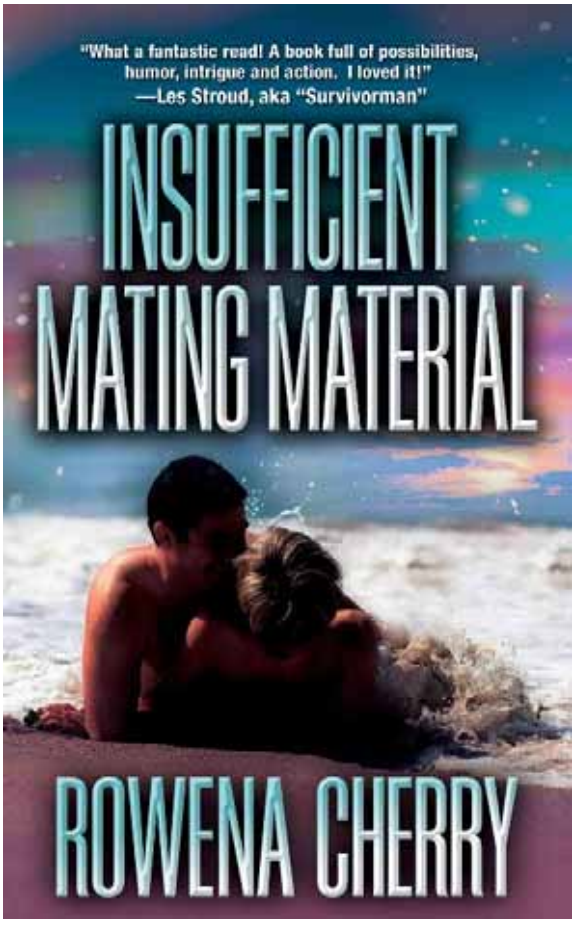
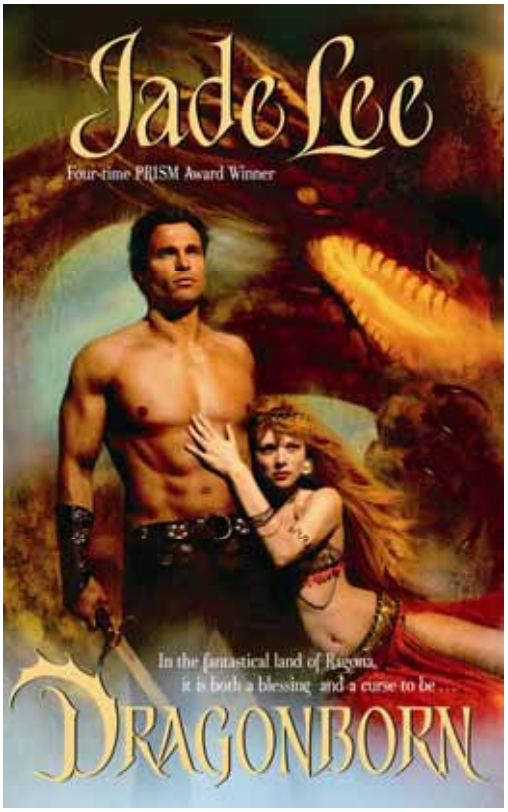
Winner of the Spring N.O.R. Awards, Best Fantasy/Sci-Fi Romance.





ONE PROTECTOR

When dragon power flows through your veins, when dragon thoughts burn in your mind, you can accomplish anything. Natiya knows, for she carries one of the last eggs in the land disguised as a jewel in her navel. Day by day the Unhatched grows, and when at last it births they will be joined in a sacred and eternal bond. Gone will be the barmaid forced to dance for pennies; born will be Dag Natiya, revered Queen. Take her body or her soul, nothing will stop them.

ONE SLAYER

When dragon power flows through your veins, when dragon emotions trample your soul, you become a monster. So knows Kiril, for one destroyed his cousin. No matter how kind or joyful, all beings must succumb to the power of the wyrm. That is why Kiril vowed to destroy dragonkind--and he has almost succeeded. Only one egg remains. But there is an obstacle he did not foresee: love.

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CHAPTER 1

So young.

Kiril slipped silently through the stunning lakeside foliage, his grip tightening on his dagger as he studied the boy and wordlessly cursed what he had to do. The blond youth--Huet was his name--was about seventeen years old with the kind of face girls lined up to kiss. A smile at the right moment and this boy could have whatever he wanted. Many times at court Kiril had wished for a face like this.

Kiril shifted. Huet hadn't moved in twenty minutes but sat staring resolutely at the fire. Was he listening to dragonspeak? Dreaming dragon thoughts? It didn't matter. Kiril couldn't wait any longer. He had hoped to do this the easy way, but he couldn't stand it any longer. He had to finish this now.

He dove forward. Gripping Huet about a surprisingly muscular chest, Kiril pressed the dagger against the boy's slender neck.

"Where is it?" he hissed.

Huet didn't answer. He didn't even breathe.

"Do you know who I am?" Kiril tightened his grip, pressing down on the blade. A thin line of red appeared on the boy's creamy skin. "I am Kiril, the king's dragon hunter. I spare no one who congresses with dragons." The unfortunate truth. "But I am tired tonight, and am prepared to forgive. Give me the egg and you will live."

Still no response from the boy. For someone so young, this one had nerves of steel. Unless... Was it possible? Had Kiril been lied to? There was something very wrong--

Faster than humanly possible, Huet swung around. Kiril had been prepared, and yet he still couldn't match the boy's speed. The youth shoved Kiril's dagger aside, spun past his campfire and grabbed a large and obviously ancient sword. Kiril barely had time to draw his own weapon before his foe was upon him. Extraordinary speed. Lightning-fast reflexes. And *d'greth*, power in his stroke. Huet had a killing strike with his blade.

Which mean a swordfight was the smallest of Kiril's problems.

"It's not an egg anymore, is it?" he asked, already knowing the answer. Dag Racho had sworn the demon spawn wouldn't hatch for another week at least. "Where is it, boy?" he demanded.

Huet wouldn't answer. He couldn't. He was dragonborn now. Huet--or *Dag* Huet now that he was joined mind to mind with his serpent beast--was losing his humanity by the second. His thoughts were completely consumed by dragon hunger, dragon power, dragon evil. There would be no sparing him now.

Assuming Kiril survived the battle. He swung his blade, parrying for all he was worth. The boy was in the prime of his physical abilities; Kiril was old. Old enough to wish he'd never picked up a blade, at any rate--dagger, sword or otherwise.

And bloody claw, this boy was strong!

Then it happened: He heard the sound. Dragons were agile and deadly; they were *not* silent. He heard the wings flap, felt the breeze on his back. Kiril wanted to turn and face the real threat, but Dag Huet attacked with renewed ferocity.

The boy's blade had the speed of the wind. Thankfully, Dag Huet and his dragon were both young, newly dragonborn. That made Huet's movements jerky, his swings badly timed. It gave Kiril time to find an opening, some way to--

Too late. Dragon claws bit hard into his back, cutting through his leather and wire *loga* like butter. The beast tried to pick Kiril up, but was fortunately too small to manage a man's weight. Dag

Huet had the opportunity to slice off Kiril's head, but the boy was too new to being dragonborn to function as both man and dragon. He could be a dragon or he could be a man. Right now, it was the dragon's turn.

Kiril twisted, used his dagger across the dragon claws that held him. The skin was new and so very soft. He felt the spurt of black blood, and the wyrm's scream echoed through the small lakeside clearing. The claws straightened reflexively, and Kiril was released--but not before he was thrown high into the air, across a jut of the lake.

At least he'd landed far away from his foe, he thought, grimacing. Bloody claw, what was he going to do now? He was paralyzed.

He looked up at the tree above him and realized with a distracted kind of fatalism that he was about to die. Here he was, Kiril, famous dragon-killer, lying like a discarded doll against a tree, numb from the neck down. Well, perhaps not totally numb. His hands had started to tingle and his legs were beginning to burn with pain.

Glancing around, he wondered how much time he had left to categorize body parts before he died. Dag Huet was the lesser threat. The boy had begun the long trek around the lake. Not even bothering to jog, the new dragonborn was moving deliberately, no doubt trying to remember how to walk. It would take him awhile to get here.

The Sapphire dragon, on the other hand, was an immediate problem. It lived only to kill. Well, to kill and amass a fortune whatever the cost, but mostly to kill. That now its essence had a human component mattered only because it made the beast harder to destroy. Both dragon and Huet had to die at once.

A hoarse cry split the air, guttural and terrifying. From Kiril's crumpled position it was impossible to tell if the sound came from dragon or man, but it gave him hope nevertheless. The cry of a mature dragon settled deep into a man's bones, robbing the strength from limbs and reason from even the most seasoned of warriors. A dragon in its prime was impossible to kill; a man was defeated by sound long before the beast drew near.

But this cry had been loud and grating, at best. This dragon was still immature. Like the boy, it was unseasoned and impetuous. Kiril could defeat it. At least, he had a chance if he could move.

The tingling in his fingers abated. Sensation returned slowly to his weakened limbs, and Kiril grunted as he struggled to stand. His knees quivered with pain, and his arm could not sustain the weight of his sword. The best he could do was lean over, gasping for breath as he braced himself in the cracked trunk of an aged tree.

Where was the dragon?

Shifting his gaze upward, Kiril swallowed, seeing the answer suddenly appear. What at one moment had been a tiny speck far distant, suddenly became an explosion of blue falling from the sky. The Sapphire was diving. Straight at him.

Kiril tried to straighten, but the shift in his weight caused a lancing pain in his knee. He staggered, gasping in agony, but a crazy grin split his face. Thank the Great Warrior Tiril the beast was still young. If the beast were a week older, Kiril would even now be engulfed in flame, cooked to toasty perfection in a delightful meal for man and beast. But the dragon was too young to have developed fire in his lungs, and so the wyrm would have to capture his prize and eat it raw.

Raw and still fully conscious.

Kiril gritted his teeth, trying to force his thoughts away from his imminent demise. He knew mindlock was the dragon's most potent weapon. But he was a trained fighter, a seasoned dragon-killer. He should be able to think. The dragon was still young.

And yet he stood, waiting for his own death.

He had to move.

Move!

He closed his eyes, forcibly blocking out the terror. Then, with deliberate thought, he flexed his muscles, calling for them to contract, to shift, to move.

Tense hip. Lift leg.

Contract thigh. Extend leg.

Shift weight...land in pathetic heap.

That last had not been part of the plan, but somehow it worked. The Great Warrior Tiril must have been amused, because at the moment of Kiril's inglorious collapse, the dragon's claws passed mere inches above him. Kiril felt the heated rush of air, gazed upwards in horror at the serpent's glistening underbelly, then cried out in alarm as the tree above him splintered and cracked from the dragon's impact.

Stupid dragon. It had missed him and got the tree. A thick branch caught the beast square on the shoulder at the base of its right wing. Stunned from the impact, off balance and flailing, the dragon tumbled backwards with a startled croak and crashed into the lake.

If he had breath to laugh, Kiril would have done so. Instead, he stared into the shimmering blue gaze of the Sapphire dragon and felt the mindlock seep into his bones. His mind slipped away...

Splat!

Icy lake water caught him full in the face. The dragon's struggles were drenching everything, Kiril included. He jerked, reflexively turning his head and body away from the icy spray, away from the dragon's gaze. He looked down at himself. Drenched from head to foot, he had to decide on his next move.

He fled behind the tree.

His next thought was to learn what exactly the dragon was doing, but that was the surest way to lose control once again. Instead, he closed his eyes and listened, sorting out movement and proximity as best he could. The beast was in the water, the wet slapping sound no doubt its wings beating heavy and sodden against the lake. A seasoned human controller would have sent his dragon rushing to the shore, directing its muscle movements with clear deliberate thought. But Dag Huet was too young to do this effectively--or perhaps even to see his wyrm's danger. And that gave Kiril the time to act.

Pulling himself upright, he hefted his sword to use like an ax. He cringed at the abuse of the weapon--it was a family heirloom, the only memento he had left. But dead men had no use for fine swords, and so the exquisite blade became a tool to hack down a tree.

Fortunately, the parts of the tree not broken by the dragon had been softened by age and disease. Though thick and ancient, the core was wormy and soft. If Kiril had not spent a year logging, he never would have known where and how to strike. But he had, and he did.

Even in his weakened condition, he finished the job in just a few quick strokes. Then he dropped his sword into the mud, thinking only that this plan had to work: He had to topple the tree or he was a dead man.

He still did not look directly at the dragon hatchling, but the flailing sounds had grown more distinct. Rather than the frenzied splashes of before, now he heard more purposeful movement. The beast had probably managed to work its legs underneath him; it would be mere seconds before the beast managed an ungainly leap into the air and escape. It was now or never.

Kiril grunted as he pressed his weight into the ancient wood. The rough bark bit into his flesh, scraping his hands bloody, but he barely noticed except to note that his grip became slick. He pushed and heaved, and yet all his strength accomplished nothing. The tree would not budge.

Did he need to cut the trunk more? Had he misjudged? Where was his mistake? Doubts

assailed him as he scanned the ancient tree. No, he had done everything correctly. He was sure of it. This would work. It had to.

And his faith was rewarded. The tree began to fall.

But was it in time? Just as the wood gave way, Kiril heard a sudden explosion of water--the hatchling thrusting upwards from the lake. The sound was unmistakable, as was the deluge of lake water that once again doused Kiril, chilling him to the bone.

Then came a heavy thud, the crackle of snapping limbs combined with a startled cry and the slap of displaced water. He knew he'd won when he heard the burble of sound as the Sapphire continued to cry underwater. Turning his head, Kiril finally risked viewing his handiwork.

Stretching across the water, half submerged, was the ancient tree, branches broken, leaves falling to cover the churning water. Somewhere beneath the quivering wood was the dragon, kicking and flailing beneath the massive tree's weight.

Another sound rent the air. Less than twenty paces away, Dag Huet screamed in horror, clutching his head to block out the dragon's terrified thoughts. Even the most seasoned dragonborn could not control a wyrm in full panic. Dag Huet didn't stand a chance.

In the lake, the dark water churned as the dragon heaved and flailed to no avail. The tree was too heavy, the mud too thick, and the water too much an encumbrance for the beast to survive. Beside the lake, Dag Huet mimicked his dragon's death throes, twisting and contorting, his human mind totally overwhelmed.

Kiril turned away from the man, unwilling to look. His eyes fell on his abused family sword. With sluggish moments, he pulled at the hilt, dragging the weapon out of the mud. The cuts in his back burned through his mind as full sensation finally returned to his abused body. He simply closed his eyes and breathed through the pain, waiting until it faded to a dull scream. Fortunately, he had the time. It would take long minutes for the Sapphire to drown. Long minutes as the boy struggled to breathe for his beast, his childish mind twisted, his youthful body wracked with pain as the serpent died.

Too long.

Stumbling forward, Kiril crossed the mud until he knelt beside Dag Huet. Again, he noticed the clear blue eyes, soft downy hair, and freckles that had no doubt delighted a generation of girls. Kiril saw again how angelic the boy truly was and felt like a hideous monstrosity beside him.

If he could, he would have spared the boy. He would have separated Huet's mind from the dragon's, leaving the boy scarred mentally and physically, his capabilities no more than those of a toddler, but alive. But it was impossible. The mind connection could only be severed before the dragon hatched. Once the serpent crawled out of its egg and into the boy's hands, Dag Huet's fate had been sealed. This youth would die at the same instant as his dragon. And the reverse.

In the lake, the dragon's movements were slowing, each churning wave a little less high. Soon it would case struggling.

Kiril raised his sword, unable to stop himself from looking into the boy's eyes one last time, and was shocked to see lucidity within. Beside him, the lake stilled as the dragon lost consciousness.

"Why?" the boy asked.

Kiril blinked. Huet knew why. Everyone knew why.

The youth continued, "Dag Racho is evil. I could..." He dragged breath into his lungs. "I could have stopped him."

Kiril nodded, unable to deny the accusation. Dag Racho *was* evil. But Kiril worked for him and had since he was a boy of twelve.

"I would have made things different," the boy whispered.

Kiril closed his eyes, then plunged his sword down. He knew without watching that he

had accurately pierced the boy's chest, deftly cleaving his heart in half. Then, eyes still tightly closed, Kiril listened for the end. It came as expected, the rattle surprisingly gentle. Dag Huet was dead.

Suddenly overcome with weariness, Kiril dropped to his knees, his hands sliding away from the pommel of his sword, which was stuck firmly into the ground. His eyes opened to scan the water, confirming that the only ripples came from the wind.

He looked back at the boy, feeling a physical pain as he scanned the angelic face. It hurt to take in. It hurt to see the water and the blood and the muddy ground. It hurt, but he looked nonetheless. It hurt, too, to remember the boy's words, but he did anyway.

Dag Racho is evil.

Yes, his mind answered. Dag Racho is evil. "But so were you," he whispered.

He pushed to his feet, more than weary, but still determined to give the boy a decent burial. He couldn't fault the child for hope, for the naive dream that the Emperor could be defeated. Perhaps their ruler could be killed, but not by committing the same sin that had created the monster in the first place. Nothing good ever came from joining one's heart and mind to a demon.

"All dragonborn are evil," he said aloud, repeating the phrase over and over, just as he had at the age of nine when first dragged to Dag Racho's court to pay for his uncle's crimes. Then he fell silent, even those words cut off as he looked at the boy.

Pain welled up inside him again. How he despised himself for this, for what he had done. But to not act would have been far worse. So with a grunt of effort, he took the boy's sword, stabbed it into the ground and began to use it as a shovel.

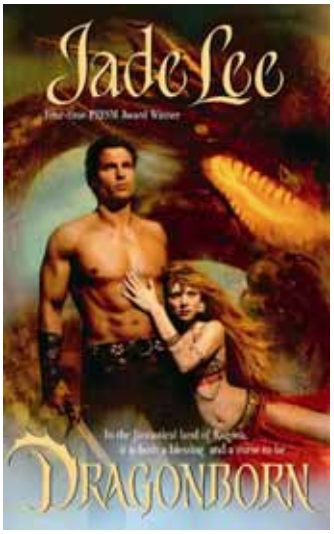
#

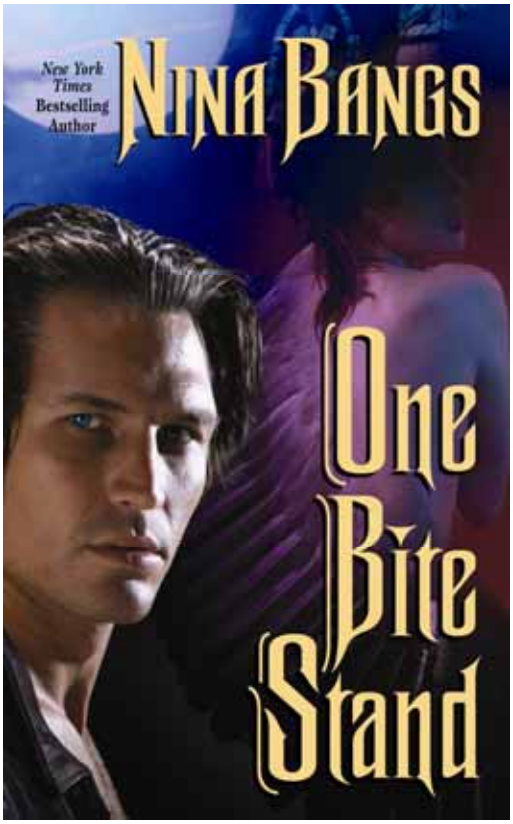
It was many hours before he finished. He worked sluggishly, like a tired old man. He buried the boy. He could do nothing about the dragon, but he made signs warning passersby that the water had been fouled by dragon. And then, after it was all over, he left. There was still one last task for him to achieve.

One more. One more dragonborn to kill. One more child to murder. One more naive hope to dash. And then it would all be over.

If he'd had the strength, he would have smiled. As it was, he could only groan.

To read more from Jade Lee, visit her website at www.jadeleeauthor.com





He's a big, bad vampire looking for a one-bite stand.

She's a big, bad harpy looking for her ticket to the underworld.

Harpies don't get callbacks. That's why Daria's job as night manager of the Woo Woo Inn is the opportunity of several lifetimes. Where better to prove that in the snatch-and-dispatch business she has CEO potential? So what if she doesn't really fit the corporate image. So what if she has to nurture her inner bitch to compete. And triple so what if she'd rather take Declan Mackenzie to bed than on a one-way, all-expense-paid trip to Tartarus. His sexy blue eyes and hard male body lure her into deep and dangerous erotic waters. With a monster eating guests for its midnight snack, cosmic troublemakers cooking up chaos, and Declan making serious moves on her, this looks like a lot more than a…

ONE BITE STAND

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CHAPTER ONE

Memo: to all harpies Subject: dress code The Depraved Fashionistas Department must approve all harpy clothes. Choose a wardrobe that compliments your grotesque harpy image and wear it with pride. Refer to the Harpy Handbook, section four, page sixteen if you are unsure if your clothing meets company standards. Punishment for noncompliance will include one year of wearing a zombie's castoffs. You will then realize that yes, it can get worse. Remember, you are the public face of Tartarus. Hades the Benevolent.

"Forget Hades's memo and tell me why I feel this way, Kal." Daria stood at the window folding and unfolding her hands.

Her brother looked up from his laptop. "Explain."

"I'm sweating. I *never* sweat. My heart's pounding. I'm breathing hard. And I have this pressure in my stomach." She swung to face her twin. "What's happening to me?"

"Either an unexpected birth or you're going to throw up." His lips tilted into a smile. "Relax, sis, this isn't worth a panic attack. It's just a job.

"It's a job I have to keep. Too much depends on it." Kal didn't understand. Harpies didn't get callbacks. It just never happened. Job interviews always ended badly. Usually with the interviewer doing lots of screaming before taking a header out of a tenth story window.

"What if he takes one look at me and decides I'm too much of a bad thing?" Was that fair treatment? Uh, no. Sure harpies had a rep for stalking the unsuspecting, who quickly became the unwilling when said harpies dragged their uncooperative butts off to Tartarus. But still, the corporate world needed to develop a little flexibility in their hiring practices.

"He'll love you." Kal wore his humoring-my-sister expression.

Still, knowing how rare this chance was, Daria wasn't about to mess up. "I can't believe this Ganymede guy hired me. It's too perfect. I get to be mean and ugly and someone pays me for it." She frowned at her twin. "What's the catch? Why me?"

Her brother shrugged. "The gargoyles were on strike?"

She pulled on her boots as she thought over the situation. "No, really, what were the chances of this job coming along just when I needed it?"

Kal paced restlessly. "No big deal. Aunt Ocypete stayed here last year. She met this Ganymede. One look and I bet he knew she could whip an army of Viking berserkers into shape. Why do you think Rome fell? Aunt Ocypete was leading the barbarian hordes."

"And?" She walked to the mirror and studied her image.
Did her boots and dress work together?

"So when he needed someone tough to manage the Woo Woo Inn, he called her for a recommendation." Kal paused in his pacing. "Who the hell names a guesthouse the Woo Woo Inn? Come to think of it, she never did tell us what happened here."

Daria didn't really care what had happened. She had the job. Now she had to make it work. She leaned forward to get a closer view of her face. "Omigod, look at my face. I can't go down to my first night on the job looking like this." She could see her title of Harpy Hopeful turning to Harpy Hopeless real fast.

"You look fine."

"Uh, fine is *not* fine. My employer specified mean and gruesome."

"He didn't use the word *gruesome*."

She ignored him. "To pass the harpy test, I have to be a vicious, cruel, violent, and *butt-ugly* being that is half woman and half giant vulture. I'm required to snatch victims and carry them off to Tartarus. I can take human form while in pursuit of clueless prey. I memorized that from the Harpy Handbook. If I'm not gruesome enough, I'll get marked down. I need a more grotesque, more

wickedly depraved, more heartless bitch image. Pull some of *those* out of your mysterious box of amazing makeovers."

"Calm down, sis."

She sighed and let some of the air out of her frenzy. "I'm sorry. It's just that Mom is looking forward to me joining her. It's the start of a family tradition. I can't blow it."

Her brother threw her a sharp glance. "Why all the insecurity?"

How could she explain it to him, all the years of not being good enough in the eyes of the other harpies? No one had bothered him because he wasn't expected to join Mom. Not his fault, but the truth.

"I was never on the fast track to success. You know, the other kids teased me a lot, especially Eris." Never ugly enough, never nasty enough."

"Why the hell didn't you ever tell me about that? I would've made sure she left you alone."

His anger for her was real and it warmed her. "Harpies have to learn to defend themselves. Besides, I eventually took care of the problem." She smiled at the memory.

Kal wasn't happy with her answer, but he couldn't argue with it, so he headed for the door. "I did what I could with your face, but you don't want to scare the crap out of the guests. You can't afford to get fired." He still looked ticked. "Besides, your bone structure doesn't lend itself to grotesque. Look, I knocked myself out on your total image, so appreciate it and stop whining."

"Maybe braces would—"

"No."

"Umm, how about if my ears stuck—"

"No."

"You could have hairs growing out of my nose and—"

Kal exhaled deeply, a sure sign of fast-fading patience. "This Ganymede person that hired you doesn't want a troll welcoming guests. We're here to find someone you can snatch and take back to the underworld. Keep your eye on the goal, and forget about everything else."

Daria ratcheted down her glower a few notches. "I guess so." She chanced another glance in the mirror. Pale face, colorless lips, and black eyeliner that made her look like a frightened raccoon. Coarse red, blue, and purple hair that fell almost to her butt. A few interesting piercings, and some dynamite tattoos. It would have to do for now. And Kal was right. She needed to keep her job as night manager at the Woo Woo Inn until she passed her test.

She trailed him out the door and walked down the stairs with him. "You know, if you'd tell me how you make your magic, it'd save you tons of time. While I was turning myself into Lady Loathsome, you could be scoping out our victim." They'd had this argument before. She always lost.

"Not going to happen, sis. I'm the only one who can do what I do. A little gift Mom gave me to make me feel okay about never getting a shot at being a card-carrying harpy. Guys don't qualify. Sexism. Gotta love it." His smile was a bitter twist of his lips.

Daria immediately felt guilty. Not a positive harpy character trait. She'd have to nurture her inner bitch. But not with Kal.

She caught a glimpse of them both as they passed a hallway mirror. Fine, so mirrors were an obsession. Daria never met a mirror she didn't embrace. A weakness. She felt compelled to check out every one. Maybe this time she'd be ugly enough, horrific enough to live up to her mother's standard. But it never happened. Probably never would. One peek at Mom and humans had nightmares for weeks. Now *that* was greatness.

She pushed the mirror from her mind and concentrated on cheering Kal up. "Your talent is totally unique, Kal. Have I told you lately what a genius you are?"

He was six feet plus of toned muscle. Kal didn't try to hide that. He'd saved his magic for his

face. It was scarred, blotchy, puffy, and made her want to look away. And it was all fake. Kal's real face was gorgeous enough to make women do astonishingly stupid things.

He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. Amazing eyes, really, if people could get past his repulsive face. Violet like Dad's eyes. Kal hated them.

"No crooked teeth tonight?" She felt bad for Kal. At least she was the right sex. Too bad they were both throwbacks to a time before hideous became the official harpy look. Without Kal's magic, she couldn't begin to compete with the harpy candidates who were naturally monstrous.

"I won't be smiling so I don't much care what my teeth look like." He guided her toward the registration desk. "As of right now, you're the official night manager of the Woo Woo Inn."

She couldn't help the queasy feeling. This job would decide her place, if any, in the harpy hierarchy. Smoothing her dress, Daria stopped at the desk. Taking a deep breath, she smiled at the woman staring at her with wide-eyed horror. Good. First impressions were important.

"Hi, I'm Daria Abarr, and this is my brother, Kal. I spoke with a Mr. Ganymede on the phone. He hired me as his new night manager. I'm supposed to start tonight."

The woman continued to stare.

Uneasy, Daria slid her gaze to the chubby gray cat crouched on top of the desk and the brown dog sitting on the floor beside it. The dog offered her a happy tongue-lolling grin. Well, at least someone was glad to see her.

The woman finally blinked, and then she glared at the cat. "Explain."

Daria glanced at Kal. He shrugged. There was something off about the woman and two animals. She could ID most nonhumans, but this little group was an unknown.

The cat stood, stretched, and yawned. "I couldn't take a whole summer of you bitching and moaning about having no one to practice on. You needed a challenge, babe, so here she is." He speared the woman with a hard gaze. "And no, I won't do the talking-in-people's-minds shit. It's demeaning."

Daria frowned. A shifter, maybe? But she wasn't getting shifter vibes from the cat. What about the dog? Was he... Whoa. She was a *challenge?* What did that mean?

Before Daria could ask, the dog stood and whined at the woman. "Can I go outside? Can I, can I? I bet all the bunnies are out. Can I chase them? Can I, can I?" His tail wagged his whole furry behind.

"Now look what you did, Mede. Trouble thinks he can talk out loud too. Fine role model you are." The woman narrowed her eyes to amber slits of fury. She spared a glance for Daria. "Would you excuse us for a minute?"

Daria and Kal nodded. They moved far enough away so they shouldn't be able to hear anything. But harpies had excellent hearing. Was that Daria's fault? Of course not. She listened.

"You hired a *harpy*? I don't believe you, Mede. I was supposed to do the hiring. What will Cindy and Thrain say when they get back? My God, she looks like an American Idol reject."

Kal winked at Daria. "See, someone complimented you already."

Mede offered the woman a cat shrug. "You'll find out in a few weeks. Hope they have great sex in Paris. It'll put them in a good mood. Besides, we have more important things to worry about than our new night manager. Declan checked in tonight."

The woman didn't lose her mad, but at least she seemed diverted for the moment. "Can anything else go wrong?" Her expression said no.

The dog was now bouncing up and down, ears and tongue flapping in the breeze. "I smell bunnies out there. Bunnies, bunnies, big fat *bunnies*!"

The cat padded toward the screen door. "I'll take the kid outside for a run."

The woman looked so angry Daria expected her red hair to go up in flames. "Don't you *dare* try to escape. You hired her. I wanted a nice normal human for the job."

The dog nosed the screen open and charged into the night. His barks faded into the distance.

The cat paused at the door. "You scared the last 'nice normal human' away. That's why I hired the harpy. Deal with her." And then he was gone.

The *cat* had hired her? Mede must be short for Ganymede. Wait. Scared a human away? What was that about? Uh-oh, complications on her personal horizon. When Aunt Ocypete had picked this place for her test, all she'd said was it might present a few difficulties. She'd never elaborated.

Daria hadn't expected to meet three nonhumans. And they knew what she was. She'd have to lull them with her friendliness and bubbly personality before trying to fly off with one of the guests. This was tough stuff. She needed a primer. Reminder to self, order *Bubbly for Dummies* from Amazon.

The woman walked, no, *swayed* over to Kal and her. If Daria had wanted to project sexy—which she didn't—she would've asked this lady to lay a few lessons on her. It wasn't just the woman's walk, it was her total package. Oozing sexual invitation from every pore, she was a predator dressed for the hunt. A really short black skirt, clingy barely-there top, and killer stilettos made for a more potent package than a pheromone cloud.

Of course, Daria didn't care, because she'd never met a male who could tempt her away from her primary goal of making it to the top.

The woman stopped in front of them and smiled. Sure, the smile was insincere, but even an insincere smile from her would bring most men to their knees. Daria glanced at Kal. Her brother was scowling at the woman. Yay, Kal.

The woman invaded Kal's personal space and gazed up at him from those strange amber eyes. "Hi, I'm Sparkle Stardust. You've got a body women would love to touch." She demonstrated by smoothing her fingers over his bare arm. "Too bad about your face." She tilted her head to stare at him from a different angle. "Is it real, or are you playing with smoke and mirrors?" Sliding her fingers along his jaw, she offered him a smile that didn't even pretend to be innocent. "So what is Kal short for?"

The only hint that Sparkle might be getting to her brother was a tic in his left eye. Amazing she'd had even that much affect. Kal was the king of calm, icy self-control.

"Kallias. And my face is what you see. Accept it, because it won't be changing anytime soon." He kept his gaze trained on Sparkle's eyes, refusing to let it drop to her scooped top.

Good thing. Sparkle's scoop was definitely a double dip. That path would lead to madness for any man dumb enough to look down. Daria jumped in to distract Sparkle from her brother. "So what do I do first?" She tried on a perky grin. Was she doing it right? Harpies weren't known for their perky anything.

"What you do first is explain why a harpy wants to be the night manager of an inn that caters to guests interested in the paranormal." Sparkle rolled her eyes in mock thought. "Wait. Could it be you hope to carry off one of our guests in your sharp little talons? I understand you get brownie points if you snag someone powerful. Think your chances are good here?"

Sparkle paused to change conversational directions. "By the way, the whole concept of half woman and half vulture is really gross." She leaned closer. "You have good bone structure, though. I can work with that."

Uh-oh. Daria didn't want anyone but Kal messing with her face. She felt the first stirrings of panic. Sparkle's eyes gleamed with the fervor of the total zealot. Daria needed to guide her back to the main topic. "Nope, wouldn't even think about carrying off any guests. Kal and I just wanted a break from the same old same old." She gulped back a nervous laugh. "I was kind of surprised you

recognized us. What are you guys?"

Sparkle studied her long, blood-red, perfect nails. "Mede, Trouble, and I are cosmic troublemakers. We're ancient beings with unspeakable powers. We wreak havoc on the universe whenever we have a spare moment. And if you try to grab one of our guests, I'll rip your wings off." She never lifted her gaze from her nails.

Forget friendly and bubbly. Harpies had the wicked-temper thing nailed down. Daria didn't take threats from anyone. She speared Sparkle with a stare that had a lot of Mom in it. "If you catch me in harpy form, we'll see who tears what off."

The corners of Kal's lips turned up in silent approval.

Sparkle finally looked up from her nails. For a moment, Daria wondered if she'd blown her job before she'd even started. Then Sparkle smiled, and Daria heard Kal suck in his breath. Sparkle would never be a harpy contender.

"I like you, Daria. You've got attitude. In fact, I'm going to make you into someone the Woo Woo Inn can be proud of."

Daria growled low in her throat. "You will *not* mess with my face."

"That'll come later." Sparkle's gaze grew thoughtful. "The Goth gear has to go. No representative of the inn can run around in a black, pixie-hem dress with rabbit fur trim and six inch split heel platform boots accented with rubber spikes and silver studs." She closed her eyes. "Give me a minute for the nausea to pass."

"Rabbit fur?" The male voice was deep and definitely menacing.

Sparkle's eyes popped open at the same time Daria and Kal turned to the man who'd walked up behind them.

Good grief, he was a walking, talking mountain. He had to be at least six feet five inches of bulging muscle and in-your-face aggression. Light reflected off his shiny bald head and the diamond stud in his ear.

Daria glanced down at the hem of her dress. Rabbit fur? Who knew? "Umm, I guess so."

From his angry huff, that wasn't the right answer. Luckily, Sparkle stepped in to head off violence. "Hey, Mel. Good to see you back again this year. Don't sweat the rabbit fur. We'll get rid of that right now."

Before Daria or Kal could react, Sparkle bent over, grabbed the rabbit fur, and ripped it from the dress. Luckily, it hadn't been sewn on too well and came away in one piece.

Daria opened her mouth to register lots of loud outrage when she caught Sparkle's pointed stare. The stare said, "Let me handle this."

Remember your job. She settled for a vicious death glare. Kal looked more puzzled than angry. That was Kal. He always thought things out before reacting. She was usually the impulsive one.

Sparkle hit Mel with her sexiest smile. "See, all gone. Give me your car keys, and I'll have someone take your bags up to your room. Why don't you go relax in the parlor? Daria will bring your room key to you once your luggage is taken care of." Without giving grumpy Mel a chance to respond, she pointed him toward the parlor.

Scowling at Daria one last time, he handed over his keys and ambled away. Everyone gave a collective sigh of relief.

"He's a were of some kind." Kal shifted his gaze to Daria. "I think I'll wander over to the parlor, too. See what's happening there. Will you be okay?"

"Sure." Maybe. Daria was beginning to see why Ganymede wanted someone mean and ugly. If the inn's nonhuman guests were like Mel¾who probably shifted into a bull elephant¾then he'd need someone with an intimidation factor of ten. The ugly part? Ugly added to her perceived menace. Perceptions were important.

Sparkle beckoned for Daria to follow her. "You're about the same size as me. Let's see if we can find something else for you to wear." She held up her hand before Daria could object. "And no, you don't have a choice. Each summer Mede and I run the Woo Woo Inn while the owners go on vacation. Mede may've hired you, but he doesn't always think in terms of guest satisfaction."

Daria was feeling a little surly. "He specified ugly. Well, ugly is a package deal. It's not just about my face. Get rid of my dress and boots, and part of what makes me me is gone."

She caught Sparkle's muttered, "Thank God."

Reluctantly, Daria followed Sparkle to her room. She couldn't afford to defy the cosmic troublemaker just yet. Daria made sure she shielded her thoughts before allowing herself a few indulgent fantasies. All the fantasies involved Daria carrying a kicking and screaming Sparkle Stardust off to Tartarus. She glanced down at Sparkle's stilettos. Hades didn't stock designer shoes in the underworld. The thought made her smile.

Once inside Sparkle's room, Daria forgot about everything. She turned in a slow circle. "This is..." Words failed her.

"Sex is my thing, sister. I'm the best at what I do in the cosmic troublemaker world."

"And that would be?" Daria exhaled deeply, trying to relax before the sexual overload made her head explode. Paintings that were way beyond explicit hung from the walls. Candlelight reflected off red silk and velvet everything. The scents of sex and desire filled the air. And if she were anything other than a mean and ugly harpy, the soft music would've made her want to perform exotic and kinky acts on the first male she met.

"I bring sexual chaos to the world." Sparkle flung open her closet and scanned the contents. "First I find two people who're completely wrong for each other." She glanced over her shoulder and offered Daria a sly smile. "Then I manipulate them. By the time I'm finished, they're so into lust I have to stamp 'Superheated Combustible' on their bare butts."

Daria made a rude noise. "You can only do that if you're dealing with weak humans."

Sparkle's smile widened, revealing straight white teeth. Daria wondered if she'd been a shark in a previous incarnation.

"I'm sure you'd be a lot stronger than any human. Why don't we place a small wager on exactly how strong you are, hmm?" Sparkle pulled a few things off their hangers before bending down to choose a pair of shoes.

Daria had opened her mouth to say no and then closed it. Kal was always reminding her to think before she acted. It wouldn't hurt to listen. "What kind of wager?" Was she suspicious? You bet.

"At the end of each night, we'll get together. If you survived the night without a lustful act, you can make me do one thing." Sparkle thought about that. "Let's amend that. You can make me do something that doesn't involve seduction. I'm the string-puller, not the puppet. Besides, Mede's my guy." She dumped the clothes over a chair and put the shoes on the floor. "If *you* gave in to temptation, I get to improve you in some small way." Her voice sounded only mildly interested as she once again studied her nails.

Daria knew she should say no, but she'd never made a bet with anyone in her entire existence. And this was way too easy to pass up. Besides, it would give her a chance to practice random acts of cruelty. Mom always said she'd never make a true harpy until her heart was as small and hard as a prune pit.

"You have a deal." Daria walked over to get a better look at the clothes Sparkle had chosen. "So what are my duties?"

Sparkle stepped between her and the clothes. "Oh, this and that. Basically just make sure the inn is running smoothly and the guests are happy." She pushed Daria toward the bathroom. "Go in

and take off your clothes. Hand them out to me and I'll give you your new outfit."

Daria wasn't dumb. She pretty much figured Sparkle didn't want her to see the clothes because she knew Daria would hate them. It didn't matter. She'd play the game. And when she came out of the bathroom, she'd grab her own clothes, run up to her room and change again. Then she'd try to avoid Sparkle for the rest of the night.

Once inside the bathroom, she stripped, handed her clothes out to Sparkle, and then slipped into the black silk pants and purple top before putting on the gold sandals. Ugh. Mom's screams would be heard all the way from Tartarus if she could see her only daughter in this outfit.

And she just might, because Daria knew there was a judge planted among the inn's guests, someone who'd grade her during these two weeks, or as long as it took her to capture her prey. It wouldn't be another harpy. Too obvious. She just hoped that he, she, or it didn't have a camera phone.

Daria tried to tug the purple top higher. No luck. Most harpies were flat-chested. She wasn't. Some nights you just couldn't catch a break. "Why purple?" Not that it mattered.

"It matches part of your hair." Sparkle sounded distracted. "Look, I have to go. The cook's having trouble with tonight's menu, and I have to find someone to take care of Mel's bags. When Ganymede comes back inside, he'll tell you what to do. Oh, and don't forget to take Mel's keys to him in the parlor. They'll be on the registration desk."

Well, well, her luck had turned. Daria grinned. Maybe she'd just change back into her own clothes right here. Opening the bathroom door, she peeked out. No Sparkle. She peered around the room. No clothes. What the... She stalked to the closet and yanked the door open. She shoved Sparkles clothes aside. Sexy, sexy, and downright sleazy.

Daria slammed the closet door shut and stormed from the room. She headed for the stairs. "Bitch, bitch, bitch," was her mantra all the way to her door. Her explosive harpy temper whipped around her until the air crackled with its energy. She wanted to change into harpy form and hunt down the sneaky, clothes-stealing viper.

She barely controlled her urge to kick down her door. Her hand shook as she unlocked it and went into the room. *Calm down*. No way would she pass the test if she blew everything her first night on the job. And as much as she wanted to snare Sparkle Stardust for Hades, she admitted the cosmic troublemaker would be hard to take down with Ganymede and Trouble in her corner. She'd have to find someone powerful—because powerful got her more points—but also someone who was alone.

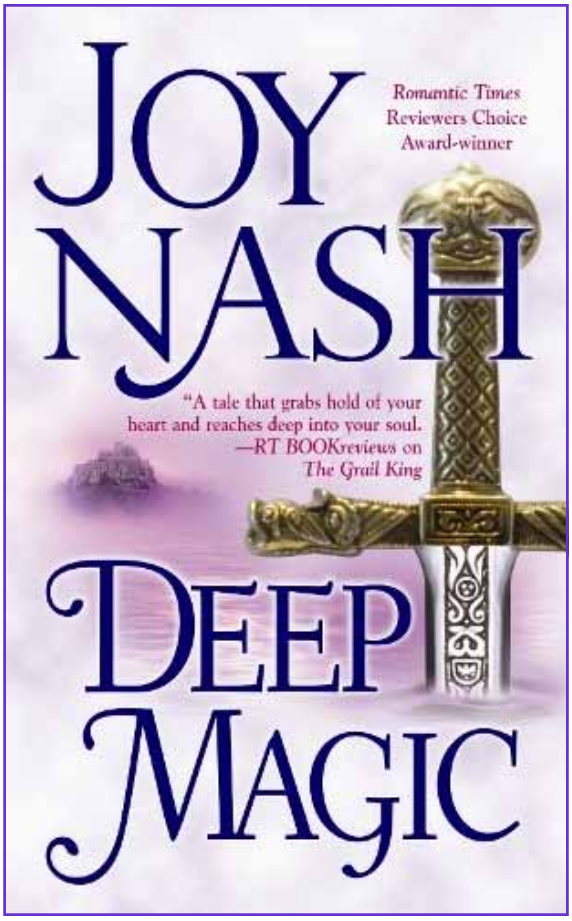
She took a deep steadying breath. Okay, she was over it. She'd change out of the purple abomination and go down to start work.

Daria was trying to decide which of her equally yummy dooms-day fashion statements she'd change into as she pulled open her closet door.

The closet was empty. She growled low in her throat.

"Someone's feeling the need to bleed."

Read more about Nina at www.ninabangs.com



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Chapter One

AD 131

A wolf could go where a woman could not.

Gwendolyn padded through night-shrouded mountains, her tracks disappearing like whispers of forgotten breath. Newly budded branches, colorless under the spring moon, sighed in her wake. Human thoughts tumbled behind gray lupine eyes. She risked much, venturing this close to the cavern where she'd once been a prisoner of Deep Magic. The heart-wrenching despair of that time clung to her paws like refuse from a dung heap.

The teasing scent of a hare wafted on the thin breeze. Her wolf's heart battered her ribs, urging her to the hunt. Panic flashed. The part of her mind that clung to humanity recoiled. She did not dare sink so far into the wolf's instincts, for fear of not finding her way out again.

Bounding up a rock-scrabbled path, she put temptation behind her. Dawn was not far off. She could not afford any distractions.

Her destination came into view. Lupine ears flattened. Delicate nostrils flared, plucking the odor of a man from the mix of scents in the air. He was but a single Legionary, leaning on his spear, but like rats, more of his kind lurked nearby. Torchlight glinted on his armor, a harsh note in the dark melody of wilderness.

The man guarded an encampment the Roman army had recently constructed on a bluff overlooking the swamps surrounding Avalon. Gwen crept as far as she dared to the edge of the camp's encircling ditch. The excavated turf had been piled high and topped with a row of wooden stakes to form a tight palisade around rows of tents. The structure had an air of permanence Gwen did not like.

She'd been watching the camp since the first day the soldiers had arrived, a moon ago. At least forty men--far too many for comfort. Fewer than twenty Druids, if one included the children, who made up half the sacred isle's population. If soldiers discovered the illegal settlement, retribution would be swift and horrible.

So far, the Romans had not ventured into the swamps. Their days were spent exploring the warren of caves and abandoned mines below their camp. This did not reassure Gwen in the least. The soldiers could only be looking for silver. If they found it--and Gwen knew it was there--they would never leave.

Cyric, of course, had set powerful spells to hide the Druid mine. And Gwen knew her grandfather's Light was more than enough to deter a hundred inquisitive soldiers. But she could not seem to quench the acid panic that ate at her gut whenever she imagined the Romans somehow stumbling past his illusions. She wanted to add a spell of Deep Magic to Cyric's protections. But there was no sense in even suggesting such a thing.

Cyric forbade Deep Magic.

The fur on her neck bristled. Still crouching, she hid herself more fully behind an unruly clump of moor grass. A faint, rhythmic vibration shook the ground beneath her paws. A horseman, traveling toward the camp. A moment later, the sentry heard the traveler's approach. He unsheathed his sword and peered up the muddy track.

A huge black war horse cantered into view. Gwen blinked. Dark light--deep blue eclipsed by fathomless black--illuminated the rider's helmeted head and armored shoulders. But surely, the aura was a trick of the moonlight. She rubbed a paw over her eyes. The light remained, streaming in black sparks along the newcomer's billowing red army cape. Her stomach lurched. She'd encountered magic of that color before. The Dark spell that had trapped her had carried that same blue-black aura.

"Who goes there?"

The man reined in his mount with a negligent motion. "Titus Opimius Strabo. At ease, soldier."

Gwen felt the guard's astonishment. His sword dropped; his spine snapped into a rigid line. "Legate Strabo! We had no advance word of your arrival." He shot a glance down the path in the direction from which Strabo had ridden. "Your escort..."

"No escort. I travel alone."

"But sir, is that wise? There could be brigands about. *Brittunculi*--"

Strabo swung from his saddle, his booted feet striking the ground with a thud. He was a tall man, much taller than the sentry. When he spoke, his voice held a knife's edge of menace.

"You doubt my ability to best a barbarian, soldier?"

The smaller man backed up a pace, hastily sheathing his weapon. "No, sir. Of course not. My apologies, sir."

Strabo advanced toward the man. The shimmering aura trailed his movement. Gwen could not tear her eyes from it. Magic was rare among Romans, yet this man's magic surrounded him with a halo of Dark Magic no Druid dedicated to the Light possessed.

Deep Magic, bound by Darkness. A chill chased along her spine. Her tail lowered. Who was this soldier? Why was he here? His aura was strong, and unrestrained by Light. If his Deep Magic pierced Cyric's wards, it would mean disaster for Avalon.

Strabo's gaze swept the camp perimeter, lingering uncannily on Gwen's clump of grass. She went still as death. A Word sprung to mind. A *not-there* spell seeped into the space between them.

He looked away. She exhaled.

"Have you seen movement in the past hour, soldier?"

"Movement? No, sir. The night has been quiet."

Strabo stared out over the swamp to the mist beyond. "I'm in pursuit of a Celt male. A traveling minstrel."

Every muscle in Gwen's body went rigid. *Rhys.*

"He entered the swamp just below this camp. Within sight of your post."

The sentry shifted on his feet. "I saw nothing, sir."

"Difficult to see anything with eyes closed, I'll wager. Ten lashes for your slothfulness, soldier. Inform your centurion in the morning."

"Yes, sir," the man all but choked out.

Strabo eyed the man, frowning. "I'll give you another chance to be useful. Is there a barbarian settlement nearby?"

"No, sir. There's the odd band of brigands, but permanent settlements were cleared from this area decades ago."

"Then where, I ask you, might the minstrel have gone?"

"I'm sure I don't know, sir."

Strabo gave a derisive snort. "Of course you d--"

He cut off abruptly, pivoting, his gaze once again veering to Gwen's clump of moor grass. The night sky was retreating before a pink glow. The dawn wind shifted. Strabo's war horse, which had been tearing at a clump of mud-spattered turf, lifted its head, nostrils flaring. It tossed its head and pawed the ground.

At Strabo's sharp order, the sentry caught the animal's reins. Strabo himself did not look away from Gwen's hiding place. A heartbeat passed...two, three...

The Roman's Dark aura deepened. Swirled. Sparked. The display was plain to Gwen's eyes, though the mundane-witted sentry, occupied with soothing Strabo's mount, took no notice.

Deep Magic sought her with tendrils of Darkness. Gwen gathered her Light and bolstered her

protection. Her magic was strong, almost as strong as Cyric's. It would hold. It had to.

Look away. There's nothing here.

But Strabo did not look away. He paced to the edge of the camp's encircling ditch, his gaze narrowing dangerously. Gwen shrank back, paws slipping on the mud.

"*Lupus.*"

The sentry's head jerked. "A wolf, sir? Where?"

"There. Behind that clump of grass."

"I don't see it, sir."

"Nevertheless, it is there."

Strabo snatched the sentry's spear, his eyes burning with a predator's fire Gwen understood only too well. But when the weapon flew, she was already gone.

#

Gwen's paws scrabbled for purchase on the muddy slope, her heart pummeling her ribs. The startled shout of the sentry scattered into the wind behind her. Strabo had seen through her illusion. He'd trailed Rhys from Isca. Why? Had her brother known he was being followed? Thank the Great Mother he'd disappeared into the mist before this Roman sorcerer caught him.

She bolted deeper into the hills, praying she could reach her secret sanctuary undetected. She circled it once, scouting behind to be sure she'd outrun any pursuit. Slipping under the outcrop of rock and into the narrow crevice, she turned to keep the dawn light in view as her pulse slowed and her wits calmed.

She crouched, silent, her ears slanted forward. *Nothing.* A sniff of the air revealed only the scent of spring. Mud and moss. A young clump of goosefoot.

She nosed to the cave's entrance and peered down the slope into the deserted ravine. The sky was awash with color; the sun would soon break over the ridge. Another slice of panic cut, one that had nothing to do with Roman soldiers. If she were missing from the village at dawn, she would suffer Cyric's disapproval. And Rhys, if he were on Avalon, was surely looking for her. He would not be pleased to find her gone--again. And if he guessed what she'd been doing...

Gwen's guilt, never far from the surface, rose. She scuttled backward into the shadow of the cave until her tail struck stone. She wished Ardra were beside her; the she-wolf never failed to calm her. But Ardra had given birth to six mewling cubs just the night before. Gwen's companion wouldn't run far in the far hills for some weeks yet.

She drew a centering breath and summoned the Words to mind. Words of Light to chase the Deep Magic of the wolf into the recesses of her consciousness.

The wolf refused to go.

Nauseating terror bled through Gwen's veins. A year had passed since the time she's spent trapped as a wolf, but the effects had not faded. If anything, they'd grown worse. Her control on her Deep Magic had slipped dangerously. She could not always control the wolf's emergence, and that was bad enough. But her greater fear was that the time would come when she could no longer banish it.

With desperate effort, she quieted her terror. The Words rang again in her mind, like bells inside her skull. They were sounds in the language of the ancients who had raised the mysterious sacred stones across Britain. Words of Light, taught to her by Cyric. But Cyric did not know of the wolf--the spell she'd crafted to banish it was her own. A chain for the beast's Deep Magic. So far, it had not broken.

After a fierce hesitation, the wolf inside her bowed before the Light. Relief flooded Gwen's

veins, even as the change ripped through her body. Her lungs constricted, her guts twisted. Bone, muscle, and sinew burned. With a shudder, she surrendered.

The agony tore at her with wolf's teeth. Clamping her jaws shut, she willed herself not to cry out. There were spells she could use to mute the pain, spells she had crafted for others, but she did not use them for herself. She deserved the pain. She was weak. Too weak. She could not resist the lure of the magic Cyric had forbidden her.

Searing heat spread, melting her bones. Her limbs stretched; her body elongated. Her face contorted, skull and skin shifting. If she could hover above her own body, what would the change look like? Horrible, surely. Evil. A perversion of nature. Anyone watching would surely avert his eyes.

But Marcus Aquila had not.

The thought shone like a beacon in her mind as fur smoothed into skin. Flesh tingled. The worst of the pain passed, lingering only as an uncomfortable vibration in her bones, a dim buzzing in her ears. Gwen lay on the damp earth, panting, too tired even to curl in upon her naked human body.

Marcus Aquila had seen the change, and he had not looked away.

She closed her eyes. The heat blossoming in her cheeks had nothing to do with magic. A man's face appeared in her mind--familiar, because even though she'd only seen him once, he'd lived in her dreams ever since. He was exotic and beautiful, with eyes and hair the color of freshly tilled earth. His golden skin was so unlike the ruddy complexions of the men who lived on Avalon. His clear brow, firm jaw, and straight nose were engraved upon her memory.

Marcus Aquila, a Roman, was--improbably so--her brother's closest friend. When Gwen had been trapped in darkness, Marcus had been the only man Rhys had trusted to help free her. As such, Marcus was the only person apart from her twin brother who knew the secret of the wolf.

But only Marcus had seen her change.

While Rhys had worked feverishly to dismantle their cousin's Dark spell, Marcus had entered the twisted bowels of the cavern. The wolf had wanted to kill him. If Gwen hadn't been wounded, weak to the point of exhaustion, Marcus Aquila would now be dead.

She'd collapsed and he'd scooped her into his arms. His touch, surprisingly, had comforted the wolf. Just when she thought her humanity had completely vanished, Marcus had called her back. He'd watched as she'd reclaimed her woman's body. His woolen shirt had been rough against her bare skin, his breath warm on her temple. Some unfathomable emotion flickered in his eyes. His arms flexed around her, his muscles banding like iron. Vaguely, she remembered emerging from the cave. But afterward...

Days later, when she woke from her fevered sleep, Marcus had been gone.

She pushed herself upright, trying to shake off the memories. Like burrs, they clung to her soul. Her chest felt strange, as if the past bound her ribs too tightly for breath. There was no use dwelling on such things, no use allowing her thoughts to drift so often to Marcus Aquila. He was Roman, and had no magic. Gwen was Druid, chosen to be the next Guardian of Avalon. They were as far apart as the earth and the moon.

Woodenly, she groped for her tunic, slipped on her shoes. She lifted her mother's pendant from its niche, and placed it around her neck. The silver was old and powerful, imbued with the protection of the Light. The wolf did not like it. The triple spiral of the Great Mother rested in the center of the pattern. A four-armed circle woven with vines encircled it. Gwen passed her hand over the pendant's face, straining to feel a spark of its Light. She could not. This was the price her treacherous Deep Magic demanded. Her powers were gone; they would not return before sunset.

A basket lay nearby, half-filled with the herbs she'd gathered as an excuse for crossing the swamps. She grasped the handle, and eased into the burgeoning daylight. Thankfully, not a soul

was in sight. Out of habit, she cast out her senses, searching for hidden dangers. She came up against a wall of deadness before she remembered her power was gone. The sun hadn't yet appeared over the high ridge of hills. Perhaps, if she hurried, she could reach Avalon before Mared awakened. She was in no mood to endure the old healer's scolding.

She hurried downhill, intent on reaching the cove where she'd left her raft. It was cloaked in illusion--she hoped it would not take long to find. In the aftermath of shifting, she was as much at the mercy of her own spells as a stranger.

She skidded down the steep slope to the muddy shore bordering the swamp, searching the bank for non-magical landmarks. A clump of willows, an oak sapling. The lair of a fox. A large hazel shrub stood between her and the raft's mooring place. As she rounded the newly budded fronds, she swallowed a cry of shock.

Strabo stood examining her raft.

He'd removed his helmet. His complexion was swarthy; his black hair was clipped short in the Roman style. Mud spattered his muscular legs, and his boots had sunk into the silt at the edge of the swamp. He was not a young man, but far from softened by age. His body looked as if it were hewn from rock.

With her magic muted, Gwen couldn't see his aura. Often, she could anticipate a person's magical intent by noting subtle changes in the color encircling his head and shoulders. To be deprived of this talent now, when she desperately needed it, was like walking with her eyes covered.

She started to ease away. The Roman's head came around sharply, his heavy brows slanting downward as he focused on the hazel shrub. Great Mother, what should she do? Run? Remain motionless and hope that by some miracle she escaped his notice? She couldn't fight him, not without her magic.

Flat, dark eyes locked with hers. His eyes widened slightly. His lips parted, revealing even, white teeth. For several long heartbeats, time was suspended. Then he lifted one hand, with fingers spread. The gesture seemed almost like an entreaty. Or preparation for a spell.

Gwen's wits abruptly returned. She turned and fled, scrabbling up the steep trail with all the desperation of a hunted beast. Deprived of her own magic, her only hope of escape was to reach the shelter of Avalon's mists before Strabo's spell caught her.

Basket thudding against her thigh, she swerved onto the trail that afforded the thickest cover. It skirted the swamp, disappearing into a heavy fog. No ordinary morning mist, but part of the spells of protection Cyric had woven around Avalon. She prayed her grandfather's magic would hold.

The mist closed about her like mother's arms. She ran until a stabbing pain in her side forced her to draw up short. Another mooring place was just ahead; the Druids maintained several such hidden refuges. If Gwen's luck held, a raft would be waiting. But she couldn't risk leading her pursuer to Avalon.

Dropping into a crouch behind a curtain of willow fronds, she strained her ears for the Roman's footsteps. She let out a long sigh when she heard nothing. Had she eluded him, then, even without magic?

She waited, barely breathing. The birds that had been startled by her passing renewed their morning songs. Even then, she remained motionless a while longer, until she was sure the threat of discovery had passed. Finally, she took a deep breath and rose, murmuring a prayer of thanks to the Great Mother. She made her way through the thick mist to the dock, where two blessed rafts bobbed gently against a mooring post.

"Gwen?"

She shut her eyes and halted, expelling the air from her lungs in one sharp breath. Goddess, not

Trevor. Not *now.* Not when her magic was gone and her mundane senses overwhelmed.

"Gwen? Is that you?"

What was Trevor doing on this side of the swamps so early in the morning? Belatedly, Gwen realized her haphazard flight had taken her to the edge of his carefully hidden barley field. One of the rafts was Trevor's; he always kept his craft in this mooring place while he tended Avalon's crop.

His firm footsteps came up behind her. Constructing a smile on her lips, she turned, her fingers clutching the handle of her basket far tighter than necessary. Trevor was a large man, tall and thick with muscle. Rhys had encountered him on the far northern isles of Caledonia last summer, and had brought him to Avalon at the first frost. Eleri and Siane called him handsome, and even Dera, who was handfasted with Howell and should not notice such things, smiled widely when Trevor came near. Gwen supposed the man *was* striking. His eyes were a piercing blue. His waist-length blond hair was bound so tightly in its queue she wondered if his scalp ached. His beard and moustache were braided in the northern style, and he wore a silver torc at his neck, the adornment of a chieftain or king. But he spoke so little, as if words were jewels and he was a poor man.

"I sought ye afore dawn." Trevor's northern burr held no hint of anger. But then, of course, it wouldn't. Trevor never lost his temper. Never.

"Did ye?"

"Ye were gone."

"I left early to search for bindweed. 'Tis more potent, ye know, if gathered under the moon, with the flowers open."

"Ye shouldna be here alone."

"Ye are alone," Gwen observed.

Trevor sighed, rubbed the back of his neck, then seemed at a loss as to where to place his hand. Finally, he anchored it on his hip. The pose gave him the look of a disapproving husband. Gwen's irritation grew, though she knew he'd done nothing to provoke it.

"Cyric forbade your wanderings," he said at last.

"Cyric does not need to know about them."

"Ah, Gwen."

The two words communicated a wealth of frustration and reproach. Sudden guilt swamped her. She *had* promised Cyric she would stay on the isle. It was a promise that had proven impossible to keep. She could not risk shifting into wolf form in the middle of the village common!

"I...I had trouble sleeping." That, at least, was not a lie. Since her captivity, she'd not slept through a single night.

"Ye could finish Eleri's pendant. Rhys brought her to us two moons past."

"I cannot do that at night. It would disturb the village."

"'Tis dangerous, Gwen, wandering outside the mist. What if ye cross paths with a soldier from the Roman camp?"

Trevor had no idea his fear had already come to pass. She didn't wish him to guess, so she forced a laugh. "The Romans bundle themselves tight in their camp after dark. Their sentries are blinded by their own torches."

Trevor laid a hand on Gwen's arm. The unwelcome touch jolted her to the core. "Your safety is important to Avalon. After we are handfasted and the babes come, this need to roam will pass."

Gwen forced a swallow down a throat suddenly thick with dismay. Trevor might be dull, but he was a good man, loyal and steady. His magic was of the earth, pure and strong. Under his influence, living things thrived--plants, animals, children. She should be glad he wanted her as his wife.

Cyric had asked for the union. And in truth, Gwen liked Trevor. Or at least she had before Cyric announced his wish they should handfast. She knew little about Trevor's past in the northland, for

he did not speak of it, and Rhys would not elaborate. She suspected he'd endured much, for his eyes held shadows. But he was not ruled by them. Unlike Gwen, Trevor had banished his demons. His hand on her arm grew unbearably heavy.

"Do not fear for me." Her tone was deliberately willful. A man like Trevor did not want a willful wife. "I go where I will. No plodding Roman will catch me, I assure ye."

She'd thought to annoy him with her defiance; her words summoned an opposite effect. His blue eyes darkened; he leaned close, his palm traveling up her arm to her shoulder. "Ye dinna need to be so strong, lass. Nay with me."

Sincere affection thickened his accent. For a brief moment, Gwen imagined coupling with him. She'd never lain with a man, but she knew enough of the way between a man and a woman to picture the deed. He would be gentle.

Marcus Aquila would not be gentle.

Great Mother, where had *that* thought come from?

Trevor's fingertip drew circles on Gwen's nape. Her stomach turned to cold lead. Even so, she might have forced herself to smile up at him, if not for her secret. Trevor knew nothing of the wolf; if he did, he would not want her.

"Gwen, I know ye dinna feel for me as I do for ye, but..."

She shifted her basket to her other arm, dislodging Trevor's hand without seeming--she hoped--too blunt about it. She made a show of squinting at the dawn.

"The sun rises swiftly. Mared will worry when she wakes and I am not there."

Trevor sighed and stepped back. "I'll take ye home, then."

"Nay. Finish your work in the field. I do not need ye."

"'Tis my duty to protect ye."

"Nay, Trevor, 'tis not. I--"

"Cyric wants us to wed."

Gwen bit her lower lip. "Aye, I know that well enough. But Trevor...do ye not want a marriage born of love?"

"I *do* love ye."

It wasn't what she'd meant, and Trevor knew it. The man might not be garrulous, but he was no fool.

"I would not make ye happy," she said gently.

"Let me be judge of that." When she didn't reply, he plowed on. "Cyric grows frail. I know the duty of taking on the role of Guardian when he passes weighs heavily on your spirit. I would help ye with that burden, if ye would but let me."

"Trevor, can ye nay see that--"

The screech of a merlin interrupted her words. The bird flew low out of the mist, narrowly missing Trevor's head.

A genuine smile sprung to Gwen's lips. "Hefin!"

She extended her arm; the merlin alighted. The bird ruffled its wings and cocked its head, blinking. Hefin was Rhys's companion, as Ardra was Gwen's. Her twin could not be far.

"Is my brother in the village?" Gwen asked Trevor.

"Aye, he arrived before dawn," Trevor said, clearly not pleased to have Gwen's attention turn from talk of handfasting. "He wasna happy to find ye gone."

"I imagine he was not." Gwen sighed and turned her attention back to Hefin. The bird was one of the few animals, other than Ardra, that did not cower in fear of the wolf. The small falcon shared a magical bond with her twin, but with her magic dimmed, she couldn't feel it.

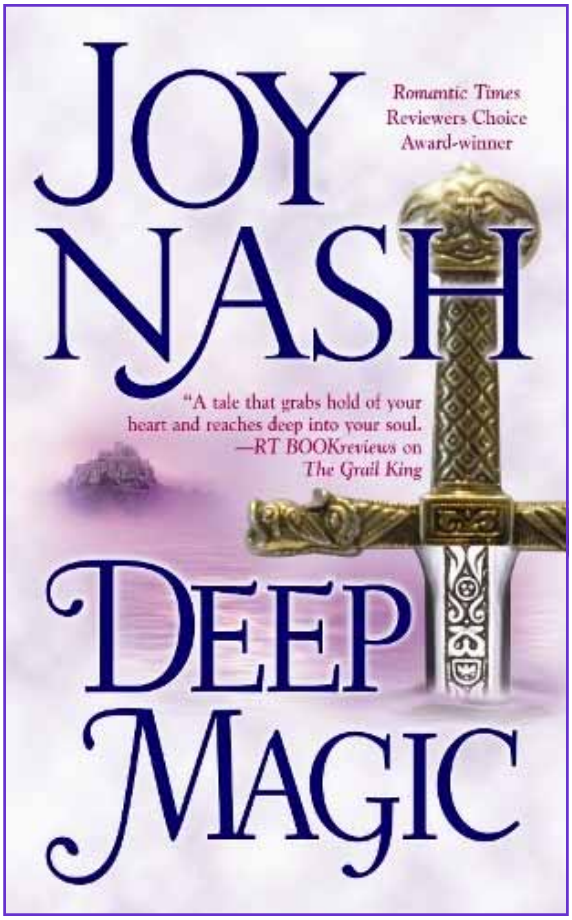
Gwen looked to Trevor. "I would seek my brother alone. Would ye excuse me?"

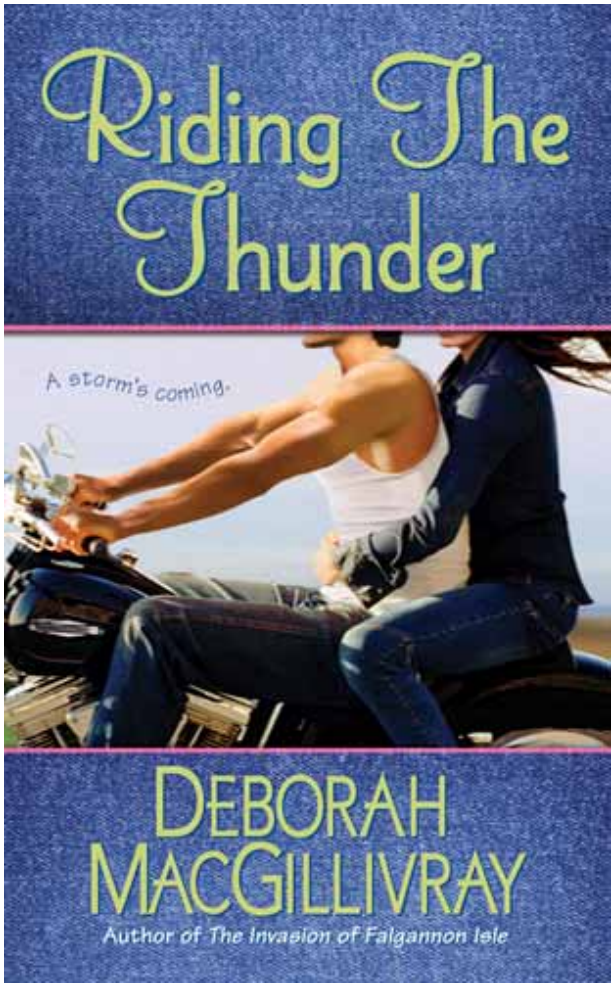
Trevor's disappointment was clear, but Gwen knew he lacked the self-conceit for protest. She felt his gaze on her as she climbed aboard one of the rafts. Hefin took wing when she lifted the long pole laid crosswise atop the craft.

Trevor's outline faded as the mist closed about her. She felt a twinge of guilt at treating him so poorly, but her regret was small compared to her relief at leaving him behind. She inhaled, filling her lungs deeply with damp, fragrant air. Thank the Great Mother, she was free of the man, if only for a while.

It was hard to breathe in the face of such unfaltering decency.

To read more from Joy Nash, go to www.joynash.com.





A Storm's Coming...
It was all part of the plan. While his brother was in Scotland dethroning the Lady of Falgannon, Jago Mershan was headed to Kentucky. There he would do his share in avenging his father on the Montgomeries. Only, there was a monkey wrench in the works

Just looking at his alleged enemy's granddaughter made Jago think of his classic black '67 Harley Electra Glide, a motorcycle with clean lines and sleek curves that promised the ride of a man's life. Asha was all woman--and the only woman for him. He'd bet she could go from zero to one hundred in the blink of an eye...and not even her claims of paranormal happenings in the diner she ran could put him off. He knew magic: He had a special name for the sights, the sounds, the tastes and smells of that perfect ride. There might be a storm coming, but it was one of passion, and together he and Asha would be...

RIDING THE THUNDER Second in the Seven Sisters of Colford Hall series sequel to **The Invasion of Falgannon Isle**

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Chapter 1

Present Day Kentucky

Lifting the icy-cold bottle of Coors to his mouth, Jago Mershan froze in mid-motion, then groaned as if he'd received a stiff blow to his solar plexus. His whole body tensed as everything about him receded to gray. Nothing could've prepared him for the impact of Asha Montgomerie on his senses.

Jago's eyes tracked the woman who'd slid out of the black Jaguar and strode across the parking lot, the image of warm honey suddenly foremost in his mind. Only, his sweet tooth wasn't throbbing. His pain centered lower—*much lower.* The jukebox switched to Bob Seger's pulsing "*Come to Papa"* causing the right side of his mouth to twitch into a hungry predator's smile. Low laughter rumbled in his chest as his eyes never left Asha.

He whispered, "Yeah, come to papa."

She was tall, around five-seven, the height increased a shade by the heels of her brown leather Wellies. Her black jeans fit snugger than his English racing gloves and lovingly displayed the long, sleek limbs that could wrap around him—ah, a man—and never let go. Being a lowly male, he thoroughly appreciated how those firm breasts filled a 34D to perfection, no Miracle Bra needed, no Pamela Lee implants. Bodies like hers were a throwback to the heyday of Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell. Placing her hand on the porch rail, Asha followed the spiral up the creek stone stairs, her body undulating in a quiet, feline grace. Those superb breasts swayed perceptibly with each step, the black scoop-necked sweater revealing tempting cleavage.

As she moved alongside the row of plate-glass windows Jago was treated to her profile, the derrière promising a male enjoyed watching her walk away nearly as much as seeing her coming toward him. Well, *almost.* Observing those mobile curves approach, a man would tingle with anticipation of getting his hands on that firm flesh.

Sunlight caught and was refracted through the full glass door as Asha opened it, blinding him for an instant. Then she rematerialized, born from the brilliant shafts. The setting sun's aura followed her with an arcane sentience, greedily clinging to her to form a red-gold halo about her, a breath-stealing shard of time that burned deep into his soul. When he was old and gray, he'd recall this instant as if yesterday and remember its power, how it moved him.

Not a classic beauty, Asha's face was arresting, feline. Her jawline hinted at the Montgomerie stubbornness, though the faint cleft in her chin softened the effect. Jago's body bucked as he imagined running the side of his thumb over that shadowy dip, seeing those cat eyes watching him, spellbound by his action. A flicker of arrogance flashed in those amber eyes, but the haughtiness was understated, carried off with regal self-assurance few women ever truly achieved.

Asha glanced about the room in disinterested fashion, her hair rippling like silk down her finely arched spine. A golden brown, Jago deemed that label pathetically inadequate. Asha's locks shimmered with a thousand golds, fiery to pale auburns and vibrant browns. That mane provoked an appetite to see it spread across a pillow as he drove himself into her slick, welcoming body, to feel it draped and cool over his burning skin. A hunger that would force a throwback like him to howl.

A wicked smile tugged at the corner of his mouth when the jukebox changed tunes and the singer began *ah-ooing* about "*The Werewolf of London*." Given a British passport was in the glove box of his leased Jeep Cherokee, and the fact Asha provoked him to consider howling, he chalked up one for odd quirks of fate and timing.

It was fascinating to observe the emotional shifts on male faces as they watched Asha pass.

Clearly, they wanted her. Oh, did they want her! Nonetheless, Jago doubted any would approach her. She stared men in the eye, dismissing them with a bat of her long lashes with a poise that would send all but the most voracious meat-eaters running. They would look her up and down and lick their chops, but the power, the regnancy radiating from her would humble all. Most would feel guilty for even daring to look, to wish, knowing they were unworthy. Only sheer morons with nothing to lose would take the risk.

Or a man as assured of himself as Jago.

Asha's aloof scan of the dining room finally reached him. Her tawny-brown eyes widened as their stares collided. The witchy force of those cat-eyes rocked him, stole his breath. Lightning sizzled along his nerves as the odd moment in time lengthened. All else faded. Never had he felt so *connected* to anyone.

Then, with a sweep of her lashes, she pretended not to notice him.

"Nice try, Asha," he said under his breath, then took a long draw of his beer to kill his parched throat. *Jago Luxovius Fitzgerald Mershan, you're one lucky sonofabitch—or cursed,* he mused.

Asha spoke to the hostess, her words lost to restaurant chatter. Evidently, she requested the blinds be dropped, for the woman did just that, plunging the diner into shadow. Asha went ahead and seated herself in a booth about halfway back, on the side opposite of the long row of windows.

Jago's position on the stool at the counter was dead center on the aisle, affording him a splendid show. Oh yeah, this Scottish miss had one sweet ass! The way she moved sent his blood into a low, rocking thrum, similar to a *Harley-Davidson* jump-starting in his chest. Yep, that's what Asha reminded him of—his classic *'67 Harley Electra Glide* in black—all sleek curves and lines, created so a man craved to climb on for the ride of his life. He contemplated if Asha made love Harley-style: zero to a hundred m.p.h. in the blink of an eye.

It would be riding thunder.

He nearly laughed aloud, realizing if he told her that—in all sincerity meaning it as the ultimate compliment—she'd probably deck him. Only a man would think comparing a woman to a Harley—not just any bike, mind you, but a *Harley*—was the highest praise. He recalled that old Robert Palmer song "Bang a Gong", and the stanza about a woman being built like a truck. Females just didn't get what Palmer wailed about. *Men did.* It was one of those *Men are From Mars* kind of stalemates. Few things born of man could bring Jago to his knees faster than a vintage Harley or the perfect woman.

And Asha Montgomerie, without doubt, was the perfect woman. A man's hottest fantasy come to life. His fantasy for far too long. Over the years he had studied dozens of photos of her. Then back in May at her grandfather's funeral in England, he'd seen her from a distance. Brief glimpses that little prepared him for the up-close effect this woman had on his system. It took all his control not to get to his feet, go to her, put a hand behind her neck and devour that small, pouty mouth.

Jago wanted her as he'd never wanted a woman before. Without hesitation he'd take her, possess her, brand her and never look back. Damning all consequences. Because like her, he too was a throwback. Too bad he was here to tear her safe, secure world apart. Before the dust settled, she'd likely hate his guts, despise him just as powerfully as he craved her.

Jago prayed he didn't destroy them both before it was done.

***

Asha stared at the menu—not that she needed to read it. *The Windmill* served Cajun gumbo on Thursday, fresh halibut on Friday, Saturday and Sunday, a grilled New York strip that would melt in your mouth every day of the week, along with BLTs, club sandwiches and burgers and fries. She

was aware Kentucky catfish was no longer a specialty on the menu, thanks to the sprawling suburban population of Lexington polluting the Kentucky River with their sewage. She knew the prices. Wouldn't have to ask for availability. Small wonder since she ordered the food supplies each week.

She usually ate after the supper crowd thinned for the evening. Only, she had spent the day on the horse farm and was now ravenous, even though it was barely five. She'd eat early and be ready to handle the cash register, leaving Rhonda free to concentrate on seating customers as they shuffled in.

The long fingernails of her left hand tapped out a restless rhythm on the Formica tabletop while she feigned attention with the plastic covered menu. Asha tried to block out the man sitting at the counter, drinking a beer. Her eyes had spotted him the instant she came in, though she affected pretense that she hadn't. Inside, her heart bounced against her ribs with a bruising force. Men like him were *hard* to miss. A female *sensed* their presence as much as *saw* them, some basic animalistic instinct that set off alarms.

"What'll you have, Boss Lady?" Netta asked, setting a glass of ice water on a paper coaster. With a grin, she pulled a *Bic* pen from behind her ear, popped her gum, and waited.

"You ever wonder why we put paper coasters under our drinks when it's a Formica top?" Asha asked blandly. She knew Netta was waiting for more than her order. The waitress wanted to gossip about *Mr. Tall, Dark and Potently Sexy* sitting on the stool.

Netta shrugged. "*The Windmill* has always put paper coasters under glasses." She snapped her gum again and lifted her eyebrows. "You know what happens if you try to change anything around here. More than the natives get restless."

Ignoring the comment, Asha folded the menu and handed it to the blonde. "New York strip, medium-rare, and a salad with French dressing. I'm famished."

Netta spun exaggeratedly on her *New Balance* sneakers, her eyes sweeping over the man at the counter. "Hmm…I'm famished, too." Giving Asha a wink, she took the order to the small window to the kitchen. She attached the ticket to the wheel, spun it around for Sam, then dinged the bell to get his attention.

The stranger on the stool again drew Asha's gaze, compelled her to look at him. *Dared* her to look at him. She tried to mask her glance, nonchalant, as though bored and seeking diversion, letting it sweep the whole room until it finally reached him. She failed. Their eyes locked and Asha nearly flinched as she felt the focus of his mind. A throb of radiant sexuality sent a shiver of physical awareness through her body, slamming into her womb with a force she'd never experienced.

This man *unnerved* her. Rarely did men do that to her. Actually, no man had. With her intense cat-like eyes, she could look down her nose and set even the strongest ones to feeling like slugs. The ability second nature to her, she turned on the frost and glared as if he were something she'd stepped in.

As a rule, that sent them running. *Not* this one. As though he not only knew the rules to the game, but also had a cheat sheet, the stranger leaned back against the counter with a wolfish grin and looked his fill. Not even pretending to do anything else, he just stared at her. It was damn unsettling. She couldn't even pretend to gaze out the windows at the pastoral scenery of the horse farm across the road; she'd asked Rhonda to close the blinds against the harsh afternoon glare.

"Here you go." Netta set an iced Pepsi, a salad and a basket of rolls before her. She stepped so that her body blocked Asha from the stranger's view. "You *know* that man at the counter?"

Thankful Netta had given her the perfect excuse for taking her eyes from the invader, Asha broke a roll and buttered it. "What man?"

Netta gave a mocking laugh and popped her gum a couple times. "Nice try, sugarplum. Men like that are impossible *not* to notice."

"Never saw him before in my life." Asha sipped the cola. Oh, she would remember this man had they met.

A master gossip, Netta excelled at knowing when to tell all, when to hint. With her smart mouth and flashing baby-blue eyes, she'd charm a person's life history from them in a wink. *The Windmill* likely had higher profits this past year and a long line of regulars due to Netta's down-home charm. What she knew about the stranger would be forthcoming.

The only way to play the game, Asha mused, was to answer a question with a question. "Why would you think I know him?"

"Sexy Lips has a foreign accent. British I think, like yours. Gives a gal shivers." Netta hugged herself and then chewed her gum. "Also, I get this sense he was waiting for something …*maybe you*. My granny *knew* things. She passed that on to me."

"Steak's up, Netta," Sam, their cook, called through the open space, setting a plate up on the warmer.

"Back in two shakes." Netta went to pick up the inch-thick steak and returned to place it before Asha. "Eat up, sugarplum." She glanced sideways at the black-haired visitor and raised her eyebrows. "Looks like you're gonna need all your strength."

#

"I sure enjoyed that dinner. You tell Sam that, eh, Asha?" Melvin Jackson said, picking up a peppermint from the bowl at the side of the register. He unwrapped the cellophane and then popped it into his mouth, waiting for her to ring up his ticket.

Sam poked his head up in the small window. "Sam heard your big mouth flappin'. So, you liked the gumbo?"

Melvin patted his round stomach. "Damn fine meal—though just a pinch too much sassafras and not enough *filé* powder."

"Bah. It was perfect." Sam frowned and waved in dismissal. "My granny, born down on the Bayou Teche, was teaching me how to make gumbo while you were barely an itch in your daddy's britches, you old coot."

"Who's an old coot?" Jackson snapped, though it was with a twinkle in his eye.

Asha counted out Melvin's change, only half listening to the routine these two went through every Thursday night. Each week, Melvin came in for the gumbo dinner; each time he and Sam fussed over the filé powder and sassafras. A running game between the two. Tonight, however, she could barely keep her attention on them. She felt the stranger watching her. Perturbed, she tried to tune him out, ignore him as if she remained unaware of his presence. It was impossible. Her skin tingled, knowing his eyes followed her every move.

"'Night, Netta, Sam, Asha!" Melvin waved as he opened the door and stepped out into the warm October night.

Asha had just stuck the receipt in the basket by the register and closed the till when Sexy Lips leaned across the counter and asked, "May I have another Coors?"

A shiver slithered over her body, a cross between female fear instinct and instant turn-on. Wow! An image of that deep voice whispering sweet nothings to her in the middle of the night was enough to give her a hot flash.

As yet, Asha couldn't determine what color the man's eyes were, due to the recessed lighting, but their power rocked her to her toes. Forcing herself to turn to the glass-doored cooler behind her,

she removed a Coors. She used the Pepsi-Cola wall-mount opener to snap off the top.

"Twist-off my arse," she grumbled, then handed it to him.

As his fingers closed around its neck, hers flexed in a spasm about the brown bottle. *Did beer have salt?* Her grandmother had taught her and all her sisters never to pass a warlock salt. Asha now wondered if that included salt as an ingredient? Maeve had been Scottish, born on Falgannon Isle in the Hebrides, where the past wasn't so distant and superstitions were the norm. Maeve believed if you passed a warlock salt, you'd open yourself to obeying his suggestions. When Asha had pressed why, Maeve said it was an old warlock's trick, a test if you'd bend to his will. Asha guessed she should've clarified if that was salt in *all* forms.

The stranger's black brows lifted, questioning her hold on the bottle. Perplexed amusement twinkled in those penetrating eyes, eyes the shade of green garnets, nearly so dark one might take them to be deep brown or black. They held a power, a force that rattled her.

Again, Falgannon Isle came to mind, where her sister BarbaraAnne lived. The island was under an ancient curse, which could only be broken if her sister—the Lady of the Isle—married a green-eyed man with black hair. She couldn't help but think of B.A.'s curse as she stared this man in the face. Maybe she should pass B.A.'s address to him. He had black hair, green eyes and his voice held a sexy hint of Ireland—all three requirements to fulfill the dictates of B.A.'s curse.

A burning flare of jealousy exploded in the pit of her stomach. Strangely, she didn't want her sexy blond goddess of a sister anywhere near this man.

Dismissing the weird thoughts, she released the beer.

"Thank you." A hint of laughter touched his words. "For a moment I thought you were going to arm-wrestle me for it…though I can't say I'd be averse to the idea of a tussle."

She opened the till again, and set about arranging the bills so that the faces all pointed in the same direction. Any excuse to avoid those probing eyes. "Not for a beer. I don't drink beer."

"Beer, or alcohol in general?" he asked.

"Beer." Asha closed the register, trying to think of some other chore she needed to do. An escape. There wasn't anything, so she drew a cola from the fountain and held up the glass. "I'm a Pepsi addict."

"That still doesn't answer my question. Drink anything besides Pepsi?"

"The occasional whisky—without the E." Asha forced herself to appear cool, calm and collected. Then why did her heart pound so erratically? No male had ever caused this reaction within her, on par with sticking her finger into an electrical socket.

"What's wrong with beer?" the stranger pressed.

"I don't care for the taste." She shrugged one shoulder. "Sue me."

His dark eyes danced with mischief. "Have you ever drunk a Coors?"

"No, I once drank a *Dark Isle* and a *Wee Heavy*."

"*Dark Isle*? *Wee Heavy?"* he inquired.

"Scottish ales."

"Ah, room temperature ale. You should try Coors. Big difference between American beer and European ale." He pushed the bottle toward her. "Try it."

She stared at the container, once again worrying if beer contained salt. This was too much like the Wicked Witch offering Snow White the poisoned apple, but instead of a witch she faced a warlock. Damn! She regretted now that she hadn't paid more attention to her grandmother's warnings.

He remarked, "First, you almost won't let me have the beer, now you stare at it as if I'm offering you a cobra."

"I'm working." Asha grasped at the convenient reason.

He laughed softly. The low sexy rumble wormed its way under her skin, spreading goosebumps across her body. "Chicken." His brows lifted in a dare.

Damn, she really wished she knew if they used salt in brewing beer. "I don't drink with strangers."

He leaned forward and stuck out his right hand. "Jago Fitzgerald."

Asha stared at it. A beautiful hand. You could tell a lot about a man from his hands. The fingernails were clean and manicured, not a nail biter, saying he wasn't the nervous sort. No calluses, yet they weren't soft. She judged he had some sort of indoor job, but used those strong hands on weekends to exercise. The fingers were long, elegant. Hands of a magician. Hands of a lover—hands of a bloody warlock trying to trick her into doing his bidding!

"Jago?" She tested the resonance of his name. Though his accent was British, he pronounced it with a long A Irish sound. Instead of *Jag-o*, it was *Jay-go*.

"It's Old English for—"

"James, I know. I just never met one walking around before." He waited for her to accept his hand. When she didn't, his left brow arched. *Well, damn him, no man called her chicken twice!* She took his hand. It was warm, dry. "Asha Montgomerie." A shiver went up her arm, lodged in her shoulder, then her neck. *Yeppers, he was a ruddy warlock.*

His handshake was firm. His thumb traced a small circle on her palm three times before releasing it. *What? Was that some sort of old warlock school handshake?* Asha wondered.

For an instant something hot flickered in his dark eyes. Asha had the odd inkling he thought about using that hand to pull her to him and kiss her. Then it was gone. She chalked it up to a trick of the recessed lights.

He let go. She thought she'd passed the test rather well, outside the electrical shock and imagining he'd wanted to kiss her. Then his left hand waggled the Coors by its long neck. Caught up in thinking Netta was right—he *did* have sexy lips—Asha blinked, recalling he had goaded her to take a drink of his beer.

She slowly accepted the Coors, saw a smug smile almost escape before he reformed his face to seriousness. Taking the brown bottle, she turned it around and stared at the label.

"What? It's a *Coors*." He laughed.

Oh, she liked that laugh. "I was looking for a list of ingredients. Every bloody thing has ingredients and daily nutritional requirements these days—even bottled water. But *not* beer. *TM*."

"*TM?"* he queried.

"Typically Male. Don't mess with male bastions like beer."

"What's to know? Barley, hops, water and yeast?"

She hesitated and then admitted, "I wondered if there was salt in it."

"On a low sodium diet?"

She smiled, suddenly enjoying the banter. "Something akin to that." Feeling silly, she took a sip, then passed him the bottle back. "Thanks, but no thanks. I'll stick to Pepsi, Cherry Coke and 7-Up."

"Cherry Coke? If you're a Pepsi addict, why not Cherry Pepsi?"

"Cherry Coke is an old favorite around here," Asha replied evasively, then chided, "You want a burger and fries with those beers?"

"I'm waiting 'til the supper crowd thins a bit more. Then I'd like one of those strip steaks with onion rings. And don't nag. I've only had three beers in the last two hours. I'm not driving; I only have to stagger a few feet up the knoll." He winked. Winks like that should be outlawed as unsafe for female consumption.

"Up the knoll? As in one of the bungalows?" *Oh great, he's right next to me*. Talk about temptation under her nose!

Jago nodded with a roguish twitch at the corner of his mouth. His eyes shifted to Netta as she came through the swinging door, carrying a tray with slices of strawberry pie, each topped with a swirl of whipped cream.

"Hey, darling," he said, "on your next pass into the kitchen how about tossing one of those steaks on the grill for me? And a side of onion rings?"

The blonde batted her lashes at him, then glanced to Asha and winked. She tossed over her shoulder, "Sure thing, Sexy Lips."

"*Sexy Lips?"* he repeated. His black brows lifted at the nickname. "I can live with that."

Damn Netta! Go ahead, feed the man's ego, Asha thought. Sexy Lips? Hell, *every inch* of the man, head to toe, was drop-dead sexy.

If he was sticking around, that spelled trouble for her.

Suddenly, the jukebox came on. Asha closed her eyes and groaned as the song started playing.

"*'Laura and Tommy were lovers. He wanted to give her everything…'"*

Asha sighed in resignation. It was a great song, one that seemed to last through the ages. "It certainly lasts around this place," she muttered, glowering at the *Wurlitzer 2700*.

The jukebox had been new in 1963, and now was worth a small chunk of change, a collector's item from the *Silver Era*. This one would go for ten times the market price of others, since each booth still had its original *wallette* table changer. But the bloody thing had a mind of its own. Oh, did it have a mind of its own!

Netta came back with her tray empty, catching Asha's questioning glare. She shrugged.

"I thought Colin took that song off the jukebox," Asha said.

Netta laughed. "*You* try taking it off."

Asha scowled at the shiny chrome *Wurlitzer* that looked brand new instead of decades old, as Ray Peterson soulfully crooned on, "*'Tell Laura not to cry. My love for her will never die…'"*

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To read more from Deborah MacGillivray at www.deborahmacgillivray.co.uk

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Praise for RIDING THE THUNDER

Award winning author Deborah MacGillivray continues her creative Sister of Colford Hall series with her hauntingly magic novel, RIDING THE THUNDER. Deborah MacGillivray gifts us with well matched heroes, luscious love scenes and engaging secondary characters that ensnare us in the suspenseful plot of her witty romantic story with a paranormal touch. My advice; get this book and ride the thunder! — Donna Hauf, *Single Title.com*

"Riding The Thunder is not just another feather in Ms. MacGillvray's cap, it is a jewel in her crown of writing achievements. This author has proven that not only can she pen torrid historical novels, but a true Seanchaidh (storyteller) in whatever genre she sets her sights on!"
—Janalee Ruschhaupt, Loves Romance and More

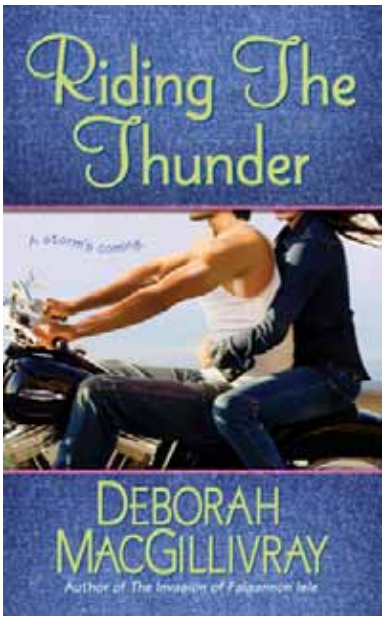
This is book two in the Sisters of Colford Hall series. In my opinion, it is even better than the first (The

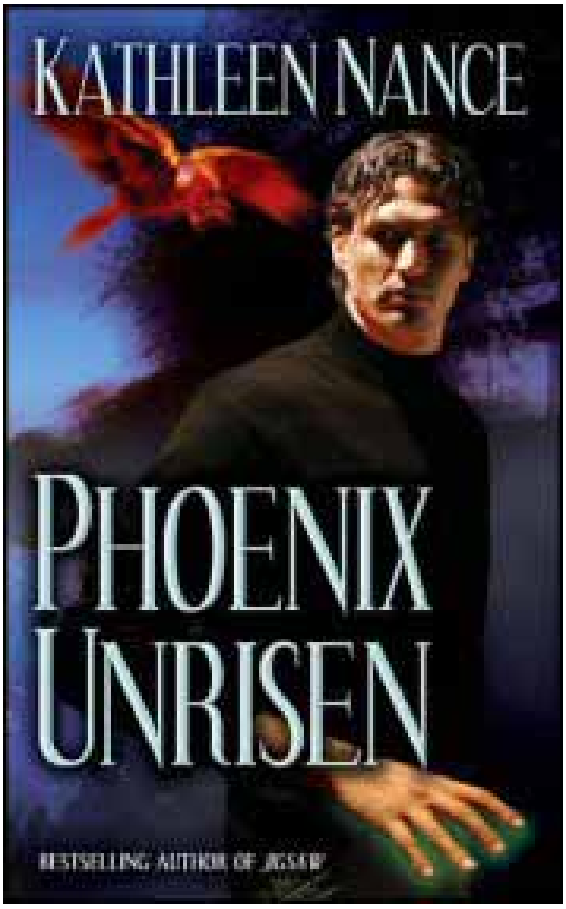
Invasion of Falgannon Isle). Trust me, that is saying something! Author Deborah MacGillivray gives each character a realistic touch, but the main characters (Jago and Asha) are downright striking. I came to deeply care for them. The secondary and background characters snuck up on me. I have no idea how these crazy people became so important to me. But as I neared the end of the book, I dreaded the thought of never seeing them again. Now THAT is talent! All-in-all, I found this to be a delicious frolic in a magical world. Perfect!
—Detra Fitch, The Huntress Reviews

"Masterfully Written Sequel! If you are one of the many readers who enjoyed The Invasion of Falgannon Isle, you will be blown over and entertained to the maximum with DeborahAnne MacGillivray's sequel "Riding The Thunder." This is a writer that just keeps getting better with each book release. Her unique talent, knowledge base, writing prose, story and character development are truly amazing. This is definitely one of those stories that readers will not be able to put down and will probably read in a day, unable to pull themselves away from the sensual mystique of the story and its characters. Only Ms. MacGillivray can write a contemporary romance and construct it in such a way that it has the feel of a Medieval Historical and a Paranormal with a mix of suspense added to the story. If you are a cat lover, you will smile and laugh as she has the superb capability of inserting a feline character that actually fits into the storyline, adding an additional dimension to the Falgannon Isle series, as well as the other stories she writes." —Beverly Meiner, *Beverly Romance Books*

"With Riding the Thunder*, Deborah Macgillivray does what she does best, putting well-developed characters into extraordinary situations and letting their actions speak for themselves. This one was a page-turner that was hard to put down."*
— Wolff Sorter*, author of* Soul Obsession

"Take a throwback town, a jukebox with a mind of it's own, a community full of unforgettable characters, a fat cat with no name, a tragic love story intermingled with a present day story and you have the makings for a book that you won't want to put down. I fell in love with the characters in this story and wanted a happy ending for each of them. Ms. MacGillivray's storylines do more than give you an escape from reality, they allow you to dream of a world where happily-ever-afters are possible and love conquers all. Beautifully done!" —Chrissy Dionne*, Romance Junkies*





As a reporter for NONE, New Orleans New Eyes, Natalie Severin specialized in the stories no one else would believe. But on a fog-shrouded night in the bayou, she stumbled across something even she found incredible: veterinarian Ram Montgomery. A man with reflexes so lightning quick he could take down three armed opponents, with healing power at the touch of his fingertips, and with eyes that sent a shot of arousal straight through her body.

Uneasy allies on the track of thugs smuggling exotic animals into the country, Natalie and Ram began to sense a more dangerous ring at work in the city. Despite her mistrust of the magic building between them, Natalie would have to put her faith in Ram or become another victim of the smuggler's terrifying secret mission.

Phoenix Unrisen is the story of a man of magic and a woman who exposes the dangerous temptations of power.

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Chapter 1

Face down a crazed hermit with a shotgun? No problem. Sneak in – and safely out – of a satanic cult ritual? Been there, took the video. Get wrapped in a voodoo priestess's boa constrictor? Loved the feel.

Natalie Severin thrived on her work's strange challenges. Except one. Foggy nights. For sheer terror, nothing struck as primal and raw a nerve as fog.

Simply put, Natalie hated fog. The loathing birthed when she was six and locked out of her foster home on a foggy night. It solidified when her twin routinely scared the crap out of her with his cower-beneath-the-covers tales. The way he spun it, fog always concealed something nasty. Fog meant the hunger of a heat-sucking alien or the looming face of a disembodied demon.

New Orleans centered fog was the worst. Born of the pervasive stifling humidity, condensed by the dark waters that entrapped the city and permeated its outskirts, Big Easy fog was a clammy touch on sweaty skin and a distorting silent veil that reeked of rotting vegetation.

So, why, always was it a foggy night when her editor sent her on one of these cock-brained stories? Check it out, Natalie. Lights in the bayou outside the city? Could be an alien infestation.

This world contained a lot of weirdness, but she'd never found a lick of evidence that any of it was caused by aliens.

She hitched her hobo bag more firmly across her sweat-soaked shoulder. The only things infesting this muck were under-age dopers, gators, and swamp gas. She slapped at her bare neck. And mosquitoes.

Thick fog deadened each footfall as the bald spot of a parking lot vanished behind her and she picked her way deeper into the bayou. Tree trunks and saplings surrounded the narrow path in a dense, wet forest, while vines and hanging moss trapped her in the damp vapor. One false step and she'd be knee deep – or worse -- in the black, stagnant waters.

Mist eddied about her boots, covering her ill-defined route. Disoriented, she stopped.

Dampness sucked at her. She tucked a wayward strand of her red hair under her Saints cap and then undid the silk scarf knotted at her waist. Draped over her neck, it offered a thin protection against the ravenous mosquitoes. Pulling her black T-shirt away from her sticky body, she fanned her belly with the hem. Where was her path?

The capricious fog shifted, and a few yards ahead, she spied her target – the cypress tree split by lightning. Bennie had said he'd meet her there A-SAP, lead her to where the lights were moving. She closed the gap, then risking the light, she hit the Indiglo button on her watch. 11:02 PM. Where was Bennie? He said he'd be waiting.

She glanced around, but the infernal fog played its deceptive games, smudging gnarled cypress trees to eerie shadows, hiding movement with its own undulations. Her breath rasped against her teeth, too harsh for the ephemeral, vaporous night. She pressed her lips together, trying to swallow her irrational fear.

Sweat gathered along her spine as she waited beside the damaged tree. There were other routes -- waterways accessible by pirogue, treacherous paths revealed only to those who knew the swampy lands. She was not one of those people. Her forte was the streets, not here. She had to wait for Bennie.

To be honest, she wasn't even sure she could find her way back to the parking lot. The admission crawled up her spine.

Too quiet. Not even the normal sounds of night insects and nocturnal predators, more at home than man in the undomesticated wilds. Beyond the faint drip of fog condensing on leaves and the pulse of blood in her ears, only silence existed, as confining as a casket.

White tendrils of mist wrapped her like frayed tendons. She shifted her feet, trying to break up the hated fog. Alternately concealing, then revealing as it curled along the bayou, fog was confusing and deceptive. It was a lie, a promise of beauty that hid evil.

Like the foggy night she'd found her estranged husband's incinerated remains.

Something cold brushed her arm. She spun, heart knocking against her ribs, and a bone white hand slid out from the fog. Out of her nightmares, it reached for her.

A yelp escaped past her control. She flinched back, and then shook her head to erase her momentary weakness. The hand was not a disembodied demon. It was attached to a moving shadow, physical enough to stir eddies of fog.

She braced her hand on the water proof cypress, settling back into sweaty-palm-edginess, while the shadow solidified into a skinny body. A man. When cavernous cheeks and greedy eyes formed on the ashy face, she let out a breath.

"Bennie! I was beginning to think you'd played me false."

"Keep your voice down. I saw something." His nasal tones grated on her.

"The source of the lights?"

"Nope. A man, p'haps, but he weren't sticking around long enough for me to be sure."

Her terror of the fog buried beneath the scent of story. "You gonna take me to those lights?"

He glanced around, his hands in his pockets jingling the coins.

"Backing out?" she challenged.

"You got the money?"

She pulled an envelope from her hobo bag and handed it to him. He took a quick look inside before shoving it in his back pocket. After another furtive glance around, he motioned for her to follow. "No talking."

Natalie followed, glad she'd worn boots and jeans despite the heat as they picked their way through the sodden ground. Wet branches scraped against her denim-clad legs, and she gave a few more useless swats against the mosquito horde.

Just about the time she was beginning to think Bennie was as lost as she was, he drew up and motioned her to stop. He turned and laid a finger to his lips, an emphatic gesture for her to be quiet. She slid closer, her nose wrinkling as Bennie's rancid odor reached her nostrils. Rotting vegetation was a perfume compared to Bennie.

She peered forward, and then bit back a muffled curse. Dratted fog covered too much. She edged closer to the tiny clearing formed where a couple of trees had fallen.

From the clearing, a beam of white light, strong enough to pierce the fog, blinked twice. Her heart battered against her ribs. Not E.T.'s ship, that was a flashlight. If there were monsters out tonight, they were the human kind.

As if waiting for that signal, the fog parted, at last giving her a clear view.

Two skinheads waited, giggling and sneering at something by their feet, and paying no attention to their surroundings, thank you, Jesus. Dawglip and Kracker were their street names. If those two sorry pieces of humanity were here, their headman, AX, couldn't be far away, and AX was the worst of a real bad bunch.

No fear of the unknown here. This sour taste on her tongue was the credible fear of the known. The fear of soulless cruelty.

Her fingers tightened around her bag strap, and, before the punks saw her, she shifted further behind a tree. Not aliens, not ghosts, not demons. This crew was vicious, crude, and undisciplined, and they didn't give a donkey's ass about the supernatural. If AX was involved, then she was looking at something fricking illegal.

Hoohah, but she had story here! Excitement bubbled like seltzer. Nothing supernatural, but still

something real and potent.

What exactly were the skinheads waiting for? She strained forward, trying to see more. Chances were AX wasn't the brains of whatever was going on. A trickle of breeze moved the fog, and she saw something else – poster-storage-sized tubes stacked at the edge of the black water, where an airboat hulked.

Weird containers for drugs.

A shadow on the far side of the clearing caught her eye. A man, gliding between the cypress as easily as the fog. She caught enough of a glimpse to identify him before he disappeared into the night.

Ramses Montgomery? He was a vet, not a reporter or a cop. Hell and damnation, what was he doing here? And dressed in all black like her – for protection and stealth.

As though Ram ever went about unnoticed. Dawglip and Kracker excepted. Even the deceptive fog hadn't blurred that hard, masculine body or softened the blackness of his hair. She caught another glimpse of him as he angled past a patch of fog. Nor did the stifling air blunt his crackling aura of determination. Suddenly her skin felt too tight to contain the rapid flush of blood.

He was one finely put-together man, a fact recognized by every one of her double-X chromosomes.

Not that she planned on doing anything about it. Her skimpy supply of cautious instincts warned her to stay far away from Ram Montgomery.

For a lot of reasons.

"People shouldn't outghta treat a dog like that," Bennie muttered, drawing her attention back. "Even a stray."

The line of skinheads shifted, and Natalie saw what Bennie meant. Her stomach churned on the pizza she'd had for dinner, burning her throat with cheesy acid.

A dog was tied in place by a ragged rope. A street mutt of no determinable parentage, it stood its ground against the human beasts tossing sticks at it and occasionally striking out with a boot. The beleaguered dog snarled and snapped at its tormentors, but the blood matting the fur, the mangled ear, the heaving chest told a different tale. The dog was losing the fight.

Natalie lunged forward, furious.

Bennie hauled her back, his scrawny arm stronger than she gave him credit. His fingers bit into her cheeks, holding her head still, while his other arm snaked around her shoulders. His knife tip pierced the silk scarf at her throat.

She stilled, even as she saw Ram appear at the far side of the clearing.

"I took a risk bringing you," Bennie hissed. "You wanted to know what caused those lights. Now you do. You ain't gonna finger me. We'll stand here real quietlike, watching, until they leave. Montgomery's on his own. His funeral."

One veterinarian against two amoral toughs? With AX likely joining them real soon? Not favorable odds for the dog's rescue. Or Mongomery's health. She might have some personal issues with Ram Montgomery, but he didn't deserve to be skewered.

She waited for Bennie's knife to waver.

Ram thrust his body between the skinheads and the dog. Kracker let fly with another sharp stick and hit Ram on the cheek. A dark, thin line welled up. Blood.

She flinched in sympathy, her cheek stinging. Ram didn't acknowledge the hit.

The dog pressed its head against Ram's jean clad leg, instinctively turning to the human's protection. With his eyes on the punk duo, Ram reached down and, avoiding the injured ear, scratched the dog's head. Hang on pal. She could almost hear the vet's reassurance.

"Leave the dog alone," he commanded, his voice a low rumble of anger.

Somehow, she didn't think the two would heed the warning. She waited, sweat dripping between her breasts, and drew in a breath of thick, hot air. As he watched the drama unfold, Bennie's knife tip relaxed from her throat. Slowly, she cupped her hands together, then slid them up her chest, shifting energy, drawing power into her arms and legs.

Ram's glanced flicked toward her. Had he seen her? His cheek twitched, the line of blood shifting its slow trickle. "Go," he said.

Was he talking to her or the skinheads?

"Looks to me there's two of us and one of you," sneered Dawglip.

"Take your boat. Leave the dog. And your merchandise."

Dawglip jerked his head to his pal, Kracker. "Bonus tonight. Someone's gonna get hurt."

"Unfortunately," Ram agreed. He gave the dog another pat, and then straightened.

Her heart thumped her ribs, an echo to the dog's tail against the tangled-weed mat. Ever so slightly, she tilted back against Bennie, holding her breath against the stench, and put her throat further from his blade. Gave her hands an opening. Her toes dug deep in her boots.

Ram gave a near imperceptible shake of his head. Though he didn't look at her, something deep in her gut told her he'd seen her and knew what she was about. He was telling her to stay put.

Arrogant, macho –

Ram struck in an unreal blur, so fast and concealed by the fog she couldn't see the motion. Only heard the results. The thud of flesh. The crunch of bone. The curses. The raw scream.

She'd barely blinked and the moment passed.

Kracker cradled his arm. "My hand!"

"That's for the paw." Ram stepped back, breathing controlled, untouched except for the blood on his cheek. Masculine power, leashed, but ready. Retribution in the flesh. He threw their confiscated knives – how in the name of sanity had he gotten those? – into the water, saying to Dawglip, who was moaning and holding the side of his head. "That's for the ear. Go, and don't make me repeat myself."

Dawglip and Kracker scrambled away, slipping on the fog-damp weeds and tripping on knobs of cypress knees.

Behind her, Bennie mumbled a fervent prayer.

Tension knotted in Natalie's stomach. Okay, maybe arrogant and macho were justified adjectives, but that didn't answer the break all barriers question: How the <u>hell</u> had he done that? Maybe it was a martial arts technique she'd never seen – and she'd studied several – but that wasn't what electrified the hairs at the back of her neck. Even the ex-SEAL who'd taught her last women's self defense class hadn't moved that fast. Nobody had those kind of reflexes.

Nobody, apparently, except a Big Easy veterinarian.

Reporter's instincts kicked into overload, throwing each leaf, each drip of water, each labored breath into stark relief. She had uncovered something strange here, the tip of a very odd iceberg.

Despite the excitement, her mouth puckered around a taste of queasiness. A jumble of fears – the fog, the skinheads -- snuck in like maggots in an

abandoned pantry, sly and malodorous.

And the man who was so much more than a simple vet? No, she had have been tricked by the deceptive fog. All that was going on was compressed time.

Time to start doing what she did best – prying.

First things first – the dog, the knife at her throat, the -- oh effing hell! Natalie's jaw froze. AX slid between the trees, gun cradled in his hand. His cronies, courage revived, circled to rejoin him. Ram, crouched beside the injured dog, his hands beginning an expert evaluation, was paying them no mind. He'd no notion of the stalking danger. Too far away for her to reach them.

Bennie leaned over and breathed in her ear. "Move out quietly." His grasp on her relaxed.

Natalie gripped her hands together, tight, and thrust upward and outward, breaking his hold, shoving the knife away from her throat. She jabbed her elbow back, straight into Bennie's abs. Letting her go, he staggered back with a gasped "oof."

"Ram! To your left!" she shouted, sprinting forward.

AX spun toward her voice. She swerved; fortunately, his shot missed.

She'd given Ram the needed seconds. In his hands, a loose branch became a missile. Straight at AX's gun hand.

AX cursed as the weapon spun from his grasp.

Natalie lunged forward, scrambled up with the gun before AX could reclaim it.

Dimly she heard Bennie mutter, "This ain't no good," as he faded away. Like she'd figured, Bennie was into self-preservation.

"Stop!" She trained the gun on AX, arresting his dive. Kracker and Dawglip edged back away.

AX was surprisingly handsome, if you were into smooth, and he gave her a practiced, knowing smile. One that had likely charmed numerous women into ignoring that he also had a reputation for rough sex.

She smiled right back, keeping the weapon steady.

"That's a man's gun," he told her condescendingly. "Not something a little thing like you wants to be experimenting with."

A little thing like her? Oh, please. She was five eight and weighed one forty. "It's a .40 caliber Glock M-27 pstol. Nine rounds in the magazine. Minus the one you aimed at me leaves me with eight. Grip's a bit big for my hand, but I'll manage."

AX's eyes narrowed. Without taking his gaze off her, he commanded. "Kracker, Dawglip, get your sorry asses back here."

"Stay where you are." She gave her own command.

"Damn, but I hate guns," Ram muttered.

"Fortunately, I don't, and, AX, mine's aimed straight at your family jewels. Anything makes me nervous, and you'll have one second to be a man." Mentally she played back her defense class. Two hands. Steady. Oh, Dear Lord keep my hands steady. She refused to swallow against the powder mouth, preferring to keep a steady eye on the target.

Kracker whined. "Let's go, AX, before this turns worse."

AX clenched his fists, biceps flexing, and the mouth of his croc tattoo opened wider. Apparently, though, he had survival instincts, too, especially disarmed. His head tilted, then, glance shifting between her and Ram, he slowly backed away. "C'mon, boys. This ain't over. Til, later. I know who you are, bitch."

Running into the bayou, the trio disappeared into the fog. Natalie chased forward.

"Don't." Ram's quiet command stopped her. "He's still dangerous. And I need your help."

She was going to chase through the fog after three thugs? Not. She joined Ram and sat cross-legged at the dog's side. The pup lay quiet as Ram ran expert, assessing hands across the matted fur. "How is he?"

"She." Ram braced his palms on his thighs. A muscle twitched in his cheek. "Cut up. She's lost a lot of blood. I need to get her back into my office. IV fluids. X-rays –" He bit off the list, then leaned forward and probed at the lump. The dog whined.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"She's still bleeding." His voice cracked, but he affectionately scratched behind the dog's ear. Trying to keep the dog soothed, she realized.

"Bad?"

"Real bad."

After the effort of a whine, the dog lay limp and motionless. Natalie's jaw tightened. Dammit, they would not lose this innocent dog. She yanked off her silk scarf and thrust it at him. "You can use this to bind her."

He shook his head, not looking at her. "The bleeding's internal."

"Do something!"

With a determined move, he laid one of his hands against the bump, while the other grasped a raw pink gem attached to a steel-link neck chain. "Give her a name."

"What?"

"A name!" he snapped.

"Val. For a valiant heart."

"Okay, Val, we're going to try something different." His mesmerizing voice softened until she heard nothing but an indistinct chant.

She started to protest. They had to leave, had to do something. The dog could not wait.

"I know what I'm doing, Natalie," he warned, not looking at her. "Keep petting her for me."

Her mouth snapped shut. She hated feeling helpless, but he was definitely the one in charge when it came to healing animals. Laying the gun on the ground, she petted the dog's head.

Her world narrowed to the rise and fall of Val's chest, to the silkiness of the fur beneath the crusted blood. Val's dark eyes fixed on her, as their brave light faded.

Tears ran down her cheeks in a salty heat. She blinked them back, swallowing a sob. "We're losing her."

Ram's only answer was a quick shake of his head.

He was wasting time! The need to act scorched across her muscles, but something in Ram's steady confidence held her in place. Dampness seeped through her jeans, and a cypress knot jabbed her knee, but she stayed at her job. The urgent hum inside her found release only in petting and soothing Val.

Whatever Ram was doing had better work.

"Put one of your hands on mine," he ordered, not looking at her.

"Why?"

"Just do it!"

She complied, one hand atop his, one hand stroking Val. The dog felt clammy. The man's strong hand was hot.

Abruptly, the fog thickened, gathering and pulsing around the locus of their hands. The hairs of her arm stood on end, as though electrified. Dense with humidity, the fog condensed when it touched her fevered skin. Droplets of water slid down her arms, dripping onto Val's fur one by one.

They were encased, bound in wet white. She could see nothing except a gleam of golden fur and a shimmer of pink at Ram's throat. The muscles of his arms and legs, the black of his shirt stretched across his chest, the untidy dark hair, the strong neck as he bent and focused.

His voice – low, mesmerizing, inexplicable in words, undeniable in power – drew the fog in a bandaging shroud. Without explanation, he placed Natalie's palm on the dog's wither and let go of the gem. His hands painted fog across Val's fur. One pass,he brushed across Natalie's knuckles. Not an erotic touch, not at this moment, yet the touch was as compelling as deep down familiar as the caress of a treasured lover.

Her heart raced, and her breath came in gulps. Reaction to the man? Hatred of the encompassing fog? Fear for the beaten Val? She couldn't tell; the strands intertwined, inseparable and inevitable. Only her worry over Val kept her from fleeing the power of the fog and the man.

"Just a little longer, girl," Ram murmured. "Be strong."

The encompassing fog began to undulate. Gradually it picked up speed until it flowed across Natalie's hands like a river. Hot and cold, energizing, soothing. Moisture penetrated her skin, reaching deep into sinew and cell. It washed away the cramp in her fingers and the ache in her arm.

What the hell?

A faint vibration tickled beneath her knees. A gator passing in the nearby waters? An airboat out hunting? The vibration grew, from the heart of the earth, shaking her teeth with its rumbling power. She clamped her jaw together, fighting, until it peaked, then faded. As if waiting for that cue, the fog broke apart, moving off them and thinning to wisps.

Val gave a weak bark and licked Natalie's hand with a rough tongue. Natalie jerked back, the uncertain ground shifting beneath her. Her gaze fixed on Ram. He stared not at the dog, but at her, his hands outstretched. In supplication? Pain? Power?

In warning?

Thin threads of horror wrapped around her throat like a garrote. If only the simple act of silence could vanquish the impossible.

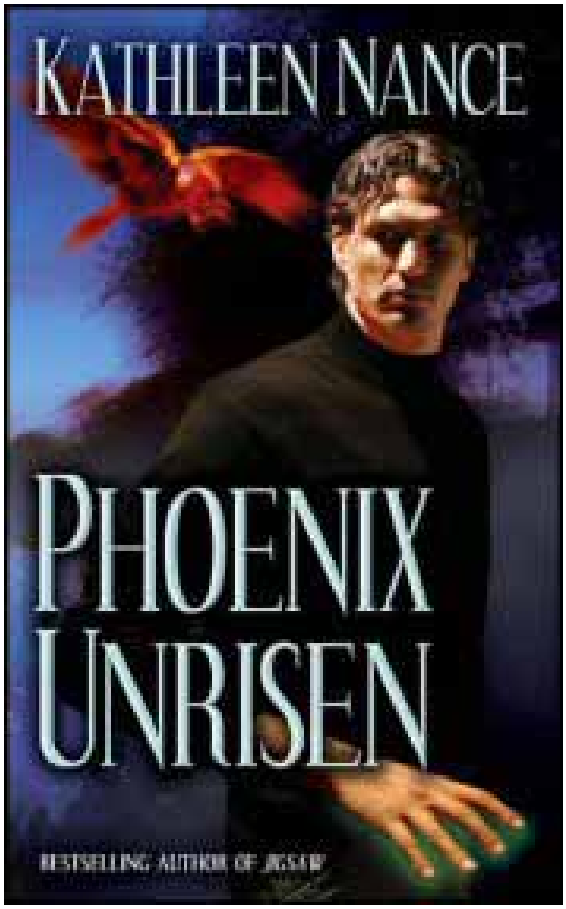
The dog got up and gave a tentative shake, then another, stronger, bark.

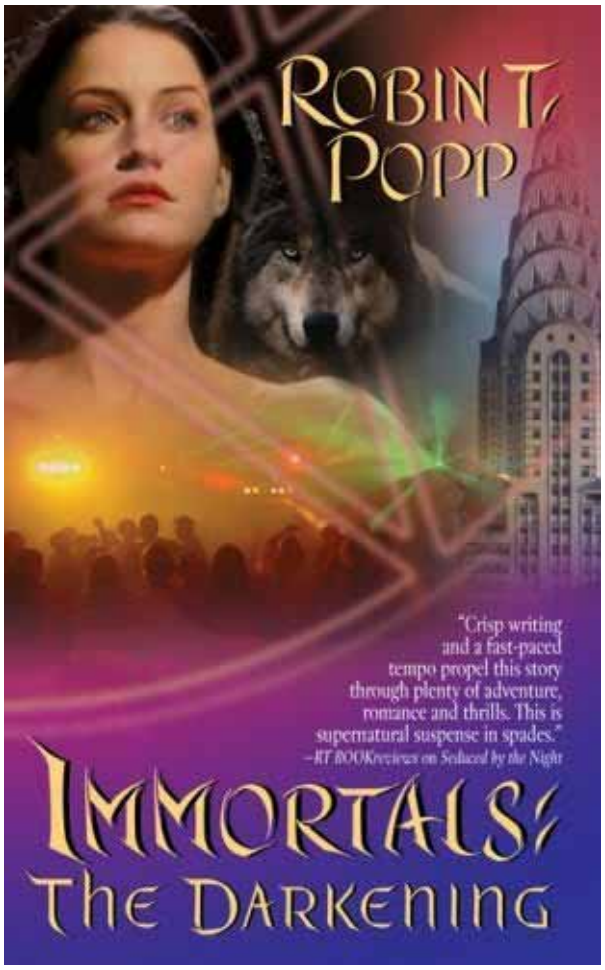
Val's fur was still blood-caked, but the mangled ear was straight. The lump had settled.

Gone was the specter of death.

The dog was healed.

For more on Kathleen Nance, visit her website at www.kathleennance.com





Immortals: The Darkening
A werewolf and bounty hunter, Lexi is badass to the bone. She has no problem protecting herself in the seedy vampire clubs of Manhattan. Until the Immortal she tries to summon actually appears. It isn't the intricate tattoos around his well-defined muscles that intimidate her; it is the raw power she sees shimmering in his golden eyes, power mingled with lust. Though she longs to give in to the pleasure he promises, they first have a curse to break, a brother to find, and a legion of vampires to prevent from joining…*The Darkening*.

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Chapter 1

So this is death.

The irony was not lost on Darius as flashes of brilliant light blinded him and pain drove him to his knees. With one hand braced against the tiled floor of the balcony, the other clutched his stomach as every nerve burned with a blistering intensity. He fought to stay conscious while nonexistent shards of glass pierced his skull.

There was powerful magic at work here—living magic that, perversely, was killing him.

"Sekhmet!" he roared. This was her fault. If his patron goddess hadn't removed his life force, the Calling spell would have transported him painlessly to wherever he was needed. Earth must be in dire straits if humans had broken a seven-hundred-year silence to Call the Immortals.

He fought the pull of the spell, drawing on his own power until he felt it rippling along his skin, causing his tattoos to lift and morph briefly into the items they represented before turning into images once more.

Whitley!" If Sekhmet wouldn't answer him, maybe her priest would. Gritting his teeth against the onslaught of ever-increasing pain, he fell into a sitting position and wrapped his arms around himself to keep from being ripped apart.

Then, as suddenly as the attack started, it ended. Slowly the pain in his head faded, and he opened his eyes. Bright light blinded him, but he quickly realized it was merely the sun shining overhead. As his eyes adjusted, the rest of his surroundings came into view— the clear blue sky, the lush green woods on each side of the sapphire-blue water of Lake Pax. Darius studied the flight of a snow-white hawk as it flew low across the water, searching just below the water's surface for its next meal.

Ravenscroft—his home—was beautiful, and yet its beauty was lost on him.

At the sound of running footsteps, he pushed himself to his feet.

"Darius, I heard you cry out." Whitley hurried to him, putting a hand under his elbow for support. "Are you all right?"

"It appears I'll live," Darius muttered, repeating a joke that was so old it had ceased to be funny.

"What happened?" Whitley ran a critical gaze over him, as if he needed to reassure himself that Darius really was okay.

"It was a Calling spell," he said. "A very strong one. There must have been many witches working together on it." He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to ease some of the tension.

Whitley looked stricken. "Without your life force, you could have been killed."

Darius grimaced but said nothing.

"It's a good thing you were able to break their hold," Whitley commented.

"I didn't," Darius answered, remembering the way the living magic had suddenly been cut off. "Something interfered with the spell."

"A demon?"

"If there's a demon out there powerful enough to stand up against that much magic, no wonder they need the Immortals," Darius said thoughtfully. He paused to give his next words emphasis. "I can't ignore this."

"There's no way she'll let you leave," Whitley said.

"I'm not asking her for permission." Giving the priest's shoulder a gentle squeeze, he turned and strode back into the palatial building that was his home.

His mother, a favorite of Re's when the Egyptian god had ruled the world, was known for her

fiery temper as well as her power for healing, which made her unpredictable at times. *Most of the time*, he amended. "Sekhmet!" Darius hollered, storming through the great hall. He headed for his mother's audience chamber, slamming through the gigantic double doors that dwarfed even his 6'5" frame.

At the far end was the low dais upon which his mother's throne chair sat—empty. Behind it, the backlit waterfall filled the room with the soft glow of light and the soothing sounds of running water that did little to calm his nerves.

Looking around, he willed her to appear. "Damn it," he growled when she didn't. There was no telling what problems the delay was causing on Earth. Ravenscroft did not exist in the same dimension as Earth; therefore, ten minutes to him could be days by Earth's standard. Given the strength of that Calling spell, he didn't think Earth had the luxury of time.

Unable to quell the sense of urgency pressing in on him, Darius paced back and forth in his mother's audience chamber, impotent rage seething beneath the surface of his otherwise calm facade. After several hours, he finally felt the shimmer of power behind him and turned to see his patron goddess materialize on her throne. Though she was centuries older, she appeared to be as young as Darius, and her beauty never failed to take his breath away. Today she was wearing a long, flowing aquamarine gown, cut low to show off her ample bosom—and around her neck she wore her diamond necklace, from which hung a simple golden orb that radiated such brilliance it could have housed the sun. In truth, it housed something far more precious to Darius.

"Where have you been?" he demanded without preamble, his eyes on the orb.

"I'm fine, thank you for asking," she said coolly.

"I'm needed on Earth," he continued. "It's urgent, so if you'll just restore my life essence . . ."

Her green eyes sparkled with the temper Darius knew too well. "It's a sad day when a son can't even be civil to his mother."

Darius bit back his snarl. "Good evening, Mother," he said with exaggerated politeness. "I must say, you are looking spectacularly beautiful today, as you do every day. Your smile brings sunshine to an otherwise dark and dismal existence. The songbirds' sweetest melody pales in comparison to your—"

"Stop—before I forget how much I love you," she warned. "I was with my sisters when you bellowed for me—and didn't feel like abandoning them so abruptly. They still mourn the loss of your brothers."

Darius heaved a sigh. "They aren't dead, Mother."

"They might as well be," she replied hotly. "To stay on Earth, fornicating with human females and pursuing other hedonistic activities . . . too busy, even, to pay Ravenscroft a visit." She paused, shaking her head. "It's enough to break a mother's heart."

Darius rubbed his head. It was the same old argument. "They're grown men. They're entitled to live however and wherever they want." He couldn't help wondering whether his brothers had felt the spell. Where exactly were Adrian and Tain, Kalen and Hunter? Had they abandoned their new lifestyles to answer the summoning? "No matter how misguided their choices might be," he added, because defending his brothers was not going to make Sekhmet more sympathetic to his request. "I, on the other hand, am very aware of my duties and responsibilities, which is why I summoned you. There's trouble on Earth. I've been Called."

"What?" He was relieved to hear the alarm in her voice. "But you're still here."

"My body is bound to my life essence. You know that as long as you wear that orb around your neck, I can't leave."

She seemed to relax. "Good." She held out her hand and he took it, helping her to rise and step off the dais. "Shall we dine?"

"What?" He let go of her hand, surprised. "Didn't you hear what I said? There's trouble on Earth. I need to leave."

Irritation crossed her face. "You're needed here."

He stared at her in disbelief. "For what?"

She had continued walking to the doorway that led into the dining hall, but seeing that he was no longer following her, she was forced to stop and look at him.

"Really, Mother," he pressed before she could say anything, "Ravenscroft is not exactly a hotbed of demon activity. There's not a breath of death magic in the entire realm."

"Don't be ridiculous," she scoffed. "Just because there are no demons doesn't mean you can't train."

"What do you think I've been doing for the past seven hundred years? I've done nothing but train— relentlessly—so that when I'm finally *Called*, I'll be prepared." He took a step forward. "Now, for the last time, restore my life essence."

"No."

He stood there, staring after her as she turned and continued to the doorway. "Why are you doing this?" he asked when he'd recovered his voice.

She stopped again and looked at him. "I don't want you to end up like your brothers."

He was so angry he had to clench his fists tightly to keep from doing something he'd regret. He fought to make his voice even. "I am not like my brothers."

She stared at him, her expression as fierce and unyielding as the lioness she was so often depicted to be.

He shook his head. "You're unbelievable. You'd let everyone on Earth suffer, so long as *you* get what *you* want."

"Do *not* try to make me feel guilty," she shouted, sparks of anger shooting from her emerald-colored eyes. "I will protect what is mine. When Re's life was in danger, did the Nile not run red with the blood of those I slew to protect him? Do you think I care about the lives of a few mortals compared to that of my only son? No, you will stay here—with me."

Her gaze burned with an intensity Darius had witnessed only a couple of times before, and though he knew she loved him, he also knew that she meant what she said. She was never going to let him leave. Ever. With his freedom went his entire purpose for being. His life stretched out before him—bleak, desolate, and never-ending. He would spend the rest of his immortal life training for a battle he'd never fight, go to bed every night with no reason to wake up the next morning, pray for an end to his imprisonment that would never come. Even paradise could be hell if you were stuck there long enough.

Walking up to Sekhmet, he placed his hands on her arms and gazed deeply into her eyes. "Mother, there are two things you should know. I love you as only a son can love his mother. And I would rather die than be stuck in this prison of yours for all eternity." Then, in a move born of desperation, he yanked the orb from around her neck. Ignoring her cry of pain, he hurled it against the far wall with all his might, hoping if he destroyed the orb he could end his life.

The orb shattered against the wall with a burst of blinding light. Darius was barely conscious of Sekhmet's gasp as he waited for his life to end. The golden light drifted across the room toward him, spiraling slowly until it formed a thin coil that eventually took the shape of a long, narrow serpent.

As it drew closer, the serpent began to twist about in the air, chasing itself in a figure-eight pattern until it finally caught its own tail.

Darius glanced at Sekhmet and saw her face turn ashen. He knew right away that something was wrong, but before he could do anything, the coiled golden serpent touched his skin just over his

heart.

Tendrils of power spread out and gripped him, growing stronger every second, pulling him. His mind started clouding over until he was barely aware of his surroundings. He was aware of shouting in the background, but he couldn't make out his mother's words.

Almost beside him, a pinpoint of white light appeared and quickly grew. He recognized it as a portal and felt himself being drawn inexorably toward it.

"No!" his mother screamed, though he could barely make out her words. "Not this way. It must be restored . . . vulnerable ...must protect . . ." Her frantic voice faded, now sounding like it was coming from a far distance. "In ...physical love ...find ... pleasure ...forget ..."

Sekhmet's spell died in her throat and she found herself alone in the audience chamber, staring at the spot where her beloved Darius had stood seconds before.

"Darius," she shouted. "I summon you to appear before me." She held her breath and waited, her heart pounding. When he did not appear, she felt an icy fear grip her. His immortal life force had not been properly restored, and he was as close to being mortal as he'd never been before. It was why Ravenscroft had expelled him.

"Whitley," she called. She knew she had to do something to warn Darius about his vulnerability, and she was hoping her levelheaded priest would help. She paced the floor, considering her options. She couldn't go herself—Re had made sure of that before he lost his powers—but once she explained the situation to Whitley, he might agree to let her send him back in a dream.

She heard the running footsteps of the man who had been her lover for thousands of years. It was ironic that she, a goddess feared by mortals and deities alike, would be afraid of the reaction of this particular man.

She quickly rehearsed what she'd tell him, stopping when she got to the part about the unfinished spell. Whitley, being a man, would not understand a mother's need to protect her child from the lure of sex.

How much of her spell had touched Darius before he vanished? Worse still, what would the ramifications be of the incomplete spell?

"Mistress, are you all right?" Whitley rushed into the room. When he saw she was alone, he dropped the pretense of being a mere priest and came to her, enfolding her in his arms. "What is it, my love?"

"Darius is gone. He broke the orb and was expelled to Earth."

"It's okay," Whitley consoled her. "He must protect the humans."

"No, it's not okay," she told him. "His life essence didn't absorb into his soul as it should have. Instead, it drew on his unique brand of magic and turned into a tattoo. He's lost his immortality, and there's no telling how it may affect the rest of his powers."

"And he's just gone to Earth where a powerful evil is waiting for him." Whitley scowled at her, and she bowed her head in shame.

"It's my fault," she said miserably. "I only wanted to protect him."

"Call him back," Whitley ordered.

"I can't—I tried," she replied.

He glared at her. "Then send me back to Earth so I can warn him."

Doing so would make Whitley mortal again, and she couldn't bear to lose both her men. But it warmed her heart to know he was willing to sacrifice his immortality for their son. "There might be another way, if you're willing to help."

"Of course I'll help. What do you need me to do?"

She quickly explained her idea, but when she finished, she found she couldn't look him in the

eyes.

Whitley was never one to push, so he remained silent and patiently waited for her to continue. Finally, she took a breath and looked up into his face, genuine tears in her eyes. "There might be one other problem."

The blaring noise of the alarm roused Lexi Corvin from a deep slumber, and she awoke feeling drugged and irritable. She wanted to rip the offending timepiece from the wall and toss it through the window of her fifth-story apartment, but knew she couldn't afford to keep buying new clocks—or replacing windowpanes. So, instead, with great restraint, she merely slammed her hand down on the snooze button to quiet the obnoxious noise.

Resisting the urge to go back to sleep, she cracked open her eyes and found herself squinting against the bright sunlight slipping through the curtains, giving the room a disgustingly cheery warmth that was at complete odds with her mood.

The week before a full moon was always hard on werewolves. Their animal side grew stronger, and they had an urgent need to foster reproduction. Translated into human terms, it meant she was bitchy *and* horny.

If she had still been living in upstate New York with her pack, she would have simply shifted to wolf form and spent the next week hunting prey and frolicking with the available males. That wasn't really an option anymore, now that she lived in the city. She had bills to pay, food to buy. That took money, and people who took off a week or two each month to be a "wolf" didn't hold jobs very long. She wanted to keep her job. It was the first one she'd had that particularly suited her. Bounty hunter.

Shoving back the covers, she dragged herself out of bed. She took a couple of minutes to stretch, trying to loosen muscles that had become tight and sore after chasing down four skips the day before. Crime in the city was up by staggering numbers, which meant business was good.

She crossed the bedroom and turned on the TV, flipping through the channels until she found the news. Lately, it was more depressing than ever. The world— or at least her little corner of the Big Apple—was going to hell in the proverbial handbasket. Just last night there'd been another gang fight in Central Park, leaving five teenagers dead and another three seriously injured. In Murray Hill, a venerable neighborhood filled with old money, a fourteen-year-old boy had gone berserk and shot his parents and younger sister before turning the gun on himself. Down in Soho, a man had stabbed his girlfriend multiple times following an argument, killing both her and their unborn child. Plus, five more people were mysteriously missing—making a total of twenty-three in the last four weeks. The police had no more clues now about how the different people were related or what had happened to them than they did after the first disappearances. The number of random street muggings was up, as were the number of rapes, and the police were advising everyone to stay inside after dark—much to the annoyance of the local nightclub owners, who were fighting back by offering nightly specials.

Lexi flipped the station and watched a reporter standing outside the mayor's office giving an update on the rumor that the city officials were debating on calling in the National Guard to patrol the streets both day and night. But New York wasn't the only city suffering, and the National Guard was already stretched thin. Lexi shook her head and turned to yet another channel, this time finding a TV evangelist asking his congregation to petition their government for stricter Conversion Laws because he felt the number of vampires in town had dramatically risen in the last six months.

She turned off the TV and walked into the bathroom. Had she really thought that by moving to the city she'd escaped the raw animal violence that came from living with the pack? It seemed she'd only traded it for a new, darker kind of violence—though she couldn't remember it being this

bad five years ago. Only recently, as far as she could recall.

She stood in front of the mirror and gazed at her reflection. The light gray eyes staring back at her looked tired. She'd let her friend Heather talk her into going to a special meeting last night. Like Lexi, Heather was a witch, but while Lexi preferred to operate on her own, Heather belonged to a group called the Coven of Light. They had stayed up too late, listening to the members discuss possible strategies for dealing with this dire outbreak of crime. The coven believed the growing problems were the work of a powerful demon, who was upsetting the delicate balance of living magic and death magic.

Lexi didn't know who this all-powerful demon was, and frankly, she found it hard to believe the coven's predictions of doom and gloom if the Big Bad wasn't stopped. Like most magical creatures, she'd learned the basic laws of physics at an early age. The world was comprised of two types of magic: living and death. The natural state was for both magics to exist in balance.

The Coven of Light witches were convinced that the Big Bad was somehow going to eradicate all living magic, even if it meant the world would be destroyed as a result.

Weeks ago, Heather had told Lexi about Amber Silverthorne, a witch in Seattle who had an encounter with the Big Bad while investigating the murder of her sister. She'd almost died too, but then some warrior called an Immortal had suddenly appeared to protect her.

At that point in the story Lexi had almost walked out on her friend. Was she supposed to believe the Immortals existed? Please. Demons trying to take over the world? Immortals? Myths and legends. Then again, people once thought werewolves and witches were just stories too.

She picked up a brush and started working the tangles from her long black hair.

Lexi would have dismissed the whole story as nonsense, but Heather had never lied to her, and she could see for herself the death magic increasing in strength.

When the coven found out the demon was being aided by one of the five Immortals, the members decided the only way for it to be stopped would be to hold a Calling and summon the other brothers to help. Heather had begged Lexi to participate. They needed as much living magic power as possible to make the spell work. Still not one-hundred-percent convinced, Lexi had nevertheless agreed.

To her amazement, the spell had almost worked. She'd caught a brief glimpse of at least one of the other Immortals in her scrying flame. Unfortunately, the spell had also Called the rogue brother, Tain, who appeared on the scene with the Big Bad at his side and helped break the spell before any of the other three Immortals could materialize.

Lexi put the brush down and held up her hands to look at the palms. Fire was her medium for casting spells, and that night of the Calling, she'd had to hold a fireball in her hands for longer than ever before. In the end, all she'd had to show for her effort were first-degree burns across her palms and fingers. But now, a week later, the only evidence of her participation was a slight pinkish tint to her skin where the burns had healed.

Last night's meeting had shown her that the witches were feeling at a loss as to what to do next. They'd played their ace and lost.

Lexi still wanted to find some way to help, but right now she had some big bads of her own to tackle. Working her waist-length hair into a braid, she secured the end with a hair fastener. When she finished, she pulled off her nightshirt that read "F*** You and Your Anger Management Class" and pulled on her working uniform of a black leather sleeveless shirt, pants, and Dockers. The outfit was comfortable to work in, but, even more importantly, she knew it made her look tough. A lot of times, taking down a skip was as much about psychology as it was sheer speed and strength.

As she prepared to leave her apartment, she felt the prickle of pent-up magic along her arms. She'd need to visit Ricco soon to help her siphon off some of it before the buildup of magical energy

killed her—not that she'd ever let it get that bad. She smiled at the thought of all the wonderful ways the dark-haired, blue-eyed vampire gang leader had "helped" her before. Ah, Ricco.

Heaving a sigh, she left her apartment. Outside, she discovered a beautiful, clear May morning with just enough of a breeze that in the shade, one could actually catch a chill. She let the sun warm her and took in the bustling neighborhood. Hell's Kitchen in the morning was a place unlike any other.

She walked along the sidewalk, listening to the chatter of people on their cell phones as they hurried about their business. The smell of fresh-baked breads and pastries mingled with gas fumes from passing cars. Over the din of traffic, she heard the distant blare of a cruise ship's horn as it pulled out of dock. At the corner, she waited for the traffic light to change before crossing to the other side, where she stopped at her favorite kolache shop to grab a bite to eat. By the time she reached the office of Blackwell Bail Bonds, she was in a better mood.

"Morning, Marge," she greeted the secretary at the front desk. Then she crossed her arms across her chest and gave the petite older woman a reproving glare. "I thought you were going to quit?"

"I quit last night, honey," Marge said in her deep, gravelly voice. She took another drag off the remaining half-inch of her cigarette. "It worked so well, I might try it again tonight."

Lexi shook her head. "Those things'll kill you, you know."

"Yeah, well, at my age, there's not much point in giving up something I enjoy." She exhaled a puff of smoke and coughed a couple of times. "What's going on with you? You look like shit this morning."

"Late night," Lexi said evasively, not bothering to elaborate when Marge raised her eyebrows. She wasn't sure Marge would believe her if she told her some super-demon was trying to destroy the world. "Who are we going after today?" she asked, pulling the top case file from her in-box. She was hoping for a difficult rundown, or maybe someone who would resist arrest so she'd have an excuse to rough them up just a little. Such things were frowned upon, but she would relish a bit of a fight just to work off her frustration—sexual and otherwise.

She opened the file and read over the case. "You're kidding me, right?" She waved the file in the air. "This is a fucking fairy. I'm not going after him."

Marge tsk'd at her in disapproval. "Such language."

Lexi tossed the file back in her box and cocked her head in apology. "I'm sorry. Let me rephrase. I'm not going after that fucking *leprechaun*." She looked at the other in-box and plucked out the top file resting there. "What kind of skips does TJ have?"

TJ was the other bounty hunter at Blackwell. He was a year or two older than she was and six feet of pure muscle. Behind that muscle was a keen intellect, which made him deadly for a human. Despite her werewolf abilities, Jonathan Blackwell still typically assigned the tougher cases to TJ.

She opened the file. "Maurice Gonzales. Charges of spousal abuse. Seven priors. Substance abuser." She glanced at Marge over the top of the file. "I'm taking this one."

"Lexi, you know the rules. Jonathan assigns the cases, and he specifically gave that one to TJ."

"It's not fair," Lexi said. "The leprechaun's a lush. He's probably passed out somewhere. He'll be easy to find, and he's so tiny that TJ can carry him in a backpack."

"If you don't like the cases you're assigned, you'll need to take it up with Jonathan." Marge's scratchy voice was firm as she stood up and came around the desk. Taking the file from Lexi, she set it back in TJ's box. "All I know is that I put it in TJ's box. Now, if you'll excuse me."

"Where are you going?"

"If you must know, that coffee went right through me. Have a good day," she hollered over her shoulder as she headed for the bathroom in the back.

Lexi's gaze found the coffee mug sitting on the desk, looking shiny and clean. She glanced over to the coffee machine and saw the carafe, sitting empty and dry on a hot plate Lexi would bet was cool to the touch. She smiled to herself and pulled the leprechaun's file from her in-box and placed it in TJ's box. She grabbed the Gonzales case, quickly thumbed through its contents, then dashed out before Marge came back.

Gonzales's apartment was only about a twenty-minute walk down to the far west part of 37th street. This close to the river, the buildings tended toward warehouses. Its emptiness gave it a bit of a spooky feel, even in broad daylight. Not surprisingly, Gonzales lived in a building where security was nonexistent. The lock on the front door was broken, so there was nothing to stop her from going straight to his apartment.

The young woman who answered held the door ajar and looked out warily. There were fresh bruises around her jaw and right eye that didn't completely hide the discoloration of her older bruises. She looked like she didn't weigh more than a hundred pounds soaking wet, and Lexi wondered what kind of scum her husband was to beat her up. She was almost eager to give him a try at someone who could fight back.

"I'm looking for Maurice Gonzales," Lexi said. "Is he in?" She tried not to appear too obvious as she looked past the woman's shoulder into the apartment.

"Who are you?"

"I'm from the bail bond agency. He missed his court appearance, so I'm here to take him back to jail."

It was hard to miss the look of surprise that crossed the woman's face. "He won't go. I tried to remind him the other day and . . ." She gave a small shrug, but Lexi didn't need her to finish the sentence. Her bruises told the story for her.

"I understand your concern, but I think he'll find I can be very...persuasive."

"He's very strong," the woman cautioned.

"Stronger than a werewolf?" Lexi asked, smiling when the woman's eyes opened wide in surprise.

A slow, tentative smile appeared across the woman's face. "Maybe not." She glanced behind her at the small boy playing with toys in the middle of the room before turning back to Lexi. "If you take him to jail, how long will he be there?"

"That depends on whether I think there's a chance he'll run again. If I do, he could be there until his new court date—which could be several weeks from now."

"Several weeks would give me time to pack up and leave." The woman stopped talking while she thought about it. "If I tell you where he is," she said finally, "will you call and tell me when he's in jail?"

Lexi nodded. "I will."

"Big John's Ice House."

Lexi smiled. The day was looking up. She thanked the young woman, got her phone number, then left. Big John's wasn't more than five blocks away.

Inside, the bar was more crowded than she would have liked since it was almost lunchtime, but she spotted Gonzales immediately.

He was sitting at a table with several other men, playing cards. Despite the dim lighting, she saw he had stringy, dark, shoulder-length hair and a jagged scar across his left cheek. When he held up his cards, she saw the prison tats across his fingers.

Lexi thought about her strategy. According to his case file, he was a little taller than her own 5'10", and he outweighed her by a good fifty pounds. She had a couple of options for taking him in—all of which would be easier if she could get him someplace by himself.

Stepping behind a floor-to-ceiling column, she unbuttoned the top couple of buttons of her shirt and pulled the band from her hair, letting it cascade down her back. Under the circumstances, it was the best she could do to soften her appearance.

Stepping up to the bar, she ordered a drink. As she waited, she passed her gaze over the room, making sure to linger on Gonzales until he saw her. When their eyes met, she gave him the barest hint of a smile and then kept looking around the room, making sure she looked at Gonzales at least once more before turning her attention to the drink the bartender handed her.

She pretended to daintily sip it, though she had no intention of drinking anything from this place. After a minute, she rose and, throwing one last shy smile at Gonzales, walked out of the bar. If she were lucky, Gonzales would take the bait and follow her out.

She walked slowly to the end of the building and stopped to wait. Just when she was about to give up and go to Plan B, the door to the bar opened and Gonzales stepped out. She saw him look around, and, spotting her, he gave a big smile. His teeth were heavily stained from tobacco use, and she wasn't sure he'd ever seen a dentist. She had to work hard to keep disgust from showing on her face.

As he came toward her, she eased around the corner. There was a narrow gravel driveway that led to a parking area behind the warehouse next door, and she walked along it, hearing Gonzales's hurried footsteps as he came after her. Briefly she listened for sounds of anyone walking nearby who might feel compelled to interfere.

The hand on her arm pulling her to a stop came sooner than she expected. He must be eager, which suited her fine. The sooner she put him behind bars, the better everyone would feel. Schooling her features, she turned and gave him an innocent smile.

"Someone as pretty as you shouldn't be in this part of town by herself," he said. "Maybe I should make sure you get home safely. Or, better yet, how about you and me go someplace we can get to know one another better?" His breath hit her in the face like a wet, moldy blanket, making her want to gag.

Instead, she laughed. "Not if you were the last man on Earth."

The grip on her arm grew painfully tighter as he yanked her forward. If she'd been a normal human female, she might have been in real trouble.

"Someone needs to teach you some manners," he growled.

"I know you don't mean you. Now—Let. Go. Of. Me." She enunciated the words, wanting to make sure there was no miscommunication, but she couldn't help adding with a mumble, "You stupid fuck."

He stared at her as if he couldn't believe what she'd said. As the comment finally registered, she saw him get mad. *About damn time.* She had a full second to brace for the impact when he backhanded her.

The blow was still hard enough to knock her head to one side and split open her lip. As pain lanced through her, she felt the wolf in her rise. She was dangerously close to shifting, but she managed to keep everything except her eyes from changing.

"What the hell ...?" He sounded confused.

Maurice Gonzales," she recited quietly, dabbing the blood from her lip with a finger, "my name is Lexi Corvin and I'm a registered bail enforcement agent. You missed your court appointment and jumped bond. I'm taking you in."

He jerked back as if he'd been hit. "Fuck that." He turned, but before he could run, she grabbed his collar and hauled him back.

He swung his arm in a wild punch she easily ducked. She fisted her free hand and hit him back as hard as she could. But he was a big man and didn't go down easily. Fueled by rage, he

wrenched free and began pummeling her face and stomach with his meaty fists.

She did her best to ignore the pain and lashed out at him again, first hitting him with several quick jabs to the chest followed by a roundhouse kick to his kidneys.

She may have crossed the line of ethics in luring her skip into a fight, but her sense of justice couldn't pass up the opportunity to beat the crap out of a man who liked to hit women.

Lexi felt Maurice starting to tire, but before she could deliver the final blow, a sudden explosion of light off to the side flashed so bright Lexi had to close her eyes. A shock wave rippled outward, buffeting her with enough force that she had to fight to keep her balance.

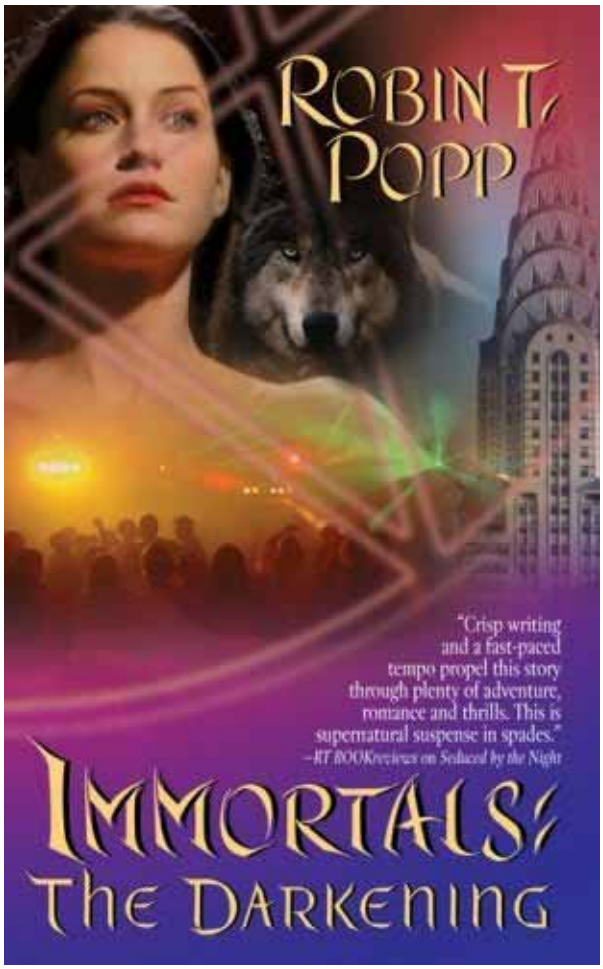
When she dared to open her eyes, a concentration of smoke or mist was starting to disperse, and in the middle of it stood the figure of a man.

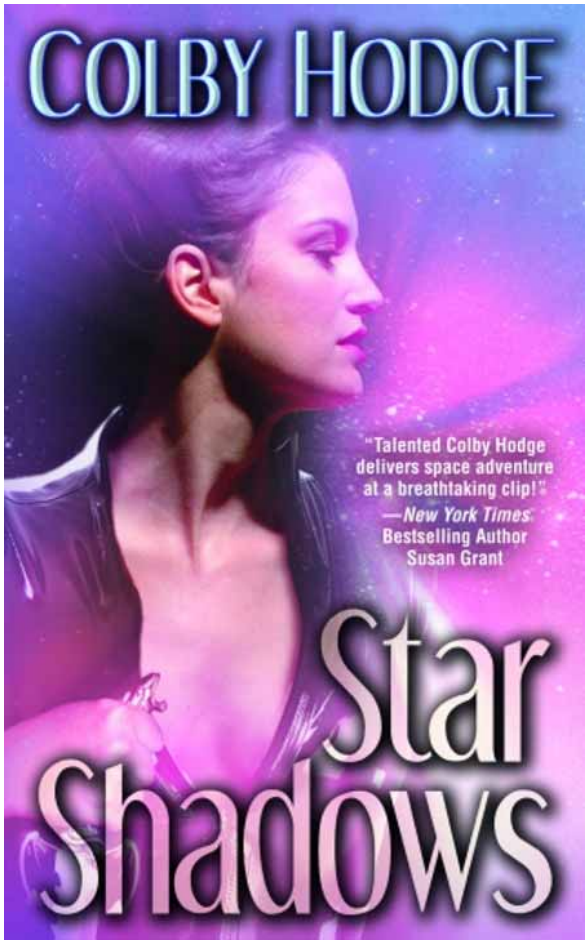
He was a giant, with dark, unruly hair that fell almost to the collar of his sleeveless black duster, which hung open in front, revealing well-muscled arms and chest, both covered with tattoos.

His black leather pants hugged slim hips and muscular legs—and his boots seemed to be of a style much older than any Lexi had seen.

His striking features seemed familiar to her, and it was with a sudden shock that she remembered where she'd seen him before: during the Calling. He had appeared briefly in her scrying flame. At the time, his face had been distorted in pain, but there was no doubt. This was an Immortal.

To read more from Robin Popp, visit her website at www.robintpopp.com





He was the only man she ever loved and the one she held responsible for her brother's death. So when Boone's star ship is shot down, Elle resolves to forget about him and to devote herself to her duty as the future ruler of Oasis. Until one day when she witnesses two warriors facing each other down and realized they could be her missing brother, and her missing lover. Here were the two men she thought lost to her forever and one last chance to save them. It was up to Elle to reclaim the love that once seemed as elusive as Star Shadows.

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Chapter One

It was one of those days that it hurt to be alive. The beauty of it inspired you to live life to the fullest. But it also made you feel as if you could die from it.

At least on the inside.

Arielle Phoenix, one day short of her eighteenth birthday, looked at her twin brother Alexander and grinned.

"How long before they figure out we've escaped?" she asked.

Zander shrugged as if to say he didn't care and flashed a grin of his own. Elle grabbed onto the back of their friend Boone's shirt with a shriek as he kicked the jet cycle off the ground and set off over the waves.

Zander was right behind them as they headed straight out to sea and hopefully out of sight distance of the villa that hung on the side of the dormant volcano. The "borrowed" jet cycles hovered just over top of the waves, kicking up spray as the ocean rolled beneath them, revealing swirl-ing colors of bright blues, shimmering greens and the purest aqua.

A pod of dolphins joined them as they headed towards a small spit of sand and coral that only appeared at low tide. It was another remnant of a volcano, one that had long ago caved into the sea leaving behind a veritable garden beneath the glass-like surface.

Elle moved her arm up and down as if she were skimming it over the waves. The dolphins swam closer, racing beside them, jumping over the wake fanning out behind the jet cycles and then diving beneath the surface, only to come up again in a race against the humans.

Elle didn't understand how she could speak to the dolphins. She just knew that they, somehow, understood each other. The dolphins tossed their heads with a smile and agreed to join them in their get-away.

It seemed there were no limits to what she could do with her mind.

Zander couldn't do anything with his. At least not anything extraordinary. Their parents seemed to think that he should be capable of great things. Their parents were both telepaths, and their father could move large objects with his mind and had the ability to see in the dark.

Yet no matter how hard their mother probed into Zander's mind there was nothing there. At least nothing that answered back to her. After countless attempts and endless frustration he begged their mother to stop wishing for something that obviously was not going to happen and she did, reluctantly. Not that she had much choice. Zander might not have the ability to project into minds but he knew how to protect himself with the litany their parents taught them.

Elle knew that he felt like a disappointment to their parents. All she had to do was look inside his mind to know how he felt.

She looked because he wouldn't talk about it. But in the past year or so it was harder to see what was inside him. His mind was not able to reach out as Elle could do with hers, but it was very good at keeping things hidden. And Zander kept a lot of things hidden from his sister and his par-ents.

The truth was that Zander was normal. Like Boone. Boone's mother had some of the physic abilities, and his sister showed some promise but his father Ruben, and the twin's grandfather Michael, and the servants were all just normal, everyday people.

Elle wondered what it would be like to be normal. To live a normal life and not live under the constant security and scrutiny. She also wondered what it was that made her so special.

Elle did not understand the fear that consumed their parents. Both of the twins chaffed against it. They felt as if they were prisoners in their own home. In their entire life time they had never left the villa, except for short jaunts down to the beach, and only under the watchful eyes of

unseen yet heavily armed guards. The guards whose jet cycles they were now riding across the waves at breakneck speeds.

If only they knew why they were so protected.

Their parents were very good at shielding their thoughts from their children. At least Zander had inherited that talent or else he wouldn't be so good at hiding things from his sister.

And Elle was very good at convincing their parents that she and Zander were completely innocent.

Until they found out they were missing from the villa.

But until then, they were free.

The wind poured through Elle's waist length hair, spreading the ash brown locks behind her like a banner. Her strangely pale gray eyes, identical to her brother's, crinkled against the salt spray and the bright sun reflecting off the top of the water.

"Faster," she said into Boone's ear. He stole a quick look over his shoulder at Elle and her heart did the little flip that always resulted when his bright green eyes were on her.

"Hold on," he replied and the jet cycle jerked forward as his thumb pressed a button on the handle.

Elle shrieked with joy as they sped up and the dolphins raced beside them.

Zander, up to the challenge, flew by on his craft and leaned sideways, spraying Boone and Elle with water.

"No!" Elle screamed as Boone went after him. Her protest was half-hearted at best. She knew she'd get the wettest when the two started battling but she didn't care. She'd be soaked through soon enough when they dove into the coral garden that grew beneath the surface of the water.

Zander's cycle moved directly in front of them and Boone bent low over the cycle. Elle moved with him but still got a face full of spray. She felt Boone's lean, muscular frame move with laughter as she held on tight. She tried to pinch his abdomen, but could not find enough loose skin to grab. His two years at Academy has erased any softness left over from his boyhood.

"Get him!" Elle yelled.

"I will," Boone said. The velocity of the wind snatched the words from him but Elle recognized the intent in his eyes. She had seen that look many a time in the past. They had grown up together after all. And mischief was not a new or sudden concept.

The dolphins moved away, content to follow along at a distance as they realized the play was getting serious. Zander's cycle sped away, hopping waves, and Boone moved even lower over the engine.

Elle, pressed against his back, was sure she felt the pounding of his heart against her cheek. He moved his hand from the control to brush against hers and she knew he that he was allowing her to enter inside his mind.

"We're carrying more weight." The words formed inside him. 'It will be hard to catch him."

"You will."

The craft skipped across the wake fanning out behind Zander as they gave pursuit. Zander toyed with them, veering across from left to right and then back again, knowing they would be slower, knowing they would have to fight the chop, hoping that they would…

Elle felt her body fly through the air as the nose of their hover cycle got caught in a wave and stalled against it. The craft flipped up on its end and both of them were dumped into the water.

Elle immediately kicked to the surface and a dolphin nudged her side with the tip of its nose as she rose.

I can do it…

The dolphin responded in kind, it's smiling face inches from her own as she broke through

into the warmth of the sunshine that danced across the water.

Zander circled them and waved cheerfully when he saw that she was safe. Elle was tempted to send him a blazing, torturous thought but lost it when she was jerked back under from below.

She twisted and found herself caught in Boone's arms as he moved up from below. Even though the water was cold, her insides warmed as their bodies slid together beneath the water. Strange sensations coursed through her as his eyes moved level with hers.

"We might drown." She sent the thought into his mind as they bobbed just below the surface.

"I could…easily…or… we could try this. '

His lips touched hers, tentatively then more forcefully as she opened her mouth against his and closed her eyes. Elle's stomach gave a sudden lurch and she realized that she needed to breathe but didn't really care.

This was better than breathing.

It wasn't the first time Boone has kissed her. They had shared a few awkward, embarrassing moments the first time he left for academy and then again when he was home on his breaks.

But this was different. It was almost as if he'd been…practicing?

Her eyes flew open and she shoved him down and away as she kicked towards the surface. Zander was waiting on his cycle, a concerned look on his face.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Nothing," Elle spit out the words with the water she had swallowed after her quick trip into Boone's mind.

"That wasn't fair," Boone yelled as he came up beside her.

Elle splashed water in his face and swam towards Zander.

"What is wrong with you?" he asked.

"Nothing," she said as she held her hand up. "Help me up."

Zander looked over her head towards Boone, who was trying to right the craft in the water.

"Zander," Elle hissed. "Pull. Me. Up." Her words were threatening and she knew that he knew better than to toy with her when she was angry. Zander jerked her up and she settled herself onto the seat behind him.

"You're soaked," he said.

"Shut. Up."

"Did he kiss you?"

"Yes."

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you so mad?"

Elle looked over her shoulder at Boone who had righted the craft and was now following them. It wouldn't take him long to catch up since they were now the heavier ones.

Why was she angry?

Because Boone has kissed a lot of girls. She had seen their faces in his mind as if she were watching a parade and each one had been more beautiful, more mature, more self assured than she was. He had practiced. A lot. And more than kissing.

Boone was no longer the boy that they had played with in the dark tunnels beneath the villa. He was a man. A man who had the capability of traveling the universe. Her father admitted that he was already the best pilot he had ever seen. He processed numbers and equations in his head as if he were a machine. He had been to more planets than she could count and had the type of freedom that she and Zander dreamed of.

And he's here…with you…

Elle felt her anger dissipate a bit. After all, if all those girls were so wonderful why wasn't he with one of them?

And the kiss had been nice.

She glanced his way and quickly recognized the stubborn tilt to Boone's chin. He was looking straight ahead. The sandbar was in sight. The dolphins swam merrily between them.

He was right. She shouldn't have looked inside. It was an unspoken agreement between the three of them and something her mother had pounded into her head since she began her training.

She should never use her abilities to take advantage of her family and friends.

But it was always so tempting. And easy.

Zander cut the engine back to idle and they coasted in to the narrow curve of sand. Boone pulled in beside them and jumped from his cycle with a quick, jerky, motion. His green eyes rounded on Elle and sparks seemed to fly from them as he stared down at her.

"I think you two need to talk," Zander said. He got his pack from beneath the seat and walked towards the opposite end of the spit.

Elle turned to watch him go. She was avoiding Boone, which despite the wide open spaces around them, was hard to do. The spit was barely wide enough for them to stretch out on but was long enough that Zander's body diminished in size as he moved away.

It suddenly struck Elle that her brother seemed lonely as she watched him shrink against the horizon. Her heart ached with a strange emptiness as she watched him jump up and down three times and move his neck from side to side as he always did when warming up his muscles.

Elle felt Boone move up behind her and dismissed the thought of Zander's feelings from her mind as other strange and bewildering things flooded in.

"It's hard to be away from you Elle," he said. "And it's lonely at Academy." She was surprised. She had expected a fight, not this strange gentleness.

He was so close that she felt the rise of his hand, as if he were about to touch her. Elle crossed her arms and kept her eyes on her brother as he peeled off most of his clothes and sliced into the water.

"I have no claim on you Boone," she said. "We're friends, nothing more."

"What if I want it to be more?" he said.

Elle's heart jumped into her throat and she turned to face him.

"What do you mean?"

His hair, a warm rich brown shade, was already dry from the wind. The academy required that he keep it short but Elle could remember a time when it hung over his eyes and flipped wildly around his ears. His eyes, all the greener against the vivid blues that surrounded them, looked down at her with a strange yet familiar glow.

"You know what I mean Elle. You are all I ever think about."

"Strange way to prove it," Elle said defensively.

His hands gripped her upper arms and pulled her a step closer. Elle placed a hand on his chest to stop him and Boone looked down at where it rested gracefully against his chest and a slow smile spread over his face.

"My heart has always been yours Elle. Since the first time I saw you."

"You were only six," she said with a wry smile. "and I was four."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I love you. I always have and I always will."

Elle looked up at him, her pale gray eyes searching his. "How can you know that?"

"I just do." He lifted her hand from his chest and placed it against his temple. "Look inside and you'll see."

Her hair whipped around them with the strengthening of the breeze as she closed her eyes and let her mind flow into his.

She saw the girls again and quickly dismissed them. She saw the pranks he pulled at Academy. She saw him studying with his comrades and she saw him practicing the fighting skills that his father and hers had taught him along side Zander.

She saw shared memories from their childhood and she saw the places he had been with his father and with his uncle Stefan. She saw the love he felt for his mother Tess and his sister Zoey, who was several years younger.

But there were some places he would not allow her to search. He knew the litany that her mother had taught them. He knew how to protect his mind. Elle wondered what he kept hidden but quickly dismissed it because of the surprise she felt as she realized that with all the memories she saw there was one constant.

She saw her face staring back at her.

Elle felt Boone's forehead touch hers as her mind floated with his. He truly loved her. But how did she feel? She had nothing to compare her feelings with. Boone was the only boy besides her brother that she had ever known. What if there was someone else out there that she was supposed to love?

But all thoughts of anyone else left her as Boone kissed her. She couldn't imagine kissing anyone else. Kissing Boone was all she ever dreamed about. All she ever thought about. And there was more than kissing; she had seen that very clearly in his mind.

She wanted that too. She wanted Boone to show her what it felt like. Her arms snaked around him and she felt his sudden intake of breath as she pressed against him.

"Elle." He groaned her name and moved the lower half of his body away from her.

"What?" she asked. She felt dazed, breathless, and warm yet twisted up inside.

His hand smoothed the wild tendrils of her hair back into place. "Maybe we should go for a swim," he said. He tossed his head towards the water. "Zander."

"Zander," Elle sighed. For the first time in her life she wished that she didn't have a brother.

Boone quickly turned away as she looked at Zander, who was playing in the water with the dolphins. He handed her pack to her and moved to the other side of the cycle and turned his back to her as he pulled of his shirt.

Elle couldn't help but admire the contours of the muscle in his back as she wondered at his sudden shyness around her.

She skinned off her shirt and kicked away the baggy pants that she wore. She adjusted the hem of the short revealing top, checked the tie around her neck and made sure that her bottom half was properly if not scantily covered.

Her father would certainly raise his eyebrows at the cut of her attire but she didn't care. What could he do to her? Lock her away from the world?

"Ready?" she asked Boone as she adjusted a set of shields over her eyes.

"Right behind you," he said, settling his own shields into place.

Elle took off at a run for the water and flattened herself out to dive beneath the gentle lap of waves with Boone close behind her.

The sand bar ended suddenly as the rim gave way to the ancient crater and a world of bright colors and exotic plants opened up beneath them.

The water felt warmer, as if the volcano that had once been here still burned down in the deep. Elle was certain parts of it were inside her. She felt the brush of Boone's body as they swam side by side and was certain that the water around them would boil.

Boone pointed out a pair of brightly colored fish that darted from behind a trumpeting piece of

coral. From below a ray moved up as if it were part of the water and barely missed their heads with its tail.

They turned and grinned at each other and as one moved to the surface for air. The dolphins quickly circled them and chattered as Zander joined them.

"I see you two made up," he said.

Elle pushed her goggles up and looked at Boone.

"Kissed and made up," Zander added.

Elle splashed water at this face and Boone rose up with a yell, placed his hands on Zander's head and pushed him under. The dolphins headed for cover as the three of them splashed, wrestled and dunked each other as they had done since they first knew each other.

But it was different now. Zander knew it and he swam away as Boone pulled Elle under again.

He's lonely…

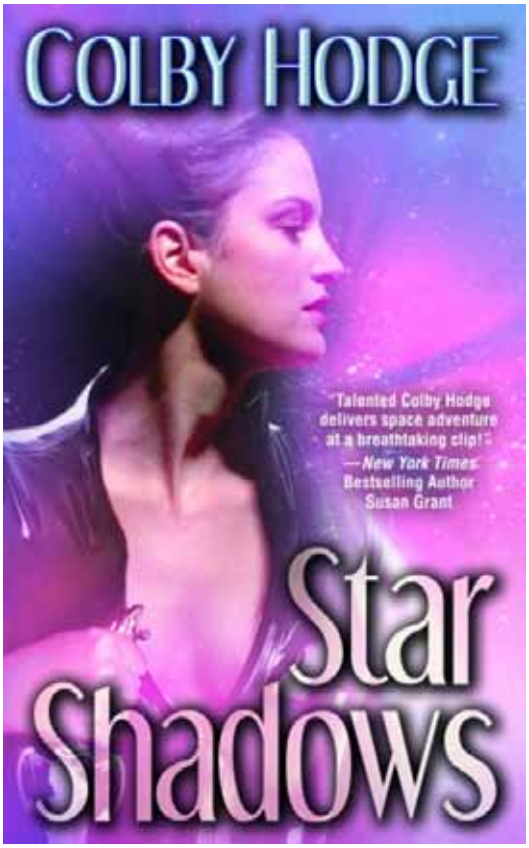
The thought once again faded as Boone's lip's found hers and they twisted away from Zander, moving as one beneath the surface and they breathed air into each other's lungs.

They kissed until Elle thought she would pass out from lack of oxygen. Her ears roared as she felt the blood rushing to her head. She pulled her head away and opened her eyes to look at Boone but saw that he was looking up.

A shadow fell across the water and as they swam to the surface Elle knew they were in trouble.

Her father had come looking for them.

For more from Colby Hodge, visit her website at www.cindyholby.com.



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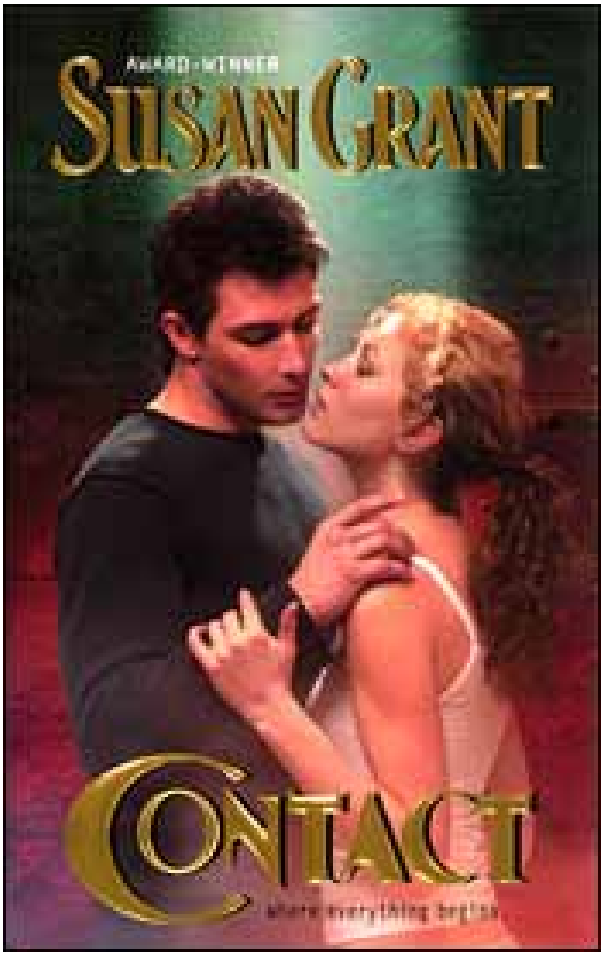


A BEAUTIFUL CO-PILOT WITH A TERRIBLE CHOICE…

A DARK STRANGER WHO HAS KNOWN NOTHING BUT DUTY…

A LATE NIGHT FLIGHT, HIJACKED OVER THE PACIFIC...

2003 RITA Award Winner

One night during the summer of 2001, I was on my way to Sydney, Australia. Midway over the South Pacific in the middle of the night, when it looks like the Milky Way is sitting right in your lap, I asked the captain, "What if a UFO appeared in front of us and swallowed our plane?" The look of dismay he gave me was unforgettable, and he inched away, as if there was anywhere to escape me.

That off-the-wall question became **Contact**, a story that ultimately, months later, quite eerily mirrored current events. In doing so, **Contact** stirred quite a bit of controversy.

Chapter One

The thunderstorm appeared in front of the Boeing 747 without warning. At 33,000 feet, in a calm, clear night over the Pacific Ocean three hours out of Honolulu International Airport, it should not have been there.

"It always happens during dinner," grumbled the captain of United 58, the redeye from Honolulu to San Francisco International. "There wasn't anything on the radar five minutes ago."

First Officer Jordan Cady set aside her half-eaten meal and leaned forward to adjust the weather radar display. On an otherwise black screen loomed a bright oval with crisp edges and a solid center soaked in hues of magenta, red, and yellow. A radar return of that size and color indicated an intense, isolated storm cell. "It's about sixty miles off the nose," she said.

Captain Wendt lifted his dinner tray off his lap and slid it onto the empty cockpit seat behind him. "So much for an uninterrupted meal. Get us a heading around it."

Jordan typed the request to veer off their assigned flight path to air traffic control, using one of the three cockpit keyboards. UAL 58 REQUEST 100 NAUTICAL MILES TO THE LEFT FOR WEATHER.

As the captain lifted the hand-microphone to his mouth and transmitted over the PA, "Ladies and gentlemen, fasten your seatbelts," Jordan scrutinized the radar screen. Other than the bright, multi-colored blob, periodic sweeps of green speckles showed a storm-free sky, an ideal night to fly over the Pacific.

A chime announced the incoming message from ATC: clearance to skirt the storm. The captain turned a knob connected to the autopilot, banking the 747, while Jordan lowered the lighting in the cockpit and peered into the night.

One good peek outside is worth a thousand sweeps of the radar. That was an old saying among pilots of the modern era. And it was usually right. Far below, tiny puffs of clouds glowed in the light of a quarter moon. Below the clouds, the sea was smooth. No lightning flashed on the horizon. Nor did Jordan see any towering cumulous clouds to back up the radar's warning. Yet, on the odd chance the thunderstorm was too far away to be seen or was obscured by wispy cirrus clouds, standard operating procedures dictated that they circumvent it. Common sense, too. And whatever common sense Jordan wasn't born with, she'd learned. Sometimes the hard way.

For eight years, she'd been flying around the world, and through more bad weather than she cared to remember. Even one-million-pound jumbo jets couldn't risk flying through thunderstorms. She knew — she'd read the post-accident reports of those who'd tried. There was no faster way to end up as a smoking hole than to think you could out fly Mother Nature. Hail punched holes in hulls and snuffed out engines; lightning knocked out electrical and communication systems; extreme turbulence wrenched off wings. Jordan preferred her life to be less exciting.

A lot less.

She had enough on her plate as a single mom who juggled flying for a living with raising a six-year-old. Flying paid the bills. But every heartbeat, every breath, every cell in her body was devoted to her daughter. That wasn't to say that at thirty-two, Jordan wasn't proud of her accomplishments — graduating flight school, getting hired by the airlines, making sure she was good at what she did — but existing as one of the many anonymous cogs in United Airlines' global transportation wheel was fine with her. Unlike her retired fighter pilot father or her fire chief older brother, she didn't go looking for action. Dull as it sounded, glory was not her goal. Maybe the limelight might have appealed to her, once. But these days, her idea of adventure was braving the Saturday afternoon checkout lines at Costco.

The captain aligned the aircraft on a safe heading. Jordan reached for her dinner tray and balanced it on her lap. "I don't care how many times we have to go around phantom thunderstorms tonight," she said. "Nothing's going to ruin my mood. The minute we land I'm officially on vacation."

"Big plans?"

"Two weeks in paradise — Colorado. My family owns land along the Front Range. Two hundred acres."

Brian whistled. "Ranchers?"

"Not even close. My father's a retired Air Force officer...went to the Academy in Colorado Springs, class of sixty-six. Started buying the land when he was a freshman, and kept adding acreage, a little at a time." A wry smile played around her mouth. "Until he met my mother, who wasted no time telling him he was insane if he thought she'd leave the suburbs for the wilderness. But Dad couldn't bear to part with the land. So there it sits, undeveloped. Waiting...."

For me, she mused, conjuring an image of aspen-covered foothills, the glorious backdrop to the property. By now, the slopes of the Front Range would be pure gold. If it wasn't for needing the money, she'd quit flying, move to Colorado with her daughter and never come back. Someday, she'd find a way to make that dream come true.

"So," she said wistfully, "camping's the plan. My daughter Roberta and I. Poor kid — Boo, I call her — stuck in the wilderness for two weeks, while I drone on and on about the ranch I want to build and the horses I want to raise."

Luckily, Roberta was into horses. They were on her backpack, her socks, her bed, and in plastic miniature form all over the house.

"Horses." Brian had perked up. "I didn't know you rode."

"Well, actually, I don't."

He gave her a funny look. They always did. She smiled sheepishly and tore open a packet of vinaigrette, sprinkling it on her salad. "It's a dream of mine, though." And in her dreams, she *did* know how to ride, flying across sun-soaked meadows with long fragrant grasses, the sun on her back, the wind in her hair —

A ripple of turbulence dragged her attention back at the radar. The glowing oval was in the same relative position. "That's weird." She leaned forward. "We turned left. The storm cell should have shifted to the right. But, look, it's still off the nose."

"It's a radar problem," Brian surmised.

"I'll write it up when we get to San Fran."

Then the airplane rolled abruptly to the left. Jordan grabbed her tray to keep it from sliding off her lap. Her mineral water spilled and salad dressing splashed onto her tie. "So much for blaming the equipment." Choppy air meant the storm was real.

Another call chime rang. This time from the cabin. Cleaning herself with a napkin, Jordan picked up the phone. "Yes?"

"Jordan, Ben. How long is this turbulence going to last?"

"Not too long," she told him. Ben was the chief purser, in charge of all eighteen flight attendants. He needed to stay updated on all aspects of the flight. "There's a little weather up ahead. But after that it's clear."

"Good. Find me some smooth air and I'll bring you guys a couple of frozen yogurt pops."

"Ooh. Incentive. You got it, Ben."

A sudden, sharp jolt sent the captain's dinner tray careening off the rear seat and onto the cockpit floor. The smell of Thousand Island dressing mixed with the odor of overcooked steak. Ice cubes skittered over the carpet.

"Seat the flight attendants," the captain ordered.

Jordan made the announcement. "Flight attendants take your seats." Brian slowed the big airliner from the faster speed used for cruise to what was recommended to penetrate turbulence. Jordan turned on the ignition, lighting a continuous fire in the engines, insurance against all four huge turbofans flaming out should they plow into heavy rain or hail.

"Tell ATC we need —" Brian calculated the distance and direction they'd need to skirt the rapidly intensifying storm. "Eighty more to the left."

Jordan busied herself doing what he'd asked. The bright oval shape had increased in size and clarity. But something had covered the slice of moon, making it impossible to see if something was actually outside, in front of the airplane. According to the radar, there was clear air to either side of the storm, which would allow the luxury of a wide girth as they went past.

A chime sounded. Jordan answered the incoming call and passed along the message to the captain. "ATC says — yes. We can deviate."

Again, they went through the routine of circumventing the storm. But the crisp-edged ovoid mirrored their evasive maneuvers, almost as if it didn't want to let them pass by. A crazy thought. Yet, a flicker of unease prickled inside Jordan, a whisper of apprehension. It was that first hint of inner acknowledgement that something wasn't going right, that a situation might not pan out as planned.

Promise? Jordan could almost hear Boo's husky little voice, could feel her skinny arms in a death grip around her neck. *You'll come home, right, Mommy*?

Jordan winced, pressing her lips together. Her husband Craig died five years ago. But she was lucky to have parents nearby who were happy to watch Roberta several times a month when Jordan worked. Roberta loved staying with her grandparents. Never once had she needed reassurance that her mother would return for her. Stranger still was that Roberta had balked at this trip, a mere overnight to Hawaii. It was a short jaunt compared to the three-day trips she typically flew. Had her daughter sensed that something might go wrong?

Jordan's spine tingled. Before 9-11, an airline job was fraught with the usual risks: bad weather, mechanical malfunctions, and air traffic control errors. Now, she fought on the frontlines in the war on terror — whether she wanted to or not. She'd never wanted to be a soldier, or a hero. But it seemed that sometimes life had different ideas.

"*I promise*," she had whispered into Boo's hair.

Jaw tight, Jordan scrutinized the sky ahead. She almost missed it, at first. Black against black, looming in front of the plane, was an oval of the same relative shape as the storm depicted on the radar screen. It didn't look anything like a thunderstorm. It appeared...solid. "Is that an aircraft?"

"An aircraft?" Brian peered into the night. "What kind of aircraft?"

"I have no clue. I don't see any lights. Or wings." And it looked larger than their 747. Much larger. "I can try calling them on Guard."

"Do it," he ordered.

Jordan radioed in the blind on Guard frequency, 121.5, monitored by all aircraft all over the world. "Aircraft on track Bravo, this is United Five-Eight. Do you read?"

There was no answer, not from the known airplanes in the vicinity or any others. She repeated the call. No one replied.

It was deathly quiet. The moon winked out of view. The black shadow loomed. Jordan felt like a field mouse in the shadow of a hungry hawk.

"Do you read United Five-Eight?" she transmitted on the radio. "Do you have us in sight?" Slowly, her hand fell away from the microphone button. "I don't think they can hear us. I don't know, Brian; I don't think *anyone* can hear us."

Promise, Mommy? Jordan gave her head a quick shake and tried to block thoughts of her little girl.

The object rushed out of the darkness. St. Elmo's fire slithered along the oval's smooth edges. Framed in blue-white streamers of electricity, the object yawned open like a nightmarish Venus Flytrap. At five-hundred knots, they hurtled toward its shadowy maw. Jordan's thoughts bogged down in disbelief. Whatever was out there, they were going to hit head on. Death would be instant.

"I can't turn away," the captain yelled, banking the airplane hard to the left. Several blinding flashes of light filled the cockpit. "Here we go."

No! The primal urge to survive exploded inside her. She didn't think. She reacted. Her hands shot out. Her boots hit the rudder pedals. But she barely had time to brace herself before the shadow engulfed the airplane and swallowed them whole.

See what they are saying about CONTACT

"Drawing on her experience as a commercial airline pilot, Grant brings a masterful realism to this otherworldly romance. Readers...will relish this emotionally charged aviation romance."

-- Publishers Weekly

"Susan Grant continues her stratospheric ascent with her latest fantasy romance, combining action and romance in a gripping, thought-provoking package. **Contact** features several strong female characters, including my nomination for Heroine of the Year. This is Girl Power at its butt-kicking best, and the result is a romance novel with such admirable heroines that I'd be proud to share it with my 11-year-old daughter. Okay, maybe not the love scenes, just the butt-kicking ones. **Contact** could easily be expanded by several hundred pages to include even more information about the establishment of the New Earth society. I also wouldn't mind reading about the events that take place in the ten years between the book's last chapter and its epilogue. Susan Grant is a talented enough author to break free of the page restraints of the romance novel genre; I'd love to see what she could do if given free rein to let her imagination and spirit run free."

-- Susan Scribner, The Romance Reader

"As a 747 pilot for United Airlines, there is little doubt that Susan Grant has been forced to confront more directly than most of us the enormous changes September 11, 2001 brought to our world. Drawing on her unique credentials and front-line perspective, Susan Grant has delivered a story of unusual depth and power that, while a terrific romance and a great adventure, resonates with a distinctly post 9-11 sensibility. Admittedly, there is a lot going on here, but for me at any rate, it all came together perfectly. I loved the fact that Jordan and her people fought back. I loved younger-man Kao. And, most of all, I loved Jordan, a truly heroic heroine if ever there was one. There is no question that all of us are different now and **Contact** reflects those changes perfectly. Frankly, if there is any justice left in this post 9-11 world, this book should be the one to take the author out of semi-cult status straight into the Brockmann leagues."

-- Sandy Coleman, All About Romance

"Your book **Contact** was so heartfelt and beautiful. I really connected with the link between mother and child and between the two lovers. It was handled tremendously and with care. Thanks for being such a great read!"

-- Annie, a reader

"Absolutely amazing! Kao and Jordan are one of the best romance couples I have ever read. The sparks that fly between them almost melt the pages. Susan Grant has taken romance heroines to heights (literally and figuratively) unheard of."

--Sime-gen

"I am in awe of Susan Grant. she's one of the few authors who get it."

-- Mrs. Giggles, Everything Romantic

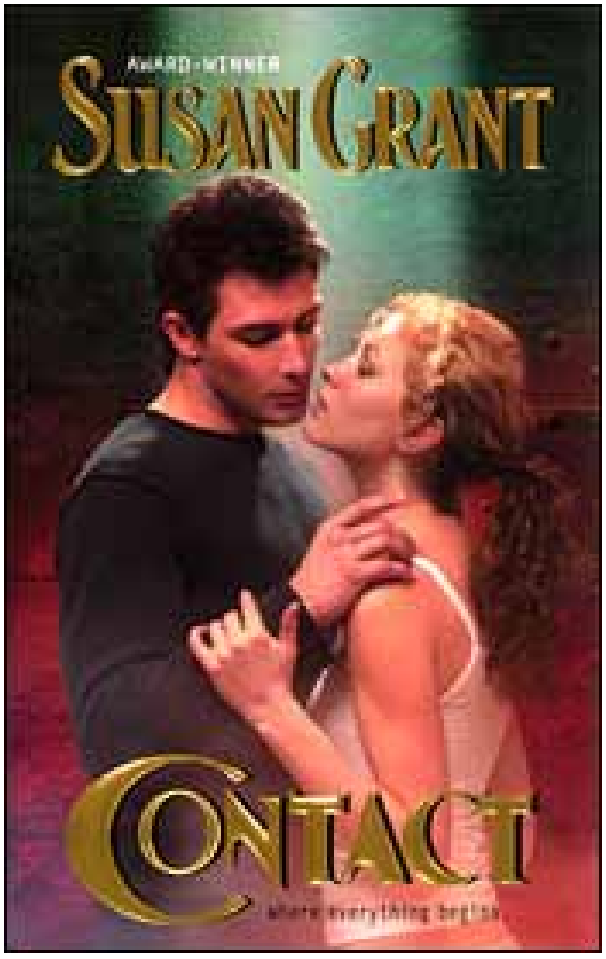
"Ms. Grant...has a true gift for storytelling."

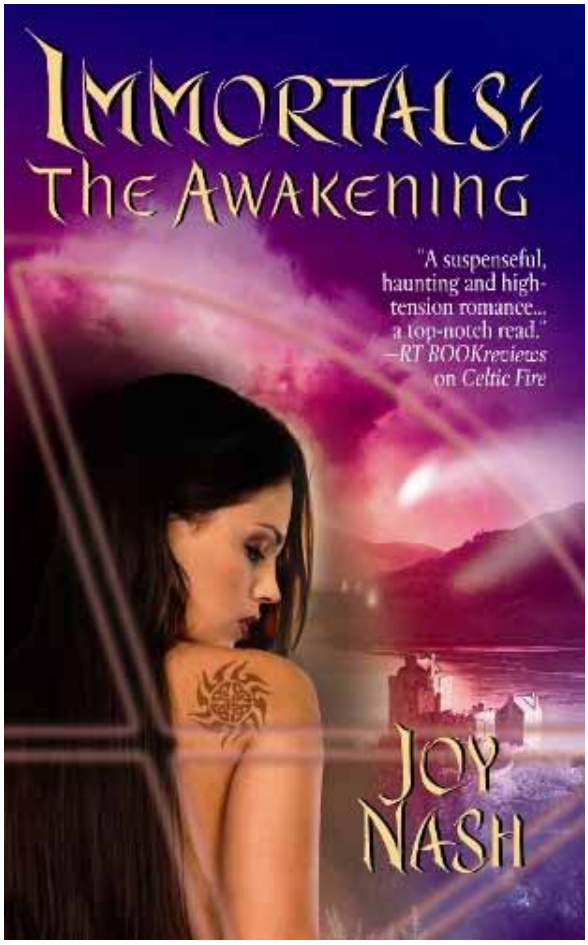
-- Romantic Times

"Depth and passion [are] fast becoming Susan Grant's trademark."

-- Wordweaving.com

To find out more about Susan, go to her website www.susangrant.com





Created at the dawn of time to protect humanity, the ancient warriors have been nearly forgotten, though magic lives on--in vampires, werewolves, the Celtic Sidhe, and other beings. But now one of their own has turned rogue, and the world is again in desperate need of the **IMMORTALS**

She came to him in a dream: her creamy skin delectably cool, silky raven hair smelling of the sea and ocean-blue eyes reflecting the depths of her passion. She was everything Kalen had been desperate to capture in his art--and in his bed. In reality, when Christine found his remote Scottish castle, it was to persuade the Immortal warrior to help repel the darkness spreading around the world. But Kalen had a vindictive Sidhe trying to steal his powers and a dark secret of his own to battle before he and Christine could give in to...THE AWAKENING

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Chapter One

There was one big problem with practicing magic naked, Christine Lachlan thought sourly.

It made her horny.

And not just an "it-would-be-nice-to-get-some-action-tonight" kind of horny. No, skyclad-induced lust, at least for Christine, was more along the lines of "Goddess-I-need-it-so-bad-I'm-gonna-go-crazy-if-I-don't-get-it-right-*now*." In other words, the kind of lust she hadn't felt in two years.

Since the last time she'd done *this.*

Starlight cast a sharp, sweet thrill through the high branches of the Roman pines, piercing the night shadows. Inside the circle of crushed sea salt Christine had sprinkled in the ancient dirt of Rome's Palatine Hill, she knelt with head bowed, palms upraised.

The night breeze raised goosebumps on her bare arms and sent an all-too-vulnerable shiver down her naked spine. Her baggy jeans and oversized sweater lay in a heap a few yards away, but they might as well have been two miles away on the floor of her cramped rented room--on top of the rest of her dirty laundry--for all the good they did her. Right now, Christine's entire world existed inside her circle, where she knelt before the Goddess with no covering on her body, no deception on her soul.

Pin-sharp pine needles and fragments of crushed marble bit into her knees. Her hair, freed from its braid, brushed the length of her spine. In the distance, the water-rush of traffic, punctuated by staccato splashes of horn, flowed along the Via dei Fori Imperiali, circled the Colosseum, and faded into the distance.

The prickle of restless desire tickled her thighs.

Goddess, how she loathed this.

She hated practicing magic while skyclad--the sensations it roused were too vivid, too *real. Too dangerous.* After Shaun's death, she'd sworn she'd never attempt it again, no matter what was at stake. Turned out she'd lied.

It hardly mattered that she didn't want to be here. That she'd rather be home, kneeling before a wobbly table spread with the beautiful square of indigo silk that had cost more than she'd earned in two weeks of hawking watercolors to stingy tourists. Within walls, protected by rune sigils, she could claim a small amount of safety. Here, amid Rome's most ancient ruins, naked under the sky, she was defenseless against her own magic.

The sensual lick of her power was as seductive as a man's tongue on her bare skin. Christine could do nothing but endure it. Her breasts grew heavy, the tips hardening. Her belly tightened with sweet fire.

If an Old One found her like this, she'd be in big trouble.

There was a very real possibility that could happen, despite the wards and the carefully drawn circle. An ancient vampire would have no trouble breaking her protections. Even the weaker undead--zombies, golems, and the like--were stronger and bolder than they'd been a few months ago. Not to mention more numerous. It seemed everywhere she looked, she saw another newly made vamp or recently resurrected zombie lurking in the shadows. And while she could defeat Young Ones singly, or even in pairs, she didn't want to think about what could happen if a horde attacked.

And then there were the demons.

She shut her eyes. Oh, Goddess. The demons. Tonight could end like the last time...

She was insane to attempt this. No, not insane, just out of options. For Christine, skyclad magic was the strongest she could summon. Tonight, she needed every last drop of her power.

The thin breeze stirred again, rustling dry branches. Italy was caught in the grip of the worst drought in its long history; the profusion of spring flowers that normally blanketed the Eternal City this time of year had died on the vine. Even the ancient pines and hardy olive trees were withering. Perversely, in the north, England and Scotland were endur-ing record rainfall. Their farms were drowning.

It was yet another sign death magic had gained frightening dominance over life magic. Christine had been watch-ing the grim, inexorable tide advance for almost a year now. Drought in some places, floods in others. Famine and an-guish everywhere. Death magic creatures were multiplying with alarming alacrity. Violence and vandalism was ram-pant. Even museums had been attacked, priceless works of art destroyed.

The was no end in sight--the living earth was fading, shriveling before a fierce, unrelenting onslaught of soul-withering darkness. Life magic--the source of all goodness--was draining from the world like water from a cracked sieve. Witches of the Light, like Christine, were trying to stem the tide, but it was a frantic, futile endeavor. Too many holes to plug, too many fissures to seal.

But this morning, she'd been given an unexpected reason to hope. A sudden cloudburst had poured life-giving wa-ter onto the drought-stricken city. Christine had heard it pounding on the roof of her attic apartment. She'd run up the twisted stairs to the terrace with every container she owned to collect as much of the rainfall as she could. Every drop was precious, even more so on this particular morning. It was the first of May--a Beltane rain held deep power.

It couldn't be a coincidence rain had fallen on the very day Christine had needed her deepest magic. The Mother Goddess blessed her mission. She was sure of it.

She splayed fingers on hard ground. The crusted surface was still damp, but underneath, the ground was as hard and unyielding as concrete. Drained of life, as the world was draining of magic. What could one witch do to stop the horror? Very little. But she wasn't alone. Not any longer.

Christine had always been a solitary practitioner of the Craft, but in the past months panic had driven her to an Internet Café to search online for other witches as disturbed as she by the rising evil. The worldwide Coven of Light had accepted Christine into their fold. She wasn't sure she felt comfortable being part of a group--artists tended to be very independent--but what choice did she have? She had magic, strong magic, though she'd avoided using the deeper as-pects of it these past two years. No more. The stakes were too high. The Coven of Light needed her. So here she was, naked, preparing to call up forces she knew damn well she couldn't control.

She pressed her hands more firmly into the moist earth. She slowed her breathing; searched the deepest part of her-self. Shifting, she nudged her knees apart. The magic of the fallen rainwater flowed into her fingertips, up her arms and down her torso in a sparkling wave. The breeze rose again, seeking the exposed feminine flesh between her thighs. A mortifying heat rushed through her stomach...into her breasts...to her neck and face. Her nipples tingled and drew tight.

She inhaled sharply. Goddess, how she hated this.

The urge to bolt toward her clothes was strong. She wanted to cover herself with her hands, bend forward to cloak her body with her hair. Anything to stop this feeling of being so exposed and vulnerable.

She forced herself to remain motionless. She was beyond pride. There were no choices left: last night, disaster had struck the Coven. An American witch had very nearly been killed during a spell designed to bring help to the world. Christine had to achieve the failed spell's purpose now, on her own. Because the alternative--a world ruled by demons and death magic--was a reality far too horrible to contemplate.

With a shaking hand, she reached for the wine bottle near her right knee. Every drop of Beltane rainwater she'd collected was inside. Working the cork free, she poured the precious liquid into the

shallow brass bowl that lay between her spread knees.

Power rippled over her skin. Her breasts responded with an ache. A tremor coursed through her belly, pooled low. Water splashed over her fingers; her mind sank into a light trance. The city, the night, the outside world--they all faded. There was only her sacred circle, her carnal hunger, the sense of drifting, helpless, on the edge of the world.

Unsteadily, she set down the bottle. Splayed her right hand over the scrying bowl. Slowly, reverently, she dipped her finger in the water and traced a single rune.

Kenaz. Revelation.

"Uni." She spoke the name of the Mother Goddess in her guise as Goddess Queen of the Etruscans. Uni had been the first deity recognized by humans in this ancient land. Her name meant "The One," and Christine knelt atop the bur-ied ruins of a temple erected long ago in her honor.

"Mother," she prayed. "Show me."

Power rippled across the water. It slipped into her fingers and pulsed into her veins. The consuming surge of magic released a panicked flood of adrenaline. Christine knew only too well that power this elemental, once unleashed, could not be stopped. Like any living thing, once born, it sought its end.

Power rose, demanding Christine's complete honesty, her complete faith. Her complete submission to the will of the Goddess. Christine had thought she was prepared. But it was hard, harder than she'd remembered. Because of the past. Because of Shaun. Because the magic required she do something she'd not dared in two long years.

Feel.

An urgent whisper rippled over her soul. A tremor claimed her body in an automatic response that was stunning in its blatant sexuality. A throb sprung up between her legs. An unwanted moan escaped her throat.

She needed to move. The compulsion shamed her--she didn't want to feel this way, needy and out of control. Didn't want to surrender to the urge to rock her hips in a pathetic parody of the sex act. But she couldn't stop herself from do-ing just that.

This was why she'd shunned her deepest magic since Shaun's death. She couldn't bear to remember what it had once been like, performing the sacred rituals with the only man she'd ever loved, before his greed and her own mis-placed faith had destroyed him.

Another wave of sensation. More control lost. She closed her eyes. A mistake--with her sight gone, she felt the magic all the more acutely, in every part of her body. She forced her shoulders to relax, knowing she had no choice but to accept what she'd started. *Be careful what you ask for.* Her fingers sank deeper into the shallow water. She stroked a sec-ond rune on the surface of the brass bowl.

Naudhiz. Need.

She bowed her head. "Uni, show me. Show me your son."

Opening her eyes, she lifted her hands from the bowl. Abruptly, the water's surface went silver-still, like a mirror. She leaned forward, letting her focus go soft. A roar like ocean surf sounded in her ears. A wave of giddy delight washed over her; a surprised gasp spilled from her lips. Her body felt light, too light, as if it were floating into the sky, or falling from above. Her spirit-essence thinned, rippled almost painfully in its freedom.

The water glowed silver-bright, reflecting the spatter of stars overhead. Christine's spirit-essence drifted toward the light. Sank into it.

Mother, show me your son.

A shiver flashed over her exposed skin. Her breasts grew heavy, weighted with need. Desire spiked, drawing an-other gasp from her lips as power swirled through her circle. She shuddered.

The magic was strong, too strong. This aching feeling of yearning, of wanting something so bitter and so sweet--it was more than she could bear. But to stop now would mean abandoning her last chance to find him.

Kalen, Immortal Warrior.

He was one of five Immortal protectors, created from the union of an aspect of the Mother Goddess and her human priests in the years when humans had been new to the Earth. The forces of death magic had been incredibly powerful in those dark years. It had been Kalen and his brothers who had guarded the infant human race, defending them against evil. Trained by their goddess mothers, gifted with god-like strength, possessed of magical weapons and powers, includ-ing immortality itself, the Immortals had been invaluable allies to those early human settlements struggling to stay alive.

The five Immortal brothers--Kalen, Adrian, Darius, Hunter and Tain--were an enigma. Created of life magic, they meted out death. Demons, zombies, golems, vampires, sorcerers--none could stand against them. Championed by the Immortals, those first human settlements thrived. Eventually, men and women learned to fight their own battles and the Immortals appeared less frequently. Finally, during the Middle Ages, they disappeared for good.

Now they were needed again. Desperately. Just a month ago, an American witch named Amber Silverthorne had been investigating the death of her sister, a member of the Coven of Light. Dark forces had been involved. While pursu-ing a lead, Amber had encountered Adrian, the oldest Immortal, and together, the pair had discovered the truth behind the recent surge of death magic. The rise in evil was the work of Tain, the youngest Immortal. Insane and emotionally enslaved by an ancient and powerful demon known to Adrian as Kehksut, Tain had vowed to drain every drop of life magic from the human world.

Using death magic doorways known as demon portals, Tain was able to move freely between human and demon realms, appearing instantly in any location he desired. His spies were legion and his power vast. Demons and the un-dead all over the world were eager to aid Tain's evil vision.

According to Adrian, only the other Immortals could stop their brother. And so last night, on the Eve of Beltane, the Coven of Light--witches on six continents--assembled in spirit to speak the words of the Calling, the ancient spell that summoned the Immortals to battle. But something went horribly wrong and the magic shattered, very nearly killing Amber. The missing Immortals had not appeared.

Christine had discovered that the Immortal Warrior Kalen was the son of the Mother Goddess in her guise as the Etruscan Goddess-Queen, Uni. As the only Coven witch dwelling in the Etruscans' ancient homeland, it was up to Chris-tine to call on Uni for help. Surely the goddess knew where her son was.

Her gaze lost in the silver-still surface of the rainwater, Christine willed her body to go soft. She allowed the sensu-ality that entwined so deeply with her magic to take control of her body. "Goddess," she whispered. "Great Mother...Uni, Queen of Etruria... Show me your son."

The throbbing between her legs intensified, quickly becoming unbearable. The exquisite knot of desire in her belly tightened. Her lungs grabbed for oxygen, taking too much. Her head grew light. It took all her effort to focus on the bowl. On the sacred water.

"Show me. I beg you."

A thought dropped into the still pool of Christine's mind.

He is here, daughter.

The shimmering surface shifted. Shadows moved like clouds across its face. Silhouettes deepened, sharpened.

Images formed.

She leaned close, not daring to blink or hardly even to breathe. The fleeting impression of a cliff, steep and rugged, a broad, rocky island separated from a coastline by a narrow swath of angry gray sea.

Like a fairy tale dream, a castle clung to island cliffs. Its somber gray walls and the intricate crenellations of its bat-tlements traced a large square around a high central tower. There were several garden courtyards inside the castle, formed by the lines of lower buildings spanning the distance between the central tower and the perimeter walls. A gray shroud of rain cloaked the scene.

Her corporeal body seemed to dissolve as she slipped deeper into her trance. The castle drew closer; the walls melted away. A new scene formed in a cavernous room lit only by a large, leaping fire. Christine's eye was drawn to movement amidst a pile of furs and cushions spread before the generous hearth. A man and woman lay there, limbs en-twined.

Clothing had been discarded in a heap nearby; she caught a glimpse of tartan plaid wool, the gloss of black leather. The lovers were nude, the man clearly dominant, the woman spread beneath him. He was as dark as she was fair--the man's tawny skin and dark hair contrasted sharply with the woman's pale complexion and red hair. Her vivid locks were cropped short and slicked with gel around her delicately pointed ears.

She wasn't human, Christine realized with a start. The beautiful woman was Elven. Or Sidhe, as Christine's Scottish grandmother had called the race of sensual Celtic life magic creatures. Christine experienced a stab of something very like jealousy. Of course an Immortal would choose a magical lover. What human woman could satisfy a demigod?

She shifted her attention to Kalen. He looked like a human man, but--*more*, somehow, in a way that robbed Chris-tine of breath. Normally she couldn't see auras--she sensed magic by touch--but in this vision, aided perhaps by Uni's grace, Kalen's magic was boldly apparent. Living energy flickered around him, blending with the firelight to dance on his flexing muscles. A blue tattoo, a pentacle inscribed in a circle, was etched high on the back of his right thigh. Each Immortal, she knew, had a similar tattoo somewhere on his body.

Kalen's head dipped to his lover's generous breasts. It was impossible not to feel a pang of inadequacy as the large globes filled his hands. A smile quirked his beautiful lips as he bent his head and sucked a pink, distended nipple into his mouth.

His lover's supple body arched upward, a deep purr of satisfaction vibrating in her throat. She flung her arms over-head, lips parted.

A sudden, sick twist wrenched Christine's stomach. Her chest contracted so tightly she could hardly gulp her next lungful of air. When she did manage to breathe, the rise of her chest was sharp and painful.

She wanted to be that woman.

Her trance slipped, cracked by her irrational anger. *Damn*. This lust was just an effect of the magic--she didn't truly want Kalen that way. All she wanted was to find him and explain the grave danger the world was in. Enlist his aid in the Coven's fight.

And if she didn't get hold of herself long enough to find a clue in her vision that would lead her to him, her quest would fail before it even started.

Drawing a deep, cleansing breath, she calmed her roiling emotions with a chant of the rune mysteries.

Uraz, Gebo, Isa.

Strength, Sacrifice, Challenge.

She could not fail in this.

Jera, Eihwaz, Teiwaz.

Hope, Faith, Honor.

She *would* find him.

Mannaz, Dagaz, Inguz.

Self, Clarity, Peace.

She would *not* let her irrational jealousy shatter her vision.

Thurisaz. Hagalaz.

Conflict. Destruction.

She couldn't lie--she wanted him for herself.

Her body was on fire for him, her vagina empty and aching. Her gaze caressed him, taking in his powerful torso, lean hips, and long limbs. She saw him with her artist's eye, as if she were preparing to capture him on canvas. His hair was dark and shining, his muscles rippling with strength, moving beneath smooth olive skin. Masculine grace, strength, sensuality--all had found a home in the body of this Immortal. But Kalen's most sensuous feature was not his strength, nor his beauty.

It was his magic. Christine could feel it, see it. A pulsing, shimmering cocoon encircled Kalen and his lover, blazing hotter as their urgency grew. His knee nudged the Sidhe's pale, slender thighs. With a growl, she accommodated him with parted legs. Her hands clutched at shoulders, ran down his flanks in fevered urgency. Her fingers pressed into his buttocks. Their bodies weren't joined yet, but they soon would be.

The realization put a bitter, metallic taste in the back of Christine's throat.

"*Greas ort.*" The Sidhe's voice was low and inexplicably angry, as if the words had been torn from her unwillingly. "*Tromhad a-steach.*"

Christine's heart thudded. Kalen's lover was speaking Scots Gaelic. Christine had learned snatches of the language from her grandmother. *Hurry. Come inside.*

"*An-dràsta!*"

Now.

But Kalen didn't seem in a hurry to oblige. He lingered at his lover's full breasts, sucking and kneading while the Sidhe's expression darkened like thunder. She twisted her fingers in his hair and gave a savage jerk. She arched her hips, trying to draw him in. He shifted languidly, accommodating her only slightly as he continued to lavish attention on her breasts. But the foreplay couldn't last much longer. Soon enough he'd slide inside.

Lust and jealousy, twin edges of a merciless sword, knifed through Christine's chest. She felt as though someone had sliced her open and ripped out her heart. The savage pain brought a rushing sound to her ears. Her breath went; the ground under her knees seemed to dissolve. She scrabbled to brace herself with her hands, but her palms met...nothing. Pitching forward, she tumbled into a dark void.

And then, suddenly, she was *there.*

No longer a spectator. *She* was the woman stretched out on the furs before the fire. It was *her* body caged by hard, male limbs, *her* legs held open by powerful masculine thighs. Kalen's dark head was bent over her breast, his lips pulling rhythmically on her nipple.

Streaks of fire raced through her body like stars shooting through a night sky. Magic and lust--opening her, claim-ing her, rendering her helpless. Her fingers entwined the silken locks of his hair. Her hips arched. Tears sprung to her eyes--if he didn't enter her *now,* she was sure she would die.

Heat consumed her. She was wet and ready, dying for him, but still he tortured her, the rough hair on his legs scraping the inside of her thighs as he nudged her legs wider. She squirmed, panting, the musk and sweat of his body in her nostrils. She wanted to lick his skin, taste him, but she couldn't reach him with her tongue. So she shut her eyes and concentrated on his touch, squeezing every drop of bliss from the sensation of his damp, slick skin sliding over hers.

His lips left her breast, traveled in a slow, hot line up her body, to her neck, her jaw. His weight

pressed down, his body covering hers, the broad, hot head of his erection prodding her slick, swollen folds. His power flared, enveloping her. Yearning burned a path into her soul. Her hips arched in supplication.

"Kalen..."

At the sound of his whispered name, his head lifted. Christine stared up at him, drinking in his features. His eyes were the deepest charcoal gray, his hair even a darker black. His forehead was high and proud, his cheeks sharp and angled. He possessed a bold, slashing nose and firm, mobile lips.

He was vital, supreme, *Immortal.* And Christine knew the deepest magic she possessed was nothing compared to the magic he *was.*

The corners of his beautiful mouth tugged downward as he stared at her. His body went still; his brows drew to-gether. His eyes captured hers and did not let go.

A frisson of unease shot through her--like she'd been caught in a lie. He felt it; she could tell in the sudden sheen of moisture that appeared on his brow. His eyes glinted like chips of onyx, his breath came on a sharp inhale.

"What the--"

She gripped his shoulders.

"Kalen...please..." But she didn't quite know what it was she was asking.

Confusion played across his features. His body went rigid, as if struggling with some inner question. With a mut-tered curse, he seemed to resolve the dilemma. He lifted his hips and positioned himself for the joining thrust.

Christine hung, suspended in time, rigid with anticipation. One heartbeat passed...two...three...

Crack!

With a sound like a firecracker snap, the scene collapsed. Kalen, the hearth, the castle--it was all, abruptly, simply, *gone.* As if it had never existed.

And Christine was left kneeling under the night sky on the hard-packed dirt--naked, cold, alone, and wanting.

#

"By all the magic in Annwyn, Kalen, *get on with it!*"

Kalen came back to himself, a sound like a thunderclap ringing in his ears, his body taut, his cock poised at the en-trance to Leanna's body.

Bloody hell. What in Hades had happened?

A moment ago, Leanna had been so frantic for him to enter her that she'd cried out in Gaelic, the hated language of her childhood. That always put her in a mood. He blinked down at the Sidhe's pale, frowning eyes. Perspiration plas-tered her hair to her forehead like wisps of crimson seaweed. Her black eyeliner had smeared horribly, painting dark half-moon circles above her cheekbones. Her normally pouting red lips were pressed into a thin, angry line.

And still, she managed to look alluring.

He closed his eyes and dragged in a breath, trying to recapture the sensations of a heartbeat earlier. For a single, breathless moment, he could have sworn another woman lay beneath him. A woman so unlike Leanna as to be laugh-able. A scrappy, sharp-angled female with small, pointed breasts and scrawny hips.

But her eyes...they had been startling. A wide, deep blue, so intense his breath stalled in his lungs. Her nose had been small, her cheeks flushed. Her hair...he frowned, trying to remember. Ah, yes. Her hair had been pure black, a dark cloud sensuously framing her face. The locks had been

thick, like heavy skeins of silk--and long, as a woman's hair should be. But there had been something else about it...

His frown deepened. *Blue.* That was it. A single long lock of hair falling from the woman's left temple had been col-ored a brilliant indigo. He gave himself a mental shake. Why would he dream such a thing? Unnatural hair dye was yet another entry on Kalen's long list of twenty-first century abominations. And it had to have been a dream. His home was far too heavily warded for the vision to have been magic.

Leanna shifted beneath him, her disapproval growing more apparent by the second. Her patience--what little she had of the commodity--was obviously almost depleted. He felt her hand reach between their bodies. Her fingers curled around his phallus. She tugged and teased like a clever milkmaid.

Tantalizing zings of electricity shot through his shaft. All thoughts of the dream woman fled.

"Now, Kalen. I want it *now*."

Her breathing grew ragged as she twisted beneath him, her fingernails digging into his flesh as she tried to jerk his hips forward. No doubt such maneuverings worked with her human lovers; with Kalen the effort was useless. Her physical strength didn't begin to equal his.

But she had other powers. Powers Kalen craved.

Her magic pulsed into his being, raw with emotion, ripe with promise. Insatiable in its demands and lush with the promise of paradise. It was part of Leanna's unique essence--a magic human men willingly died for. Could it show him the path to salvation? Kalen wasn't sure, but he hoped it could.

He hoped.

Leanna's fingers tugged on his shaft, guiding him to her slick woman's flesh. "*Now*, Kalen."

And still, he hesitated, a nagging sense of disquiet again buzzing in the back of his mind. Leanna made a warning sound deep in her throat. Mentally, Kalen swatted away his vague unrest and slipped easily into her body. It was an act he'd performed a thousand times in the decade they'd been lovers. Ten years--an instant in his overlong life. He'd had countless other women, both Sidhe and human. Even so, Leanna's magic was like nothing he'd ever felt.

He moved within her. A surge of imminent freedom overtook him, like that first glorious instant when an eagle takes flight. He drove hard; there was no need to hold back, as with a human lover. Sidhe were a hardy race, far more possessed with stamina and lust than their human cousins.

He bit back a groan as Leanna bucked beneath him, her hot sheath contracting around his rock-hard shaft. Her long nails scratched pain across his back, but he barely felt it. His pleasure, his being, his *life* was focused on a single, elusive spark--the magic Leanna alone could create. The magic that could open his soul, absolve his sins, make his life bearable again.

She twisted beneath him. "Turn over. I want to be on top."

With a single smooth roll, he accommodated her. Leanna had strong preferences when it came to sex--generally, it was easier to give her what she wanted than to force his own wishes on her. And in any case, Kalen enjoyed watching a woman ride him. He steadied her hips in his hands as she flung her head back, cupping her breasts.

A sudden mental image of the woman with the blue-streaked hair, performing the same act, flashed into his brain. Her hair had been very long--he was sure it would pool in a luxurious swirl on the tops of his thighs if she were atop him, arched in just that same way. He hardened even further as he pictured it.

Leanna purred, obviously taking full credit for his phallus's sudden increase in enthusiasm. Her writhings turned urgent, her lithe body moving in a creative combination of back-and-forth and circular motion. Her magic gathered, again crowding thoughts of the dream woman from Kalen's

mind. Green sparks showered around him--he concentrated on one, brighter than the others, zinging just beyond his reach. He saw, as he always did, how he might capture it. Make it his own. Feed upon it with his soul.

This time he would not fail. This time, *now*, he would claim the elusive prize for which Leanna's human lovers will-ingly died.

The spark flared, flashing bright and new as the first instant of creation. Leanna hummed, her body drawing power from the living core of the universe--the font from which all life and all life magic sprang. She took the seed, saw it blos-som, shaped it into a soul's center flame--a hot, burning ball of creative power. And Kalen could only gaze at it in awe.

No wonder men--and some women--traded body and soul for this instant of blazing triumph. The moment of crea-tion--who would not die for that?

His fingers dug into her flesh. He jerked her hips down, hard.

"Oh, yes!" Her body jackknifed forward, her pelvis bucking against his palms.

Their combined lust exploded, its magic raining down on their joined bodies. "*Yes!*"

Kalen's climax broke, and with it, the full force of his own magic. With a roar, he threw himself into the sparkling green stars. Snatched them, one by one, letting them pass through his skin and into his body. At the same time, he felt Leanna busy at her own game--soaking up Kalen's Immortal life essence. He didn't care. She could take what she wanted, and welcome to it. It was only fair, after all.

The sparks coalesced, emerald light contracting inside him, brightness intensifying, filling every corner of his being. A rush of elation, of power, of triumph. Inspiration, in a blinding flash. With stunning clarity, he saw the path to the heart of the universe.

It was a woman--the woman from his dream. Her features were muted, rendered in charcoal on a sepia back-ground. Every line, every shadow, every stroke and smudge of the pencil was revealed to him. Wide eyes, delicate cheekbones, subtly pointed chin. Heavy, dark hair falling over bare shoulders. He was glad there was no color in his vision--the blue streak of the woman's hair was barely noticeable.

She was magnificent, incredible. A goddess, a Madonna, equal to any painted by the masters. As mysterious as Leo-nardo's *Mona Lisa*, pure as Michelangelo's *Madonna*, alluring as Botticelli's *Venus*. But she was to be Kalen's own. *At last.*

Leanna abandoned his softening phallus. She wasn't one for afterplay; once she had what she wanted she was quick to withdraw. Kalen didn't care; in fact, he barely noticed. The vision of the dark-haired woman was already wavering, the soft charcoal lines blurring. As always, time was of the essence.

He shoved himself off the furs, strode to the easel he'd set up nearby. His hand shook a bit as he grasped the slen-der charcoal pencil. With a deep breath, he placed the tip against the virgin page.

The first strokes came easily, flowing with exquisite delight. Dimly, he was aware of Leanna padding to the cabinet where he kept his store of single malt whiskey. The Italian marquetry door opened and closed; glass clinked against glass as she poured. Blocking the sounds, he bent his head to the easel, his hand moving across the paper with fevered urgency.

The dream woman was fading from his mind like scratches in the sand before the tide.

He was desperate to capture her features before she disappeared completely. The long, graceful line of her neck. The hollow at the base of her throat. The haze of lust in her eyes. He worked as the image faded from his memory. Fi-nally, his hand slowed. The stump of charcoal fell from his fingers.

She was gone.

He exhaled a long breath. Suddenly, he became aware of Leanna, his muse, watching him. His

gaze took in her na-ked hip, propped casually against his mahogany sideboard. Her palm cradling a glass--his best Macallan, he'd wager. He'd paid twenty thousand pounds sterling for a single bottle. She could drain it, for all he cared. If only he could grasp the prize he craved.

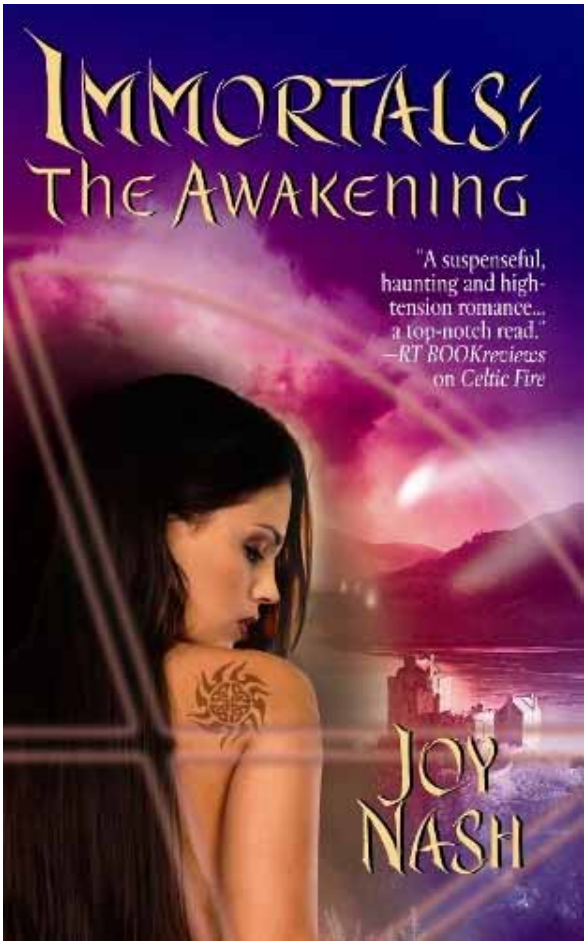
For several seconds he stared at the Titian hanging above the sideboard, unwilling to shift his gaze the few inches to the left that would place his own finished drawing in his line of vision. Had he grasped Leanna's magic? Had he given birth to a work of true art? Had he at last reclaimed the spark that had been taken from his soul? He'd felt nothing but glorious inspiration as the lines flowed onto the paper. But Hades himself knew Kalen had felt that way many, many times before.

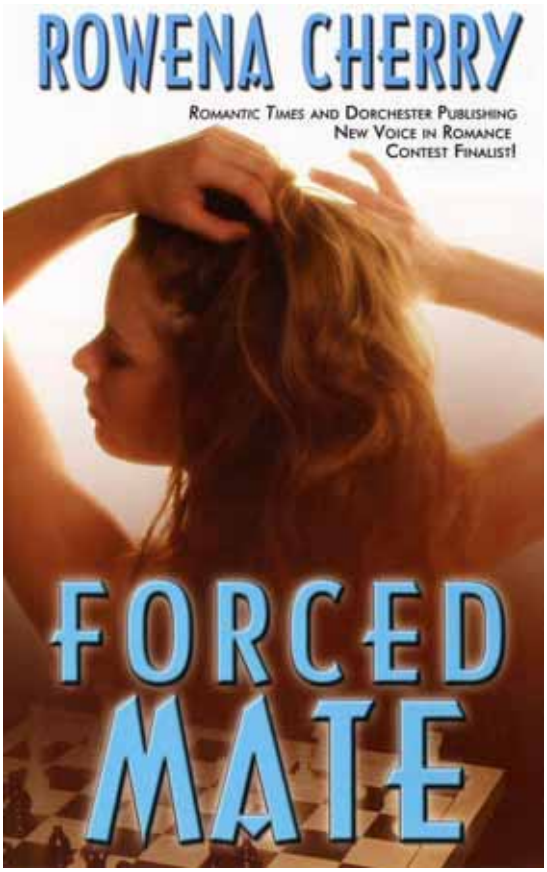
Leanna cleared her throat, but didn't speak. Even she wouldn't dare to intrude on this moment--she, better than anyone, knew what it meant to him. Steeling himself, he turned his gaze on his creation.

Disappointment burned a rancid hole in his gut.

To use the vernacular of this gods-forsaken century--his drawing bloody sucked.

To read more from Joy Nash, go to www.joynash.com.





FORCED MATE --what's the book about

FORCED MATE is a chess term (all my titles are chess terms). Basically, the Black King and the White King race to make a pawn their Queen. It seemed a great metaphor for a romance where two powerful world leaders want the same girl. Persephone is abducted (from Earth) by Hades (dark god of the Underworld) ... and kicks his butt.

My heroine, Djinni-vera (Jinny) Persephone, is psychic and a mind reader, and an intergalactic warrior in training who is being kept hidden on Earth until the time is right for her to marry her betrothed, the White "King".

The "Black" King sees a picture of the heroine, and decides --much as Hades did-- that he has to have her. He also wants to make her happy --in some versions of the myth, Hades also was willing to go to great lengths to please Persephone and he turned his underworld into a dark version of Earth for her, but with a double bed.

Since the "Black" King has never had to woo a woman to get her into his bed before, he's a bit out of his depth. He consults unreliable sources, such as old, pirated James Bond movies, and Romance novels, and an embittered English mercenary, and tries almost every stock "Romance" situation, and is astonished and baffled --and annoyed-- when his romance is not an instant, outrageous success.

Of course, the White "King" does not take the abduction of the perfect pawn Princess

like a gentleman and a sportsman. He objects. He wants her back. He does not give up gracefully.

This is a complex romance with many levels and layers. It's full of puns, miniature spoofs, good jokes (and bad jokes!), bathroom humour (I-tell-your-alcohol level toilets), political intrigue, one explicit consensual sex (think of England) scene, and a whole starship-load of interesting characters with their own ideas of what is really important and whose side they are on.

Some commentators have said this book is about the ultimate hunk. Others have said it is about the heroine and her relationships with other females. Others have said it is about the humor. For me, it was the book of my heart.

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FORCED MATE

by

Rowena Cherry

http://www.rowenacherry.com

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Prologue

The Cambridge Road, England. Earth date 1994

"The more powerful he is, the more terrible he'll be... in bed, and as a husband. Especially if he enjoys his 'god's Right' all over the galaxy. Grandmama, after all the dreadful stories you've told me about the god-Emperors of Tigron – "

"By all the Lechers of Antiquity!" Tarrant-Arragon swore. Impossible that the unseen mate of his dreams had been caught on tape speculating that he was a brute and a bore in bed. Impossible that she could be talking about anyone else.

"*My dear, your qualms would be forgivable if you were being forced to marry the wicked Prince Tarrant-Arragon,"* a regally venomous voice sizzled from his car's speakers.

"Stop the tape," Tarrant-Arragon ordered.

"Sorry about that, Your Highness." The human driver silenced the stereo system, while maintaining the stretch limousine's speed on the deserted, dark motorway. "As we backward Earthlings say,

eavesdroppers seldom overhear praise of themselves."

His reluctant mate's opinion of his sexual prowess would be the talk of his Star Forces. As would his reaction. As the next god-Emperor of Tigron, he'd be expected to say something depraved.

"I don't usually take any notice of virginal fears," he drawled for the two Tigrons sharing the car, although he spoke in English. "However, I may improve my chances of a happy mating if I pay attention to hers. I wonder which 'dreadful stories' she's heard."

It was reprehensible of him to encourage lewd speculation, but the more the Tigrons obsessed about his sexual notoriety, the less attention they'd pay to the spy tape, and the older woman's very peculiar turn of phrase.

"Happy mating? Is that important to you, Sir?"

Sarcasm. Tarrant-Arragon raised an eyebrow. Presumably the driver had no idea how dangerous it was to annoy a Great Djinn.

"Mating is. A god-Emperor's heir does not concern himself with his mate's happiness." The girlbelonged by "god's Right" and by necessity to the last legitimate Great Djinn. Himself. To admit that he wanted her happy would be out of keeping with his very nasty reputation.

"That's why we're taking her to a certain romantic hot-spot."

The driver had all but called him a liar to his face. No one had ever dared question his motives or his veracity. This human insolence was... fascinating.

"Whatever it takes," Tarrant-Arragon conceded, amused. "I've staked the fate of an Empire on my success with her. As long as she is fertile, I have no objection to making her happy."

"Big of you, Sir. But you're quite right not to want to hear any more. It only gets worse." Tarrant-Arragon saw an assessing flicker of the driver's light blue eyes in the rearview mirror.

What was on the rest of the tape that the driver didn't want him to hear? Protocol be damned, he wanted to know the worst.

"*We* wouldn't miss it for ten worlds' tribute." Tarrant-Arragon deployed the Royal Pronoun. "Rewind. Play it from where my girl alleges that I'm, ah, terrible in bed." Machinery whirred. The girl restated her ill-informed fears. Hers was a voice of contradictions, an exotic siren's breath from the lips of a nineteen-year-old, an English upper-class accent with a nerv-ous crack in it when she mentioned "bed", "husband" and "god's Right". She had good reason to be nervous if she publicly attacked his royal sexual prerogatives.

Tarrant-Arragon never discussed his infamous Right to deflower any virgin he wanted—or the fact that he had never exerted it.

He certainly had no intention of explaining himself to a judgmental human who was a very tem-porary member of the abduction party. No matter what else was on the tape.

As for the Tigrons, if they heard something they shouldn't, they could be managed. The Stormmaster was loyal; the physician understood the dynastic necessity of taking what might be the last fertile Djinn female in existence anywhere.

According to his spies on Earth, this girl was the daughter of a rogue Djinn—reportedly assassinated—and a clairvoyant Englishwoman who had died in childbed. With such a mate, he might not only save the Great Djinn from extinction, but also restore lost psychic power to the Imperial blood-line.

Having spies on Earth was illegal. Crossing the Earth exclusion zone to come after her was a violation of Communicating Worlds' treaties. If abducting her meant war, so be it. Psychic or not, if she were truly his half-Djinn second cousin, it was worth any risk to have her. If.

She was almost too perfect. He hadn't crossed galaxies to carry off a feminine impostor, or to saunter into an attractively baited trap set by his great enemy The Saurian Dragon.

The minutiae hadn't seemed important until now.

"One moment, driver. How did we obtain this tape?"

"Sheer luck, Sir. We couldn't get a tap on her phone. Not without the local authorities' help, and they'd take a dim view of our activities if they knew you aliens from outer space existed—"

While the driver discoursed in a fragmented and roundabout style in keeping with the state of British roads, Tarrant-Arragon turned on the reading lights, picked up a file which he'd tossed onto the seat beside him and extracted surveillance photographs of his quarry.

This time, he studied them closely. Could one tell from a photograph whether a girl was more or less than she seemed?

In the first, his spies had captured her on film swerving through Cambridge's crenellated cloisters on a man's bicycle, a white striped, navy Homerton College scarf across her face, wearing camouflage fatigues and high heels.

In the next, she fought with a rapier, face mesh-masked, her body padded and buttoned-up, her long, long legs sheathed in skin-tight, sword-fighting white. Again, she wore heels. Why? Her opponent was light-worlder lean, of similar height. Human.

In the third, she practiced martial arts, her loose white garments fastened with a knotted black belt, a shapely foot—bare for once—nanoseconds from a man's throat. Her hair was tied back but visible. It was red-brown. A full-Djinn would have black or silver hair. But she was half-human.

Alone. Fighting human males for fun. No sign that his enemy's Knights watched over her. These photographs told him nothing except that the girl had an idiosyncratic sense of style and unfeminine tendencies.

"Electronic bugs went haywire," the driver was saying. "We couldn't break in to plant a bug. Her locks are unpickable—"

"I forbade the use of obvious force. I didn't want her forewarned." Tarrant-Arragon smiled ruefully into the driver's mirror. "But it seems she is expecting me anyway. So?"

"So, we got lucky. She gets up to paint in the dead of night. Oil paints stink. I'd say that's why she opens her window. There you go. Two midnights ago, window's open. Your spy's spying. Her phone rings. It's a trans-Atlantic call from her grandmother. Now, she's painting like a demon is after her—"

One is, Tarrant-Arragon mused.

"So she uses the speakerphone. Bingo! Both are recordable."

"She paints? Do we know what?" Tarrant-Arragon loved detail for its own sake and as a mark of his agents' competence. Now his interest was more than academic.

"Self-portraits in sexy, historical/mythical settings, Sir. We got lucky there, too. She took her artwork to a psychology seminar. Photos in the purple file, on the booze cabinet. Light good enough for you, Sir?"

"My eyes are ten times better in the dark than yours are, human." *To say nothing of my other senses.*

"How very shark-like of you, Sir!"

Ignoring the questionable compliment, Tarrant-Arragon reached forward, took the file, and sat back using the smoke-grey carpeted transmission hump as a footstool. His first impression was of a pale female trying to interest a big male in a game of outdoor chess, despite a gathering storm, and despite the obviously lecherous intentions of her open-robed hero.

Defying the dark forces from behind two ranks of waist-high white chessmen, she stood tall, straight-backed, slender and full-breasted, with her undjinnlike hair billowing across a high forehead.

What he could see of her face was hauntingly beautiful with large, dark eyes, high, cat-delicate cheekbones, a straight, narrow nose, and a suspicion of a stubborn chin. Hard to believe that this was the girl he'd seen in the black and white newspaper photograph which his spies had sent to Tigron.

"Self-portraits, you say?"

"Perhaps she isn't photogenic," the driver defended her.

"Perhaps." Feeling perverse and predatory, Tarrant-Arragon examined the self-portrait for further reasons to distrust the girl. A title caught his eye.

Forced Mate? Not a very attractive title, but appropriate under the circumstances. Too slack damned appropriate.

Tarrant-Arragon assumed his Chess Grand Master pose, eyes narrowed, two long fingers tapping his upper lip.

Forced Mate had a chess meaning. Thanks to his chess-rival, Jason, he knew that it was the name that a human, Pandolfini, gave to the end game where the board is reduced to the two Kings, each racing to make a pawn his Queen.

A reference to a royal rival? Carnality!

"If you were being forced to marry the WICKED Prince TARRANT-ARRAGON." The incongruousemphasis from the tape replayed in his mind. Should he read something more sinister into the way Grandmama's voice shook with hate when she pronounced his name?

What if the recorded conversation had been about a suitor other than himself? Who the Carnality could the girl have spoken about in such terms if not himself? Impossible that an unknown Djinn prince—and potential usurper—might exist! He was the last of his kind.

Or was he?

Tarrant-Arragon glared jealously at the male in his mate's self-portrait. Face in shadow. Broad shoulders, dark hairy chest. The muscular build of a heavy-worlder, the gravity-defying height of a Prince of Tigron. Robes like those he would have worn, if he weren't disguised as a modern English gentleman. Black robes. The black reserved exclusively throughout the Tigron Empire for Tarrant-Arragon.

"Great swirling nebulae, she's 'Seen' me. She is psychic!" He traced a finger over the image of the bride he'd come to take by stealth if possible, by force if necessary. "Physically, at least, I appear to be your ideal mate. And—one way or another—you are mine!"

Reflected in dark, bullet-proof, tinted windows, Tarrant-Arragon's habitual sneer twisted into his first genuine smile in a long time. He felt ridiculously happy.

"Marry Tarrant-Arragon? Never!" the girl declared.

Given that she was psychic, and assuming that she had no idea she was being recorded, her vehemence about not marrying him could perhaps be explained away if she had been humoring her malevolent Grandmama, the exiled Empress Helispeta of Tigron.

"My honor as a Saurian Knight would require me to fall on my sword if the Tiger Prince came courting.... As if he would."

No time to savor the irony. The ramifications of her Knighthood should be made clear to the too-talkative driver.

"Driver, she is a Saurian Knight. Do you comprehend what that means?"

"Saurians. The *Other* cosmic superpower. Self-appointed Intergalactic peacekeepers. Bit of a crossbetween our U.N., our N.A.T.O. and the Freemasons, Sir. Full of their own virtue, your enemies are, and too democratic for their own good."

Although he suspected that the driver had rehearsed this partisan little speech, Tarrant-Arragon was amused.

"Near enough, but not quite what I meant."

"No, Sir. I expect you meant to say that it's not natural for a young lady to be a Knight, Sir."

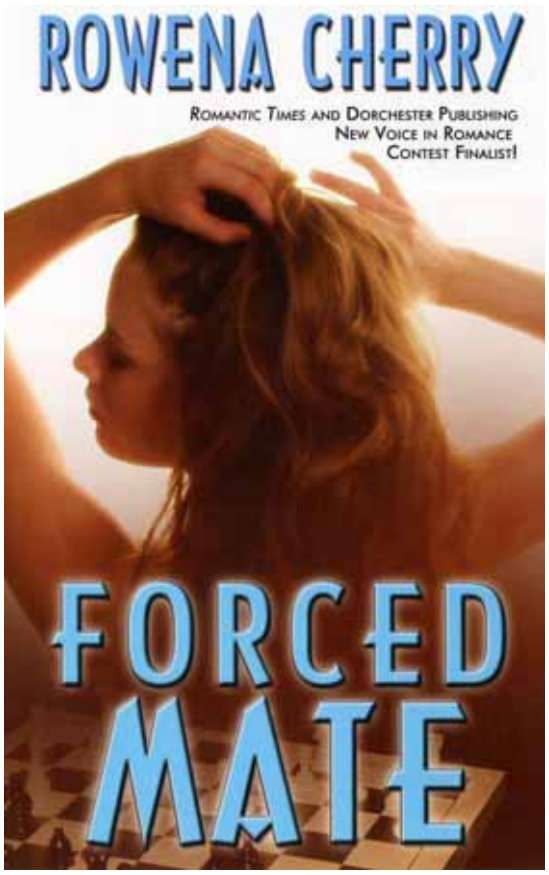
"Quite so. I find it incredible that the Saurian Knights' leader—the so-called 'Dragon'—would allow a girl to be a member of his inner circle. Not just a girl, but a girl-Djinn. He must know her identity."

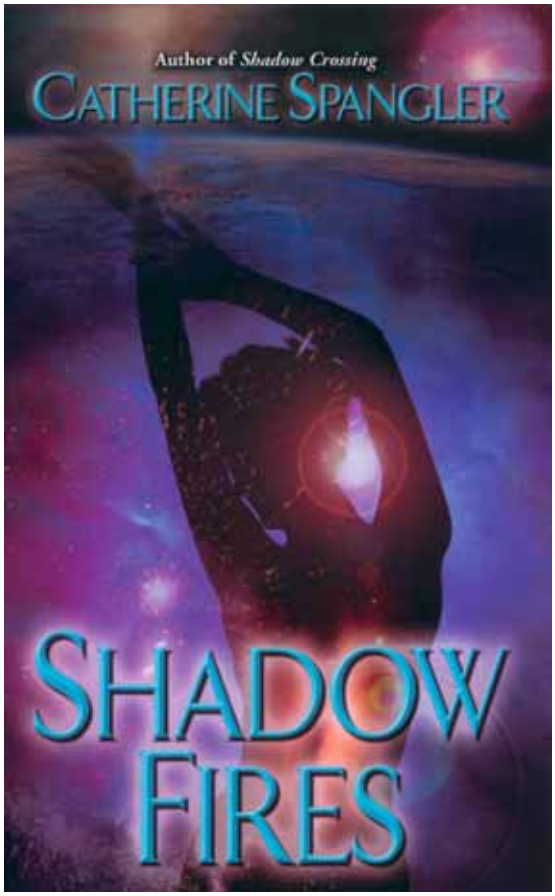
Tarrant-Arragon thrust one hand into a special, deep pocket and toyed with the three Rings of Power which identified him as the most feared ruler ever to dominate the Tigron Empire. He considered the matter.

"Of course he does. My great enemy is no fool. We must assume there's a connection. Whether she knows it or not, she may be a 'poisoned pawn'. A chess term. Meaning that my enemy may have deliberately exposed her to me, hoping that I will take her and thereby come to harm.

"You see, driver, the Saurian Knights are sworn to thwart and defy me, or die in the attempt. If she is a Knight, she has taken the same deadly vow.

"Since I mean to mate with her, she is honor-bound to kill herself before I can, ah, touch her, or else she will attempt to kill me... if she knows whose bed she's in. Which is why she must not find out who I am."





Title: SHADOW FIRES
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SHADOW FIRES is a classic Beauty and the Beast story set in a faraway world, and garnered a prestigious RITA nomination and other awards. Jenna dan Aron, a Shielder with psychic abilities, finds herself reluctantly mated to Arion of Saura, an alien Leor who seems more beast than man, and who has no place in his life for softness or emotion. Jenna and Arion struggle to learn about diversely different cultures, and to accept one another despite their differences. The formation of their unique and amazing bond shines through to the end, as they discover the heart is mightier than any weapon, and love can forge shadow and fire together.

CHAPTER ONE

He stood on the bridge of the massive spacecraft, his powerful legs braced as the ship began its descent toward Candest. He maintained his balance with one large hand lightly gripping the edge of the main con-sole. Like his legs, his chest was bare, with well-delineated muscles rippling beneath golden skin. Silent and majestic, he waited. Suddenly his head turned, and his unblinking midnight gaze fixed unerringly upon her.

Terror jolted through Jenna, momentarily disrupting the vision. He couldn't possibly see her. She was inside her modest quarters in Shamara; he was on a Leor warship, still on the outer edges of Candest's stratosphere. She gasped for breath, her chest heaving, as she tried to dispel the vision, to break its insidious hold on her. But like a nightmare that would not end, the images re-sumed, sucking her into a clairvoyant vortex she could not evade . . .

He still stood there. His face was clearly recognizable, even though it had been more than four seasons since she'd seen it—just that one time; even though she'd never actually met any Leors. But she knew him. He had high, bold cheekbones; a powerful, square jaw; a prominent, wide forehead; all creating the frame for sur-prisingly sensual lips, a starkly-chiseled nose, and black-hole eyes so dark, no pupils were visible. No facial hair or eyebrows softened his chilling visage, no hair of any sort covered his gleaming head.

She'd always sensed the thoughts of those in her visions and his were no exception . . . D*etermination, edged by desperate need and utter ruthlessness. Cold, logical analysis of obstacles to be overcome and the most direct methods of doing so, without compunction or mercy.*

Again he looked directly at Jenna, and her heart battered against her chest. A staggering energy snaked between them, a treacherous snare. The command bridge faded from sight, and everything around them ceased to exist. No ship, no Shamara—only the two of them, in the vastness of the universe . . .

The vision ended abruptly, and Jenna lurched out of her chair. She wanted to run, fast and far. But she knew it was useless. She felt the inundating chill and the sick sensation in the pit of her stomach that always followed on the heels of a vision. Even with the link severed, and even though the Leor's ship must still be several hundred kilometers away, his powerful presence lingered in her chamber, a cruel taunt of her future. She couldn't escape him, no matter how hard she might try.

She knew, with absolute certainty, why he was here. Just as she knew what would happen next. Her fate was sealed. She had foreseen it in a vision on Liron over four seasons past, and had long ago learned the futility of trying to alter the course of destiny. Her visions were never wrong and could not be thwarted.

She'd never had any other discernment of her own future, either before or since that fateful cycle of the pink moon, the same cycle that Ranul san Mars, the great Shielder leader, had passed on. Not that it made any difference. Her fate had been decreed by Spirit. She sank back into the chair, willing her heart to stop racing and the air to return to her lungs. She couldn't let panic take hold. It would accomplish nothing.

The roar of an overhead ship drew her attention. She rose and went to the entry. Stepping outside, she looked skyward. A huge, glittering black and red warship passed overhead, dropping lower as it approached the landing pads. The Leor had arrived.

And with him came the end of her existence. Dread clawed at her, and she pressed a trem-bling hand against the panel frame to steady herself. She wanted to scream out in protest, to rage against the forces orchestrating this cruel turn of events.

But it did no good to curse the reality, or to resist it. Her life, as insignificant and drab as it was, had never been hers to command. She'd always been at the mercy of her visions, guided by the will of Spirit, or so she'd always fervently insisted. She couldn't—wouldn't—accept the possibility that her ability might come from the dark side of the universal forces. Just as she couldn't avoid fate.

Slowly, Jenna turned and went inside. She knew what she must do now. Since there was no

way she could alter the destiny hurtling head on towards her, she would face her fate with dignity and make the best she could out of her situation. She slipped on a cape to protect against the chill of the morning, raising the hood to avoid being recognized and thus shunned.

Because of her clairvoyance and her uncanny ability to predict the future, the other Shielder colo -nists had always maintained a wary distance. Superstitious, forced to expend every micron of energy to survive, they had found it simpler to avoid her than deal with their fears.

There was nothing for her in Shamara. Nor did anyone care that her destiny was that of mat-ing with the leader of a barbaric and cruel race. Her life here, and her freedom, had just come to an end.

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"We are not in the business of bartering people, Your Lordship," Jarek san Ranul said, a hard edge to his voice. "We have plenty of irridon to offer in return for your services."

"I don't need irridon. I need a mate." Arion, ruling Comdar of Saura, set his drink on the conference table. He found having to bargain for a bride almost as abhorrent as mating outside his race. Yet he had no choice.

Problems from generations of inbreeding among the small Leor populace, along with the short fertile cycles of Leor females, necessitated that new gene pools be introduced. The Komiss, the council overseeing all Leor clans, had decreed that the leaders of each clan would take a non-Leor mate to insure strong, healthy future leaders, and to avoid extinction. Producing offspring had become even more crucial with the Controllers' increasing aggression towards the Leors.

"I'm aware of your people's problems, but I cannot condone using human lives as a medium of exchange," san Ranul responded. "With all due respect, Your Lordship, Shielders are highly opposed to slavery. We have worked too hard to free ourselves from the oppression of the Controllers to willingly allow any of our people to be forced into such a state."

Arion was well aware of the Shielder aversion to bondage, just as he suspected san Ranul knew Leor society had a lower caste system consisting of slaves. While Arion believed the Shielders were too lenient in some regards, he had nothing but respect for the ferocity with which they'd bat-tled, and won, their freedom from the Controllers. He also respected Captain san Ranul, who had rallied his people and led them through a wormhole to a different section of the galaxy, then headed up creating new settlements.

"We do not look upon our human mates as slaves," he said. "They are accorded the same treatment our Leor females receive—that of equals."

"Yet you trade services in exchange for those mates, as if they were commodities rather than living, sentient beings."

"Trading services for goods is what we do, Captain. I am sure you know most of our settlements are in deserts and basically barren. For generations, Leors have survived by bartering. We fight in battles, transport goods, and offer protection on trade routes and other ventures. In return, we receive whatever we need to survive, including the means for our race to continue."

San Ranul drew a deep breath. "Comdar Arion, I do not want our differences on this matter to drive a wedge in our working relationship. Our initial agreement with Komissar Gunnar was the exchange of irridon in return for transporting Shielder settlers from the other quadrant. As I stated earlier, we have ample stores of irridon."

Feeling the chill of the meeting hall, Arion rose and strode to the large firebox where heat stones glowed, sending out a beckoning warmth. He tossed back his cape and let the heat seep into his skin. "My need for a viable mate is greater than the need for irridon." He turned to face the Shielder leader. "And your need to transport two newly-uncovered Shielder settlements from the grasp of the

Controllers is also very great. It is miraculous that they have survived this long."

"You also need irridon," san Ranul argued. "It provides the majority of your fuel, both for your spacecraft and on your settlements. I don't see why we can't reach an agreement that doesn't involve the exchange of lives."

"I have stated my terms. Would you place the welfare of two entire settlements over that of one individual female?"

"One life sacrificed to save many?" San Ranul walked to the firebox. He stared at Arion. "How can I place a value on any life, or determine if one life is more important than another?"

Such weakness to put so much significance on a single life. The good of the majority must always come first—a philosophy san Ranul had once lived by. Perhaps the Shielder leader had grown soft, but it was far more likely he thought he'd be able to deal with another Leor. If so, he was mistaken. Arion turned towards the entry. "Then I am afraid we cannot do business."

"Wait." San Ranul followed him. "There must be some way around this impasse."

Arion slowed. It went against his nature to give anyone a second chance, or to negotiate his terms. Few people were foolish enough to consider suggesting such to a Leor. But the Shielders and the Leors had enjoyed a profitable business relationship for over four seasons, and the Komissar had a connection with them through his mate.

He turned to face san Ranul. "Take the issue to your people. Perhaps one of your females would come willingly, for the good of all."

San Ranul considered. "There are very few women who would meet your requirements. The majority of our women are mated, or too young, too old, or not virgins."

"Virginity is one requirement on which I will not compromise," Arion said.

"I'm well aware of that, Your Lordship."

"I only require one mate, Captain. Again, I suggest asking your people. If one of your females comes forward—"

"I will do it."

The feminine voice caught Arion by surprise, and he turned toward the entry. A slight figure stood there, shrouded in a hooded cape. San Ranul appeared just as surprised. "What did you say?" he asked.

The figure took a step forward. "I am offering to go with this Leor." Her voice was low, soft.

Shock registering on his face, san Ranul strode toward the figure. "Jenna? Is that you?"

"Yes, Captain."

"I don't need to ask how you knew Comdar Arion was here, but . . . " He hesitated, then gestured towards Arion. "I'm not sure you understand what the Comdar is requesting."

Her head shifted towards Arion. "I think I do."

Intrigued, Arion moved around the Shielder leader. "Show yourself."

She hesitated, and he felt a wave of uncertainty which caught him off guard. It took a mo-ment to realize it was *her* emotion he was feeling, another surprise. Since Shielders had natural mind shields, Leors were unable to probe their minds and ascertain their thoughts, as they did with other species. Even with his mind-probing abilities, Arion had never *felt* another being's emotions. Yet he was clearly sensing this female's anxiety. It was the only logical explanation.

"You are afraid," he taunted.

"I am . . . apprehensive." Her voice remained low, but he detected the note of resolve.

"If you believe yourself worthy to be a Leor's mate, you will show yourself."

Slender hands lifted slowly to the hood and lowered it. The first thing he noticed, as he al-ways did with humans, was her hair. It was a deep rich copper, the color of the fiery tones of a de-sert sunset. It was tucked inside her cape, so he couldn't determine its length.

Her face was strong, angular, with a square jaw line, but her features were very feminine. Russet brows—another oddity to Leors—formed perfect arches over deep-set gray eyes that were the same soft color as polished magnasteel. Her nose was narrow and straight, her mouth small but curved.

She stared back while he studied her, her gaze clear and direct, a point in her favor, as Leors insisted on direct eye contact, which facilitated their ability to probe minds—except with Shielders. She had none of the magnificence of a Leor female, but she was pleasant enough to look at. She wasn't very tall, her head coming only to the top of his chest. He wondered how sturdy she was. "Take off your cape," he ordered.

"Wait," san Ranul protested. "I'm not sure there's any need to go further. Jenna, you don't have to do this. At the very least, we should discuss the ramifications of such a decision."

She turned her head towards him, and the lights reflected off her hair like sparks of fire. "I must do this. I've foreseen it as my destiny."

San Ranul's eyes widened. "You saw this in a vision?"

"Yes."

"But surely not all your visions are accurate," he protested.

"Yes, Captain, they are."

Further intrigued, Arion asked, "You are a seer?"

Her gaze returned to him, and he found himself falling into mesmerizing gray eyes, filled with the mysteries of the ages. "I am, Your Lordship."

Prophecy was nothing new to Arion. Every Leor clan had at least one shaman who was able to communicate directly with the Goddess and offer prophecies of the future. This woman's eyes alone were enough to convince him she spoke the truth. "You have foreseen a destiny with a Leor?" he persisted.

She drew a deep breath, her chest rising beneath the cape. "I have foreseen my destiny with *you*, Your Lordship. Four seasons ago."

Amazement jolted through him, along with a sense of déjà vu. Actually, it was a real memory from a little over four spans ago—that of Morven telling him, "*The Goddess has chosen your mate. She will be surrounded by fire and visions.*" Not that Arion had discounted it, but when a mate had never materialized, he assumed Morven must have misinterpreted the vision. However, it *was* possible this Shielder female, with her fiery hair and seer abilities, was meant to be Arion's mate. Still, he never accepted anything at face value or took anyone but his most trusted advisors at their word. Treachery abounded in his world.

"How do you know your fate lies with me?" he challenged. "If you have not been around Leors, we would all look similar to you."

Her gaze didn't waver. "That might be the case. But how many Leors bear the mark of a new moon on their left shoulder?"

Only Arion did. The crescent-shaped birthmark was part of his heritage, appearing in all the males in his line, and accepted by his clan as proof of his right to leadership. But the mark was on the back side of his shoulder, completely covered by his cape. There was no way this woman could have seen it. Stronger evidence that she was the one Morven had prophesied. "Take off your cloak," Arion grated out.

Her hands weren't quite steady as she untied the cape and shrugged it off. It fell in a pool on the floor. Fully revealed, her hair was stunning, falling in silky waves halfway down her back. Arion had never seen hair that color, like the burnished glow of fire stones. But then he found all hair fascinating, as did most of his people.

He shifted his perusal to the rest of her. She was small boned, very slender and delicate. He felt a wave of disappointment. She must be wrong about her vision. "You are far too frail. You would

not survive the first mating."

Faint color brushed her cheeks, but she raised her chin proudly. "I'm stronger than I look, Your Lordship."

Her persistence impressed him. She would have to be mentally strong, as well as physically sturdy, to survive life among Leors. He asked the most vital question, the one that would determine if he would even consider her for a mate. "You are a virgin? Untouched by any man?"

"I am a virgin," she said quietly.

"Do not lie to me about this," he warned her. "My personal healer will examine you thor-oughly to ascertain the truth of your words."

"No man has ever touched me," she said with quiet dignity.

A startling rush of primitive, masculine possessiveness flowed through him. He was not one to be swayed by emotion, and he did not like the reactions this slip of a female was spurring in him. It must be the different gravity and atmosphere of Shamara, he told himself, asserting his triton will over his emotions. "You are aware that you will leave Shamara and live in a Leor settlement? Your relocation will be final. You will not ever return here."

"Yes." Her voice was hardly more than a whisper.

He pressed on, ruthlessly determined that she understood all that would be required of her. "And are you aware that we will be joined as mates . . . in every way a male and female can be joined?"

Her color deepened. "Yes, Your Lordship."

"Your sole purpose will be to bear me offspring. You will belong to me, until death separates us."

She closed her eyes for a brief moment, and when she opened them, all the softness was gone. Now the strength of the magnasteel glinted there, the resolute look of a warrior about to go into bat-tle. "I'm fully aware of your requirements. I am prepared to become your . . . mate."

She stumbled over the last word, and san Ranul stepped between them. "Jenna, you don't have to do this. There's no reason to bind yourself to such an agreement."

She turned toward him, her resolve reflected in her bearing. "Tell that to Spirit, Captain. And tell that to those two Shielder colonies still in the other quadrant. Where will their help be when the Controllers find them?"

San Ranul obviously had no answer for that. His hand dropped away from her arm. "Just be very sure, Jenna. I can't help you once you leave Shamara."

Arion's ultra-sensitive hearing picked up the slight hitch in her breath as she said, "I under-stand." Another hitch, as she turned back toward him. "I would like a few moments alone with his Lordship."

San Ranul didn't seem happy with any of this, but he appeared to reconcile himself. "All right," he said. "I'll give you some privacy. I'll return shortly." He strode to the entry, glanced back at Jenna, then left.

She clasped her hands together, her gaze on Arion. "There is one condition I require before I make the final decision to go with you."

His eyes narrowed. "You would seek to *bargain* with me?"

Her white knuckles were the only outward indication of her tension. "I only seek to insure my own well being and dignity."

He could not fault her for that. "You will not be mistreated, as long as you respect and honor our laws."

"I will do my best to honor your laws. But I would like your word that you'll never strike me, or allow anyone else to."

"Leor males do not strike their mates."

"Your word, please, that you will never hit me."

A growl rose in his throat. Had he not just told her he would not harm her? She reached out as if to touch him. He tensed before he could control his reaction. With rare exceptions, no one touched him.

As if sensing his aversion, she dropped her hand. "I will be in an alien culture, surrounded by beings who are very different from my own people. Beings who are physically much stronger and have a . . ." she paused, as if choosing her words. "Fiercer nature. I must know that you will stand for me."

"I protect what is mine," he growled. "Never doubt it."

"You give your word?" she persisted.

He would have to make it very clear she was never to question him in any way. But he was a master strategist, and understood they were in negotiations. Her enlightenment could come later. "Yes. You have my word."

She exhaled slowly. "Then I will come with you."

"Only if the physical exam bears out your virginity," he reminded her. "And your ability to bear offspring."

"It will." Her gaze was unwavering. Once again, he was struck by the power of her eyes. "I consent to this examination, but I want you to know that my word is also good."

"I am glad to hear it. I will not tolerate lies from anyone, especially not my mate. Make sure you remember that." Arion decided the sooner he could educate her in Leor ways, and what was expected of her, the better.

"Since I have always placed a high value on the truth, I don't expect dishonesty to be a prob-lem, my lord," she replied.

Her quiet dignity increased the fledgling respect he felt towards her. He already believed his healer's examination would validate her claim of innocence. "If we are to be mates, I would know your full name," he said.

"Jenna dan Aron."

He inclined his head. "I am Arion, Comdar of Saura."

"Comdar Arion," she acknowledged, her voice low.

Most human females had voices that grated on him. Hers had a melodic quality, with a pitch that vibrated pleasantly in the highly-attuned receptor in the top of his head. He again felt the odd affect she seemed to have on him. He stepped closer, picking up her scent—clean and sweet. If he could stroke his tongue along her flesh, he would be able to ascertain every nuance of that tantalizing scent. He could feel the natural warmth emanating off her, a lure that called to all Leors. And her hair . . . he wanted to touch it, feel the satiny wonder of it between his fingers—

Enough!, he told himself sternly. Indulging in the senses was a weakness, and one that *would* be controlled. He gestured abruptly towards the entrance. "Then come. We will go to Lanka now, and she will confirm whether or not your claim of innocence is true." He stood back, indicating she was to go ahead.

So she would be his mate, he thought, watching her petite form as he followed her. Not a tall statuesque Leor female, who would be fearless and could fight as well as any male. He had always hoped for a mate who would be his equal, but fate—and the Komiss—had decreed otherwise. It appeared this fragile human female with hair the color of fire was his destiny. At least she was strong in spirit, and already, he harbored a grudging respect for her courage.

But she had much to learn about Leor ways, and she would have to accept the fact that he would be her master in all things.

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Like Lord Arion, Lanka had inscrutable obsidian eyes, devoid of any warmth or emotion. The healer's grim face clearly reflected her disdain, and her repulsion, at having to deal with a human. She communicated with abrupt hand signals and curt words. Her hands were like ice, and there was nothing gentle about her thorough and invasive examination. When she was done, she turned without a word and strode from the infirmary.

Captain Ranul's wife, Eirene, helped Jenna smooth down her tunic, then sit up. Eirene was an Enhancer, an empath with miraculous healing abilities. She had quietly dissuaded Lord Arion from witnessing the exam, much to Jenna's gratitude. The Enhancers, known for their spirituality and integrity, commanded respect throughout the galaxy, and Arion had consented to allow Eirene to stand as the requisite witness.

"Are you all right?" Eirene asked, her gentle voice reflecting her concern.

"I'm fine." But Jenna remained on the edge of the table, not trusting her legs.

"You're shaking." Eirene's stunning, blue-eyed gaze searched Jenna's face. "Are you cold?"

"A little."

"Here, let me get your cape." She picked up the garment and slipped it over Jenna's shoul-ders.

But it was a bone-deep chill that inundated Jenna, one a thousand capes couldn't diminish. "Thank you," she whispered, sliding off the table.

The panel tone chimed, followed by Jarek san Ranul's voice over the entry com. "May I come in?"

"Just a minute." Eirene waited until Jenna found her leggings and boots and slipped them on, then told the captain he could enter.

Jenna's clairvoyant abilities usually only manifested during visions, but she was always amazed by the glowing energy between Eirene and Jarek. When they were together, bright, golden light seemed to encase them. Jarek glanced at his mate before turning his attention to Jenna. "Are you all right?"

She wished everyone would stop asking her that. She wasn't all right. She was very apprehensive about her future. Besides, not much in her life had ever been 'all right'. She was taking this step because she believed it was predetermined, the will of Spirit, and not her choice to make; and because she could be out of place in a Leor culture as easily as she could be on Shamara. What difference would it make?

"I'm fine." She fumbled with the fastenings of her cloak, while Eirene murmured quietly to Jarek.

Even if this hadn't been her destiny, there was the issue of the two Shielder colonies. Not every Shielder had traversed the wormhole leading to a safer part of the galaxy, escaping the vengeful Controllers, who had been systematically destroying the Shielder race for over fifty cycles. These Shielder settlements were stranded in the old quadrant, and had no chance of survival if help didn't reach them quickly. Someone had to take action to ensure the colonists reached the sanctuary of Shamara.

The Leors had the only ships large enough to carry so many people, as well as fast enough and sufficiently armed to outclass Controller and Antek craft. Combined Enhancer and Jardonian technology had made it possible to modify the Enhancer spheres that opened the wormhole between the two quadrants.

Now Leors could operate the spheres without the mental energy of an Enhancer. This basically made them the only choice for getting the Shielder colonists to safety. At least Jenna's sacrifice

would serve some purpose, by ensuring the rescue of those colonists.

Not only that, but she desperately wanted children, and she couldn't see it happening if she stayed here. The superstitious Shielder men would hardly talk to her, much less consider her for a mate. The one good thing that had come out of Lanka's humiliating examination—outside the all-important confirmation of Jenna's virginity—was the verification that Jenna was healthy and had a sufficiently wide pelvis for bearing children.

That in itself made the situation endurable. She was determined she would be a good mate to Arion, and do her best to respect him and to honor the Leor ways. She would be a good mother to their children, as well. She'd heard Leors believed in the power of visions, and even based decisions upon information provided by their shamans. Maybe they wouldn't find her clairvoyance repulsive.

Maybe she'd find acceptance among them.

"Jenna," Jarek said, breaking into the desperate mental litany to validate her decision. He stepped forward and grasped her shoulders, his serious gaze probing her eyes. She saw concern and doubt in his dark eyes. "Are you sure about this? You must be very certain. Once it's done, it cannot be undone."

Her fear didn't change the certainty. "I'm sure."

Jarek nodded, accepting her decision. "Then I thank you from the depths of my heart. Your heroism means salvation for over five hundred people. It will not go unmarked. And you won't take this journey totally alone." He turned toward the entry. "Maxine, you may enter now."

A tall, stately woman walked into the chamber. She was very attractive, with a mane of dark brown hair streaked with gold, and golden eyes. Her tawny skin was flawless. She was dressed in a form-fitting gold flight suit that showed off a spectacular figure. She looked hauntingly familiar, but Jenna couldn't remember ever seeing her before.

"I am here, Captain," the woman said in a well-modulated, yet strangely flat, voice.

Jenna moved closer, still puzzled by the woman's familiarity. She looked like . . . Oh! Sud-denly it came to her. The woman bore a striking resemblance to Celie Cameron's new mate, Prince Rurick Riordan. But . . . how could that be?

"Jenna, this is Maxine," Jarek said. "She is an android, gifted to us by Prince Rurick."

"Actually, I am Maxine V," the android stated. "Named after Max, the original android made to masquerade as Prince Rurick. Max has created ten replicas of himself, to serve various functions. There are five male versions—Max II, III, IV, V, and VI; and five female versions—Maxine I, II, III, IV, and V. I am the last, and therefore," she paused and appeared to preen, displaying an odd lop-sided grin, "the best. I have extensive programming in medicine, agriculture, communication tech-nology, aerospace engineering, computer—"

"Hold up, Maxine," Jarek interrupted. "We're quite aware of your credentials. They are most impressive."

"Thank you," Maxine said primly, although her demeanor was anything but modest.

Jenna couldn't help but stare, amazed at how human Maxine appeared. She'd heard of an-droids of course, especially after Celie Cameron and Raven McKnight—each now mated to roy-alty—had spent quite a few cycles with Rurick's personal android, Max. But she'd never seen an an-droid, and Maxine almost overshadowed the looming shadow of life with a Leor. *Almost*.

"I have asked Comdar Arion to accept Maxine as a token of our gratitude for his assistance," Jarek explained. "And he has agreed."

"He did not want me at first," Maxine said. "But then I informed him of my comprehensive programming in genetics. I can be immensely helpful in researching ways to offset the recessive traits caused by a small gene pool and excessive inbreeding. I might even be able to determine why Leor females have such a short breeding period. I estimate there is an eighty-two-point-three percent

possibility that—"

"I'm sure your abilities will be very beneficial to the Leors," Jarek interjected. "That is all they need to believe about you accompanying them. However, your main purpose is to act as a companion to Jenna and to ensure her well being."

Jenna tore her fascinated gaze from Maxine to stare at Jarek. "You're sending her along for my benefit?"

"Yes." Jarek looked at his mate. She smiled at him, adoration shining in her eyes. "Eirene and I didn't want you to undertake this alone. Maxine seemed the perfect solution."

"But surely you need Maxine here," Jenna protested, reeling from this unexpected development. "There's so much she could do in Shamara—in the infirmary, in the hydroponics labs, in engineering, in so many areas."

"We've been doing just fine up until now, without Maxine," Jarek told her. "Your need is greater. Arion has already agreed to take her along, so it's settled. Now you won't be alone."

The darkness weighing down Jenna's soul suddenly seemed lighter. She battled the rush of tears to her eyes. "Thank you," she managed to say, despite the emotion clogging her throat.

"You're welcome." In a move that surprised her, Jarek pulled her into a rough hug. "We should be thanking *you*, Lady Jenna. Words cannot express our gratitude."

He released her, and Eirene stepped forward to hug her as well. "Spirit go with you," she whispered. "May joy and happiness be your shadows."

It was more affection than anyone had displayed towards Jenna since the death of her par-ents, and she found it overwhelming. She took a moment to steady herself and wipe the tears from her eyes. She stared at Jarek and Eirene, the two people who had always accepted her and treated her like a normal person. "I will forever remember your kindness."

"We need to prepare to leave," Maxine said briskly, dispelling the emotion-laden atmos-phere. "The Leor ship is scheduled to depart at sixteen hundred hours."

So little time left. The chill returned. With a last good-bye to Jarek and Eirene, Jenna turned and walked from the infirmary, sensing Maxine following close behind. She stepped into the sunlight, struggling to draw a full breath into her tight chest, and drew her cape more tightly around herself.

"I must send some communications and collect my equipment," Maxine told her. "I will meet you at the ship in one hour."

Jenna nodded and turned toward her quarters. Then she saw Arion. He was standing ramrod straight by a storage building, his arms crossed over his chest. When he saw Jenna, he dropped his arms and strode toward her. His intense gaze was fixed unerringly on her, and she felt like a kerani in the sights of a hunter's laser rifle.

Not even the open area of the compound diminished his size. His short cape flew back with his rapid strides, one side flipping over his shoulder and revealing a massive chest. The muscles of his powerful thighs flexed against tight leggings as he walked. He moved with surprising fluidity and grace for such a large man, and he moved rapidly. She'd heard things about the Leors, discus-sion about their superhuman speed and strength, apparently true, as he crossed the width of the huge compound in a matter of seconds.

The sun's rays reflected off his bald head, making it appear he wore a crown of light, an illu-sion that was at odds with the very nature of Leors. He stopped before her, the darkness of his soul-less eyes reflecting his true nature. "Lanka has verified your chaste state," he said bluntly. Although he spoke in Contran, one of the universal languages from the old quadrant, his deep voice was harsh and guttural, so different from the smoother Shielder cadence.

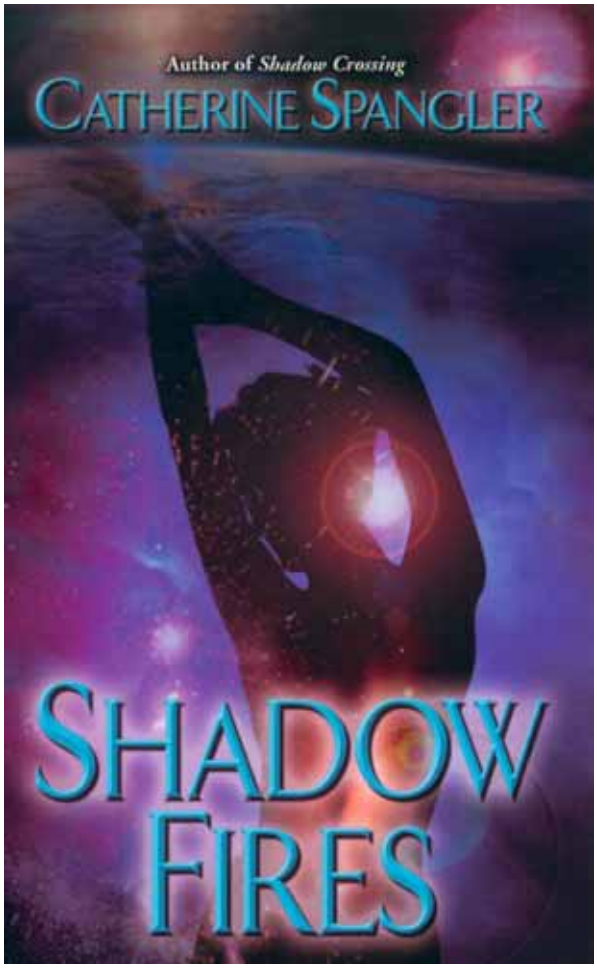
Jenna dropped her gaze, and the daylight provided her first good look at his skin. She stared at his exposed chest and arm. She'd also heard about Leor skin. *Reptilian flesh*, some called it. It cer-

tainly wasn't like human skin. Very faint, crisscrossing lines formed a blurred diamond-shaped pattern which, along with the swarthy tone of his flesh, created the appearance of a leathery texture, similar to that of a lizard's hide. She knew its temperature changed with the external environment; cool to the touch on a cold day, or warm when exposed to heat. It drove home the fact *he wasn't human*.

He was a barbarian hybrid, the result of a long-ago crossbreeding of humans with a reptilian race. The physical makeup of Leors was supposedly more human than reptile, and they could readily breed with humans. *But they weren't truly human.*

And this non-human Leor was about to become her mate.

For more from Catherine Spangler, visit her website at www.catherinespangler.com



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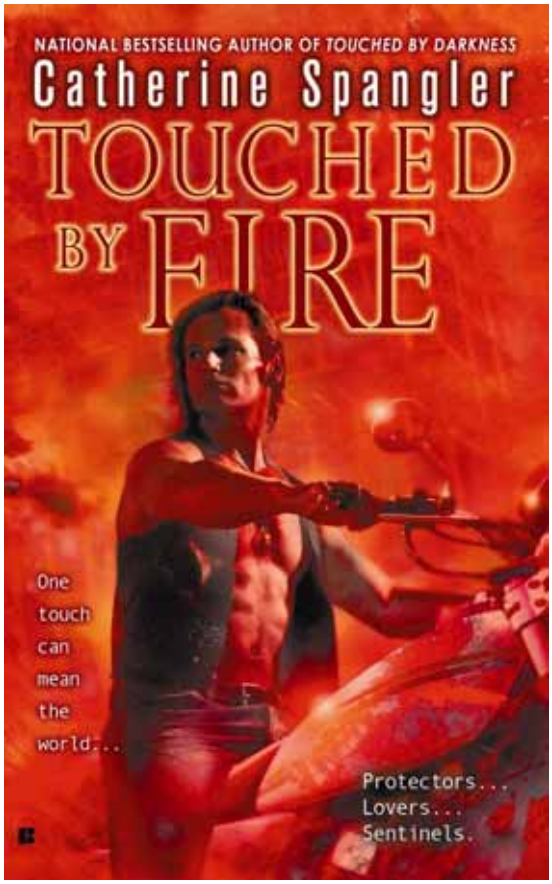

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Alter your reality . . . with edgy, sexy paranormals from Catherine Spangler. Catherine's dark, exciting Sentinel series continues with book two, TOUCHED BY FIRE. Since a brutal attack on her sister eleven years ago, Marla Reynolds has avoided relationships with men. Then she meets Luke Paxton in a Houston bar and is upended by an intense attraction she doesn't understand. But Luke does—it is an energy he must harness to achieve his goals. He is a Sentinel, a member of an ancient superhuman race. His purpose on Earth is to track unimaginable evil, and he needs Marla—willing or not—to help him focus his psychic powers.

CHAPTER ONE

For ever, day by day, is there a choice to be made by each soul. One may lead to happiness, joy; the other to confusion, to disturbing forces, to evil . . .
(Edgar Cayce Reading 1538-1)

Sex. Desire, fueled by lust and pheromones. They coiled through the atmosphere of the Red Lion Pub, edged by forced gaiety, quiet desperation, drunkenness, and cigarette smoke. It was relatively early in the evening—six o'clock—but happy hour was in full swing, and the bar was packed with business professionals eager to celebrate the arrival of Friday night.

Some simply wanted to unwind from the week; some—the extroverts—to recharge their psyches. But many, like Marla's friend Rebecca, wanted to roll the dice on the possibility of finding someone to scratch a sensual itch, to stave off the loneliness, and maybe extend that companionship through the weekend, or even longer.

Marla was: *D)None of the above*, but she was also Rebecca's ride home, and had been unable to refuse her request for a happy hour stop. Rebecca was lonely and searching for a masculine fix, and it wasn't Marla's place to point out that no one could make you happy; that particular commodity had to come from within.

Like Marla was the poster girl for good mental health. She had her own personal demons, but at least she understood the source and was working on it. She should be able to pick up men in bars in, say . . . ten years or so.

With a sigh, she surveyed the smoky room. She wasn't surprised that Rebecca, a Brit, had chosen a pub for her trolling. The Red Lion had beautiful, classy décor—dark wood and red leather upholstery on booths and bar stools, and even a fireplace. The television discreetly placed in one corner was turned off, thank God.

If Marla saw one more news report on the tragic school bus explosion and ensuing fire that had taken the lives of twenty-two children, she was going to be sick. She'd already grieved her heart out for those children and their families. A good reason, in her opinion, why it was a bad idea to watch the news—too damned depressing. In lieu of television, there was background music playing in the pub, but it was low enough that it didn't hinder conversation.

Rebecca was already across the crowded room, sliding into a booth with three guys, plying them with her British charm and knockout body. Resigned to the fact that it might be awhile, Marla made her way to the bar. No one gave her a second glance, which wasn't surprising. She knew she was dowdy, slightly plump, with unruly hair and eyeglasses—although they were Vera Wang designer frames—and in her conservative cocoa-hued suit. Like the rest of the country, Houston business dress leaned toward a more casual look, but Marla had had a meeting with her company's CFO earlier in the day, and had wanted to look professional.

She hitched herself onto a bar stool at the very end, sliding her purse into her lap. A burst of energy, like electricity, shot through her, and she jerked her hand from the counter. Strange . . . must have been static electricity, but the surface appeared to be laminated wood. And the electricity was still tingling through her. Baffled, she looked at the man to her left, just as he glanced at her.

He gave a brief, polite nod, looked away, then stiffened and snapped back around. His eyes widened, fixed on her face. He appeared to be studying her. "Well," he said in a deep, rich voice. "Hello."

She twisted to look behind her and see who he was talking to in such a sensual tone. No one was there. She turned back around, saw he was still staring at her. "Are you talking to *me*?"

He arched dark blond brows. "To the best of my knowledge." He extended his hand. "I'm Luke Paxton." It could have been just a friendly introduction, but the intense, predatory look in his deep-sea eyes warned her otherwise.

Disbelief and confusion rolled through her. This striking male specimen couldn't possibly be coming on to *her*. He had a strong, interesting face with sensual lips that practically moaned *I'm a great kisser*, those incredible eyes, and thick sun streaked hair that swept back past his shoulders—very broad shoulders attached to a large, well-muscled body. He wore a black long-sleeved pullover, jeans, and boots; a black leather jacket was slung over the back of his chair. Everything about him screamed *sexy*—and *dangerous*. No way was he interested in her. She was obviously delusional.

"Uh . . . " Ingrained southern manners insisted she respond civilly. She placed her hand in his. "I'm Marla Rey—" She didn't get any further, because another jolt of electricity shot up her arm. She instinctively jerked back, but he wrapped his long fingers around her hand.

"Oh. Sorry I shocked you." She stared at her trapped hand, wondering how to retrieve it gracefully. Unfortunately, her skills at verbally sparring with sophisticated, gorgeous men were abysmal. "I seem to have a build up of static electricity."

A smile teased his sensuous mouth. "I like being shocked. Especially by an attractive woman."

Now she *knew* he was giving her a line. Great. Why not pick on any number of females in the Red Lion—women who were not only willing, but *really* were attractive?

She wormed her hand free. "That's very nice of you to say, Mr. Paxton, but—"

"Luke. Mr. Paxton sounds old and decrepit, and hopefully, I'm not over the hill yet."

Oh, man, he was anything but. Suddenly warm, Marla wished someone would turn up the air conditioning a few notches. There were too many bodies in here. And way too many pheromones, because her own body was tingling with energy, and there was an ache between her legs, like she felt when she watched a sultry scene on *Sex in the City*.

For the past eleven years, she'd been unusually sensitive to the emotions of people around her. Apparently the combined barrage of the guys with wet dream mentalities and the women with desperate sexual appetites was strongly affecting her tonight. She wasn't sure she could handle much more of it.

"Luke," she conceded, grasping her purse. "Very nice talking to you, but I've got to go."

"Meeting someone?"

"Not exactly, but—"

"Stay. Have a drink with me." When she just sat there, too surprised to react, he added, "Please."

His steady gaze was as alluring as his dark magic voice. Disconcerted, she felt as if she were falling into those Caribbean eyes. "Well, I don't know."

"Just one drink. You sat at the bar, and you're not meeting anyone, so I have to assume you were planning to have . . . something."

The way he said *something* sent the words, *hot sex*, *tangled sheets,* ricocheting through her mind. *Whoa! Down, girl*. What was the matter with her? She hadn't been interested in men since . . . that night. She shoved back the memories before they could surface and ruin the evening, and possibly the weekend. Obviously, it was time to get new batteries for her trusty bedside companion.

"What do you want?" he asked.

That was a loaded question. She struggled to force her thoughts back to something—anything—away from disturbing memories. "What do I want?" she parroted, still trying to get her brain back in gear.

Humor and sensual knowledge gleamed in his eyes. "To drink. What do you want to drink?"

"Oh, I—" *Am an idiot.* She realized the bartender was standing there expectantly, a knowing smirk on her twenty-something face. "A glass of merlot, please," she told the young woman.

Luke tapped his mug. "Another beer."

The woman nodded and left. Marla drew a deep breath, still feeling the strange energy in the air, despite her attempts to ignore it. "Well," she said lamely.

"You didn't finish telling me your name," he prompted.

"I didn't, did I?" She managed a shaky smile. "Maybe we should try this without the handshake. I think one shock is enough, don't you?"

"I don't know." He rested one arm indolently on the bar, turning his body toward her. His full, charismatic attention was focused on her. "Some shocks are very . . . stimulating."

This guy was definitely out of her league. Where the hell was Rebecca? Marla cast a quick glance to the corner, saw Rebecca practically wrapped around the man next to her, laughing at something he was saying. Maybe she'd decide to go home with him, and then Marla could leave. The sooner, the better.

Luke's gaze followed hers to the corner booth. "Someone you know?"

"The blonde in the red. Her car's in the shop—again—and she's riding with me."

"So you're only here because of her." He said it as a statement rather than a question.

"Well . . . yes."

"Then her mechanical misfortune is my gain." He was giving her that look again—pure, masculine appreciation.

She didn't understand it. But then his gaze swept down her legs. Her awkward position on the stool had forced her skirt to ride up, and a generous expanse of thigh was exposed. Ah. He was a leg man, which might explain some of the attraction. Her legs were her best physical feature.

All the Reynolds women had great legs, which was a good thing, since they tended to be plain and brainy otherwise. Plus Marla had on her bronze Prada pumps, which she'd gotten in a great closeout deal because they were from last season. They extended the leg line nicely.

With apparent reluctance, Luke returned his gaze to her face. "Nice shoes."

Yeah, right. "Thank you."

The bartender returned with their drinks, and she fumbled in her purse for money to pay for her wine.

"I've got it." Luke handed the young woman a credit card and she whisked it away.

"Thank you again." Bemused, Marla picked up her wine and took a healthy sip. She wished this damned energy buzzing around and setting her nerves on edge would ease off. If this was the usual ethereal pattern at the Red Lion Pub, she wasn't coming back, no matter how much Rebecca tried to strong arm her into it.

"So back to your name," Luke said.

"Oh, I guess I never got to that."

"No, you didn't."

"I'm Marla Reynolds." She felt foolish, as if she were introducing herself at a self-help conference.

"Pleased to meet you, Marla Reynolds." His hand slid over to cover hers, sending another jolt through her.

"What is it with this place?" she muttered. "They need to invest in some serious antistatic measures."

He murmured something, but she barely heard him. Her attention was on the acute awareness of the fact he was touching her, and the incredible warmth of his hand over hers. Not to mention the sexual energy that swirled between them, causing her nipples to pucker and the ensuing dampness

between her legs.

Pure, raw chemistry.

She'd heard of it happening, but had never experienced it. This guy was potent, especially since he appeared capable of stirring to life her sexual desires, which up until now, had been nonexistent around men.

She gently extricated her hand, pretended she needed it to straighten her napkin beneath her wine glass. "What do you do for a living, Luke?"

Those blue eyes watched her with an intensity that was both flattering and unnerving. "I'm a private investigator. How about you?"

That explained the aura of power and danger he exuded. She'd be willing to bet he was ex-military or ex-police. "Nothing even remotely exciting. I'm the head accountant for a large manufacturing firm. Very ordinary."

He actually looked interested. "What does your company manufacture?"

"Building tools and equipment. Hydraulic shearing machines for metal roofing and siding, power saws, that sort of thing."

"Accounting, huh?" He smiled, and she felt the force of his charm all the way down to her toes.

She willed her racing heart to slow. "Guilty."

"I like smart women. Especially when they're also pretty."

She resisted the urge to look over her shoulder again. Maybe he just needed eyeglasses. Or maybe he was desperate, but she simply couldn't imagine a man who looked like he did having difficulty getting any woman he wanted. She took another sip of wine. "How do you like being a private investigator?"

He shrugged, turning toward the bar to drink his beer. Muscles rippled beneath his shirt, and she inwardly sighed. He was definitely built. "I like the independence and flexibility, being able to pick and choose my jobs, set my own hours. But man, I see some nasty stuff. People can be so . . ." he paused, shook his head.

"Inhuman?" she supplied. A chill went through her, as the nightmare memories that were rarely far away finally succeeded in sliding into her mind.

She must have shivered outwardly, because he leaned close, putting his arm around her. "Hey, you okay?"

His scent drifted to her, woodsy, like sandalwood, and clean, primal male. Another jolt of electricity went through her. His hand rested lightly over the nape of her neck, a possessive gesture dating back to prehistoric man. She couldn't find the strength to protest. Her senses seemed heightened, excruciatingly aware of this man on a visceral level; every look, every touch, every nuance.

"You okay?" he repeated, concern in his voice.

She gave herself a mental shake, managed a smile. "Oh, I'm fine," she lied. "I just drank my wine too fast. I'm a lightweight when it comes to alcohol. A really cheap date." *What on earth had possessed her to say that?*

He laughed, the sound low and sexy. "Really? In that case, how about having dinner with me tomorrow night?" He massaged her neck gently, persuasively, and tingling sparks jumped down her spine.

This whole thing was surreal, and his touch, not to mention the uncomfortable energy throbbing through the pub was making it hard for her to think straight. Even so, she was certain there could be no legitimate reason for this Chippendales candidate to be interested in *her*.

It just didn't make any sense. Unless, of course, he was one of those men who thrived on challenge, and was able to ferret out the women who just weren't interested. How insulting that

would be.

Regardless of his motives, Marla didn't date *anyone*, gorgeous stud or otherwise. She hitched her shoulder, trying to shrug his arm away without being rude. "Thank you, but no."

He took the hint and dropped his arm, but his gaze remained locked with hers. "Why not?" He sounded disappointed, which was very strange.

Even stranger, she felt a . . . link, almost, with him. She told herself it was just the stunning chemistry between them—and she wasn't biting. "I'm sorry," she said with real regret. "But I don't know you."

"I don't know you either. I'd like to learn more about you. What harm could there be in us having dinner together?"

He certainly was persistent. She drew a deep breath, decided to be blunt. "You're not my type."

His brows rose again. "And what is your type?"

No man was her type. None, nada. Damn. If she had more experience, maybe she could better deal with this. But she'd never had to deflect regular men, much less one with the looks and stature of an Adonis. "I don't make it a habit of picking up men in bars," she said. "Nor do I go out with strangers."

"I'm glad to hear it." He leaned toward her, his hand trapping hers again. More energy buzzed through her. This pub had a serious static problem.

"So we're basically strangers," he said. "And you're cautious about going anywhere with a man you don't know. That's understandable, and smart. But if we let it go at that, we won't get a chance to learn more about each other. Let's do this: Let's meet somewhere tomorrow night—any restaurant you want. You don't have to give me your phone number or address. We'll just meet, have dinner, and see where it goes from there."

His touch had her distracted again. His thumb stroking over her skin was sending little waves of sensation up her arm. Yet at the same time, she was starting to feel comfortable, very relaxed, almost lightheaded, as if she'd had several drinks. "Well . . ."

"Where do you want to meet?" His voice was low, hypnotic.

Wow. That wine must have been extra strong. She was actually considering having dinner with this guy. *What harm could it do?* she asked herself. Maybe this was a good sign. Maybe she was finally ready to put what had happened to Julia behind her, to let go of the terror and the guilt. God only knew she had normal biological urges, which for some reason, hadn't yet fizzled out with Luke, as they had with others.

"Just name the place and time," he said in that deep bedroom voice.

Her body tightened, and she felt a renewed rush of dampness between her legs. *Maybe it was time*. Surely it couldn't hurt to meet him in a public place, to do a little socializing. She was so damn tired of being wounded. Here was a chance to test the waters. Although why he wanted to have dinner with her remained utterly mystifying. Still, she found the opportunity intriguing, even . . . exciting.

"Marla." His voice rolled over her in a warm rush. "Say yes."

"I—oh . . . yes." She let out her breath, felt as if she'd just reached the top of Mt. Everest.

He smiled again, and she almost melted then and there. "That's great. Where do you want to meet?

"Um, what do you like to eat?"

His eyes gleamed. "Oh, I eat *everything*."

Code red, code red, there's a fire here. Marla resisted the urge to fan herself, instead focused on a restaurant choice. "Do you like Italian?"

"One of my favorites."

"How about *Damian's Cucina Italiana*? It's on Smith Street, not too far from here. They have wonderful food."

"Damian's. Smith Street." He turned, extracted a heavy gold pen from his inside jacket pocket, and wrote the information on a cocktail napkin. His writing was bold and sure, like him. "I'll find it. What time?"

Tomorrow was Saturday, and they'd have a long wait if they got there too late. "How about seven?"

"Great." He wrote that down. "Do they take reservations?"

"I think so."

"Then I'll reserve us the best table available. How does that sound?"

Terrifying. Exhilarating. Stomach twisting. *Go for it*, she told herself. *It's time to get on with your life*. She knew Julia would approve. "Sounds good." She looked up as Rebecca strode toward them, managing to look both elegant and efficient at the same time.

"There you are." Rebecca's gaze was as sharp as her British accent was crisp. She took in Luke, couldn't possibly miss how he was turned toward Marla, or his body language proclaiming—amazingly—his interest. "Hello." She extended a perfectly manicured hand. "I'm Rebecca Smithson. I work with Marla. And you are?"

"Luke Paxton." He shook her hand.

"Watch out for static," Marla muttered.

Rebecca shifted her blue eyed stare to Marla. "What?"

"Didn't you feel anything?" At Rebecca's confused look, Marla said, "Never mind."

"Right, then. Stephen over there has offered to take me to my flat, so I'm heading out with him. Thanks for the transport today."

Relieved that she could also go home, Marla said, "Will you have your car in time for your trip next week?"

Rebecca had resumed staring at Luke; with apparent reluctance, she turned her attention Marla. "Don't know yet. I'll ring the garage tomorrow and see if my roadster is ready. And I'd like to pay you for petrol."

"We can settle up later." Marla slid off the bar stool. "Good night, Luke."

His gaze locked with hers, intense, hot. "Don't forget. Tomorrow at seven."

As if he was remotely forgettable. She managed a smile. "I won't. Thanks for the drink." She walked away, acutely aware of him watching her.

Rebecca followed. "You're actually going out with him?"

Marla paused just inside the entry. The strange energy wasn't present here, and her head felt clearer. A twinge of doubt snaked through her. "I was planning on it. Why? Did you sense anything wrong with him?"

"Oh, no. He's bloody gorgeous. Probably incredible when he's starkers." Rebecca sneaked another peek his way. "Makes me wonder if I even want to bother with Stephen. Poor comparison, and all that."

More doubt crowded in. "I'm wondering now if I should do it," Marla murmured.

"Oh, don't be barmy. I haven't seen you with a single bloke the whole time I've known you, and that's—" Rebecca considered a moment. "Over three years. I was beginning to wonder if you might be a homosexual—mind, not that you acted like one."

Marla suspected many people thought something was wrong with her, and they were right, since post-traumatic stress disorder was a definite problem. But it was something she didn't want to share. "I just haven't found the right man," she hedged.

"You'd be barking mad not to go for *him*."

"I guess." But away from the strange electrical charges and the sexual energy inundating the pub, Marla had more clarity; common sense told her this might not be a good idea.

Rebecca glanced toward the corner booth. "Oh, Stephen is signaling. Listen, I want to hear all about this hot date. I don't leave for Mexico until Monday—assuming my roadster is ready—so we'll chat before then. Cheerio." She was gone with a flash of red and a whiff of the Burberry perfume she favored.

And Marla was left with growing doubts. Digging out her keys, she stepped into the night air. It was early April and already warm, which, along with the ever present humidity, was normal for Houston. Looking around, Marla walked quickly to her car, beeping it unlocked as she approached. Since that night, she'd taken self defense classes, learned all she could about staying safe—even if it was belated.

She was about to slide in her car, lock the doors, and drive away without delay, when a movement caught her attention. She looked over to see Luke striding through the parking lot. He had on the black leather coat, which made him look even more dangerous. He glanced her way and she took an involuntary step backward, but he didn't appear to see her.

He strode on to a huge black and chrome motorcycle—a Harley, if she wasn't mistaken. She watched as he straddled the large bike with surprising grace. The motor started with a deep, smooth rumble, and he wheeled the bike out of the parking lot and down the street, accelerating rapidly.

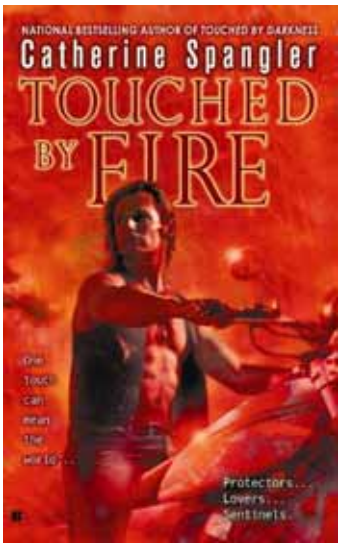
Marla stood there, her heart pounding, until the sound of the motorcycle faded away. *Are you crazy?* she asked herself.

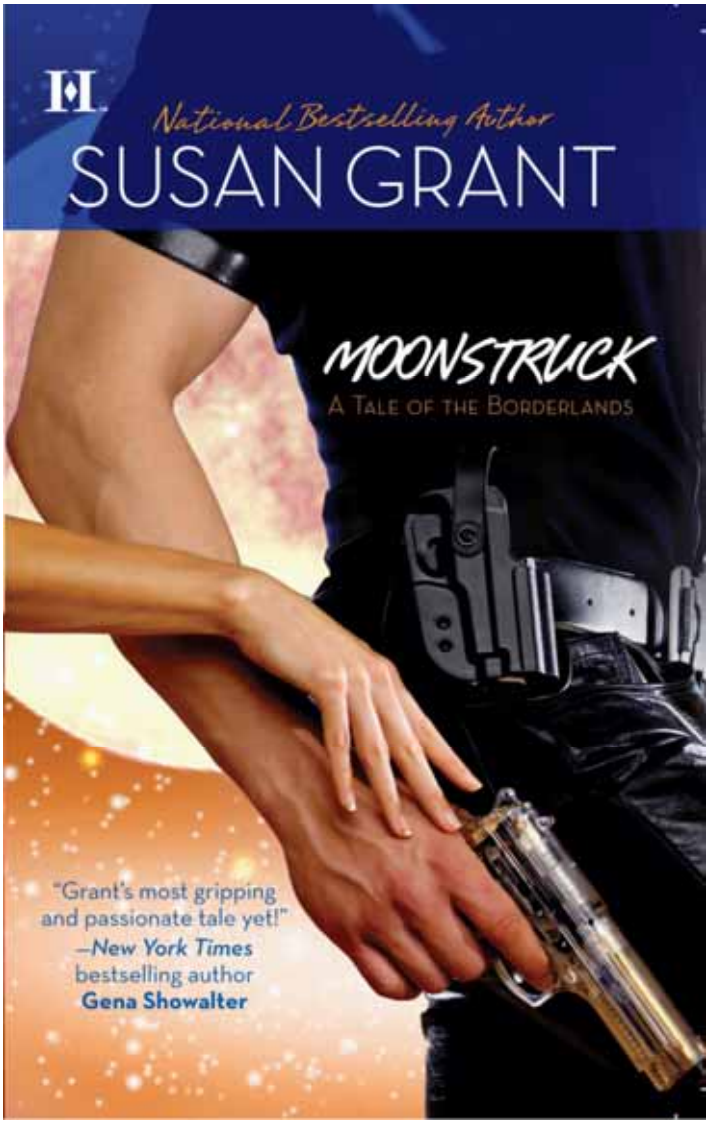
What the hell was she doing, agreeing to go out with a man who was drop-dead handsome, unbelievably sexy, and wore black leather and road a Harley? He was definitely not the ideal 'starter' date for a woman who'd avoided all nonplatonic encounters with men since she was nineteen.

She was playing with fire—the gasoline and blowtorch kind of inferno—with this one. And she knew then—knew with absolute certainty and considerable disappointment—that she wouldn't be meeting this man at the restaurant tomorrow night.

Her instinct for survival was too great for her to take such a high-stakes risk with a guy like Luke Paxton.

For more from Catherine Spangler, visit her website at www.catherinespangler.com





Coming in 2008!!

A riveting plot, compelling characters and a heart wrenching love story in this action-packed science fiction romance that centers around an unlikely peace treaty and a clash of cultures. Admiral Brit Bandar is an outstanding heroine who buries her traumatic past under devotion to her career—and her hatred of the Drakken Horde. Warleader Finnar Rorkken is an incredible hero, a street-fighter who straddles the line between his brutal Hordish heritage and his innately ethical core. This is a can't-put-down read that draws you in from the first page and doesn't let go until the tension-filled final chapters! --Linnea Sinclair, RITA award winning author

Chapter One

Brit woke slowly, luxuriating in silken sheets as she took a drowsy accounting of her circumstances: One, it was morning. Two, she was naked. And three, she was lying in a strange bed.

A real bed. Compared to the one in her quarters onboard the CSS *Vengeance*, the bed was lavish, big enough for three or four. It appeared, however, that only one other person shared the mattress. What was his name again?

Brit rolled onto her side to view her bedmate. Did it matter what she called him? She'd tolerate his company for perhaps another night or so before he became another pleasant memory from shore leave like all the others before him.

She reached out and moved a curl from his forehead. No lines of worry marred that perfect, golden skin. He'd never needed to block out the screams of battle, nor grimaced at the horrors of war. No, this man existed in a sort of perpetual shore leave: all pleasure, no pain. He was almost pretty, she decided, but well-built--she would not have chosen him otherwise. His dark hair was tousled; his lips were full, stopping *this* short of feminine. She preferred a more manly mouth. Ah, but he'd used it well. There was time for him to use it again, too, before she deserted him for breakfast.

On her belly, she slid closer and licked his jaw. "Wake up..." *Whatever your name is...*

He stretched and smiled, then rolled her onto her back. Two long, thin slashes marred his shoulder. "I scratched you," she murmured as he nuzzled his way down her neck to her breasts. She hadn't remembered clawing him; she normally wasn't violent in bed. Well, not this violent. But it had been too long between shore leaves this time, and she'd been hungry.

Hungry to forget...hungry to remember.

With this stranger between her legs, she could cast her memories back and pretend he was Seff and she his young wife, innocent, full of hopes and dreams, all the things she wasn't now. They were only teenagers, married less than two years when Hordish marauders came. With this pretty stranger and all the others before him she could lose herself in the sex, almost believing in those moments of blinding, no-strings-attached passion that she was still human. That she could still feel.

"Come here." She took his head between her hands and kissed him roughly. He returned the kiss with equal intensity, crushing her to the pillow, but something wasn't right. Something's missing, she thought. *Of course it is, you fool. His passion is staged--it's what you bought him for. Yours is real*.

She swore under her breath, grabbing his shoulders and digging in as she trapped him close. She wanted him inside her--now--thrusting hard, before her thoughts, her self-analysis, went any deeper.

From the bedside table, her Personal Communicator Device rang.

"Blast it," she hissed, twisting from under him to grab the PCD.

Her bedmate playfully pulled her back and threw her down to the mattress. "Whoever it is can wait."

"Release me." The snarling command came out in her admiral's voice. The man-toy backed off immediately, lifting both hands. White, soft palms, she noted. He hadn't done a day of real labor in his life. Why, when there was nothing to do but service wealthy, privacy-craving clients on this pleasure dome of a resort planet? He was an attractive, empty shell of a man looking for a day's pay earned with his cock. It was quite nice as cocks went, true, she thought with a brief, almost longing stare at the man's hefty equipment standing at attention between his legs...until the communicator rang again, diverting her attention.

Brit sat up, swinging her hair over one shoulder. "Admiral Bandar," she said curtly into the PCD as she hooked the secure-signal communicator over her ear. Several tones told her that her voice required authentication before the identity of the person trying to reach her could be revealed. The procedure was typical for high-priority, classified calls. Except that Brit was light years off the beaten track on a vacation planet. The connection could take awhile.

In the corner of her eye, she caught the sparkle of her midnight-black, crisply pressed officer's uniform hanging in the closet next to an iridescent, gossamer-lace poolside cover-up. Who would dare to bother her on shore leave? This was supposed to be a few weeks' respite before she returned to the helm of the *Vengeance* to hunt down increasingly desperate Hordish pirates in the Borderlands. The war might be over, but there was cleanup to do.

The war...over. It had been several months and Brit still couldn't wrap her mind around the concept. Yet, long ago, before time began, the galaxy was whole. The worlds of the Drakken Horde were the original cradle of the goddesses. Then, under threat of religious extermination, the goddesses were forced to flee their home. They found refuge on the ice planet Sakka, where they formed a new government, the Coalition, and essentially split the settled galaxy in two. The two sides, Coalition and Drakken, had warred ever since. Every school child could recite that bit of history. What no one considered, however, was the sheer number of faithful living across the border under Hordish rule who worshipped the goddesses in secret--undocumented believers, billions, even trillions of them. When the young goddess Herself, Queen Keira, killed the Drakken Horde leader Lord-General Rakkuu to escape capture, she in effect broke the dam holding the faithful back. The warlord's blood hadn't even cooled when those secret believers began pouring out of the shadows. Thus, in an almost bloodless coup, the Drakken Empire had come crashing down, bringing peace to a galaxy that remembered nothing but war.

Peace with the Horde? Bah! It would never last. The only trustworthy Drakken was a dead Drakken.

Brit shot to her feet. Pacing away from the bed to find privacy for the call, her hair swinging just above her buttocks, she felt her bedmate's eyes on her nude body. She was older than him by a number of years, she was certain, yet, nearing forty, she looked better than women almost half her age. Then again, she allowed herself no excesses. She was disciplined, focused. She knew what she wanted, and that was to kill Horde.

"Authentication verified," a computer announced.

A familiar voice came on next. "My sincere apologies for the interruption, Brit," soothed Prime-Admiral Zaafran, her commander-in-chief. "However, it is with good news that I do."

She closed the veranda door behind her. "The treaty has broken down." Her hopes soared.

Zaafran's deep chuckle crushed those hopes. It didn't sound like he shared them, either. *He doesn't have the reasons you do*. "I have orders," he said. "A new ship--brand new, state of the art."

A bolt of surprise shot through her. "And the *Vengeance*?"

"She's being retired."

Her warship had the best record out there, winning more battles than any other. She loved that hunk of luranium; it was as much a part of her as her skin and bones. The merest whisper of the word *Vengeance* struck fear in the hearts of the Drakken. They knew that she, Admiral Brit Bandar, was in command. They knew that she held no mercy in her soul for them. "Admiral Stone-Heart" they called her.

The nickname amused her.

Over the years, countless Hordish war leaders had lusted after her capture. Oh, the things they'd dreamed of doing to her, most of them related to sex and torture--she'd learned a few choice scenarios from listening to Drakken prisoner confessions during interrogations--but they'd never

caught her. Now they never would. The entire Drakken realm lay vanquished at the Coalition's feet. A victory that for Brit wasn't satisfying at all. She wasn't done with the Drakken yet. No, nowhere close. "It will seem odd, commanding a new ship, Prime-Admiral."

"One foot on the bridge and you will change your mind. I've seen her. She's more impressive than any ship in our fleet, even your beloved *Vengeance*."

"I look forward to you convincing me of that, sir," Brit quipped, though an expanding ball of tension sat cold in her gut. Regardless of the reason, Zaafran planned to remove her from her ship. Even if she was trading up, as he'd implied, it was an unsettling event. It would be for any captain of any ship, let alone tearing her from her beloved *Vengeance*. The warship had been the closest thing to home since Arrayar Settlement.

"Convince you, I will," Zaafran assured her.

"What is the ship's name? Give me that, at least."

"Have patience, Admiral. Report to the Ring. I'll tell you the rest."

Patience--bah. Brit frowned as he ended the call. A summons to the Ring to trade ships seemed odd. The usual procedure for a new ship captain was to proceed directly to the shipyard or port, run through the usual change-of-command formalities if taking the bridge from someone else, and be off. Yet, the Prime-Admiral wanted to see her in person. He was hiding something. But what?

She let herself back inside the room and shoved the veranda door shut. Morning sunshine streamed between the slats of shuttered windows. The Ring was the Prime-Admiral's headquarters, a space station orbiting Sakka, the Holy Keep of the Goddess and the seat of the Coalition government. Of late, the Ring had been the location of the *Unity* Peace Conference where Coalition and Earth leaders were meeting to determine the fate of a vanquished Drakken Empire and its newly liberated citizens. And, Brit surmised, carve up of what was left of any value for themselves.

It was a giddy, hopeful time--for everyone else but her. While the galaxy celebrated the Drakken surrender, Brit had prowled the bridge of the warship she commanded, cursing it. Dreading it. She wouldn't know what to do in peacetime. She wasn't ready for it. Peace meant unfinished business with the Horde. She could never reverse what they'd done but she could keep it from happening to someone else. She'd spent her entire career doing exactly that.

Now they were taking her ship away, replacing it with a new one. Taking her mission and replacing it with...what? The mighty *Vengeance* was to be retired. Would *she* be forced into retirement next? Brit tore the PCD off her ear and stalked back to the bed.

"It's about time," the man-toy murmured with come-hither eyes. But it was a wasted effort. The mood had passed.

"Get dressed." Brit reached into the closet and removed a few extra credits from the safe. She'd paid the man in advance, but his performance last night warranted a tip. She tossed the credits on the table. "And be gone before I return."

She closed and locked the bathroom door, and stepped into the shower, letting the streaming water fool her into believing the moisture on her face wasn't angry tears.

□□

Warleader Finnar Rorkken paused in the entrance of a dilapidated eatery and bar, waiting until his eyes adjusted. Inside, it smelled like sweat and sex and blood--like any typical Hordish haunt. A few dead bodies littered the stone floor. Finn stepped around them, his boots muddy from the hike from the ship to town. This planet had been badly bombarded during the Great War, probably several times. Spring rains turned scarred hardpan into mud. All week, downpours had continued unabated. He'd never seen so much damn rain.

Water dripped from his ponytail and earrings, his leather overvest and trousers. His wool sweater stank, and was two-sizes smaller than when he'd bought it. He was tired of being wet, tired of being hungry more often than not, tired of...

Blast it all, he was just tired!

The tang of cheap alcohol hung heavy in the muggy air. Finn waved off the expectant glance of a bar wench. He didn't want a drink; he wanted a warm, dry room and a good square meal--simple needs but harder than ever to satisfy. Worse, there was more than his belly to fill. He had a crew of fifty-two to look after.

As an Imperial Fleet warleader, he was paid in scrip that he divvied up amongst the crew. In port, they'd exchange scrip for real money. The implosion of the Drakken government had rendered the scrip worthless. Finn had to dig into his own funds to support the ship and crew. There hadn't been much in the way of funds. Now he was liquidating ship furnishings, liquor, and unneeded weapons, anything he could barter or sell. To slow the hemorrhage, he'd resorted to raiding. It was like the old days.

He'd given up piracy (more or less) upon his promotion some years ago to Warleader. He'd turned a new page in his life. He'd thought he'd found a new career, a respectable one. Now, he'd fallen back on old ways. Desperation did that to a man. The skills honed during his reign as Scourge of the Borderlands hadn't vanished. A recent haul from a raid in the Borderlands had been sizeable enough to keep them fed. Life had turned good again, relatively speaking, until the *Pride's* plasma core acted up, forcing them to put down on this scum pool of a planet for repairs.

Finn had paid dearly for the privilege. No one was supposed to fix Drakken ships anymore without Coalition knowledge. Almost all the remaining raid money went to bribing a mechanic to circumvent the new rules. Rationing supplies would be necessary all over again, something he hadn't yet the heart to break to the crew. No, not until he learned more about the mysterious summons to the Ring of the Goddess.

A body slammed into his side. Finn spun, his dagger in his hand. Hooking his boot under a leg, he threw a large man to the ground. The stench of alcohol rising up from the drunk was almost strong enough to make his eyes water. With the distraction of the drunk, someone who hadn't grown up on the streets as he had might not have felt the light touch of fingers on the empty leather money pouch attached to his belt. He had the pickpocket in his hands and off the ground in a half breath. Through the red haze of anger, he saw two eyes going wide with fear.

He dropped the thief to the ground, making sure he saw the glint of his blade. "You'd better run, boy." The child dashed away. "Run!" he shouted after the waif, old memories whispering. He'd been in those shoes before; he knew what it was like, being so hungry that you were immune to risk.

Finn exhaled as his pulse slowed. A pickpocket this time; a thief with more murderous intent the next. He was a target. The men and women in his crew were targets. No matter how tattered their uniforms, they were several levels up from what most people wore around here. Any one of them could be ambushed at any time, ending the day lying on their backs in a pool of blood for the price of what little of value they had in their possession. The Borderlands had always been a dangerous place. Now there was an air of acute desperation.

But Finn might have a way out of this dead-end spiral, an escape. *An escape or a trapdoor?* He didn't know. His mysterious summons from Coalition Headquarters commanded that he show up at the Ring next Septumday. The accompanying message was a personal one, issued by Chief of the Coalition Naval Command, Prime-Admiral Zaafran, as if the idea of Finnar Rorkken, formerly the Scourge of the Borderlands, aboard the Ring wasn't surreal enough. Good gods, what was next, a love letter from Admiral Bandar? The way things were going, he wouldn't be surprised to see ol'

Stone-Heart herself sitting there when he arrived.

He almost wished she were. After all the games of hide-and-seek they'd played in the Borderlands, he felt as if he knew her. A more worthy opponent he'd never encountered. If he ever had the chance, he'd buy her a drink and brag about all the times she'd thought she'd had him in her clutches, only for him to slip away again. He respected her, aye, admired her, but he had to admit the male in him was more than a little curious about the woman at the helm of the *Vengeance*.

No one knew what she looked like, although there'd been many guesses bandied about. No one who'd met her ever returned to pass along the juicy details. They were either dead or scraping luranium out of the mines on a prison asteroid. Not him, oh, no. He'd led her on one merry chase after another across the Borderlands until she'd been called away for more pressing duties: battles more critical to the survival of the Coalition than catching a pesky pirate.

The war, over--it was damned hard to imagine. Now that he was out of a job killing her people, and she was out of a job killing his, maybe they'd have time for that drink, after all.

You're delusional, Rorkken. Aye. Something told him that Stone-Heart didn't view him in quite the same way he did her.

Smirking, Finn clamped a nano-pic between his teeth as he scoped out the noisy, crowded, shadowy bar. Bioputers spread through his mouth in a refreshing wave, eliminating any sourness. The pic was a welcome little novelty found amongst other, more important supplies taken on that Borderlands raid. The Coalition had lived with high-tech for generations. The Drakken lived with whatever they could steal or, rather, appropriate. Other than their machines of war, their weapons, they were centuries behind the Coalition in technology.

There was a newcomer to this two-sided game: Earth. When it came to tech, Earthlings made the Drakken look downright advanced. Luckily for Earth, it was protected under its new status as a Holy Shrine, thanks to it being the birthplace of Queen Keira's consort, quite an achievement for such a far-flung, water-covered little rock.

A burst of singing drowned in angry shouts. Glass shattered. Someone cried out. Finn rolled his eyes. It was time to haul his crew out of the bar before they were too drunk to find their way back to the ship. Then he'd tell them the news.

The musical tinkle of female laughter drifted over to him. A group of women stood off to the side, giggling and ogling him, waiting for a signal to come closer, one or all of them. An image of their naked bodies writhing under and over his lasted only seconds and barely registered between his legs. Zaafran's orders and what they could mean commanded too much of his imagination. If the outcome was as good as he hoped there'd be plenty of time for such sport soon, for him and his crew.

With a sly, regretful glance in the direction of the women that got them tittering all over again, Finn crossed to the rear of the bar. He found his second-in-command leaning heavily on a grimy counter, his eyes glazed over with a telltale fog. "Gather the crew, Zurykk. We're off."

"We've only just gotten started, sir."

Finn circled his hand. "We've got orders out."

"Orders?" Zurykk dropped his boots. The skinny little wench wrapped around him protested. She was small, hollow-eyed. A girl that age should be in school, not a soldier's bar. Problem was, the last years of Lord-General Rakkuu's aggressive campaign to topple the Coalition had frayed what little was left of society's edges. Unnecessaries like education had been the first to go. People were too busy reeling from the horrors of war, too numb to salvage their humanity in the shadow of unbearable atrocities.

Would the treaty with the Coalition make things better or worse? Who knew? It was a time of change. Finn intended to land feet-first like he always did.

"What orders, Captain?" Zurykk repeated.

"We're to dock at the Ring of the Goddess no later than Septumday morning."

"The Ring?" Zurykk searched his face and choked. "Gods, you're serious."

"As a plasma burn, aye."

"We're gonna run for it, though, aren't we? We're not going to show up." Zurykk absorbed Finn's determined expression and downed the last of his drink. "You're crazy."

"An optimist."

"A fool!" In the glare of Finn's disapproval, the man added, meeker, "Captain, *sir*." He slammed his glass to the counter and exhaled loudly. "The question isn't whether you'll be executed, Cap'n, but whether it'll be public or private."

"Private, I hope. If that smart-noose curls around my neck, I plan to spend my last breaths on obscenities raw enough to make Stone-Heart blush."

"You need blood to blush," Zurykk pointed out.

Finn chuckled. "Aye, you do, that." Blood was something that cold bitch surely didn't have. "Gather everyone up, Zurykk. We're off."

Finn took a watchful position by the door as his second-in-command yanked the crew off chairs and out of cots, tearing them from the arms of lovers or from bowls of greasy, cheap, but belly-warming stew. Rakkelle, his latest pilot, pulled her shirt over surprisingly white and delicate breasts. A few red splotches on her skin told him she'd been engaged in activities that had been anything but delicate. Finn hated to interrupt any of it. Without battles to do the job, a crew needed a way to vent energy. Finn would rather it be sex than bar fights that could leave them dead or, worse, badly injured. These days, with medical supplies hard to come by, they needed to preserve what little they had.

With the crew grumbling all around him, Finn walked out into a cold and soaking drizzle. Rakkelle strode alongside him. Again he thought of her breasts, and felt a twinge in reaction to the thought of tasting them. Lusty little Rakkelle wouldn't mind, but Warleader Finnar Rorkken didn't sleep with his subordinates. He still had a few principles that went along with his hard-won title. A few.

Fewer principles by the day, he thought, reminded of his precarious situation.

"Zurykk says we're heading out, Captain," Rakkelle said.

"Aye. We're been ordered to the Ring."

She let out a husky war cry, spinning around to face the others. "The Ring! We're going to the freepin' Ring! We'll slice off their wee little Coalition balls and crack 'em like gornuts!"

The crew roared like they did before a battle.

"Shut your traps!" Finn bellowed. He rested a hand on the butt of his pistol, glaring at the noisy men and few women who knew he'd use that weapon if provoked. "I've been summoned to appear by Prime-Admiral Zaafran."

Boos and curses came in response.

Finn drew the pistol. The laser sight streaked along the foreheads of the suddenly silent crew. His aim was deadly, and they knew it. It was no different from his pirate days: a strong arm kept a Hordish crew in line. "Disrespect of our military orders is to disrespect me. Who dares more disrespect?" He armed the pistol. "It will be your last mistake."

"But, sir, they're Coalition."

"And so are we." That generated more growls of protest, quickly self-extinguished. "We are one now, one world. We either accept this, or we flounder and fail. I will not fail." He twirled the nano-pic between his tongue and teeth, glaring at the men and women surrounding him. He counted to ten before he spoke again, quieter. "Am I clear?"

"Aye," the mumbles went around.

"I didn't hear you."

"Aye!"

Finn jerked his chin to the dock. "Let's move out."

Ahead, his warship glinted darkly, evilly, a giant amongst the smaller ships in port. His ship, his pride, he thought. *Finn's Pride*. With most Hordish vessels bearing monikers like *Blood Wrath*, *Scourge of Death*, and even *Stench*, his ship's name was the source of ridicule at first. One by one, his disparagers learned the consequences of that. Now his ship commanded respect, wherever they went.

Finn strode on ahead, letting damp, cool air wash over him. He was going to have to fight to keep his ship, fight to keep his career. It was nothing new. He'd struggled for everything that had come his way, from the moment he was born until now, fighting for every gods-be-damned bite of food, it sometimes seemed. From skinny street urchin to opportunist pirate, to working his way up the ranks of the imperial fleet from unwilling conscript to decorated Warleader, he'd busted his ass for it all.

He threw a grateful glance at the heavens in thanks for all the near-misses, lucky breaks, and last-minute saves over the course of his life. Someone Up Above took pity on his sorry soul. The gods had been generous with him, aye, but they'd made him sweat for every blasted bone they'd thrown his way.

What is granted can be taken back, no matter how hard you've worked to win it. Finn had learned that lesson well. He threw a dark, regretful glance at his ship. Ah, but it had been good while it lasted...

As if reading his thoughts, Zurykk ventured quietly, "What of the *Pride*, Captain? What of us?"

"I have nothing more to tell." Finn was well-aware that the ears of the crew were hard-tuned on his every word. "Zaafran refuses to explain until I am onboard the Ring. Only then will he reveal his news." *History-making, ground-breaking, life-changing news* had been the Prime-Admiral's exact words. Finn wasn't sure what to believe. News might mean a promotion, or the commencement of his war crimes trial. "I asked for more than that, I did, but he told me to have patience."

The crew was vocal in their disappointment. Of course they wanted to know more. Their fates were tangled with his. In these dark times, the loss of their warleader would be devastating. He was all that separated them from hunger and homelessness. For morale's sake, he'd keep the pitiful state of the ship's vault to himself now that he'd coughed up what he owed for the plasma core repairs. For the same reason, he'd keep private his nagging reservations on his summons to the Ring. Zaafran's "news" was either incredibly bad or incredibly good. Finn had his bets on the former. His heart held out for the latter.

To find out more about Susan, go to her website www.susangrant.com