

Descendants of the Light 3: Hope's Heart

Eve Vaughn

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Prologue

H'trae: Zerus, 494 H'trae Years Ago

Tonight was the night. Garm would have to die. She contemplated her plans, wishing it didn't have to come to this. Regardless of his brutality, it was hard to reconcile the fact that she would be taking another life.

Dyshira paced the length of her room, back and forth, until she was dizzy. Just when she thought her husband couldn't get any lower, he outdid himself.

Garm didn't realize it, but she knew what he planned to do with her people. Coming back from a shopping expedition in town, she'd heard her husband and one of his trusted advisors talking. Upon hearing the mention of her homeland, Dyshira paused.

"We'll withdraw our protection from Tiearen and let the Shadow People do what they will. We can use the resources of the land, and any survivors can work as slaves in Zerus. I'm sure many of them will fetch a hefty price, especially the comely wenches," Garm laughed.

Dyshira's heart fell. She'd married Garm because he'd threatened to withdraw his protection if she did not. Since she'd given in to his blackmail, Dyshira had suffered many nights of shame and degradation at his hand.

She'd witnessed his brutality. The servants cowered in his wake. People feared him. No one dared to contradict Garm unless they wished death. Dyshira even knew that Garm had been responsible for his own father's death.

For months she'd plotted, trying to find a way to rid herself of him. Now she had a plan and it must happen tonight or else she'd never get another chance, for tomorrow her people would be doomed.

Any minute, Garm would join her and the plan would be set into motion.

The door crashed open. She was going to confront him sooner than she thought. Dyshira turned around to face her husband, his dark hair flowing around his shoulders, black wings flapping behind him.

He could've been a handsome man if it weren't for the perpetual sneer on his lips, or the meanness in his silver eyes. She forced a smile on her face, pushing a stray braid over her shoulder. "Husband, I'm pleased to see you."

Garm's eyes narrowed; he looked her up and down. "What are you up to, Dyshira?"

She blinked her eyes, feigning innocence. "I only wished to bid my husband welcome. Please have a seat on the chair and I'll get the oils to rub into your skin." Dyshira turned around only to be hauled back against his hard chest. He towered over her, seeming larger than life. Dyshira's head only reached just below his pectorals.

Garm's fingers circled her throat. "You're up to something, wife, and I will know what it is."

"What... what do you mean?"

His grip tightened around her throat. "You are more compliant than usual."

What the *farcken* was wrong with this Ceyan? He punished her for being too disobedient and was suspicious if she was too compliant. She couldn't win with him. If only she could get him to taste the wine she'd prepared for him.

His hand slid from her throat to her breast, squeezing it painfully in his hand. It took all her self-control not to wince. "I only wish to please you, my lord."

Garm released her. "You may fetch the oils."

"Thank you, my lord." She scurried over to the table where massage oils lay, before turning back to him. "Please, have a seat." Dyshira gestured to the plush sofa that Garm favored when he visited her rooms.

Her heart beat faster than she ever remembered as she prepared the tray of oils. Dyshira's hand shook when she poured wine into a goblet before walking over and offering it to him. "Some refreshment for my lord?"

Garm gazed at her with a suspicious gleam in the depths of his silver eyes, but took the wine. "Perhaps I should make you taste this first."

A nervous laugh burst from her throat. "What... what do you mean?"

"Nothing. You don't have the heart to harm me," he laughed before bringing the goblet to his lips and downing its entire contents in one long swallow. "This is good wine. Go fetch me more." Garm wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, practically tossing the goblet at her.

Dyshira hurried to refill it for him. Now it was only a matter of time.

While Garm sipped his wine, Dyshira began to rub oils into Garm's weather-beaten skin, her dark hands against his golden flesh creating a stark contrast.

Suddenly he seized her hand. "What have you done to me, woman?" he yelled.

She smiled, knowing that the poison now flowed through his veins. "I'm not sure what you mean."

Garm stood up with a roar. He turned around and grabbed for her, but she was able to sidestep his grasp. "You... won't get... away... with... this." His words began to slur as he stumbled drunkenly around the room before collapsing.

"Oh, but I think I will." For the first time since she set eyes on Garm, Dyshira was happy.

Chapter One

Hope paced the floor wondering, not for the first time that day, how in the hell she'd gotten into this mess. A healer from a race of people long thought extinct? It couldn't be. She was just plain old Hope Phillips, social worker from Toledo. Extraordinary things didn't happen to people like her, yet here she was surrounded by riches she'd never thought to see in her lifetime.

She looked around the room again, taking everything in. It was like something from out of *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. Sheer tapestries of every color imaginable and some colors she'd never seen before decorated the walls. The furniture all looked as though it was made from some type of precious metal, but from the way it shimmered and sparkled Hope couldn't identify it.

In the corner of the room lay a large soaking pool she'd had the pleasure of trying out only a few hours ago. Actually the serving women had referred to it as a tub, but that thing was larger than any tub Hope had ever seen. In the middle of the room was a large bed surrounded by soft cushiony pillows that made her sleepy just looking at them. This entire room was probably bigger than her whole apartment back home.

Home.

According to Prince Kalian, this was now her home, and in a few hours she would be wed to one of the Ceyan princes. Hope knew that she should try to escape and find her way out of here, but where would she go? Who would take her in and give her answers to the questions that had been on her mind since she'd been here?

Hope shivered, feeling cold all of a sudden, and it was really no wonder. The outfit they'd given her to wear was positively indecent. Although it did feel nice against her skin, she might as well be naked. There was nothing left to the imagination with this see-through thing. The shimmering blue material wrapped around her breasts and fell

to the floor leaving her shoulders bare. Two long slits went all the way up to her thighs, making her feel more self-conscious about her body than she normally did.

Hope walked over to the mirror, noticing her belly sticking out further than was probably attractive, and her too generous hips. She couldn't be classified as fat, but she knew that it wouldn't hurt to lose twenty pounds. Chubby was a word that could better describe her, yet as she looked in the mirror there was something different about her appearance.

Her usually dull blonde hair flowed around her shoulders with a healthy glow. Her rounded features seemed sharper, more defined, blue eyes brighter than ever. Could this attractive woman in the mirror be her?

She touched her face to make sure this was no illusion. What had those women done to her? After she got out of the tub, the serving women had rubbed exotic smelling creams all over her face and body. Could that be the reason for this transformation of her features?

Just then she heard a knock on the door. Were the servants back? Was it the necromancers? Her body shivered as she thought of the four faceless men who'd entered her room earlier and had done the most amazing things to her body. She'd shivered and moaned beneath their tender ministrations. Hope had felt a wanton lust she'd never experienced before, and a little bit of shame for reacting that way.

The most extraordinary part about her meeting with these men was the sudden transformation of their faces. The necromancers took on the features of a man she didn't know. He was beautiful, with his long blond hair several shades lighter than her own, shining silver eyes, and a well sculpted face with full kissable looking lips. Who was this man?

A second knock broke Hope from her thoughts. "Come in," she called realizing that whoever it was wouldn't go away.

The door opened and in stepped Eden, one of the women who'd been kidnapped alongside her.

For such a tiny woman, Eden's body was surprisingly well developed. Hope noticed that the other woman wore an outfit similar to hers except for the color and the cut. The shimmering pink material proved to be the perfect contrast against her dark brown skin, clinging lovingly to Eden's rounded hips and full breasts. It bared her narrow waist and flat stomach. Despite the flimsiness of the outfit, she wore it with an ease that made Hope a little envious.

"Eden, I'm so glad you're here. I've been going crazy with no one to talk to." Hope rushed over to give her a hug. She wasn't a tall woman herself, standing only five feet five and a half inches, but next to Eden, who barely reached five feet, she felt like a monster.

Eden grinned, revealing small white teeth. "I snuck away. I was getting bored sitting in my room."

"Have you seen your sister and Raven?"

"My sister is with Prince Kalian and I believe Raven is with Prince Thane right now. They're both throwing fits," she laughed, throwing her head back in apparent glee.

"How can you be so calm about this? These men, with wings I might add, have brought us to another friggin' world. How come you're not having a freak out fest right now?"

Eden smiled and shrugged. "May I sit down?"

"Oh, sure." They walked over to a pile of pillows in one corner of the room and sat down.

"Well?" Hope prompted.

An unreadable expression entered Eden's dark eyes as she pushed a stray braid over her shoulders. "What would be the point in freaking out now? The time to escape has passed us, and to be honest, I'm not really sure I want to."

"Why not? Don't you have friends and family back home that'll miss you?"

"My only family is Genesis and she's here now. I did have friends back home, and I'll miss my job and my students, but they'll eventually forget about me."

Hope didn't know whether to be in awe of the other woman for having accepted her fate so graciously, or to shake her and ask her what kind of drugs she was on. "Well, I do have a family and my parents will probably be worried sick about me." Even as she said the words Hope realized they weren't exactly true.

Hope's mother and father had divorced when she was five. It had been a bitter break up with neither party speaking to the other ever again. The only time her parents saw each other was when Hope was dropped off to spend the weekends with her father.

She'd hated those weekends because by that time her father had a new girlfriend, Phoebe, who resented the presence of a child from her lover's previous marriage. Hope had tried her best to stay out of Phoebe's way, but nothing seemed to please her. The visits became fewer, especially when Phoebe triumphantly presented her father with two sons.

Hope's mother was not a much better example of parenthood. She would stay hung over for days at a time. Different men came in and out of her mother's life. Some were good to Hope, and others weren't. By the age of twelve it was Hope who took care of her mother instead of the other way around. Food had been her only comfort.

Hope left home at eighteen and never looked back. Working her way through college and earning her degree in social work, she'd set up a nice life for herself. The only problem was the people in it.

"Your face says otherwise," Eden observed.

"Yes. I don't think they'll miss me." Hope lowered her eyelashes.

"That's so sad."

"Not really. I've learned life's lessons from an early age, and have been taking care of myself for a very long time now. I've just learned to deal with it."

"So I take it that you have no one special back home."

"I was actually married when I was twenty-five to a really nice guy named Frank."

Eden shot her a quizzical look. "If he was really nice what was the problem?"

“That’s the problem. He was too nice, and I felt like a piece of shit for marrying him. You see, I’ve never exactly been the prom queen type. Men have only ever seen me as a friend, you know, Good ole’ Hope, she’s just one of the guys.” She paused with a sigh. Eden watched her with intent brown eyes waiting patiently for her to finish.

“Well anyway, along came Frank. He was the first guy to look at me as if I were a desirable woman. Needless to say it went to my head and when he proposed, I said yes.”

“So basically you settled for Frank even though you didn’t exactly feel sparks with him.”

“Yes! That’s exactly it. Also I’d been so used to doing for others; my mother, my brothers, who only came around when they wanted money, and my so-called friends, that for once I wanted someone to take care of me. I wanted to be cherished. I know it sounds corny, but I was tired of being alone. I married him knowing that I could never love him as much as he did me. He was so good to me, and he didn’t deserve a lukewarm marriage.”

They had an amicable divorce. Two years later Frank found someone who was just as crazy for him. The beautiful Christmas card he’d sent with a picture of his wife and newborn baby daughter spoke of his newfound happiness, and she was glad.

“Well, at least you realized that it’s better to be alone than to be miserable with someone else.”

“Yes, I think so.”

“You’d mentioned that you were going to some retreat when we were back in that shack. What was that all about?”

“It was a singles retreat actually. I kind of signed up for it on impulse. I was feeling really depressed and thought it would be fun to go there and meet new people.”

“Why were you depressed?”

“Oh, because my rat fink brother didn’t invite me to his wedding.”

“What? Are you kidding me? How could your brother not invite you to his own wedding?”

“That was probably my stepmother’s doing, but we were never particularly close and he only talked to me when he wanted something. My stepmother said they couldn’t invite a lot of guests because of financial constraints, but that’s a bunch of BS.”

“I can’t believe your father would allow them to exclude you like that.”

“Ha! My father is a big pussy. That woman has been leading him around by his johnson since the day they met, but trust me, as depressing as my life sounds I’m sure there are people out there who suffer far worse. You never did tell me why you’re so calm about this.”

Eden cocked her head to the side as if she were trying to think about what she was going to say before finally speaking. “I know this sounds a bit odd --”

“Honey, this is all odd, from the winged guys, to the fact that I can now understand their strange language after touching a big red rock, and the serving women with cat faces. Uh, need I go on?” Hope was still trying to reconcile herself to these things and didn’t really know if she could. One thing was certain, crying wouldn’t change anything no matter how much she wanted it to.

“They don’t seem strange to me.”

“Come again?”

“I’ve dreamed of this place before, and of these people. I feel... kind of like I belong here.”

“But we’re human. We don’t belong here. We belong on Earth with other humans, doing human things, not saving a race of winged people.”

Eden smiled. “No. We’re not. Can’t you feel the connection between us? Even when we were back at that cabin it felt like I knew you already. I felt the same way with Raven. Genesis felt it too, though she’s a bit skeptical. All my life I’ve felt different. I could... do things that I knew normal people couldn’t. Haven’t you ever felt like that? Please, be honest.”

Hope wanted to deny it but that wouldn’t be the truth. There were times when she did feel different and the weird soothing ability she possessed had always seemed like one of those freak things.

Her mother occasionally suffered from migraines. Once, Hope had rested her hand against her mother's head and in an instant the pain had disappeared. Her mother, who believed in psychic phenomena, told her that she had healing hands, and made Hope touch her temples whenever a migraine came on. The thing was, it always seemed to work.

"Yes," Hope whispered. "There is something that I thought was just one of those freak things, but now... do you think it has anything to do with being a... what did they call us?"

"The'Rans."

"Yes, The'Rans. I think it's a rather daunting prospect to be responsible for restoring health to the Ceyan people."

"Maybe a little, but if it's our destiny, I don't see any other course of action but to try to save them." Eden shrugged.

"I wish I had your confidence. Aren't you the least bit frightened?"

"Of what?"

Hope gave the little woman a look of pure disbelief, pursing her lips. "Come on, Eden. You're not going to tell me that you're not a little worried about what will happen if we can't cure the Ceyans of this mysterious illness, or about having to join with one of the princes in marriage."

"I'd be lying if I said I wasn't. Yes, it's a big responsibility to lay on our shoulders, but how desperate do you think Prince Thane and Prince Kalian were when they came to Earth? Imagine how frightening it must be for them to see their people dying."

"I'm sure it is, but why do we have to marry them? Can't we just save their people and go home?"

"The way I understood it, there are these God-like beings on H'trae who made it a condition for revealing our whereabouts. I'm not sure if the princes even fully understand why either, but I have a feeling that we'll soon find out."

Talking to Eden was like having a conversation with Yoda. She spoke in riddles. "Do you think we are who they claim?"

"Hope, I have no doubt. Why else would I feel so at home here and I... I've dreamed of this man, he's tall, heavily muscled but not gross. He's got long blond hair and piercing silver eyes, and a face that's so perfect it's god-like."

Hope gasped. "You just described the man of my dreams. That's exactly how I pictured him. Are we sharing the same dreams?"

"I don't know, but when the necromancers came to my room, their faces transformed to the likeness of this dream man. I don't fully understand it, but it's got to mean something, right?"

A knock on the door prevented Hope from answering Eden's question. "Come in," she called out.

Two blue women walked into the room. The taller of the two stepped forward and bowed. "My lady, we are here to prepare you for the ceremony."

Eden stood up, and gave her a slight wave. "I guess that's my cue. I'll see you there."

Hope gulped, her nervousness taking over once again. "Okay," she said, standing up.

Her friend must have read the uneasiness in her eyes, because she leaned forward and squeezed her hand. "Everything will be okay."

"How can you be so sure?" Hope challenged.

"Because I feel it."

Chapter Two

Prince Aarik waited impatiently for the ceremony to begin. Ever since he'd spotted *her*, she was never far from his mind. He'd observed the women briefly when his brothers Kal and Thane returned from Earth. The legends were indeed true. The women were among the most beautiful he'd ever seen.

While he wouldn't have minded taking any of them as his mate, the tall slender one with midnight tresses, or one of the dark beauties, his eyes had been riveted on the golden one. He'd learned her name was Hope. He tested her name on his mouth.

It was a strange name to his ears, but it rolled off his tongue. At the time he'd seen Hope, she was being carried to her room, unconscious from Kal's mind lock, but what Aarik could see of her he liked. Everything about this woman fascinated him, from her beautiful golden-hued hair, to her soft, delicate skin.

She had a healthy plumpness to her body that he found attractive. He preferred his women with a little meat on their bones, finding them softer and more pliant in bed. His cock ached when he thought about what Hope would look like draped across his bed, naked.

He stood to the right of his brother Rohman's throne with Kal on his immediate left and Thane on Kal's left denoting their rank as tradition dictated. Rohman sat with his back ramrod straight looking at the ceremony participants before him with an unreadable expression on his face. One could almost think that the king was sitting at an execution rather than a mating ceremony.

The hall was crowded with unmated males lined up along the side of the walls, here to participate in the Feast of the Flesh in hopes of finding a mate. They were lined up according to rank as well, beginning with the Royal Ceyan Guard and then the barons of the land. Then they were organized by age, oldest to youngest.

Aarik tried to appear interested as the pre-ceremony entertainment commenced, beginning with the Dancers of the Mist. They were enticing wenches, their bodies covered in shimmering pixie dust. The lights from the hall reflected off their bodies making them positively sparkle.

They twirled and gyrated, their naked bodies brushing against the men in attendance. Aarik felt a slight stirring in his loins but nothing more. For some reason his mind couldn't stay focused on what was in front of him.

Instead he thought of a golden beauty and wondered what her body would look like naked or wrapped in a pretty *ilsa* gown. He bet her nipples were a soft pale pink not much darker than her skin, but large and suckable.

He bit his lip thinking about running his tongue between the folds of her tempting pussy, and stopped himself. For all he knew, Rohman could choose her as his bride. As was their custom, the Ceyan King, his twin, had first refusal of all the women present.

Aarik couldn't understand why it bothered him so to think of his brother claiming Hope, especially when he had not yet spoken to her. Other doubts assailed his mind. Would she accept him as her mate? If Rohman were to choose her, how could Aarik reconcile with choosing a bride that he didn't want? He had nothing against the other women, but his mind was made up the moment he'd set eyes on Hope.

One of the dancers sidled up to him, brushing the tips of her breasts against his arm. Though he was in no mood to interact with her, he knew it would be a great insult to her if he didn't at least show some token appreciation for the entertainment.

He let his fingers glide down the side of her body, grazing the side of her breast. Normally, he would have done much more, like run his hands over her body. He even considered pushing his fingers between her nether lips, but when he looked at the pretty dancer's face, all he could think about was Hope.

The dancer smiled as though sensing his withdrawal and twirled away to turn her attention to Kal, who seemed just as disinterested. From what Aarik had gathered, Kal and Thane had already made their choices. They were each already smitten with a

The'Ran woman, Thane to Raven and Kal to Genesis. The women were all the two of them could talk about.

They had even gone to Rohman pleading with him to remove their chosen women from the lineup but the king had stubbornly refused. Aarik's younger brothers had cursed Rohman, calling him heartless and other harsh names.

Though the prospect of losing Hope to his twin bothered him beyond all reason, in the end, there was nothing he could do about it. Besides, no one understood Rohman as well as he did. Many thought the king was hard to the point of cruelty at times, but only Aarik knew that behind the harsh façade lay a tender heart. Perhaps with the guidance and love of the right woman, more people would see it too.

Aarik said a silent prayer to the Ancient Ones that everything would work out for the best and that none of this would be in vain. If anything, this ceremony would give them temporary relief and a much needed distraction from the constant worry about the fate of their people.

You seem wary. Tell me what is on your mind, mehier. Rohman's voice entered his mind.

Communicating to each other without words had been something they had been able to do since birth. It surprised him to hear his twin use an endearment he hadn't spoken in such a long time.

This ceremony seems longer than it should be. I don't understand why we can't just pick our mates and be done with it, Aarik answered back.

Because this is what has been done long before our fathers and their fathers were alive. Do you wish to argue against tradition?

I don't question tradition. I only question its length.

Rohman raised a dark blond brow so like his own. *Are you so anxious to mate? Perhaps you have seen a woman to catch your fancy as our brothers have.*

Why would you say that? Aarik asked defensively. *And if I have, what does it matter? You'll choose who you want anyway.*

Ah, so you believe me to be the brute that Kal and Thane think I am. I find that cutting, brother.

Aarik released a mental sigh. You know that's not true. I only say it because I know it's your right to choose whatever mate you please. I ask you on the behalf of Thane and Kal, please consider that their hearts have become involved with two of these women. Think how it would make them feel to see you mate with someone their hearts have already chosen.

How is one woman different from the next? Hasn't our mother taught us how untrustworthy women are?

You'll cease talking about our mother in such a disrespectful way. The only untrustworthy woman in this castle is your whore, Ani. She has been plotting and scheming since you deigned to take her into your bed.

But that's the beauty of it, mehier. At least I know Ani is a scheming whore, something she doesn't hide. It's much better than a whore who acts the innocent.

I wish you would not start in again on Mother. Don't you think she's suffered enough already? How do you think it makes her feel to have her son's scorn?

Rohman's face grew dark with the blood rushing to his face and Aarik knew he'd hit a nerve. Every bit of suffering she's experienced, she brought on herself. I will speak no more of this.

But --

I will speak no more of this!

Rohman's voice thundered so loudly in Aarik's head that it began to throb a bit, but he would not back down. We will speak of this, and I will have my say. You mark my words, Rohman, one day our mother won't be around and by the time you realize how wrong you've been about her, it will be much too late. I pity you, brother.

Rohman remained stubbornly silent, and Aarik shook his head hoping that his prediction wouldn't come true. He breathed a sigh of relief when the Dancers of the Mist finished their performance, signaling the royal musicians to play. A line of unmated women filed into the hallway, expectant gleams of anticipation in their eyes. These women had come from all over H'trae in hopes of snagging a Ceyan husband.

Aarik craned his neck to see Hope, his heart beating anxiously. His wings fluttered behind him in excitement.

He didn't have to wait long before the four The'Ran women were ushered into the hall. They all had apprehensive expressions on their faces, unlike the native women who knew what to expect. They held hands almost as if to show solidarity. He admired their courage and hoped that they'd each find happiness with his brothers.

Aarik then afforded himself the luxury of looking at Hope and his heart began to speed up faster than it already was. By the stars, she was even lovelier standing in a blue *ilsa* gown, her lush curves inviting him to rush over to her and caress the delectable flesh his eyes rested on.

Her eyes were the color of a cloudless sky and she had the sultriest pair of lips he'd ever seen. His cock began to throb. Aarik couldn't remember a time when he'd wanted a woman so instantly and so much. The intensity of his emotions stole his breath, making it impossible to focus on anything else but her.

He forced himself to look away when Rohman stood up to commence the ceremony. The king strutted in front of the audience and held up his hand to silence the whispers fluttering around the hall. "Greetings to all the participants of this season's Feast of the Flesh. As all are here to find a mate, these are the rules that will govern this ceremony. I will have the first choice of the women, followed by Prince Aarik, Prince Kalian, and then Prince Thane. When we have chosen, the next in line to choose will be the Ceyans who serve in our Royal Guard, the highest rank proceeding first and so forth. After the Royal Guard, the Barons, and then the choosing shall proceed by age, oldest to the youngest. The joining period will follow."

Rohman then turned to the women lined up in front of him. "You may disrobe."

Aarik's eyes strayed to Hope. To his delight she was looking straight at him as well. He gave her a reassuring smile and was rewarded with a smile in return. How he wanted her. If Rohman chose her, Aarik didn't know what he would do.

Tentative fingers worked the ties of her *ilsa* gown until it fell in a puddle at her feet. Her body was just as wonderful as he imagined it would be. More than anything

he wanted to taste those generous curves with his tongue and delve his fingers between her smooth thighs. His mouth watered with longing. If Rohman didn't hurry, Aarik would have to take matters into his own hands.

But for now, he had to force himself to stand still while Rohman held their fate in his hands.

Chapter Three

Rohman stepped forward, feeling his duties weigh heavily on his shoulders. The last thing he wanted was to be here choosing a bride when he should be trying to save his people. What were the Ancients Ones thinking to make him and his brothers participate in this *farken* ceremony?

While his brothers all seemed to embrace this idea, he was not too happy about it, yet if this is what he had to do to save his people, then so be it. He would have his answers later. Rohman eyed the women in the line, careful not to let his gaze linger too long on the The'Ran women. Since they had been brought to the palace he stayed out of their way.

He was sure they were all lovely just as his brothers went on and on about, but he more than anyone knew that behind beauty lay treachery. Whichever woman he chose as his mate would soon learn that he wouldn't be easily moved by a beautiful face, and that his word was law.

For the benefit of the participants, he at least owed them a cursory inspection even if his heart wasn't in it. Rohman began at the beginning of the line, inspecting women of all shapes and sizes. Some were comely; some were plain, while others should have worn masks. As was the custom he touched the women as he walked down the line, tweaking a breast here, or caressing a supple ass there.

None of them held his interest for more than a few seconds. When he would have walked past one woman with long dark hair and eyes, she reached out to stop him. None of the women were supposed to touch him without permission and as he turned around to tell her so, she started fingering herself as though to excite him. "If you choose me as your mate, your majesty, I will deny you nothing. Absolutely nothing." The bold wench smiled at him, her tongue snaking out to run over her lips.

Rohman looked her over from head to toe. She was certainly pretty enough and he could find no fault with her body, however she was much too bold for his taste and inspecting her was just a courtesy, not that she knew it. No one knew that he would only be able to choose a The'Ran bride. He was sure this woman would be one of the first to be chosen by one of the other unmated men.

"I'm sure you would," he said, cupping her hot sex with his palm. The heat generating from her nearly singed his hands. She moaned in delight, grinding herself against his caress. The woman threw her arms around his neck, pressing him boldly against her body, and doing what any man would, he dipped his head to taste what she had to offer.

Her eager mouth opened under his and she tried to control the kiss by pushing her tongue into his mouth, but he halted it with a light nip of his teeth. Lifting the woman off her feet to hold her against his chest, Rohman took his time exploring the warm recesses between her lips, until he felt that he'd given her enough of his attention.

He set her back down and gave her a swift pat on the bottom. "You will make a fine mate for one of my warriors," he gentled his rejection.

"But not for you, my king?" She pushed her dark hair over her shoulder almost as though she were coming out of a trance.

"No, not for me," he said moving on to the next woman, ignoring her pout. When he saw the next in line he wished that he hadn't lingered with the one before her.

"I want a kiss too!" the woman's shrill voice filled the room. By the stars, the woman had the face of a *heka* beast. He didn't know whether to run for dear life or pretend that he didn't hear her although that would have been impossible considering how loud she'd yelled.

Rohman had never seen a woman quite so thin. Her bones seemed as though they would pop from her flesh at any moment. Sadly, her nose, which probably took up the majority of the space on her face, was her most attractive feature, though it was a bit off center. The beast's -- woman's teeth stuck out so far he wondered how she bit into her food. A thick coat of hair covered her cheeks and he inwardly cringed. He'd never

seen anyone quite like her before and the only thing he could think to explain her looks was that she'd angered a wood nymph.

Rohman felt immediate remorse for having such bad thoughts about someone who surely couldn't help what she looked like. He knew more than anyone that beauty was just surface. Bending his head to meet her lips, he hoped that she didn't see the distaste on his face.

He had only meant it to be a token kiss when the woman jumped into his arms and wrapped her legs around his waist. She clung to him like a vine, not letting go. She pressed hot foul smelling kisses on his face and neck. The room filled with titters and giggles, which he immediately silenced with a cool challenging glare.

Rohman was no weak man but it took a considerable amount of effort to pry the woman off. Once free of her succubus grip, he continued down the line quickly, barely giving the other women a cursory glance. There were a few women he stopped in front of and touched, but he didn't linger until he reached the next woman.

The first The'Ran woman.

This one had to be Hope. His servant had reported on the status of the women and had given a full description of their appearances. Simi had not been incorrect. Shorter by at least half a head than the average Ceyan woman, she had a golden prettiness about her that would have pleased any man to look upon.

Her soft rounded body would provide an ample armful for any one of his brothers who chose her. Rohman looked toward his throne to gauge the expressions on his brothers' faces. While Kal and Thane remained impassive, Aarik had an anxious expression in his silver eyes. He smirked at his twin. *So I see you have already chosen as well, like our brothers. She does have beautiful curves.*

Aarik's mouth tightened, but he didn't respond to Rohman's telepathic challenge. He reached out and lightly grazed a hand over one plump pink-tipped breast. Hope shivered, her sky-colored eyes staring back at him with apprehension and another emotion that he perceived as fear.

Though Rohman had no time for women and their feelings beyond what they could offer him in bed, he didn't want these women to be afraid of him. Their skills were needed to save his people, yet he couldn't ignore the dictates of tradition and not sample their lovely charms before deciding which one he would take as his mate.

He ran his fingertips lightly across her belly, eliciting a response. The stubborn set of her mouth told him that it wasn't pleasure. Blue eyes narrowed to slits and it seemed as though she was sending him a message. Rohman briefly tapped into her mind to read her thoughts.

I may have to participate in this archaic ceremony, but I most certainly don't have to like it.

He smiled at the direction of her thoughts. So this one had spirit. There was nothing he despised more than spinelessness. She would be an excellent mate for his brother. Rohman had no intention of claiming this one. Despite what his brothers thought, he did care about them, especially his twin. And if there was a particular wench they were interested in, what did he care? Women were all the same, weren't they? But he would have his little revenge for all the curses they'd laid on his head.

Unable to resist, he ordered, "Turn around."

Hope shot him another angry glare before complying. Rohman smiled inwardly at her resistance. He palmed her backside with both hands, giving it a squeeze before letting go. Yes, she would do nicely for Aarik. Hope emanated a gentle, nurturing spirit that seemed to somehow fit with his twin's fierce, but sensitive soul.

The next one had to be Raven. Thane had been especially descriptive about this one with her *tela*-colored eyes, long dark hair that flowed past her shoulders, and striking features. His eyes traveled over her willowy body. Though he much preferred a woman with more curves, she was well built. He could see why Thane was so taken with her. Several inches taller than Hope, Raven was still just shy of the average Ceyan female height. She was beautiful. Far more beautiful than any of the other women he'd seen so far. Raven possessed an exotic beauty, which was the opposite of Hope's blonde prettiness.

She held her head like she was already royalty. Rohman wondered where she'd gotten such a regal bearing. Instead of fixing her gaze on him as was his right, Raven looked straight ahead as if he weren't there. No woman had ever openly defied him, and this little spitfire would be no different. He smiled despite this show of insubordination, accepting her unknowing challenge.

Again he looked to the throne and he could almost touch Thane's anger. Turning back to Raven, Rohman reached out to touch her only to have her flinch away. He raised an eyebrow and tried again. The motions were repeated twice more before he grew tired of the game and pulled her roughly against him.

She continued to struggle against him to no avail, his strength too great for her even though he could tell that she was using all of her effort. "Your disobedience will get you in trouble, woman," he said to her before bending down and brushing his lips against her temple.

Her *tela*-colored eyes screamed murder, but some driving force within him seemed to want to test her worthiness. Thane would need a woman who could match his passion, one with the same amount of fire. Rohman knew that any woman without the will to handle his brother would soon be cast aside. Could Raven be that woman? Yes, she would be more than enough for Thane to handle.

He then moved on to the one called Genesis. What an odd name. She was taller than Hope but shorter than Raven, and she had the most unusually colored skin he'd ever seen. He'd heard what was whispered amongst the servants but probably wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen it for himself. It was different, but he liked it.

Her skin was beautiful. She was beautiful. A short cap of glossy dark hair crowned her head accentuating the high cheekbones and exotically slanted eyes. Dark, heavily lashed eyes blinked at him, her expression indiscernible. His eyes drifted to a lush mouth that looked so soft and inviting it made one want to instantly kiss it. Though he suspected many would say that Raven was the most stunning of the women he'd inspected so far, Genesis rivaled that beauty.

She was also slender in build although not quite as willowy as Raven or as curvy as Hope except for her backside. How could a woman with such a small waist have such a generous backside, one that would make any man daydream about riding it?

Her high breasts were crowned with blackberry nipples jutting out invitingly. Rohman cupped one in his palm, seeing what her reaction to him would be. She stood unmoving as though she was merely tolerating his touch.

"I will kill him," Rohman heard Kal's voice threaten from behind him. Already his brothers were becoming territorial of these women, and he wasn't sure if it was a good thing or not.

Rohman caressed her face and leaned down to kiss her when she twisted her head away just as their lips were about to touch. Genesis stepped back and this time he saw very well what she was thinking. It was the same look given to him by Hope and Raven. Did she think to defy him too? Using his powers, he turned her head to face him without laying a hand on her.

The surprise in her eyes told him that she hadn't expected that. Good.

"You *raztah!*"

Rohman turned around just in time to see Kal charge forward, only to be pulled back by Thane and Aarik. He smiled, shaking his head. These women had not been in their world for very long and already his brothers were being led by their cocks.

He watched his brothers in amusement. Thane shot him a glare before attempting to calm Kal down. "No. Don't do it, Kal. This is what he wants. Don't give him the satisfaction. Think of our people who've come here to enjoy themselves."

As if finally noticing the anxious looks of the participants surrounding them, Kal visibly calmed down, yet he threw Rohman a look of utter dislike. If Rohman didn't know better, he'd think Kal really hated him. His brothers thought he was just trying to rile them, and maybe he was a little, but if they all had to choose brides, he wanted them to at least be happy in their choice.

He could hear Aarik say something to Kal but didn't quite catch it before he turned back to Genesis, who was now looking anxiously toward Kal. It was obvious to

Rohman she seemed to care for his brother as well. He approved of this woman. She had enough spirit, but he could also see that she possessed a cool head about her that he found to be rare in women. Perhaps Genesis was a little too defiant for his taste, but Kal would be able to handle her fine, although on second thought, Rohman wasn't sure who would be handling whom.

He reluctantly moved to the last woman knowing that this would be his mate if he were to respect his brothers' wishes. Eden -- the sister of Genesis. He didn't know exactly what he'd expected, but it certainly wasn't this great beauty in wee form.

His breath caught in his throat and it felt as if someone had slammed their fist into his chest. She was much smaller than the other women, at least a head shorter than even Hope, yet her body seemed perfectly proportioned. She barely came to his stomach. Rohman usually preferred his women much taller, but her height seemed just perfect for her.

Eden had skin reminiscent of Genesis's yet it was at least two shades darker and seemed richer. His fingers itched to touch her, but unlike the other women, it wasn't from some sense of duty; it was actually because he wanted to. She looked up at him with large dark, thickly lashed eyes that looked almost too big for her face. Her features were perfect, from her tilt-tipped nose to her lips -- slightly fuller than her sister's, but infinitely more enticing. Her head was covered in long nearly black braids that hung down her back. He'd never seen a style quite like it before but it suited her, and he liked it. It almost hurt to look at her she was so beautiful.

He took a slight step back to take in the full glory of her body. Certainly, she was small, but her breasts weren't. They were surprisingly large, tipped with nipples so dark and sweet-looking his mouth began to water. She had an impossibly tiny waist flaring out to generous hips and a plump backside.

Rohman couldn't look away from her absolute perfection, and it pleased him that he saw no fear in the dark depths of her eyes. In fact, a small smile touched her lips.

Had any of his brothers chosen this little one, he wouldn't have conceded. Indeed, he would have kept this one for himself. A fierce possessive charge ripped

through him. He knew there were other men in the room watching and wanting her, but they couldn't have her. She was his!

Rohman turned around encompassing the entire room in his gaze. "I have chosen." He then stepped closer to Eden. "You are the one." And before she could respond, he lifted her up in the air, tossed her over his shoulder, and stormed out of the room.

"No!" someone cried out, but he didn't turn to see who the voice belonged to.

Chapter Four

Hope looked over to see a distraught Genesis yell at Prince Kalian, "Do something!"

Raven grabbed her arm. "You knew it was going to be like this."

Hope wished she could offer words of comfort and tell her that everything would be okay, but anything she thought of just seemed trite. Besides, she couldn't tear her eyes away from the muscular winged warrior standing by the throne. It had stunned her to see the king at first because he had the same face as the man in her dreams, yet she instinctively knew it wasn't him when she spotted Prince Aarik.

Twins. How incredible. While the king seemed hard, arrogant, and a little bit on the cold side, she felt an instant connection to the handsome prince. Her heart began to flutter uncontrollably, unable to believe she could inspire such intensity judging from the way he looked back at her.

His body was all sinewy hollows and ripped muscles. He was large, but not overly so. Hope wondered what he thought when he looked at her. She heard Raven saying something to Genesis, but couldn't make out what was being said because Aarik stepped away from the throne and started down the line of women.

She watched as he nodded toward the women in attendance while some of the others he touched. Hope found that she didn't like seeing him touch other women. She frowned, getting upset as the women grew bolder and he lingered longer. She didn't know where this irrational sense of jealousy was coming from considering she didn't even know him.

Her teeth ground together as the same woman who'd thrown herself at the king attempted to do the same with Aarik. The only thing that prevented Hope from scratching that bitch's eyes out was the fact that Aarik sidestepped her grasp.

Hope watched his progress as he continued down the row of women, not realizing she was holding her breath until Aarik stood in front of her. An electric charge flowed through her so strongly she lost all ability to speak. Her mouth opened, but no words came up.

Aarik was even more gorgeous up close. The way he looked at her told Hope that he felt the connection too. She could feel her breasts tighten and her pussy tingle. Hope couldn't remember ever reacting this way to anyone in her life.

When he touched her face with his calloused palm, she sighed, leaning her cheek into his touch, knowing with a certainty she'd never felt before that this was her man. "I'm Aarik, and you are Hope." The words were spoken as a statement, but she nodded anyway, still unable to find her voice.

His fingers splayed across her throat, tickling her skin with his gentle touch. His hand slid down to her collarbone, then to her breast, cupping it before giving it a firm squeeze. She could feel the lick of flames in the pit of her stomach burning a trail to her pussy. It wasn't even his touch that really made her feel this way, she realized, but the way he looked at her.

She'd never considered herself a highly desirable woman, attractive maybe, but never desirable, but this man made her feel like a rare gem. Hope shivered in reaction to his touch, so unlike his brother's.

"You're beautiful," he whispered and seemed as if he would kiss her when someone interrupted the moment, making them aware of the others surrounding them. For that brief moment in time it had felt as if they were the only two people in the room.

Aarik straightened up. "It is customary that I must inspect all the women, but fret not, because it is you that I want."

Hearing him say the words filled her heart with a warmth that made her breath catch in her throat. Nodding in consent, she watched as he moved to Raven, giving the dark-haired beauty only a cursory glance and a smile before moving to Genesis, who didn't seem inclined to be touched. He whispered something softly that Hope couldn't quite make out, but whatever it was caused Genesis to visibly relax.

Aarik then turned to the crowd. "My choice has been made. I choose Hope." He walked back over to Hope and held his hand out to her. Feeling shy all of a sudden, she placed her hand in his and let him lead her out of the hall.

She didn't know where he was taking her, but was surprised when it wasn't a bedroom. The room he led her to looked like a private library, with books decorating the walls on all sides.

Hope shivered, but this time from cold, suddenly remembering that she was naked as a jaybird. "Do you think I can have something to wear?" she asked, wrapping her arms around her body.

"How remiss of me. Let me fetch you a blanket to warm you up. Please sit." He gestured to a welcoming-looking chair upholstered with some type of animal skin she couldn't identify.

Her eyes followed Aarik as he strode to the other end of the room and retrieved a large blanket adorning the couch. He walked back over to her, knelt down, and wrapped it around her shoulders. Their eyes locked again, and that same bolt of electricity that she'd felt at the ceremony was stronger than ever.

"Why did you bring me here?" she couldn't help asking.

"I thought that perhaps you would feel more comfortable if we got to know each other a little better first before our joining. My younger brothers have the advantage over me and have already spent time with their women."

To be honest she didn't care if they got to know one another right now. The way her body reacted toward him, the getting to know each other could come later. She was horny now.

To her bewilderment, Aarik threw his head back and laughed. "I am flattered that you're eager for our joining."

Her jaw dropped. It was almost as if he'd read her mind. What the hell?

"I did read your mind." He smiled at her.

"You... you... get out of here!"

"If it's your wish for me to leave, I will, but where do you want me to go?"

Was he for real? "Umm, it was just an expression meaning are you serious?"

The smile returned to his face, a gleam of amusement sparkling within the depths of his silver eyes. "Yes, this seems to surprise you."

"Well, where I come from, people can't read each other's minds."

"Yes, I have heard of this strange Earth place. Tell me about it."

"Can I ask you a question first?"

He bowed his head slightly. "Anything, my lady."

"Why did you bring me here? I know you said you wanted to give us a chance to get to know each other, but what I mean is, why this room?"

"This is the room where I come to think. It's my favorite room in the palace. I thought I'd share it with you."

The sentiment was touching and Hope could feel the bond between them steadily growing by the minute. "That's really nice of you. Thank you. Do you live in this palace all the time?"

"No, only the times when I'm needed by my brother. I have lands and a palace of my own, nothing as grand as this of course, but large enough to suit my needs -- our needs."

Hope smiled at the way he said ours. It was hard to believe that only hours ago she had reservations about this entire situation, but now all she could think about was being with Aarik. It felt like she'd known him for years instead of a few hours.

"I'd like to see it."

"I'd like to show it to you. Do you know, Hope, before the ceremony began I was nervous?"

This big beautiful man scared? It was hard to believe because he looked fearless. "Why?"

"Because I knew you were the one from the moment I laid eyes on you and I was afraid Rohman would choose you first."

The ceremony was the first time they'd physically seen each other. Was it possible he'd dreamed of her too? "Did you dream of me?"

“Only after I saw you. When my brothers brought you back from Earth was the first time I laid eyes on you.”

She gasped. He’d seen her then?

“Why do you seem so surprised? I’m sure there were many men on Earth who wanted you for a mate.”

She shrugged, wishing she’d met Aarik earlier in life. “Not really.”

Aarik gave her a look of disbelief. “What’s wrong with the men on that world? Earth men must not be intelligent if they didn’t see what a prize you are.”

Hope felt herself blush. “I guess I’ve never been the type to inspire men to great romance.”

“Forgive me for not believing you, because when I look at you, all I can think about is how much I want you. I’ve never felt such an instant attraction to any woman before. I know you were brought here primarily to help our people, but I’m glad that you’re now my mate.”

Hope realized that no matter how much Aarik wanted her, he was trying to put her at ease by being a gentleman. Maybe it was time for her to take matters into her own hands. She leaned forward, took his face in both hands, and planted her lips against his.

Aarik stiffened briefly before wrapping his arms around her, pulling Hope closer. She took charge of the kiss, pushing her tongue against his lips, prying them open in a heated assault. She caught his moan in her mouth, swallowing and reveling in it.

Her tongue swirled and explored the wet recesses of his mouth, tasting and savoring him. Aarik tasted of sweet wine, titillating her senses with its unique flavor. No man had ever inspired her to take charge in quite this way before and she loved it.

Hope’s fingers dug into the mane of his silky blond hair holding his head closer to deepen the kiss. Aarik’s tongue came out to meet hers, licking and dancing with hers. The kiss seemed to go on for hours before they both pulled away from each other, panting for breath.

"You are a bold woman," he said, not sounding displeased.

Hope smiled. "But you like that."

"I do." He pulled her back into his embrace, burying his face against her neck, nipping and kissing her tender flesh. Hope threw her head back to grant him access, feeling a jolt of pure ecstasy shoot down her spine. Aarik pushed the blanket off her shoulders and pressed more kisses against her exposed skin.

With each kiss Hope experienced a new sensation, but the one thing that remained constant was the hot, sultry feeling she felt from her head to the tips of her toes. "Your skin is so soft, I can kiss it all day," he murmured.

In one swift movement, he pulled Hope down on the floor, pushing her onto her back and tearing the blanket away from her quivering body. His silver eyes studied her with a stark possessiveness that robbed her of the ability to think straight.

Aarik stretched out beside her. "I know it's chilly in here, but I'll make it warm for you." To her surprise his silver eyes began to glow and he looked toward the fireplace. In the next instant, a fire began.

"How --"

"Shh, we'll speak of it later." He smiled before returning his attention to her body. His large palm slid between the valley of her breasts and trailed down to her belly, not stopping until it rested in the tangle of curls between her thighs. "Open your legs for me, *jihar*."

Hope didn't think to deny him what he wanted, and when fingers began to probe her throbbing pussy she nearly lost it. "Yes," she moaned, wanting more.

"Do you like my touch?"

"Yes. Please. More." She lifted her hips up against his fingers. Hope could feel a dampness between her legs, and she imagined what it would be like to have his cock inside of her. Her mind drifted to the incident with the necromancers.

When they prepared her for this joining, they'd told her that they needed to stretch her vaginal and anal walls so that she'd be able to accommodate the size of a

Ceyan. This made her wonder just how large he was exactly. Could he really be as large as those rods had grown to?

She'd worry about that later. For now she'd concentrate on the delicious sensation of his fingers sliding against her thick labia. Hope wished that he'd hurry up and slide them inside.

It felt so decadent to lay sprawled on the floor with this gorgeous Ceyan on top of her, doing the most incredible things with his hand. She let her fingers drift along the edges of his wings. The feathers were soft and she liked the way they felt.

Aarik brought his hot, hungry mouth to her breast, taking the tight peak between his lips, while slipping a finger into her hot channel.

"Yes, that's it!" she groaned, rolling her head from side to side, wanting more than just one finger inside of her pussy. He finger fucked her hot little hole, making her cry out in pleasure all while sucking voraciously on the hard tip of her breast, increasing her pleasure. She thought she would explode with lust.

Hope planted her hands against his chest and felt the erratic beating of his heart. She smiled knowingly. He was just as turned on as she was. "Please, Aarik," she pleaded.

"Please what?" he asked, lifting his head and stilling his finger.

"You know."

He grinned. "Yes, but I want to hear you say it."

Men and their egos were something that Hope had no time for, but Aarik was doing the most delicious things to her and she knew she owed him his due. "Stick another finger inside of me. I want more," she begged, eager for him to unleash the savage passion she knew he was holding back.

Hope had never wanted to be fucked this badly in her life. This feeling was primitive, and older than time, but she wanted to be taken and claimed by this man. She wanted to be his woman.

Aarik slid another long finger into her now sopping channel, gently sliding in and out.

“More!”

He raised a brow. “More?”

“Yes! Please give me more.” Again he slid another finger into her, but Hope wanted something else now.

“Harder!”

“I don’t want to hurt you, Hope.”

“Please, Aarik. The only way you can hurt me is if you stop. Please don’t stop. I don’t think I could take it if you did. Give it to me harder.”

Aarik rammed his fingers into her sheath, with short savage thrusts. “Do you like this, my little wanton?”

“Faster, harder, give me more!” she yelled, bucking her hips against his hand unable to get enough of him. It seemed as though some sexual demon was driving her, making it impossible to get enough of this man. The raw sexual tension burning within her would not be appeased.

Though he gave in to all of her demands, prodding and poking at the pace she wanted, it still wasn’t enough. She knew there was only one thing that would satisfy her and that was his cock. Hope wanted him balls deep inside of her, pounding away until neither one of them could move.

“Woman, you are so hot. That’s it, *jihar*, ride my fingers as they fuck you. You’re tight, but you’re so wet my cock will have no problem sliding into you. Already my fingers are soaked with your delicious smelling juices. You want it bad, don’t you?” He flashed white teeth at her in a small smile.

“Yes! I want it! I need it!” Hope didn’t think she could wait any longer.

The look of lust in his eyes sent a shiver racing down her spine. “Then you won’t need to wait,” he promised.

Hope whimpered when he removed his fingers from her pussy. She watched in amazement as he brought them to his mouth, licking off her juices as if it were the most delicious thing he’d ever tasted.

“You are just as delicious as you smell,” he said when he finished. Aarik stood and fumbled with the ties on his loincloth. Hope pressed her thighs together tightly, the pressure creating a heady sensation she could barely stand.

“Hurry,” she moaned, cupping her breasts in her palms to relieve the pressure she felt within.

When he tossed aside the covering, Hope’s eyes nearly bulged out of her head.

She knew he’d be large, but this was ridiculous.

Chapter Five

"Holy moly!" Hope exclaimed, her eyes wide with surprise and, if he wasn't mistaken, fear.

Aarik knelt down next to her wanting to assuage her anxieties. He cupped her cheek. "Hope, you were prepared by the necromancers, weren't you?"

"No... I mean yes, but I didn't think it would be so large."

"This is the way Ceyan men are built. I begin to wonder what kind of men there are on Earth."

"None as big as you. I don't think elephants are as big as you."

He laughed. Hope was so adorable. "Touch it. It won't hurt you."

"I... I don't know if I want to."

"You're being silly. You were prepared and you should be able to take every inch of me, in every hole I so desire to fuck you in. Remember, this is what you wanted. What happened to my eager little wanton?" he teased with a smile.

"I'm being silly, aren't I?"

"A little. Touch it, Hope. It won't bite." He positioned himself on his knees in front of her.

Tentative fingers reached out to run along the length of his shaft, making him shudder with pleasure. This woman was all that he could hope for and more. Her touch drove him to the brink of insanity. Like Hope, he wanted more than just soft caresses. "Wrap your fingers around me, Hope."

She did as he commanded, grasping his cock in her hand. Her fist slid up and down his turgid length and his body tightened with need. More than anything he wanted to bury his cock between her soft thighs and touch the inner depths of her pussy, but he knew he wanted her to be completely at ease before he took her.

His eyes roamed over her ample curves drinking in every valley and crest. She was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. Aarik reached out, rubbing the silky strands of her hair together between his fingers. It was an unusual shade almost like a molten gold, but not quite as dark. His breath caught in his throat when Hope released his cock and positioned herself so that her face was eye level with his jutting member.

"It's so big," she whispered before licking its sensitive tip.

Unable to help himself, he grabbed the side of her head and pulled her closer to his cock, wanting to feel her lips wrapped around it. "Suck it," he groaned.

When Hope sucked him into her mouth, it took every ounce of willpower not to thrust forward. A wave of heat rushed through his body, threatening to drown him in desire. He couldn't remember a time when a woman had made him feel quite like this, but even as the thought crossed his mind, he knew why.

His brother Thane had talked about heartmates while his twin denied their existence saying such talk was drivel. Aarik tended to side with his twin on this issue, because he'd never thought it was possible to feel such an instant passion and heart rush for anyone. However, with one look at Hope, his world turned upside down.

He couldn't quite explain what this feeling was, but his heart beat faster, his thoughts were consumed with her, and when he touched her, it felt like nothing else. Aarik wanted to know everything about her, what made her laugh, and what made her smile. He could imagine her ruling and growing old by his side. She would make a fine princess. Within Hope, Aarik sensed a noble heart.

Her lips tightened around his cock as she began to bob back and forth in a speedy motion. Her hand grasped his balls, giving them a light squeeze. "By the stars, woman, you will make me spill my seed before I can get inside of you," Aarik panted.

She moaned around his cock, the humming sensation sending a ricochet of pleasure pulsing through his being. Her mouth felt so damp and warm, almost as good as he knew her pussy would be.

When the head of his throbbing erection hit the back of her throat, he lost it. He jerked back, pulling his shaft from her mouth, and pushed her back against the floor. "I need inside of your channel now!" he roared, unable to stop.

He parted her thighs, looking down at her pretty pussy, covered with tight blonde curls. "Open yourself for me."

Hope reached between her legs, her fingers parting her slick folds to reveal the tempting pink flesh inside.

Aarik gripped his cock and rubbed it against her clit.

"Oh, Aarik, please," Hope moaned.

He chuckled. "Not so frightened now, are you?"

"I'm too horny to be frightened. Besides, I know you won't hurt me." She looked at him so trustingly he felt his heart contract. If this wasn't his heartmate he didn't know what one was.

Aarik pushed forward, stuffing the tip of his shaft into her hot channel. "Are you okay?" he asked when he heard her gasp.

"Yes. I'm perfect. Please don't stop. Stick that big beautiful cock inside of me."

"Are you sure you're ready?"

"I don't think I'll ever be more ready. Please stop teasing me and give me some cock."

He smiled, loving the fact that she knew her own mind. "Whatever my lady wants, my lady gets." With one swift movement, Aarik slid his cock deeper into her thirsty cunt. It was tight and wet, seeming to suck him in. It was the most mind-blowing sensation he'd ever experienced.

Aarik paused every now and then to check and see how Hope was handling this. Her eyes rolled to the back of her head and if he were to go by the soft little moans coming from the back of her throat, she was enjoying this.

He didn't stop pushing forward until his balls rested on the curve of her ass.

"I never thought..." she moaned, breaking off.

"Never thought you could feel like this?" he finished for her.

“Yes. Please, make love to me, let me feel you move within me.” Hope grabbed his shoulders and pulled him against her. He could feel her hard nipples poking his chest.

As he moved within her, Aarik watched Hope, loving the feel of her fingers lightly caressing his wings. She was so beautiful, from the curve of her cheeks to the delicate shape of her ears, and her body, so soft and pliant -- so full of his cock. He knew he would never grow tired of her and if he did, it would be when he was too old to move or care.

Hope wrapped her legs around his flanks, tilting her hips upwards, taking him deeper than he thought possible. The piercing jolt of pleasure surged through him. Aarik groaned, ready to explode.

She moved against him heightening the sensation of their mutual passion. Aarik drove deeper and harder into her, getting closer to climax with each powerful thrust. His wings fluttered behind him signaling his excitement.

Hope’s nails scraped down the sides of his shoulders, breaking skin when she screamed her release.

When Aarik felt his balls tightening, ready for climax, he covered her parted lips with his, wanting to taste the sweetness of her mouth once again. With one last powerful thrust, he shuddered against her, releasing a primal cry. He braced himself on his arms, emptying his balls of their seed.

“Oh, Hope,” he groaned, unable to think of anything more eloquent to say although there was so much in his heart. He collapsed on his side and pulled her into his arms. They both gasped for breath.

Lying with her in his arms, Aarik was content to stay here, listening to the beat of her heart. He placed a kiss on her sweat-dampened forehead. Hope was the first one to break the silence.

“Oh, Aarik, will it always be like this?” she asked with wonder in her voice.

His chest swelled with masculine pride. “That good was it?”

She smacked him on the chest. "It must have been just as good for you because I heard no complaints."

He chuckled, thinking not for the first time that he'd never felt so comfortable with a woman before. He'd had many bed partners in his lifetime, and while enjoyable, no one had ever touched his heart, body, and soul the way Hope did. "It was more than good, my lady, and when I catch my breath, I'll show you how good it can be again."

She lifted one golden brow, giving him a quizzical look. "So soon?"

"With you, I can go for a very long time. You inspire me to feelings I didn't think were possible." Aarik gave her a kiss on the tip of her nose.

"Did you feel it too?"

"It was like nothing else. I am not used to these feelings."

"How do you think it's possible to feel this way about someone in such a short amount of time? I mean, it's so intense. I felt it the minute our eyes locked and when you touched me, it felt so right. I never thought there was such a thing as love at first sight, but how else can we explain this?" she asked.

"I don't know, but what I do know is that I was glad that you were brought to H'trae."

A worried expression entered the blue depths of her eyes and he was instantly concerned. "What is it, *jihar*? Why do you look so serious all of a sudden?"

"I guess from being reminded of the real reason why I'm here."

"I see." The thought had crossed his mind as well, and even though he was still becoming accustomed to these new feelings he was experiencing, the fate of his people wasn't far from his mind.

His people were dying. For months, he and his brothers had searched all of H'trae trying to find an antidote for the mysterious ailment that seemed to have no cause or cure. All they knew was that it caused a slow painful death and was spreading rapidly.

Aarik had visited the sick, seen their suffering, and cursed himself for his inability to do anything about it. They'd tried fairy medicine, Elven cures, and sorcerers,

but nothing seemed to work. Stranger yet, it seemed to be an ailment that only affected his people and he couldn't understand why.

It was only on the suggestion of his brother Thane that they seek out the last of the The'Rans, a race of healers who were said to possess great powers. Upon visiting the Temple of the Ancient Ones, Thane and Kal had learned there were four unmated female The'Rans left. Though they all possessed a great power that would be valuable to their people, only one would possess the power to save them.

It was odd that the Ancient Ones had made it a condition that he and his brothers should take these women as their brides, but lying here with Hope in his arms, he'd never been happier about anything in his life.

Aarik planted a kiss on her damp forehead causing her to smile. He didn't think he would ever tire of looking at her lovely face. And she was all his.

"Aarik?"

"Yes, *jihar*?"

She raised her head. A worried expression clouded her blue eyes, again. "What if I can't help your people?"

"We won't speak of it now. We'll talk about it later."

"No. I think we need to talk about it now. This is important and affects your people. You should be worried about this too."

"Do you think I haven't thought about this in all my waking hours? Before you came, I thought of naught else. Just for this one moment, I don't want to think about it. I want to hold you, and enjoy how good you feel in my arms."

"Don't get me wrong, I'm not trying to kill the moment. I just can't help but think, if this illness is slowly wiping out your people, how long will it take before it affects you? We just met, yet the thought of losing you scares me to death."

He sighed, realizing this was a topic that he wouldn't escape anytime soon, and Hope did have a point. How long would it be before someone close to him was affected... his mother, or brothers. It wasn't something he wanted to think about, but it was a reality he'd have to face.

“It has crossed my mind, but I have to believe that you and the other women are the answer, otherwise there is no hope. Hope. That is an interesting name. How did you come by it?”

“You’re trying to change the subject again.”

“I’m not actually. I’d really like to know.”

“I’m not really sure why my parents named me Hope. I think it was probably because I was the last hope to save their crummy marriage.”

“You don’t sound very fond of the people who gave you life,” he observed.

“It’s not that. I’m just not particularly close to them. They only seem to want me around when they need a favor. My father not so much as my mother, but it’s kind of a give and take relationship with those two. I give and they take.”

His heart went out to her. The sad note in her voice made him upset on her behalf. How could anyone treat their own flesh and blood like that? Families were to be honored and cherished, not used and cast aside. It was one of the problems he had with Rohman’s ongoing feud with their mother. Yes, she had done the wrong thing, and some may have even said it was unforgivable, but at the end of the day, she was still their mother and deserved their respect.

He knew how it hurt the queen whenever Rohman cut into her with his acid words and hurtful barbs. “It pains me to know that you didn’t get along with your family.”

Hope smiled although it didn’t reach her eyes. “Don’t feel sorry for me. It’s something I’d grown used to and I’ve long since accepted them for what they are. In a way, I know they care for me, if not in the way that most parents should care for their children, but they care. And I didn’t mind doing things for them, to be honest, even if they didn’t appreciate it.”

He ran his palm along the smooth line of her hips, unable to resist touching her soft skin. “Most people would not have continued to do what you did if it wasn’t appreciated.”

“I guess I’m not most people.”

"You have a very kind heart."

"Either that or I'm a big pushover."

Aarik frowned, furrowing his brows. He was unfamiliar with that term. Would he ever get used to all of her unusual phrases? "Pushover? What is that?"

"A big chump."

He threw his hands up in the air in frustration. "I give up. Your Earth sayings confuse me. What kind of things did they demand of you?"

"My father mainly just made me run errands for him while my mother..."

"What?"

"You are going to think this is strange, but my mother suffers from migraines."

"What are migraines?"

"Really terrible headaches, kind of like someone is pounding you on the head, but from the inside. Anyway, for some reason when I massaged her temples, it would make the pain go away."

He brought his head up sharply. "Tell me that again."

She gave him a bewildered look. "Um, I used to massage her headaches away."

"So you took her pain away?"

"I guess so. What's the big deal?"

"Is this something that you've always been able to do?"

"You mean giving my mother head massages?"

"Yes. Have you always had this ability?"

"I'm not really sure. I've only ever tried this on my mother."

Aarik sat up abruptly and jumped to his feet, pulling her with him. "Come with me."

"Where are we going?" she asked, yanking her arm back.

"You will see when we get there."

"I really hope we stop to get some clothes first."

Chapter Six

Without any words or preamble the king threw Eden on the bed before covering her body with his. His hot mouth smashed over hers, claiming and devouring her all at once. Her body went up in flames from the moment he touched her, but she would not allow him to take her body without so much as a hello.

She tore her mouth away from his. "Wait!"

Seeming not to hear her, Rohman buried his face against her neck, pressing a hot trail of kisses from her jawbone to her throat. His hands roamed her body squeezing her breasts in calloused palms, touching her all over. She wiggled and squirmed beneath him, trying to free herself from him to no avail. He was much too strong for her. Besides, the more she moved beneath him the more it seemed to turn him on.

"Stop!" she cried out, despite the fire building up inside of her. Taking drastic measures, she opened her mouth over Rohman's shoulder and bit him. Hard.

"Dem!" he yelled out in obvious pain. He raised his head up to look down at her. "What is wrong with you, woman? Don't you ever do that to me again!" he roared.

Taking advantage of his momentary distraction, she wiggled from under him and scrambled to the other side of the bed. She got on her knees and placed her hands on her hips, uncaring that she was naked. "And don't you dare treat me as if I'm some whore," she said, not bothering to raise her voice, but managing to get her point across just the same.

Silver eyes widened in apparent disbelief. His jaw dropped and it was obvious to Eden that not many people, if any, talked to the king in this way. King or not, she was a person with feelings and he would remember that the next time he touched her.

She had long since accepted that she would be his mate, but she'd be damned if she allowed him to disrespect her like this.

“Who... do... you... think... you... are?” he demanded through clenched teeth.

He presented a very intimidating figure, larger than any man she'd ever seen, but he didn't scare her. “I think I'm someone who's been insulted. Maybe you're used to treating other women like this, but you won't do it to me.”

Rohman's eyes narrowed before he reached over and grabbed a handful of her braids, pulling her toward him. His grip was tight but not painful. He applied enough pressure, however, to make her move closer to him. He wound her hair around his fist forcing her closer still until their faces nearly touched. “I have claimed you, which means you are mine, to do with what I want, how I want, and when I want. You will obey me in all things!”

Was this joker kidding? Did the women in this world allow him to steamroll over them this way? The show of aggression seemed misplaced for some reason, and she couldn't figure out why. Arguing with him would only raise his ire, but perhaps if she tried reasoning, it might work.

“Is that how you want it to be between us? Do you want to use me like a piece of property instead of your mate?” She touched his cheek and looked into his eyes.

Eden immediately pulled her hand away when he flinched. For that brief moment, she'd felt a deep sadness within him. The odd thing was that she didn't think it was because of the illness that had struck his people. It was something entirely different and though she didn't know what it was, she intended to find out.

“You didn't answer my question. Is that how you want things to be between us? I would rather that we at least be friends if we're to be bound together for the rest of our lives.”

“I have no use for friends, and I have no use for you, beyond what you can do for my people and perhaps to get an heir from you.”

Eden looked away from him, hurt by his words. This was the moment she'd dreamed of all of her life -- her handsome king. He was just like she'd pictured him, with his long mane of blond hair, piercing silver eyes, and such an arresting face that it was difficult to look away from him, but he was different somehow.

When she first saw him at the ceremony, he wasn't the smiling, warm-hearted man she believed that he'd be. Instead there was a coldness about him that worried her. She thought of Prince Aarik who seemed more gentle and sensitive. He was much more like the man of her dreams. Could it be that she was with the wrong mate?

To her surprise the grip on her hair tightened. Rohman's forehead touched hers and Eden couldn't figure out why anger now flashed in his eyes. "We have not even joined yet, and already you are unfaithful to me in your thoughts? Is there no woman who can be trusted?"

"What... what are you talking a-about?" she stammered, thinking that he would end up pulling her hair from its roots if he yanked any harder.

"You're thinking about my brother," he accused through clenched teeth.

"So what if I was? You're not exactly what I expected."

"You don't deny it?"

"Why should I? It's the truth." Eden shrugged.

"Either you're very honest or very stupid. I think it's the latter."

"You're not exactly a prize yourself. You may be a dream to look at, but you're a nightmare in reality. I don't know who hurt you or what happened to make you treat people like this, but you really need to get over yourself."

"You'll soon learn that my word is law around here. It'll go much easier for you if you do."

Eden shut her eyes against his anger. "Who hurt you, Rohman?" she asked softly.

Her question seemed to take him by surprise. "What are you talking about, woman?"

"Why do you hurt? There's no reason to lie to me. I felt it."

"I don't want to discuss this. You talk too much. The only thing I need from you is to lie back on the bed and be silent while I plant my seed within you."

She'd failed.

Rohman wouldn't open up to her on so short an acquaintance, but she had to know why there was so much aggression hiding so much pain. "Is that what you really want, for me to lie down and let you have your way with me?"

"Isn't that what I said? I'm not in the habit of repeating myself."

She clenched and unclenched her fists, trying to stop herself from punching him in his perfect face. Violence wasn't the answer. Eden sighed, eyes downcast, not to show her obedience, but to hide her upset. She wouldn't let him know that he'd gotten to her. "Fine. Please let go of my hair and I'll do as you ask."

He lifted one dark blond brow, a humorless smile touching his lips. "I'm glad that you finally see things my way." Rohman's eyes searched her face, and she wondered what he saw. Eden had been told she was pretty, but did he think so? During the ceremony, she was sure that there was some connection between them, before he turned alpha on her.

This wasn't the way she wanted things to begin with them, but if she was to learn anything about him, she'd have to win his trust. Besides, despite his thickheadedness, she found that this proximity was wreaking havoc with her equilibrium.

She made a move to break free of his grasp, but he held her firm. "No, wait. I want to taste you again. Open your mouth to me."

This time Eden didn't think to disobey the soft command. Her lips parted to accept the thrust of his questing tongue. Rohman's kiss was hot, hungry, and searching.

She didn't want to respond to him when only moments before he had pissed her off, but her traitorous body didn't care. Her nipples tightened into hard sensitive peaks.

Rohman tilted her head back to deepen the kiss. It was like an awakening of her soul. A shiver of delight raced through her body, making her want him more than she'd ever wanted any other man. To her chagrin, she found herself not only wanting his kiss but his hands all over her body -- her breasts, ass, and pussy.

Moisture gathered at the juncture of her thighs and she pressed them together to temper the heat between them. Hot. Her body was so hot she could barely stand it, and this was just from one simple kiss.

Rohman lifted his head to look at her. "You taste good, woman. I wonder how one so small can make my cock so *demmed* hard," he said more to himself than to her.

He pushed her back on the bed and when she thought he would fall on top of her, he didn't. Instead, he straddled her body, his eyes looking her over. Feeling self-conscious all of a sudden, she attempted to cover her breasts with her arms, but his eyes began to glow and her arms felt pinned to her sides.

Eden tried to move but she couldn't. He was holding her down telepathically. "Let me go." She fought against the invisible force of his gaze.

"You will not hide from me what is mine. I wish to see all of you."

Rohman palmed her breasts, rubbing his thumbs over her nipples. "Beautiful. They are large and nearly fill my hand. They will suckle my heirs, but now they will suckle me." He bent down to take one pointed nipple into his mouth.

She didn't want to respond to his touch, but she couldn't help it. It felt so good, and her body was on fire. His teeth grazed and nibbled the taut peak, taking her body through a wave of passion.

Eden didn't really know how to handle these new experiences she was feeling. Having only been with one other guy, she didn't have a lot of comparison in the lovemaking department. Her first experience had been hurried and not much to write home about. It hadn't prepared her for this feeling of utter bliss.

The delicious sensation of his hot mouth on her sensitive mound made her body shake. Rohman transferred his attention to her other breast, licking and whirling his tongue around it much like he had with the other one.

"Let me touch you," she moaned, wanting to run her fingers over the hard planes of his body.

He released his hold of her. Eden's fingers glided along the hard ridges of his shoulders and then touched his wings, trailing along the soft black feathers. She ran her

hands over the contours of his muscles, loving the way his hard body felt beneath her fingertips and palms.

Rohman released her nipple from his mouth with a resounding pop before looking into her eyes again. "You're so exquisite. So small, but so perfect." He touched her face with such reverence that her heart flipped.

He seemed like a totally different man from the one who'd arrogantly told her that she belonged to him. Once again she felt that connection with him that she'd experienced in the hall.

He kissed her between the valley of her breasts and then on her neck, licking, and sampling her skin. His tender ministrations made it hard to believe that he'd been such a brute earlier.

Rohman hunched his shoulders and to her amazement his wings retracted into his back. "Why did you do that?" she couldn't help asking.

"So that I can do this." He rolled onto his back, pulling her on top of him. He settled her so that she now straddled his hips. "You are so little, I didn't wish to crush you."

Eden felt shy all of a sudden. Her face grew warm, and she was thankful that her dark skin would hide her blush. His show of tenderness touched her. Now he reminded her of her dream man. "I won't break so easily, you know."

"Perhaps not, but surely you can see how much larger I am than you."

Her lips twisted in slight annoyance. Just a half inch shy of five feet, her height had always been a bone of contention. It wasn't easy being a sixth grade teacher when she wasn't much taller than her students. "I'm not fragile, you know."

"Hmm, you look fragile."

"I'm much stronger than I look."

"Is that so? You're not much bigger than my cock. Do you think you'll be able to handle me?"

"I'll give it a good shot." She smiled at him, and for the first time since their acquaintance he smiled back. Yes, they were going to make it.

* * *

A malevolent pair of eyes watched them from the cracked open door of the bedroom closet. Ani watched the king and the little woman called Eden interact. She didn't like the way he smiled at the dark-skinned intruder. His rare smiles were reserved for her and her alone!

As a slave, Ani knew she had no hope to participate in the Feast of the Flesh, otherwise, there'd be no doubt in her mind that King Rohman would choose her as his mate.

Hadn't he told her many times that he enjoyed what she did to him in bed? Wasn't she the one to bring him to a delicious completion night after pleasurable night? She'd worked hard to bring herself to his attention, ridding herself of the competition when other pretty wenches cast their eyes in his direction.

The king belonged to her!

Who did this woman think she was to replace her? No woman would take her place, not even the king's chosen mate. Ani would fix that little whore, and then she'd be the only woman to warm his bed.

Chapter Seven

Aarik led Hope down a long corridor. If what she said was true then she might be able to help. "Where are we going?" Hope asked again.

"We will be there shortly."

She wrenched her arm out of his grasp. "That doesn't answer my question. Where are we going, because I'm not taking another step until you tell me." She crossed her arms across her chest. His eyes drifted appreciatively over her body now garbed in a blue *ilsa* gown that hugged her every curve.

His cock grew hard just looking at her. Once they finished with this business he planned on reacquainting himself with her gorgeous body. "You do know that I could pick you up and you wouldn't have a choice."

Her blue eyes sparkled with defiance. "Yes, I'm aware that you're physically stronger than me, but I know you won't," she challenged.

"Oh? You think not?"

"I know so."

"And how can you be so sure?"

"Because if you were going to do it you would have done it already. Now stop being so secretive and tell me where you're taking me." She tapped her foot impatiently. She was much more strong willed than he originally thought, but he liked her spirit.

Aarik knew he'd have to tell her or start an argument. "I need to take you to one of the guards. He's quarantined in the back of the palace."

Hope's hand flew to her mouth, her eyes widening. "Does he have the illness?"

"Yes."

“But, Aarik. I don’t know if there’s anything I can do for him. For all I know, the thing that I did with my mother could have all just been inside her head. This is the real thing.”

“I know. But we’ve already failed if we don’t at least try. Will you do this for me? He’s in a great deal of pain.”

She looked as if she was giving it some consideration before nodding. “I’ll do it.”

“Thank you. This means a lot to me.” He bent over to press a light kiss against the side of her mouth. His cock stirred. At the merest of touches this woman had the power to drive him out of his mind. When he would have pulled away, Hope twined her arms around his neck and ran the tip of her tongue over his lips.

Aarik’s arms wrapped around her waist, lifting her off the floor. He ground his cock into the juncture of her thighs. She cupped his face, her tongue pushing past his teeth, swirling and circling his.

He could feel the tips of her breasts against his chest. Aarik wanted to throw her on the floor and suck on them. His hand slid down her back to palm her round supple backside. Later, he wanted to put her on all fours and take her from behind. A rump such as this one was made especially for riding.

“Greetings, your highness, my lady,” a guard said, walking down the opulent halls and nodding respectfully toward them before moving on.

Hope’s face turned a bright red, as she buried her face in his chest. “Oh my goodness, put me down,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry, *jihar*, but when you touch me like that, I can’t help myself. Let’s go. We shouldn’t have tarried.”

He placed her back on her feet and took her hand, leading her through the palace until they reached a room at the end of the hallway. Aarik turned to her, placing his hands on her shoulders. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Yes. I would like to help.”

“Okay. This won’t be a pretty sight,” he warned.

“It’s okay. I wasn’t expecting one.”

Taking a deep breath, Aarik opened the door and walked inside the dark room expecting Hope to follow him.

“Why are there no lights in here?”

“It hurts his eyes. I will light some candles so that you can see,” he whispered back, not wanting to make too much noise, knowing that it pained Silvius’s head.

Once Aarik’s eyes adjusted to the darkness he was able to make out the candles along the sides of the walls. He concentrated on the thought of fire until the candles lit.

A loud groan filled the room. “The light, please, your highness, I can’t take the light.”

Aarik walked over to the narrow bed, kneeling down beside it. The room’s occupant lay very still, his eyes filled with pain. Beads of sweat covered Silvius’s face. He was even worse than the prince remembered. Only yesterday there was at least some color in the soldier’s face, but now he was deathly pale. His once full face was now gaunt and almost lifeless.

Silvius Rogxian, a member of the Ceyan Royal Guard, had fallen ill only days before. The most distressing part of his illness was that it seemed to be progressing faster than it had with the others who’d fallen victim to it.

Hope looked at the dying man with horrified eyes. She walked over to the other side of the bed and to Aarik’s surprise she took Silvius’s hand in hers. “Tell me where it hurts.”

“Everywhere,” the man croaked.

Hope placed her free hand over Silvius’s chest and closed her eyes. Aarik held his breath anxiously waiting for something to happen, and when nothing did he closed his eyes in defeat.

Dem.

He’d been so sure that Hope would be able to help. A cry ripped from Silvius’s throat and Aarik’s eyes flew open. To his amazement, Hope’s hands began to glow, the light growing brighter with each passing second.

Hope slipped her hand from the guard's and placed it on his chest to join the other one. Aarik's heart soared as he watched a miracle happening. The color in the sick man's face returned and his breathing became easier. Hope's eyes were tightly shut and her body began to shake.

Suddenly she began to chant unintelligible words and then her eyes flew open only revealing the whites. Aarik didn't know whether to let her continue or to stop her, especially when her words grew louder and her body shook uncontrollably. When her head began to roll from side to side, he jumped to his feet.

This had to stop! As much as he wanted to save Silvius, Aarik didn't think he could let it happen at Hope's expense. He rushed to her side and pulled her away.

The nonsensical flow of words didn't stop and her eyeballs were still white. He shook her to break her out of the trance she seemed to be in. "Hope. Wake up! Hope!"

He shook her harder, and then she passed out.

* * *

Hope woke up in a comfortable bed, surrounded by colorful plush pillows. Her eyes swept open to see Aarik leaning over her with a worried look in his eyes.

"Hope, say something. How do you feel?"

She shook her head, to clear it of the haziness clouding her mind. "I... I think I'm okay. What happened? I remember touching that man and now I'm here."

"I'm not really sure how to explain what happened myself, but whatever you did, Silvius is much better than he was before. The color returned to his face, and he was able to sit up. I believe you were able to take away his pain, just as I thought you could."

Hope tried to reconcile what this meant. Before the incident with Silvius, she could argue the strange thing she could do to her mother was nothing special, but now there was no denying what had been said all along.

There was something special about her.

How else could she explain the strange phenomena? When she laid her hands against the guard's chest, her body vibrated from within, and what felt like an electric current flowed through her body. Then everything went black.

"Is he cured?" she asked.

"I didn't stick around long enough to find out, because you were my first concern, but as I carried you out of that room, he seemed much better. Thank the stars that you're okay. You frightened me when you fainted."

"What happened to me exactly?"

"You were shaking and your eyes turned white. I don't know if I can let you go through that again."

"No. I have to."

"Not if this is going to end up hurting you."

"But isn't this why I was brought to your world? To help? If I can't do that then what reason do I have to be here?"

He pulled her against his body and buried his face in her hair. "You would be here for me, to rule by my side, to be my lover, the mother of my children. I know we have only been together for a short time, but I can't lose you now that I've found you. You mean too much to me."

Her heart swelled with love. Love? Was it really possible to love someone instantly? She thought about the people in her life who were supposed to love her, like her mother, father, and brothers. She'd never felt such warmth emanate from any of them the way it did from this man.

Whenever she was in Aarik's arms, she felt safe, warm, and special... like she was home. Whenever their eyes met or they touched, not only did he stimulate her body, but her mind and heart as well. If this wasn't love, she didn't know what was.

"It means a lot to me that you want to keep me safe. But seeing that man lying in pain, with the knowledge that he would soon die without help... I can't turn away from that. This is my destiny."

"Your destiny now lies with me."

"You're talking nonsense. If I can't help your people, do you just expect them to die? As your mate, they are my people now too. I can't walk away from what I saw. It's almost like... when I touched him I realized my true calling."

"But --"

Hope covered his lips with her index finger, silencing him. She shook her head. "No. This is something I must do. For the first time in my life, I feel like I can truly do some good."

"You've already done well in your life. You took care of your selfish family. I think you've sacrificed enough," he finished stubbornly. The firm set of his mouth told her that it would take some convincing for him to see things her way.

"Yes, I've helped people before, but not like this, and now it wouldn't be for selfish reasons."

"Selfish? How could doing for others be selfish?"

"I didn't do those things for people because I particularly wanted to. I did it to win their approval. I thought if I continued to do my family's bidding, they'd love me like they were supposed to, but they never did. After a while doing for them just became a habit. About a month ago, I hit the lowest low. I was depressed, and I didn't really want to live. I had no true purpose in my life. I thought the answers to my problems would be a singles retreat in the Catskills, although to be perfectly honest, I wasn't exactly sure if a man was what I needed." She paused to catch her breath. It was almost painful remembering the past few months up until this point, finally coming to the realization that she wasn't really wanted anywhere, that no one valued her as a person, because they saw her as someone to be manipulated and used.

Aarik cocked his head to the side. "I'm sorry to hear that, but I don't understand what this has to do with anything."

"Please let me finish. I'm probably not making much sense right now, but bear with me." She sighed. "Now where was I? Oh yes, I was going to a retreat, but then I had the oddest compulsion to drive and keep driving until I ended up in some backwoods town. That's when I ran into your brothers. Imagine how scared I was,

captured by two hulking strangers who didn't speak a lick of English, and then thrown into a stinky old cabin not knowing if I would live to see the next day. I think I must have cried for three days straight, but it wasn't just from the kidnapping, it was everything. I cried for everything that was wrong in my life."

Aarik stroked a stray strand of hair from her eyes, and looked at her with sympathy. The lines around his mouth had relaxed, but he didn't speak.

"I think those were some of the darkest hours in my life, but when I was brought here and it was explained to me what was expected, I was scared. I thought they had the wrong person because it all just seemed so overwhelming. Me? Hope Phillips from a race of healers? You had to be kidding, right? But when I woke up in this strange place I felt that I belonged. I denied it earlier when I spoke with Eden, but the only person I was lying to was myself."

"I'm beginning to understand."

"Do you really?"

"I think so."

"So you should know how I felt when I touched that guard. My true destiny was awakened and I'm not going to turn my back on it. I love you, but not even you will keep me from it," she said with a determination that surprised even her.

He gasped. "You love me?"

Did she just say that? "Yes, I suppose I do."

"You are my true heartmate, because I feel the same as you." And with that he lowered his head to hers.

Chapter Eight

Aarik's lips were hard, warm, and demanding. Hope twined her fingers through silky strands of blond hair, holding his head close, reveling in the wonder of her lover's kiss. His mouth on her felt so good -- so right.

Her tongue snaked out to meet his and they danced together in a circular motion, teasing and tasting each other. The unique smell of his masculine scent filled her nostrils, intoxicating her senses. Every time he kissed her it felt like the first time and she couldn't get enough of it.

Hope didn't want this moment to ever end. The wave of passion coursing through her body filled her with wild sexual abandon. Boldly, she took charge of the kiss, tightening her fingers in his hair and letting her tongue explore the deep recesses of his mouth, leaving no inch unexplored.

When she finally lifted her head to look into his beautiful silver eyes, she ran her tongue over her lips savoring his flavor. "You taste delicious."

Aarik's eyes twinkled with amusement. "If I taste anything like you, I'm sure I do."

Hope couldn't believe she was here with this gorgeous man, and he belonged to her! Her heart threatened to overflow with the love she felt for him. She'd learned to live without this emotion for thirty-five years, believing it wasn't for people like her. The newness of her feelings brought tears to her eyes.

Aarik looked alarmed, noticing the moisture in her eyes. "What's wrong, *jihar*? Why do you cry?"

"Because you make me very happy."

"Your happiness is my number one priority."

"Just as yours is to me." Hope pressed a kiss against his forehead.

She allowed him to push her onto the bed and shivered as his fingers undid the ties of her gown. When she was naked to his gaze, Aarik cupped her breasts in his hands, his thumbs lightly grazing her nipples.

“Mmm, that feels so good,” she moaned with delight.

“It feels good to touch you like this. Your beautiful pink-tipped breasts, so large and perfect, filling my hands just right,” he sighed, giving them a squeeze.

She arched her back wanting more than just his hands on her. Hope wanted Aarik to take the hardened peaks into his mouth.

“As you wish, my lady.” He settled himself between her parted thighs and brought one aching peak to his lips, kissing it before laving it with his tongue.

“Oh, Aarik. We’re going to have to talk about this mind reading habit of yours,” she sighed, a sizzling bolt of desire filling her body.

He playfully nipped her nipple and smiled. “But it’s to your benefit, is it not?”

“I guess, but a girl has to keep some secrets to herself.”

“Ah, I see. So I suppose it’s a secret that you want me to do this?” Aarik licked her breast with one long broad stroke, making her gasp, before traveling down her body. “Or this?” He placed a kiss on her navel and circled it with his tongue.

Hope felt like she would explode with lust. What was this man doing to her?

Aarik opened her thighs, and parted her moist labia. “Or was this a secret?” He planted a kiss on her clit and Hope thought she would expire on the spot.

“Okay, okay, you win. Please, just lick it, suck it, do whatever, but don’t tease me, I don’t think I could take it,” she groaned, feeling like she’d lost her mind.

Aarik shot her a triumphant grin and then he sucked her clit into his mouth. Hope lifted her hips in reaction. The sensual tug of his lips on the hot little button made her yearn for his domination. She ran her fingers along the ridges of his hard shoulders. Aarik’s skin was as hot as Hope felt on the inside, making it obvious that his desire equaled hers.

She ground her pussy against his face, wanting to feel the thrust of his tongue inside her channel.

Your wish is my command, my lady.

The words filtering in her mind took Hope by surprise, but she was too horny to analyze it.

Don't be afraid, jihar. His mind touched hers once again.

"I'm not afraid," she whispered.

Aarik's tongue slid into her hot sex, licking and tasting her walls. He rolled her throbbing clit between his fingers. She'd never had her pussy eaten quite this way before and she loved it.

Hope reared her hips up, letting his tongue drive deeper into her. "That's it, Aarik, fuck me with your tongue. Take me. Oh, dear Lord, take me," she begged, feeling like she'd explode, especially when he mashed his face into her cunt and fucked her with swift savage thrusts of his tongue.

She writhed and wiggled, moaned and groaned, unable to speak. Hope couldn't remember a time when she'd ever been this hot, but it was sultry, passionate, erotic heat generated from a lover's touch. She loved the way Aarik's skilled mouth moved over her body, taking her to an exquisite peak.

Her body shook with uncontrollable pleasure. Aarik grasped her hips to still her movement while he continued to lick and fuck her tender pussy. "Aarik, I don't think I can take anymore," she groaned, feeling her cream ooze from her channel, to the crack of her ass.

Do you really wish me to stop? he asked.

"You'd better not!" She pushed herself up to rest on her elbows and glared down at him.

She could hear the chuckle in his mind as he licked her with long, lingering strokes. *Umm, you're delicious.*

It wasn't long before he licked her to another body shaking orgasm. Hope figured she would be a quivering mass of useless flesh if he continued to do this to her. It warmed her heart that her satisfaction seemed to be his priority.

When Aarik finally lifted his blond head, he winked at her, making her heart skip a beat. "What would my lady like now?"

She placed her finger under her chin, pretending to give it some thought even though she already knew what she wanted. "How about some big, hard Ceyan cock?"

Aarik's smile widened. "I think that can be arranged, my love, but I have one request."

"Anything, my handsome prince."

"I want to ride you. I want you on your hands and knees. I want to run my fingers down the soft trail of your back and grasp your hips as I gaze at your big beautiful backside. I want to stick my cock in your pussy until you scream my name for more, and then I want to take you again."

Aarik's seductive words left her speechless. She wanted this too. Without hesitation, Hope twisted her body around until she rested on her stomach. Hope then pushed herself to her hands and knees as Aarik had dictated.

She turned her head around to see what he would do next, but he just sat there on the bed. "What's wrong? Is everything okay?" Hope asked on the verge of moving, but he stopped her.

"Stay where you are. I want to see you like this a moment more."

"Why?"

"Because you have a gorgeous body and I like looking at it," came his simple reply.

A sudden rush of warmth filled her body, her self-consciousness leaving her. "Well, can you look at me, and fuck me at the same time? I'm horny over here."

Aarik chuckled. "You are a bold wench."

"But you love it."

"I love you."

"If you loved me, you'd stop teasing me and give me some of that cock."

"As you wish," he laughed, grasping his shaft and rubbing it along the crack of her ass until it reached the wet opening of her cunt. "How bad do you want it?"

"Aarik, you've got to be kidding me! You know how bad I want it. Give it to me."

"I want to know details." Hope could hear the smile in his voice and she wanted to strangle him. Chinese water torture be damned, this was far worse, but she decided to go along with his little game. If he wanted this little victory, her payback would come later, but for now, she was far too aroused to argue.

"I want you so bad that my pussy is on fire for you. I can barely think because the feel of your cock against me is driving me insane. I want to feel your hands on me while you possess me -- make me your woman."

"You are my woman, but it warms my heart to know that you want the same things I do."

"In that case, give up the goods."

"As you wish, my lady." And with that, he shoved his cock so deep into her Hope cried out at the deliciousness of it.

"That feels soooo good." She pushed her hips back to meet his thrusts. The smooth steady rhythm of his pulsing erection, sliding in and out of her, filled Hope with an elation that she couldn't quite put into words.

She squirmed against the titillating strokes of his cock, throwing her head back to let out a loud scream. "Yes!"

"So tight," he whispered. "You have the most wonderfully tight pussy. I don't think I'll ever tire of it."

"You'd better not," Hope shot back, clenching her vaginal muscles around his cock.

Aarik howled in obvious delight. "Hope, by the stars, woman!"

She repeated the motion, her pussy sucking his cock in like the tight pull of a vacuum.

He shuddered against her and she knew he was close to his peak. Hope didn't want this moment to end. To her surprise, he parted her ass cheeks, and began to rub his thumb against the tight ring of her anus.

“Aarik, what are you doing?” she asked. No one had ever touched her there before the necromancers and she wasn’t sure if she liked it.

“I want inside your nether hole.”

“But... I’ve never done that before.”

“There’s a first time for everything,” he grunted.

“You’re so large. I don’t think I can accommodate your size,” Hope protested.

Was he nuts?

“You said the same thing about your pussy, and do I not fit there?”

“That’s one thing, but my behind is a totally different story. Please.”

“I can make this good for you. Don’t you trust me?”

She frowned. So he was going to try to get her on the trust thing? Typical man.

“Yes, I trust you but --”

“So trust that I wouldn’t do anything to hurt you. Do you believe that, Hope?”

She could only nod, not trusting herself to speak. Would she really be able to take his massive size in her ass?

Relax, jihar. It will be very easy to slide inside of you. Your hole is already slick from your juices. His telepathic words had a calming effect and she relaxed. What was she so worried about? She knew he wouldn’t harm her and if they were to spend the rest of their lives together, shouldn’t she want to try new things with him?

Hope relaxed as he continued to rub her anus, his cock still planted deeply inside her pussy. She gasped when Aarik slid a finger into the tight hole. It was an odd sensation that took getting used to, but it wasn’t unpleasant. Once she adjusted to the first intruding finger, he slipped in another one.

This time he began to work them in and out of her ass at the speed of his cock in her pussy. Hope licked her suddenly dry lips. This wasn’t bad. She clearly remembered what the necromancers had done to her, and though they had stretched and stimulated her asshole, it felt nothing like this.

Again she felt a steamy heat build up inside of her, the sensation so heavenly her body began to shake with lust. Between his fingers in her ass and his cock in her pussy,

Hope was on the verge of her most mind-blowing climax yet. "Aarik, please stick your cock in my ass," she heard herself pleading, not believing that the husky voice belonged to her.

"Are you sure you're ready for it, my lady?" he asked with a smug note in his voice.

"Yes. I want to feel you there."

Aarik pulled his cock from inside her wet channel and removed his fingers from her anus. He pressed his shaft against her crack and paused. "You can change your mind if you want," he assured her.

"No. I don't want to change my mind. Just give it to me."

"Anything for you, my lady."

Instead of a slow easy joining, Aarik jammed his cock into her ass in one swift motion, robbing Hope of her breath. To her utter surprise, she felt only a slight discomfort and no pain.

"Didn't I tell you I would fit?"

"Yes," Hope sighed, already wiggling her hips against him. She never knew how good it would feel being taken like this. Then she realized that this gluttonous passion was due to Aarik.

"Now you'll listen to me the next time." He began to move within her.

It felt tight at first, but his movements became more fluid and easier. Aarik grabbed her hair, yanking on it, guiding her body on his cock in smooth savage motions. She felt like a caveman's woman, being taken in such a primitive way, but it felt superb.

Hope fingered her clit, heightening the delightful sensations moving through her. She wondered if it would always be this good between them. His grip tightened in her hair and his thrusts became more urgent as he pounded into her ass, his large balls slapping against her pussy.

"Oh, Aarik! Yes!" she begged, nearing completion.

The buildup within her was almost more than she could take. He speared into her, deep and hard. Aarik's fingers dug into her hips, breaking skin, but she barely felt it.

Her fingers dug into her tight cunt, fucking herself while he plowed into her ass. "Ah! Hope, I don't think I can hold back any longer."

"Then don't."

"I want to make sure you're satisfied."

"You do satisfy me... don't hold anything back."

"I will have your climax."

"I'm so close. Aarik... Oh!" She screamed her release.

Hope suddenly felt the damp wet heat of his seed shooting up her rear. "Yes! Yes! Yes!" she cried feeling him shudder over her.

Her knees gave out and she collapsed on the bed in an exhausted heap. His cock slid out of her ass with a decisive pop before Aarik lay down beside her.

He scooped her into his arms, molding himself against her back. "Did you enjoy it?" Aarik asked, lifting Hope's hair to kiss her neck.

"Need you ask? You know I did."

His arms tightened around her. "Sometimes a man wants to hear the words."

"Then it was wonderful." Hope turned around in the circle of his arms wanting to face him. She touched his cheek. "Aarik, words can't describe how I feel right now."

"You don't need to say anything because I feel the same way. I thank the stars that you were delivered here."

Hope's eyes welled with tears, her feelings overwhelming her. Despite the trials ahead, she realized this was where she wanted to be. This was now her home, and this was the man she'd spend the rest of her life with. She briefly thought about the people she'd left behind on Earth. They would need to learn to stand on their own feet without constantly depending on her. Maybe it was for the best.

Hope would miss them despite their treatment of her, but this is where her destiny lay, on H'trae, with Aarik. For the first time in her life, her heart felt complete.

Epilogue

Eden lay in the center of the bed, a content smile on her face. Rohman had taken her body to heights she didn't think possible. She rested her head against his chest, listening to the steady beat of his heart.

She knew they had a long way to go before he would completely open his heart to her. Someone had hurt him badly, so much in fact that he had shut off certain emotions within himself. Whenever Eden touched him, she felt his pain and sadness.

She'd gathered from the way people reacted to the king that he shut himself down emotionally. Eden vowed to get to the bottom of this and find the key to his heart. She wanted him to heal.

There was much more to him than the harsh dictator that he let others believe he was. She could tell that he cared about his brothers, and the fate of his people. One day she would make him care about her too.

Deep in her heart, Eden knew this was where she belonged. She'd dreamed of him and this place since she was a little girl. Just as she was about to say something to Rohman, there was a loud knock on the door.

Rohman frowned. "Who is it?" he roared, making Eden flinch. He really needed better people skills.

"It is Lusio, your majesty," the voice on the other side of the door called.

Rohman turned his head toward her, his eyes raking over her body. Eden could read the lust in them. "Cover yourself, woman. I don't wish for others to see what is mine."

She could have argued that the outfit she'd been given was so see-through that it didn't matter, everyone had already seen her goodies, but decided against it. When she

slid under the satiny sheets of the bed, dragging the covers over her breasts, he bade Lusio to enter.

A tall Ceyan guard entered the room, his dark head bowed. "Your majesties," he greeted humbly.

Eden had to cover her mouth to stifle a giggle. Majesty? That would take some getting used to.

"I hope you have a good excuse for interrupting us, Lusio."

"It is urgent, your majesty. Queen Daliah --"

Rohman stopped the guard's flow of speech with an angry glare. "You have interrupted us with news of my mother? Get out of here!" he roared, his face turning a bright angry shade of red.

Eden didn't particularly care for the tone of his voice. It was so easy to see why everyone was so scared of him. "Rohman, you shouldn't --"

"Be silent, woman," he hissed before turning back to the shaking man.

"But your majesty, your mother has fallen ill and is rapidly deteriorating."

Eden gasped. The color left Rohman's face. "My mother has contracted this ailment?" He hopped out of bed and hurriedly threw on his loincloth before turning to her. "Stay here."

"I should come with you. Maybe I can help," Eden protested.

"Stay here!" Rohman turned to Lusio. "Take me to my mother's chamber."

When she was alone, Eden was furious. Who the hell did he think he was to treat her like that? Wasn't the main reason she was brought to H'trae to help his people? Why did he want to shut her out and what was the strange vibe she'd felt whenever he talked about his mother?

Well, she wasn't going to sit around and do nothing. She had a purpose and she'd fulfill it. Eden climbed out of bed and walked over to the large walk-in closet. She'd been shown around earlier and knew this room was filled with beautiful *ilsa* gowns. She grabbed a short pink toga-style gown and donned it as quickly as she could.

Eden didn't hesitate to leave the room. She needed to find someone who could tell her how to get to Queen Daliah's chambers. She walked down the opulent hallway in search of another person when she ran into a tall blue woman.

The woman was naked to the waist, a sarong-style skirt covering her lower body. Yellow eyes looked down on her, and there was something about this woman that Eden didn't like despite the smile on her face. But maybe this woman could tell her what she wanted to know. "Umm, would you happen to know where I can find Queen Daliah's chambers?"

"Actually, she's in a little dwelling outside the palace walls. I can take you there if you like... your highness."

Eden gave her a tentative smile, still not warming up to the woman. "Thank you, I would like that... er... What's your name?"

The woman revealed sharp white teeth that sent a chill down Eden's spine. "My name is Ani."

The End... for now.

Eve Vaughn

Eve Vaughn has enjoyed creating characters and making up stories from an early age. As a child she was always getting into mischief, so when she lost her television privileges (which was often), writing was her outlet.

Her stories have gotten quite a bit spicier since then!

Eve likes to read, bake, make crafts, travel, and spend time with her family. She lives in the Philadelphia area with her husband and pet turtle. She loves to hear from her fans, so feel free to contact her at EveVaughn10@aol.com or join her yahoo group at www.evevaughnsbooks-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.