



# THE COMPLEX

ONE THOUSAND  
WISHES  
ONE THOUSAND,  
STARS

KATHERINE  
RHODES

*The Complex*

One Thousand Wishes,  
One Thousand Stars

By Katherine Rhodes

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One Thousand Wishes, One Thousand Wishes

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# Philautia

**AN ANGEL FELL.**

P'iliktus was there.

His heart shattered when I walked away from the safe haven of his arms into the arms of another, a Human. A Human I had known for just six months. And he managed to do what P'iliktus couldn't do in three centuries years.

Catch an angel.

Catch me.

# Chapter One

I WIPE THE SLOP FROM THE COUNTER, and gave the rude troll a nasty look.

*Literal slop.* Trolls were disgusting and I wished with all my might John would ban them.

He wouldn't, because it was bad for business. John was excellent at making sure his bar was calm and welcoming, even without his vampiric influence. The dude was a sea of calm.

Which was why I had so much trouble believing Marindor about him ripping heads off to save their mate, Aura. Still, I guessed even the calmest person could go off the deep end when love was involved.

On top of all that, there was a great helping of irony in the djinn making a wish. While I did have to be careful, I was also lucky that John allowed me to use my powers as I wished. I'd heard stories over the years of those with unkind Lampmasters who kept their djinn imprisoned.

I was fortunate. John held my lamp. He was more a friend than a master.

Of course, if he had listened to me in the first place, we wouldn't have been sent to this godforsaken Complex.

He disagreed, of course. He was also in the throes of newly mated bliss, so fuck his opinion.

The troll dropped more of his slop on the bar top I had just wiped. I growled at him, and realized--it was a her. Christ, trolls came in ugly and uglier.

Damn. I had to stop doing that. I didn't want to judge these fellow Metas, but it was hard when they were dropping their drool on my workspace.

Maybe instead of wishing them away, I could work on another wish. I stared at the bar, and stirred up some powers from deep inside. I swiped my hand over the surface the female troll and her two friends kept drooling on. "Resist and clean." I murmured the words, and the stupid sparkle of blue flashed over the area.

Why did my damn magic have to sparkle?

The female grabbed my wrist. "The hell are you doing, shorty? I thought this was a no magic bar."

“I apologize, ma’am, but I was just trying to keep the area clean for you and your friends. It seems I was having difficulty doing that and I didn't want you to be disappointed by our lack of attention.” That was suitably ass-kissy.

“You a genie?”

“Djinn, yes.”

“Watch yourself, or I'll beat my three wishes out of your hide.”

I nodded and walked away. That was not at all how it worked, but I had to get away from her before I said something I would regret, and things escalated.

Apparently, never piss off a djinn wasn't something the trolls passed among themselves. We were small in stature, but big on power and attitude. I just didn't want to get John in trouble.

I passed the office to grab another bottle of the drink the trolls loved so much, and I heard sex noises from the behind the door of the store room.

Shoving the door open, I caught John mid-fuck with his adorable little succubus mate, Aura. “You have a private office, vampire! Good shit, can you keep the coitus contained?!”

Aura looked chastised, and John just grinned. “I told you to make sure you were stocked.”

I walked by them, John still stroking himself in and out of Aura’s lovely body. “I was until the trolls showed up. You've got no shame.”

“No, but I was kind of betting on the door working.”

“Just, clean up. Use the air purifier. Don't need the stock room smelling like sex.” I closed the door behind myself.

Shit, the way John, Marin and Aura went after each other was unbelievably *hot*. I took a second to make sure that my erection cooled off and walked back to the bar. I was totally jealous of the chemistry there.

Placing the bottle on the shelf, I turned back to the bar to see if anyone else in the lunch crowd needed a drink or to put an order in to the kitchen.

I froze.

A little blond-hair girl bounced across the room, her bright blue eyes lit from within with an otherworldly light.

I knew those eyes, that hair.

I stood as though I were stone, peering around. *Was her mother here?*

Oh, gods and demons, I didn't need her mother here.

She bounced over to the table where a man helped her sit. I broke my frozen pose and turned--her father helped her up.

*Her father.*

My blood pounded through my veins, my heart slammed in my chest. That bastard was here. Here, in the complex, with Brami. Where was her mother? I want to know and not know at the same time. I did not trust Trilland, not even with his own daughter.

Brami looked just fine. A happy five year old trotting out to lunch with her father. Trilland looked as handsome as ever, and that light of lies still shone in his face. I could never figure out what he was up to, or what exactly he was doing that was evil--but it was there.

Marin leaned into my field of view. "Hello? Hi?"

I jerked and snapped my attention to him. "Oh, damn. You too?"

"Me too, what?"

"They're in the storeroom."

Marin laughed. "Figures. I was going to ask if John had a minute to help me, but if he's dick-deep in Aura... What are you staring at over there, anyway? They are going to want service soon."

"Shit."

Shedding the coat that had his rank and name on it, he grabbed an apron. "I got this. You can explain later."

"Thank you." There was no way I could talk calmly to Trilland. Not in a hundred years. By which time he would be dead and my Min would be alone and dying.

*Not my Min. His Min. His angel.*

I wanted to choke the fucker out.

I walked back to the hall behind the bar and tried to take a deep calming breath. I groaned; all I could smell was the sex down the hall. Marin would probably join them in a few.

Newly mated. *Blech.*

*Djinn, do you want me to ask this guy anything?*

Quietly impressed by Marin's growing abilities, I answered, *Aside from his lunch order?*

*Screw off.* But there was no malice in his tone.

*Nothing. Just make sure the little girl is well cared for and happy.*

It was the least I could do for Min.



“Hey. barkeep!” It was the troll woman. “Can we get a refill here? This is my last lunch as an unmated woman!”

The two with her cheered and guffawed. I thumped my head back. I was going to have a drunk bachelorette troll at my bar during lunch. Which also meant that at some point her drunk future mate was going to roll in with his crew and drag her off to the ceremony.

Trolls were also loud.

Didn't need this Friday to be like this. At all. I slogged back to the counter and refilled the drinks. I was going to have to go into the storeroom and replace the good trogog drink with the cheap one. They were probably going to stiff me on the bill. I knew the troll with the...bride, and she'd cheated me once or twice. Not the whole bill. Yet.

Marin walked back from the table with the order and stared at me. I ignored him for a moment while I slid the order to the back to start cooking, but he kept staring.

“What?”

“Angel.” It was all he said.

“What?”

“The little girl. She's half angel. Nephilium.”

“Braminasandara Oe. It's his daughter.”

Marin's mouth made a little ‘O,’ clearly understanding everything I had not verbalized in that answer. “Never would have pegged you for someone who likes wings.”

“It's not about the wings.” I glanced over at the two at the table. “I wish that child had been mine.”

“Djinn making wishes?”

I stared at him. “Fucking human language. Makes me sound like an ass.”

“You don't need the humans for that.” Marin winked.

I shook my head and made a rude gesture. “Meanwhile, can you do me a favor?”

“After that hand jive you just gave me?”

“I've got more.”

The psychic laughed at me. “Fine. What?”

“Check the passenger manifests for me. See if that jack-off brought his wife with him. I didn't think she was coming here, but I can't imagine her leaving her daughter.”

“Name?”

“Arahambramina Oe.”

“Yeah...I'm gonna need you to write that down.”

\* \* \*

I walked through the lighted streets to my favorite club. The music could be heard well down the street--and if nothing else, I had to give the designers props for keeping the commerce and commercial areas of the Complex away from the dorms and apartments.

UniAqua was thrumming with the Friday night crowd. This was one of the coolest clubs in the Complex. I'd found it my second week there, and after trying one or two others, decided this was going to be my go to.

The center of the club was a huge water tank with a glass floor. The water underneath could be accessed by four sets of stairs on the outside walls of the club, and there were four dive points. The water-bound and water-dependent Metas of the Complex could come and go as they please through an exit below or they could join the dancers above.

Paying the entrance fee and walking to the bar, I set myself up for the evening near the end of the bar. Glancing around the room slowly, I sized up all the women, and a few of the men, who might garner some of my attention.

They all fell short.

After being reminded of how ethereal Min was, all of the beautiful people and bodies in the room seemed...flat. Disinteresting.

Looked like it was a night of drinking and trying to drown my sorrows in alcohol and maybe a little literal water. Swimming, for some reason, always soothed me. My mother had sworn she was nothing but psychic. The draw of the water was sometimes too great for me to believe that.

Months before I had made friends with the bartender at the club. He could come and visit me at my bar, and I would visit him here. We usually traded drinks. Tonight I just sat, nursing a local brew. *Local brew*. Like there was any other kind in a closed dome system.

I felt a little discord floating through the air, and my attention drifted over to a group of Humans on the Aquarium. They were dancing and having a good time and bothering no one. Just annoying people with their bad dancing. Watching them, however, was a group of ayakashi, in many different forms. They were clearly angry that the Humans were dancing

over a body of water they considered theirs. Except it wasn't theirs and there was plenty of room for them on the dance floor.

"You see that?" the bartender asked, tossing a chin at the ayakashi.

"Hard to miss. They're like strobes in deep space."

"Can you handle it if they get too aggressive?"

Raising an eyebrow at Hin, I shook my head. "Isn't that why you have security?"

"I'm not talking about the ayakashi. I'm talking about protecting the Humans. They're nice people and they just want to dance. The floor doesn't belong to the ayakashi."

I sighed. "You're just lucky my Lampmaster doesn't hold my power back."

He grinned. "Hey, I didn't want these wars either and I want this place to work. To do that we have to let the Humans know that we mean no harm, and are in fact handy to have around."

"Ugh."

"Plus, your magic is cool looking."

"It fucking sparkles, Hin. Sparkles. Like I'm some kind of damn glitter bomb."

"Exactly. And it sparkles blue." He motioned the walls around us: all blue and white and glittery.

Just great. He liked the sparkles because I matched his decor. Lame. So lame.

I had to remind myself that I was a very lucky djinn with a Lampmaster who was more a friend than master, and that's what allowed me to be here, and help the Humans if they needed it.

A moment later, they needed it.

It only took the ayakashi a moment to swarm them. And there were more than just the ones on the side of the Aquarium. Several ran from the bar, a few dropped from the second floor balcony, and there were a handful that rose up through the dive points in the floor, from the water.

"Leave!" one of the ayakashi yelled.

I hopped off the barstool and headed over to toward the group. I didn't rush. I wanted to see what they were going to do. The Humans huddled close to one another, and stared at the frightening green Metas that surrounded them.

"Leave!" commanded an ayakashi, dripping from the pool.

“Leave!” Five or six of them this time.

The glass under the Humans shook with the pounding fists of another half dozen of the ayakashi hiding in the water directly beneath them. The Humans looked terrified of the noise, the magic, and the anger that filled the atmosphere.

Shouldering through the ayakashi, I stood in front of the frightened patron. I gestured for them to follow me. “Come on. You’ll be better off over here.”

The ayakashi next to me turned and opened its great gaping maw, speckled with teeth. It hiss-spat at me, and tried to scare me.

One thing about djinn: it wasn’t easy to spot us. Ever. We were always short, usually with plain features and looked like any human in Seldova. Unremarkable. Until we unleashed our powers, which were nearly limitless. There wasn’t much we couldn’t do if our masters asked it. I had known one who was slave to an unkind Lampmaster who had made him implode a star. Truthfully, after most young djinn played with their power, they were bored with it and rarely employed it, and I wasn’t an exception to that.

Except when an ayakashi tried threaten me with their bad teeth and rank breath. Then, the lamp got left behind and I retaliated.

Summoning up the magic, I snapped his jaw shut and locked it closed. With a sweep of my hand, he went flying back and stuck to the railing of the balcony in a shocking explosion of the wretched blue glitter that went with the power.

Two more ayakashi charged at me, but instead of waiting for all these idiots to charge me one at a time, I shoved them all to their knees, and then down onto their faces, prone on the top of the Aquarium.

Just below my feet, I saw the glimmer of a pale green specter sliding through the water toward the six ayakashi that were banging on the top of the Aquarium. I didn’t have to worry about those particular idiots.

Ellestra was in charge in the water.

I motioned the Humans toward me again. “Come on. It’ll be safer if you have an area on the balcony to yourselves. They won’t hurt you now. And they won’t be welcome back here.”

A petite woman took my hand and stepped out of the circle of prone bodies, pushed forward by her date for the evening. I walked a few more of the Humans out and motioned to the balcony stairs.

“What are you?” the petite woman asked.

“I’m a genie and I’m granting your wish for a nice night out with your friends.”

The bouncers finally showed up with several Climintra guards, and they pushed their way through the staring crowds. I wasn’t letting the ayakashi up until the Humans were on the balcony.

Just as I was releasing them, six of their friend who had been under the floor were ejected out of the water through the dive points, up into the air, and landed on their now-standing friends. They soaked everyone in a five-foot radius. Which, conveniently, was mostly just the other ayakashi.

“What the hell is going on here?”

Te’krick’it, the manager, was standing with his webby hands on his hips just off to the side. A vodnik, the man could assume a mostly human shape, though he couldn’t quite get rid of his amphibian nature, as seen by the webbed fingers and pale green skin. He lived in the Aqua dome and needed the water environment. He was also a little bit on the shifty side, but not enough to make him a criminal. At least, not outright.

The Climintra were hauling the ayakashi to their feet, and were completely unimpressed by their show of dominance. Instead, the lieutenant motioned for his men to haul the unruly Metas out the front door of the club.

“Te’krick’it Boblbefen, do you wish to press charges against these Metas?”

“No, I don’t even know what’s going--”

“Then we will take them down the station, document this situation, and release them. Do you wish to ban them from this establishment for a predetermined amount of time?”

Tekri looked at me, and I nodded. I knew he wanted this place to be friendly and welcoming--it was good business. “Yes, fine. Um. A month?” Hin and I nodded. “A month. And they owe me a cleaning for that tank! They probably screwed up the water conditioner--”

“The water is fine.”

I looked to my right where the voice had come from. Ellestra was standing there, smiling, dry as bone as though she’d been in the water just a few moments before. I grinned at her, and she returned the smile.

“Fine. Just a month then.” He turned and looked at me, and Hin, and the security guards who were just now starting to show up. “Someone had better tell me why the hell there is djinn magic all over my club!”

“I had to use it?” I offered.

Tekri growled at me. Or, at least gave me the vodnik version of a growl, which was more an aggressive croak. He pointed at Hin and motioned him to the back of the club. On the way he signaled for the DJ to start playing music again and slammed the door, as he and the bartender disappeared.

One of the human males walked over to us and stuck out his hand. “Thank you, man. Djinn. Meta. I mean--”

“You’re welcome. Don’t worry about the title. I know what you mean. Go have a good time with your friends.”

“Thanks. Seriously. What were they?”

Ellestra answered for me. “Ayakashi. They aren’t all bad. Just like the rest of us, we’re not all bad.”

“I didn’t think you were.” The Human ran back up the stairs to join his friends, all of whom were waving and smiling at us. I waved back.

Ellestra slipped her arm in mine and pulled me away from the adoring fans. “Come on. Before the fame goes to your head.”

I smiled at her. The beautiful naiad had black hair that always looked like it was caught in a gentle current, soft and flowing behind her. Her eyes were brown and she seemed to like my attention.

“You were in the tank?”

“I cleaned it up for Tekri. He’s a nut about the cleanliness of the aquarium and I can help. So I do.” She glanced around as we walked to the back of the building that held the club. “Do you think anyone else saw me in there?”

“I don’t think so. There wasn’t much heavy magic in here tonight. Just me and I could feel a vague hint of a sorcerer. Maybe. Don’t know if they were paying attention. Thanks, by the way. As much as I love water, I hate the breathing underwater thing.”

“No problem. Sorry I was running late.”

I gulped. Shit, we had planned to meet up there. I’d completely forgotten. Still, she didn’t pick up on my goof, and we found a dark booth in the back of the club, away from the thumping beat of the music. But the vibe of the club was off now, and it was bothering me. I wasn’t going to be able to stay here all night, and especially not in this booth. I looked at the pretty naiad sitting next to me, pressed against my side.

“Would you like to go back to my place?”

A giant grin spread across her face. “You know I would. I was hoping you’d ask.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

As we headed out the door, I thought I caught sight of Trilland. He was pressing a pretty young Human against the wall and grinding into her as she giggled inanely at him. But why would he ever be somewhere like UniAqua? He was the leader of a religious sect and he had the gorgeous angel all to himself. There was no need for Humans for him.

I had to have been imagining it.

And by the time we got to the door of my apartment, Elle had banished all thoughts from my head. Her hand was firmly planted on my ass, giving me a squeeze every once in a while. There was no question what she wanted as we rode the shuttle up the dormitory dome. She confirmed that with another hearty squeeze on my backside as we stepped off on my floor.

“Get the door open, fast, Pili. Fast.”

This was us. This was our relationship. I wouldn’t call her my girlfriend, and she wouldn’t call me her boyfriend, but we spent a lot of time together. And we liked it.

As soon as the door was closed behind us, I pressed her against it and magicked off her clothes to the chair.

“Damn it, djinn, that’s hot.”

Elle clawed at my clothes, but I did the same for mine-- they were gone in a moment. We stood naked, and I pressed her into the door, ravaging and plundering her mouth in a brutal, demanding kiss. Her tongue slid over mine, petting and caressing, and seeking my mouth as well.

She wrapped her hand around my hard cock and stroked, but not gently and not teasingly. Elle was after this tonight, and it felt good. I palmed one of her breasts, crushing it, pinching the erect nipple hard.

Pulling back just a bit, she was panting. “Just fuck me, Pili. Nothing sweet.”

I grabbed her by the waist and spun her around, facing the wall next to the door. “You just want my cock tonight?”

“Yes,”

Grabbing her hips I pulled them toward me while holding her against the wall. We were close to the table I needed and I pulled it over. Kicking her leg up, I put her heel on the table and opened her pussy for me.

“You’re ready for me,” I cooed, running my hand over her soaking wet sex.

“Yes, yes. Pili, come on. Hard. Don’t be nice.”

I pressed her forward again, leaning across her back with my arm and pushing her into the wall, jutting her sweet ass out even further. I fisted myself, pumped myself twice and lined up with her opening, and speared deep inside her. We both chorused a groan as I started thrusting into her from behind.

It was a lovely behind, too. I slapped it hard, and Elle let out a yelp that slid down into a lustful moan. She was beyond wet tonight and my erection slid in and out of her core without any trouble. I slipped a hand up her side and found one of the breasts that was being crushed against the wall, and pinched the nipple.

“God, shit, yes!”

Her yelps were full of enthusiasm and that just drove me harder. But as wonderful as her tit was in my hand, I wanted her to come around me and that meant teasing her clit. Surrendering her the plump breast, my hand dropped to her swollen pearl. One advantage of fucking a naiad was, except for the hair on their heads, they were hairless. Including the delicious pussy had consumed my dick, and the waiting clit that my fingers now stroked.

She was shaking and when I gave her sex a quick slap, she came hard. Her walls contracted and milked my thrusting cock--but I wasn’t there yet. This sweet little naiad would keep coming until I stopped stimulating her. My multi-orgasmic little delight.

Pulling her back around to face me, I wrapped her legs around my waist and pushed her back into the wall. Now, it was easy for my to drag my erection over her extremely tender clit, dragging her toward another orgasm. I dropped my head to her breast and pulled the nipple in, between my teeth.

I bit and she screamed, coming again barely on the end of the last climax. This creature was so damned responsive. My thumb found her dark entrance and I ran the pad of my finger over it, teasing and tormenting her.

“Holy hell, Pili!”

My own cum was rising and I wanted to make her come one last time before I did. My hips pounded into her, finding the deepest part of her willing pussy. She was panting and twitching, and I knew she was about to come again. I popped the tip of my thumb through the ring of her ass, and



slammed hard. She screamed, both her pussy and ass contracting around me. It was the last thing I needed and my cum raced up my shaft, releasing deep inside of her.

\* \* \*

“You look a little distressed, djinn. What’s shaking?”

Ellestra could always tell my moods. I could always see her in both of her forms: human and water specter. She was powerful as a water spirit, but completely vulnerable in her most human form.

“I saw someone today I didn’t think had come with us here. It threw me off--and then I caught *them* again.”

Laughing, she put a hand on my arm. “You have got to stop getting offended by the three of them always finding each other. You knew that’s what was going to happen when they agreed to a mating, and they are new to the whole thing. Poor Aura needs her sex at least once a day.”

“Poor Aura, getting it from two guys.”

“Oh, you would have given it to her as well if she wasn’t falling in love with the two of them. It’s not easy being a sexual creature who wasn’t good at being sexual. You know that.”

I harrumphed. “You’re right. I hate it when you’re right.”

She wiggled her ass against my finally-sated cock. “You got yours anyway.”

“Yes, I did. Several times.”

“So, who did you see?”

I ran my hand over her arm. “Someone’s daughter.”

“Oh. The angel’s?”

I nodded, and cleared my throat. “Yes.”

Ellestra rolled over and laid her head on the pillow. “P’iliktus. You know damn well I’m not jealous. This, what goes on between us works for us, here and now. We had lives before this, and there’s nothing wrong with that. Someday this will be over and we’ll move on. But right now, this is the closest we’re going to get to mates. So. If you want talk about your angel, I’ll listen.”

I leaned forward and kissed her forehead. “May the gods and guiding stars always see fit to keep us in each other’s lives.”

She winked. “Just wish for it.”

“Very cute.”

She flicked my nipple with no sexual intent. "So? Tell me."

My sigh conveyed just about all of my emotions. "Her daughter and husband came into the bar today for lunch. I don't think Min was here--but I'm not sure she'd stay behind. But Brami and the asshole were there. I had to have Marin take their orders. I'm not sure he knows who I am, but I wasn't taking the chance."

"Why? Why don't you want him to know?"

"Elle, I'm in love with his wife. The mother of his child. He isn't a stable person. Would you want to know the man who caught your angel wife from her fall was nearby?"

Her eyebrow rose. "Are you sure he knows the truth?"

I shook my head. "I'm not even sure he knows I exist. I don't want to take the chance."

"You still love her?"

"I don't think I will ever stop."

Goddamn, that was a painful admission. But Arahambramina hadn't chosen me. She'd chose Trilland, and I had to leave that behind me.

The nimble naiad in front of me helped.

I leaned into her and took her again, making her scream my name a dozen more times before we fell asleep.

## Chapter Two

“So, THE CAPTAIN ASKED ME TO GO CHECK this cult out tonight--” Marin stopped and stared at me as I walked into the corridor. He snorted. “Well, someone had a good night.”

“Fuck you. I showered.” I sniffed my hand anyway.

Marin tapped his temple. “You are just radiating all kinds of sex.”

I rolled my eyes. “Great. Which means you two will be ducking into the office. Please, use the office?”

“Eh, I already tapped that.” John grinned at me.

“So what were you saying about the Captain?”

“Just Climintra business.”

Raising an eyebrow, I folded my arms. “Meaning, butt out?”

“Nah, I just don't know if you're interested in this stuff. It's boring. Cults and religions and--”

My voice sliced through his words. “I have my university cert in Religious Studies.”

Both John and Marin stared at me, astonished. I looked between them, and sighed. “What? Djinn can't go to university?”

John cleared his throat. “No... I just didn't think you'd have a degree in Religious Studies.”

“Because everyone expect a vampire to have an advanced degree in Culinary Arts and a cert in Behavioral Health?” I had laughed so hard when he'd told me he had a degree in food. Vampires didn't even need to eat, and here he was a master chef. “I also have a degree in Biology and Emergency Management.”

Marin laughed. “I guess you get bored when you live so long.”

“Absolutely,” John and I chorused.

“Noted.” Marin laughed. “Well, if you're really interested, the Climintra has their eye on this cult. They aren't fond of the idea that this group is rising so fast in popularity among the Humans and some Metas. In a closed system like we have here on Lorn, the idea of a cult rising to power is bad.”

I took over the explanation. “The rise of a singular belief system can lead to the regression of morals, and the chance that social systems promoting equality will collapse and be unrecoverable without the complete

dismantling of the entire society than has succumbed to the singular thought process. In addition to the loss of social diversity, those who do not completely give over to the common belief may be ostracized, jailed, or even killed as an example of the penalty of going against the current of the beliefs.”

Marin raised an eyebrow. “Right. Religious Studies...”

“Includes lots of anthropology and the structures of social systems.”

John jerked his thumb at me. “He's going with us.”

I was momentarily surprised—but then remembered that both he and Marin were now full agents of the Climindra. After they had busted a sex trade ring, the Climindra were interested in what the two of them could do together. Their mate had turned it down, and instead took up the offer of schooling. She'd always wanted to be a chemical engineer, and she had the brains for it.

They gave me all the information I needed for the meeting that night, and we went about our day. Marin had patrol somewhere, and John was in the back with the chef working up new dishes. Even though I had teased the vampire about his culinary degree, I knew that he really enjoyed cooking and sampling food. He didn't need food, but he could eat a bit, and he made sure that it tasted good.

One of the things that made this bar so popular was our changing menu. We tried to keep it fresh and rotated new ideas about once a week. There were some daily specials as well.

Another thing was the under table brews we had. There were several hobby breweries around the Complex and we offered those on the Down Low menu. It had to be ask for, and we needed to know who had told the customer about it. It wasn't illegal per se, but we wanted to keep it quiet since there were a lot of people who would have come in for that and ruined the reputation of the bar.

The cult meeting that night was in one of the deep levels, under the city. It was one of the old debarking areas from when everyone had first arrived in these hellish domes. I had traveled separately from John, so no one knew that we were somehow connected, other than friends.

I was old enough to have enemies. They didn't need to know that John was my Lampmaster.

The room had been transformed into an amphitheater, and there were drapings on the walls in back. There was an ornate curtain behind the

mobile podium. I studied the symbol there, trying to make heads or tails of it. I had never seen it before, and I had kept up with my studies and the new religions and cults that had come and gone.

I wasn't nearly as old as John, but I remembered pulling away from Vaimm as a child. I grew up on the ship, one of thousands upon thousands of children who did, and the vanguard of thousands more who never knew our home world. I distracted myself once I understood what that meant.

With all the various and varied Metas on the ship, there were always religions rising and falling. But once we met the Humans, it got even more interesting. They had beliefs that canonized some of the Metas as saints and gods. They had always been fascinated by the angels, the djinn, and the shifters. They didn't much care about trolls or nymphs, and were downright frightened of liches and wraiths.

Rightfully so. It made me wonder if there was any chance our people had visited there and planted the idea of us years and centuries before.

Their religions were complicated with ritual and dishonest faith. There was fraud among even the most honest and most simple of beliefs. Most Metas followed a religion for a while and then left for their own personal spirituality, leaving behind nothing more than a text and an empty hall with symbols.

Humans did not. They clung to things for centuries. I was utterly fascinated by the different beliefs that had risen, fallen, been forgotten, and those which had managed to persist. I was intrigued by their idea of heaven--it was so pretty and wholesome. Almost boring. People with flowery ideas, clouds. Harps. Golden haired, chubby, infant angels. White pure innocence. No fighting, no fucking. Where was the joy in that?

If there was a heaven, I wanted *my* heaven to have sex and drinking and no guilt. A tropical beach. A mountain for me to climb. A forest for me to hike through.

And no lamp. No chains. No commands, no master, no restrictions.

That was heaven.

The symbol in front of me was none of the things I knew from my world or from the Humans' religions. It looked like a stylized pen--a feather plume that some folk enjoyed writing with. Mostly useless now since nearly all their technology was voice controlled.

Aside from it being pretty in gold and silver, there was no making heads or tails of it. It was just... a feather. Maybe.

John seated himself across the room from me, and Marin was somewhere in the middle. I could see why the Climintra wanted them to work this together. They were good together, and they were even better at pretending they were Human. I sat quietly, taking in the feel of the room.

The people walking in were chatty and excited. They didn't pay any attention to those already seated in the arena, staying little cliques. None of them had a bead on me or John and Marin. They weren't just unaware. They were willfully ignoring us. I didn't like it.

As the room filled, I realized something about the people filing into the seats. Down to the last person:

They were all Human.

John, Marin, and I were the only Metas in the room, and no one realized we were there. No one wanted to realize we were there.

What the hell was this? Was this a Humans only meeting? Those were discouraged by the Complex. The whole point of the experiment was to get Humans and Metas working and living together, and if there were "only" meetings, it would never work. There were, of course, secret 'only' meetings, but nothing on this scale in a public space.

No, this had to be something else. What had we stumbled upon?

A few minutes later nearly all the seats were full, the light flashed, and a palpable excitement filled the room. There were sounds of rustling and shuffling, and then the lights went out.

The darkness lingered in the room, just a little longer than most people were comfortable with and then a spotlight cut through it, blinding everyone. The feather on the curtain, seemed to come to life under the deep red, glimmering light.

"Glory!"

It was a disembodied voice that called out to the audience, and the audience echoed back. "Glory!"

"Praise unto the stars that have brought us to this place!"

"Glory!"

"Praise unto the creator who saw our need while we sought the stars!"

"Glory!"

"Praise unto those who steered us to this world!"

"Glory!"

"And may those who oppose us in our search for the creator be struck down and cleared of our path."

“Glory! Amen!”

Oh, this was *rich*. The implication of the words was heavy--the ritual of a mass answer, the gathering of like minds. This place was ripe for the picking of a charlatan.

The Charlatan appeared in the light.

I had to cover my mouth with my hands from screaming. I bit my lip and looked again.

The charlatan was Trilland Samarad.

Min’s husband. Brami’s father.

“Greetings to all of you! I am pleased that you of the Complex could join me this evening. I know it has been difficult for you all, being locked away from our words and guidance. But I am here to reassure you. And what reassurance it is! Glory!”

“Glory!”

He led the group in a prayer that had to be the most convoluted and nonsensical thing I had ever heard. It was jumbled words, catchphrases and disingenuous sentiment. There was some kind of song, and then, the infamous plate got passed around.

But how did you fill an offering plate with no physical money? All money in the Complex was traced through an implant in your hand and all transactions were recorded. When the basket reached me, and I peered in, I understood. They used jewelry. Gems. Gold. Silver. Contraband money. Coins. Heirlooms. Things that could be pawned or sold off-world by pirates.

Everyone around me was watching and I reached into my pocket. I conjured a necklace there, and enchanted it. I made sure to hold it up for everyone to see as it sparkled in the light, and I dropped it in. The enchantment would have it disappear in a few minutes and reappear in Marin’s pocket so he could place it in, and then repeat for John. Once John had put it in, it would disappear completely into the ether it was composed of.

There was nothing good or comfortable about any of this. Trilland was a schemer, but what was he doing here? He hadn’t come in on the ships; I knew that now. Marindor had checked all the registers and rosters. Trill snuck in after, and probably had forged papers so he could move around. Which meant that his daughter —also had faked papers.

My angel's daughter was part of some damn scheme.

But then, where was Min? Min wasn't the type of Meta to walk away from her child. That wasn't the woman I knew.

She couldn't be part of this...

...could she?

Had I judged her wrong all these years? Did she fall for Trill because she was more his type? Scheming and scamming? Had I been so blinded by what I saw that I never got below the surface and learned she was a cheat and a liar?

My heart was pounding in my chest. Gods and stars, what was going on? What was this gathering all about? Was Min here? I didn't know if I could face her if she was part of this scam.

But everything changed in the next heartbeat.

Trill had whipped the crowd into a frenzy, whooping and hollering and chanting and calling out "Glory!" I was expecting people to start speaking in tongues. He pulled back the curtain.

Brami stood there, small, terrified, her little wings trembling. She had tears on her cheeks that glistened in the bright spotlight, and her white robe was disheveled. Trilland grabbed her hand and pulled her forward beyond the curtain.

"Behold--the angel child who has been granted to me!"

The room dropped from frenzy to chaos.

A horrible realization ripped through me; he'd stolen his own child from her mother. He yanked her wings away from her back, and held them at their widest expanse, turning her to show her to everyone in the room.

"Glory! Glory to our creator. Glory to he who has blessed me with this angel from on high!"

I dug through my memory as hard and as fast as I could. This was an outlier religion, one not of the mainstream. They practiced worship of angels.

*And djinn.*

Shit.

The Litteris Antiquorum sect. Their name meant something in an ancient Human tongue, but they took their beliefs from a branch of religion called Abrahamic--using only the texts, no dogma, no other beliefs. And in those texts, angels and djinn were creatures of wisdom, light, and power.

Shit.



This little girl was in danger. Serious danger. I was tempted to run out there and grab her and make a run for it. But that would put her and me in deeper danger, so I wasn't going to take the chance. I had to be patient and get her out logically and carefully.

I didn't know what had happened to Min. I needed to find out, but this wasn't as important as getting Brami away from her father.

\* \* \*

"You're sure?" Marin asked, running a hand down his face.

"Of course I'm sure. How many angels do you know?" I wasn't in the mood for this. "Brami is Min's daughter, and Trill is the father. Trill is a scam artist."

The deep rumble of the liche Captain rolled through the room. "We can't go running into this, Alvinad. We need time. We have to make sure that what you think is going on can be proven. We can't just take a child away from her father, no matter how much of charlatan he might be."

"I realize that." I scrubbed my eyes. "Look, whatever is going on here, I want in. I want to help."

"You're a civvy," the captain said. "You can't--"

Marin interrupted. "I was a civvy too, sir. Smith was too, even more recently than I was. We collaborate all the time."

"I'm a djinn, sir. I'm about as powerful as they come. There's not much I can't do, and I want to apply that to finding Brami and making sure she's safe."

The captain considered me. His face was a mask, and there was no way to tell what he was thinking. Well, Marin might be able to, but that was something I left to him. "Who is your lampmaster? Do you have one?"

"We all have one," I said.

John nodded. "I'm his lampmaster. I have placed no restrictions on him or his powers save to do no harm."

The captain jerked his head a little and looked at John. "You let him walk around unrestricted?"

"With all due respect, P'iliktus is nearly three centuries old. He either is or isn't a good person at this point. He would find a way to use his powers no matter what I said as his master. Lucky for us he's a good guy and wants to help people. One of whom is this beautiful little girl."

Go, John. Exactly. That's exactly what this was. I had been friends with this vampire since he taught my class on the ship about the history of Vaimm. He knew me. And he knew what Min meant to me. Helping her daughter was what I needed to do.

The captain nodded. "Fine. You'll join Smith under cover. I don't know much about this group--"

"Litteris Antiquorum." I supplied the name "I'm reading up on them. But I don't know if they are a real branch of the religion."

"Why not?"

"Well, for one, what went on in that room tonight was a spectacle. It was not a reverent ceremony which is what I was led to believe they preferred. Calm, quiet, reflective."

Marin nodded. "That was a show. Not a ceremony."

The captain stroked his beard. I stared at him. He was having second thoughts about me joining this, but this was the near-literal personification of what I should be doing with my degree. Using it to save people.

"You're going to have go in. You have to find out more about the group. We have to break this up if they are holding the child a hostage. Even if the cult leader is her father. Marindor, you're going to be the obvious and public face of the Climindra. Don't be subtle as to who you are in there. John and Pili, you'll be the ones blending in." He looked at his watch. "We have an off-schedule arrival today, and I need to go meet his ship so we don't get him killed."

"There's a ship coming in today?"

"It's a Climindra ship, and this is a *major* exception to the 'no ships' rule. He was granted permission by the Monk. So he comes in, no questions asked."

"Who is it?" John asked. I thought that we wouldn't be made privy to that information, but I was certainly all for 'it never hurt to ask.'

The captain looked between us. "Zar Kodone."

All three of us stopped, and traded looks. "Are you serious?" Marin finally asked.

"Very. Gentlemen, I'll talk to you all later, and we can find out when this next cult meeting is." The captain turned on his heel and headed out of the room.

"Zar Kodone." I whispered the name.

"Zar Kodone." Both John and Marin whispered it.

“Why the hell is the most brilliant detective ever coming here? I mean, if he’s that smart, why couldn’t he find a way to stay off this dry, marble-shaped hell?” I looked up at the dome miles above us. “Once you’re here, there’s no way off.”

“Legally,” Marin added.

“I know that. My question still stands.”

The captain looked between us. “You don’t need to know. Get your gear, and get out of here.” He spun smartly and marched out the room.

“There is a reason they are bringing Zar Kodone here,” John stated.

“You don’t bring the greatest detective to this closed system without a reason,” I agreed. “But that’s not our concern. Let’s find out what Trill is up to, and take Brami away from him.”

Marin held up a hand. “If he’s guilty.”

Of that, I had no doubt.

## Agape

THERE WERE THOUSANDS OF NIGHTS on the ship, the unending voyage from Vaimm, when his mother's voice was the only thing that kept his tears away. He only just remembered our world. He had been only three when the ships blasted away from what would soon be ruin.

The trees, the grass, the water, the sky... they all called to him even if he didn't understand why. How did he long for something he'd barely known?

But mother's stories gave him comfort in the constant dull evening light of the ships. She would tuck him in, long after other mothers had stopped, and P'iliktus never complained. He was sure she felt it was somehow her fault her son was so small.

It wasn't, of course. He'd gotten his father's genetics. Mother was a beautiful, if common, psychic. Father had been the djinn, and djinn were small and short of stature for the simple reason of their confinement upon their 18th birthday. It was easier to find a lamp for a small Meta than a large.

But father was gone, killed in the death and destruction that had pushed all of the species of Vaimm to flee the world, the system. All of us fled, in a great generational ship that had taken a generation too long to build. So many lost loved ones, and whole species teetered on the brink of complete extinction. The ship, that took us in a direction our best and brightest scientists only guessed would find us a new home, was our best and only hope for survival.

Pili had only his mother. And mother spun stories of all the Meta that traveled with them: Giants, djinn, vampires and valkyries, shifter and specter alike.

His favorite stories, though, were always of the angels.

Nothing fascinated him more than the species of Meta who lives just out of phase with the universe. Our wings were a delight to him. Our power amazing. And when I walked into his first year class, he was instantly smitten.

I didn't see him. Not that I couldn't see him, but he *was* a small, unremarkable boy with dark hair and dark eyes, tan skin and a diminutive

personality. I always knew he was there, but I never saw him.

His mother died in an accident that killed too many people on the ship. A crack from a rogue asteroid struck the ship and cracked the hull. The area had been locked down, but it was too late for those inside. His mother. My father.

The angels might live out of phase with the rest of the universe, but we were still subject to the rules of life and death. And death came that day.

But I still didn't see the little boy. I didn't know he would do anything in all the galaxies for me.

Life went on. We flew through the stars to a destiny none of us could see.

## Chapter Three

TRILLAND BURST OUT LAUGHING AND SLAMMED his beer glass on the counter. “That’s awesome. You do that all the time when you sneeze?”

“Fuck you man,” I said, meaning it far more than he could possibly have realized. “Yes. I sneeze magical blue glitter.” I wiped my nose and threw the tissue in the trash, washing my hands.

“Is your snot blue and glittery?”

“No! What the shit?”

The past four weeks had been absolute hell for me. John and I were doing everything we could to cozy up to this sick son of a bitch and it was eating me alive. He had proved to be difficult to crack for about, oh...a nanosecond. It only took about three days of free drinks at the bar for him to show his true colors.

He was just a cheat, a snake oil salesman, to use the human phrase. Which was a great phrase.

Once he gave up the ruse, he would come in with and without Bami seemed sad but well cared for. There was nothing there to justify us taking her away from him.

The cult, meanwhile, was starting to really garner attention in Human circles. The meetings were gaining more and more attendees, and every night there was a show he would parade that poor, tired, clearly anxious little girl into the light. The tremble in her wings had started to disappear and was replaced with a slumped defeat. Her feathers weren’t quite as fine and soft anymore, and her father didn’t care.

And now Trill sat at my bar, making fun of my unfortunate side effects when I sneezed. Goddamned sparkling magic.

Leaning on the bar he stared at me. “So, you’re a genie, right?”

“Djinn, yes.” I wiped the counter again.

“What the hell is the difference?”

“One is the wrong word, one isn’t.”

He laughed drunkenly. “Nice. Good answer.”

“You’re the leader of the Litteris Antiquorum, what do you think the difference is?”

“You’re not blue or green and you don’t have a fancy head dress.” He took a swig of beer. “I don’t know. I don’t know if I care either. I mean

djinn, genie. You all grant wishes.”

“A genie is a very Human construct that grants three wishes to whoever rubs the lamp. They are usually funny little green or blue smoke people. Djinn,” I held my arm out and poked myself, “are very much not smoke, not blue or green, and have--” Whoa. I didn’t want to tell him about the limitless powers. “Uh, have a master.”

“You have a master? How does that work?”

Did I really want to tell this guy how I worked? I shook my head. “Look, Trill, this is some personal stuff we’re getting into. I don’t feel really comfortable telling you about how my abilities work.”

“But you don’t mind finding out about the way I’m running my church.”

Shit and damn. I didn’t want to do this. “Yes, then, okay. I have a lampmaster. —A lampmaster holds the lamp and controls every aspect of a djinn’s life. Whether we are confined or free, whether we can use our magic or not. They do get three wishes, or wants, and once that’s up they must pass on the lamp. When we find a mate or a spouse, we give them the lamp and the rules change.”

“An actual lamp?”

“Once upon a time, before we learned about electricity and how to fly from star to star, yes. They were oil lamps of all sorts.”

“You live it in?”

“Well, we’ve moved on from oil lamps, but we never lost the phrasing. We are confined to something analogous to it. It’s not really living when your whole essence is jammed into a 100 cubic inch space.”

“And anyone can make wishes?”

“No. You must be the lampmaster. The current master must turn the lamp over to you. You can’t just grab it and go. And there’s rules for wishes.”

“Really?”

“Of course! Haven’t you even read your own ancient literature? A story called ‘The Monkey’s Paw’?”

“The what?”

I rolled my eyes. I had been making my way through ancient Human literature and that story, The Monkey’s Paw, had really caught my attention. It made sense that it would because it was about an ill-thought-out wish.

But then I remembered whom it was I was talking to and shook my head. "Never mind. It's just about someone who makes a really bad wish."

"Like, unending wealth?"

"Correct. That is not a good wish. At all. You don't understand how money really affects you and those around you. You want wishes that are helpful. Useful. I've seen many djinn try to tell their lampmaster something was a bad idea, but in the end, we cannot disobey."

"Is the size of the wish restricted?"

Nope. Nice try though. "Yes."

Trill looked around and I knew what question was coming. "Who has your lamp?"

Yeah right. This guy wasn't giving up. "Sorry. That's classified. I don't tell people who has it. I have an amazing lampmaster who hasn't yet used a single wish and I'm free to come and go and use my powers as I please."

"Damn, I was hoping for a little bit of that money magic."

I swiped my hand over the bar top and a pile of notes they used on the Human worlds appeared there. They were large bills and Trill's greedy eyes popped out. He grabbed the stack and shoved it in his pocket.

"That's wicked awesome. Thanks man. You're the best."

"Are you sure?"

"What?" He looked distressed and shoved his hand in his pocket. I knew the bills were gone. They were an illusion. All money I conjured was an illusion almost without exception. "What the hell?"

"It's fake. It's always fake. It's why I tell people to think hard about what they are going to wish for if they are the lampmaster of a djinn."

"Not cool."

"It's the rules, man."

Taking a hard drink from his glass, Trill studied me. I could tell he was sizing me up for a question. I was hoping we were going to get to the long con soon. I wanted to get Brami away from him. "Do you think you can help me with the group?"

Bingo. "Doing what?"

"I need to leave here soon, and I want a hard luck story to run on them. I want them to hand over as much of the non-Complex money as they can. I need some help with the angel kid. Someone to make her look sick, so its believable."

"The angel kid?" I sighed. "Isn't she your daughter?"



“Yeah...”

“I hear the but.”

He shrugged. “The mother was into me. Big time. I mean, what could I do when she fell for me.”

“Fell?”

“Yeah, that whole angel thing. They have to fall into sync with the rest of the galaxy in order to sleep with us. Otherwise you’re humping air. So she fell for me. I agreed to marry her. She got pregnant almost immediately and I felt trapped. I took the kid and we left. She wasn’t happy, and she didn’t like what I was doing for a living. But pfft. She can’t tell me to change. She fell for *me*. Not the other way around. And when I realized the kid was a pretty powerful nephilium, I took off and decided to make my living any which way I pleased.”

“I can probably work an illusion.”

“I’m starting to get some Metas in the group. Can they see through magic?”

“Not usually.”

“Eh. Don’t want to take that chance then.”

He took a swig and didn’t say anything else. I had two customers at the far end who were gesturing for drinks and I headed over. That wasn’t where I wanted to leave the conversation with Trill, but it would look suspicious if I hung out with Trill for too long.

Marin had confirmed he hadn’t been on the manifests, but was in the system now. This meant he’d used the underground network to get there and would be using it to get off Lorn. It was an open secret that the closed system here was nothing of the sort. I was more and more convinced that he had left Min behind without really thinking about it.

Now, I was worried that he was going to injure his own daughter. He didn’t even call her his daughter. It was always “the angel” or “the kid” or “the angel child.” Never daughter or my daughter or even Brami. Just... distant disinterest.

By the time I got back to where Trill had been sitting, he was gone. He hadn’t paid the tab either, cheap asshole. After all the discussions that we’d had about honesty, none of it was getting through. Not a bit of it. He wasn’t going to listen. This was going to have to reach the dangerous stages before I could get Brami away from him.

\* \* \*

Her perfect hips slid over mine, riding my cock slowly.

Elle was in no hurry this evening, and this was best way to enjoy her. Naiads didn't need sex to survive like their cousins the succubi, but they were a lot better off when they had sex regularly. And I was Elle's choice.

I slipped a finger between her legs to find her clit, but she pulled it away. "No, Pili. I want to ride you for a while. It feels so damn good. I want a slow fuck."

I put my hands on her thighs, and just helped her moved.

"What are you thinking, djinn?"

"Not much with the way that pussy of yours is enjoying me."

The sway of her heavy breasts was slow as she kept her rhythm and smiled down at me. "You're not a normal male, Pili. You can fuck and think at the same time. So what are you thinking?"

Her muscles closed and massaged me deep inside. She wanted to talk while we were doing this, I was game. "Brami."

"Still?"

"Until I can get her away from him."

"Have you spoken to her?"

I added a little thrust up to my hips as she rocked forward. "He won't give me the chance. But he asked me to help with the long con for her. Make her look sick."

"Mmm..." For a moment she closed her eyes and rolled back and forth, letting the sensation of my erection rock against her clit. "May... mmphf. Maybe you can. That's could be your in with him."

"I had suggestions --oh-- and he dismissed them."

"Does he trust you?"

"Now, yes."

"Every time, Pili, I swear your dick gets bigger. Maybe he doesn't completely trust you. Maybe he's holding back."

My hands found her ass and gave her a slap. "That's possible. I know that he won't tell me about his wife."

"Are you sure they married? Oh, yessss."

I grunted as she bore down hard on me. "Yes, I'm sure."

"Breasts, please, Pili."

I pulled her down to me and my mouth found a nipple. She tasted sweet and sexual, and sucking her into my mouth I rolled the nipple with my teeth and tongue. Elle gasped and tried to pull back, but I held her there, savoring the hard pearl.

Changing from a rocking motion to a piston motion, Elle was done riding and wanted the prize. She slammed herself down on my cock, over and over, the tight silk fist of her pussy milking and squeezing me as she took her pleasure. I was content to suckle her, help her reach the top.

I bit softly and held her there, and she came, screaming. Her sex pulsed and pulled me in deeper. I sat up and rolled her back, so that I was on top. She lay exhausted and I thrust hard into her. She recovered from the orgasm, and just as she started to respond to my cock still inside, I pressed a thumb against her clit. She thrashed and squirmed and a moment later I splashed my cum inside her, triggering another orgasm.

I slowed and as I recovered, I moved us around on the bed so her back pressed against my front. It was always intense with us and took a moment for us to find our voices.

“Damn. Every time, Pili. The multiples are fantastic.”

“I do enjoy a good romp with you.”

“I like that you get that filthy mouth during sex and then go back to your not so filthy after.” I could tell she was grinning.

I did have that habit. A filthy mouth while we had sex. I shrugged. Elle rolled over and stared at me.

“So, are you sure they are married?”

“That’s what he said.”

“Could he have lied?”

“That wouldn’t shock me. But I also don’t think that he did because without certain kinds of love, angels wither and die.”

“What?”

“The humans have words for all the different kinds of love. Ancient words. *Philia*, *eros*, *pragma*, *ludus*, *storge*, *philautia*, and *agape*. Seven different kinds. Angels have to have at least three of them to live, and six of them to have a child. So she must have been married to him to feel the *pragma*.”

Elle was taken back. “Seven different kinds of love?”

“Sure. Love is love in regular Human tongue, but even we know there are different ways love manifests. *Philia* is brotherly love, the love between

best friends. Eros is..." I laughed and pointed between our naked bodies, "literally this. Ludus is playful love, young love. Pragma is deep love, enduring. Storge is the love of mother and child. Philautia is wholesome love of the self. And agape is lovingkindness, a love of the galaxy and everything in it."

Elle smirked. "I didn't know love was that complicated!"

"Everything worth anything is complicated. And angels live on this love. Love and good food."

Tilting her head, Elle considered me. "This is more than you just caring about her, isn't it? You really are in love with Min."

"I can pretend," I answered. "But she doesn't know who I am. She might remember me from when we were kids, but there's nothing there now. She fell for a Human. Someone I'm convinced has used her and walked away."

"How much do you know about angels?"

I sighed. "Too much. Really. It makes me look like a stalker or sycophant."

"Tell me."

Pulling back, I was shocked. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, please. Tell me about them." She traced a careful finger down my collar bone.

I closed my eyes. "I met Min when I was five. The day she walked into our first year classroom. That was over three hundred years ago. I was instantly fascinated by her. I went home and started asking my mother everything and anything I could think of about the angels. She handed me books and videos about all of the species of Vaimm, and I ate them up, studying the parts about the angels over and over.

"Millennia ago, the angels were no different from the rest of the people of Vaimm. They lived with us and among us, and were nothing more than psychics with wings. But there was something greater for them, because they could see time and space. Finally, one of their kind transcended our plane of thinking and being. They moved just out of phase with the rest of the people of Vaimm. Slowly, all of the angels were able to shift to the different plane of existence.

"It was immediately obvious that they could no longer interact with the rest of the people of Vaimm, much to the chagrin of those who had been in love. They could see and smell and talk to each other, but they could not

touch. Not now, not ever again. Someone figured it out, though. The angels could, if they wanted to, fall back into sync with the rest of the universe. It took tremendous effort and they had to be sure they wanted to take the step. Because once they fell, they could never return.

“Family and friends could choose to support or abandon those who fell. Most times, they chose to remain in contact with the angel, supporting their decision and supplying the love that they would need to survive the phase shift. It was critical, even more after an angel fell, that they had support. But there were a few who chose to fall for foolish, ill-considered reasons. Love was hard to prove to those who were angels, and hard to conceive for those who were not.

“An abandoned angel was a pariah, in both Meta and angelic circles. The love that they gleaned from those they fell for had to be enough to sustain them. There was no way to survive without it.”

I opened my eyes and Elle had a horrified look on her face. “They die?”

“They die.”

She propped up on her elbow. “Pili... he left her. She’s still alive, but he left her. She’s going to die.”

“I don’t know that. No one knows.”

“You have to find out.” She sat up straight. “P’iliktus, she could be dying.”

“I don’t know that. I don’t even know where she is.”

Her stare was deadly. “Listen to me. We have been having fun fucking each other’s brains out, but you love her. She may be dying and you need to find her. You can save her life.”

“I can’t even save her child!”

*BANG! BANG!*

The intrusive knock on the door scared the both of us and we scrambled for some clothes as fast as we could, as more ‘bangs’ sounded on the door.

“Hang on! I’m coming.” I glanced back and made sure that Elle was at least out of sight. Naiads didn’t have a lot of problems with nudity, but still ... I hit the lock release and the door slid open.

Zar Kordone stood there, dressed in black from head to toe.

“P’iliktus Alvinad?”

“Yes. That’s me.”

“You are an acquaintance of one Trilland Samarad?”

I nodded. “That’s correct.”

He swept into the apartment as Elle stepped into the living area wearing in my shirt. Shit, really? Her clothes were there—

—but the look on Zar’s face when he saw her there spoke volumes about why she did that.

“Good evening, Inspector.” Elle’s voice was cold as ice.

*Oh.* They knew each other.

“Good evening, Ellestra.” His voice was as cold as hers.

They were in love. *Interesting.*

“Inspector, how can I help you? You can see I have company and if this can wait until the morning—”

He turned fully facing me. “It can’t. Time is of the essence. What do you know about Trilland Samarad?”

“He’s the leader of a Litteris Antiqu—”

“No.” His words snapped off my answer. “No. What do you *know* about Samarad? I am here on behalf of the Climindra, and this is important.”

Keeping my expression neutral, I considered him for a long moment. This Human was purported to be one of the smartest beings alive at this time in history. He wouldn’t have come here to listen to me tell him lies and spin platitudes about Trill. Not in the middle of the Complex Dark.

“Trilland Samarad is a liar and a cheat. He’s a charlatan who doesn’t really believe what he’s selling to the people who attend the Litteris meetings. He’s exploiting his daughter for his own monetary gain. He asked me, just today, if I would help him make his daughter look sicker, and didn’t want me to use an illusion that some Meta might be able to see through. It’s my belief that he has no interest in keeping his daughter alive, never mind healthy, but I have no proof of that yet.”

“And yet you work with him, and have befriended him. Why?”

“His daughter.”

His bright green blue eyes that were more than just hazel stared right through me. “The wife.”

I nodded, briefly.

“What do you know about her?”

“Only what I remember from years ago on Creda. Once she moved to Rexu to be with Trill, I lost track of her.”

“So you knew her before she fell.”

“I did. Sort of.”

“Pining?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Yes. Very much.”

It was almost painful the way he was trying not to notice Elle standing there. “What’s your motivation for getting the child away from him?”

“Isn’t his use of her enough? I don’t have an ulterior motive. Brami is terrified and tired and a tool for her father. Even if her mother wasn’t Min, that’s all the reason I’d need to try to get her away from him.”

Another brief nod and a glance over at Elle. “I’m here because I’m tracking a serial killer. Milton Averon. The people of Rexu have a very larger reward out for him, but I’m assigned to the case. They want him captured and returned to stand trial.”

It didn’t take Zar Kodone’s brain to realize exactly what he was saying. Elle got it too. “You think Trilland is this Averon?”

“Yes. There’s a trail following him through Rexu, and the trail disappeared six years ago for just twenty-four months before it was back on Rexu again. Everything points to him. The people of Rexu don’t know his name, but he’s the reason I’m here.”

“A serial killer?” I didn’t like Trill, and I hated that he was using his daughter, but a killer?

“Yes. It’s a strange pattern. I suspect there may be some sociopathy, but there’s a chance there’s a split personality issue. I can’t be sure until I get my hands on him. But I can’t do that until I have more proof of his crimes. And again, I fear that may be too late for both the daughter and the mother.”

The hairs on the back of my neck stood. “What about the mother?”

“We weren’t able to locate her before I left. I came here in desperation to see if I could get him to go back to her and give up her location so that we could keep her safe. But he’s got no interest in her, at all anymore. She’s served her purpose.”

I glanced at Elle. “You’re telling me that he left her there? On Rexu?”

“To die, yes.” Zar raised an eyebrow. “On purpose. I’m sure she’s either seen something or knows what he is.”

A cold chill ran through me, icing my blood from head to toe. “And he left her there knowing she had nothing left and would die without telling anyone.”

“Precisely.”

Elle grabbed my arm. “You have to go. You have to find her.”

Shaking my head, I let out a sigh. “I don’t know where to start. I don’t know Rexu. You know the Metas almost never went there.”

“I need you here to trap Alveron. You’re the only one--”

“Blow it out your ass, Zar.” Elle cut in, and I was shocked at her words. “He needs to find Min before she dies. He can save her. He can give you your witness back. And anyway, John and Marin know what’s going on with Trill here. They were all making friends with him.”

Holding up my hand I stopped the verbal assault from both of them. “Hold on. I don’t know how to get off the planet. There’s no *way* to get off the planet. I don’t know where I’m going on Rexu. There’s too much of a question here.”

Taking my hand, Elle turned to me. “You love Min. You’re the only one in the galaxy who can save her. If you want to save Brami, save her mother first. Marin, John and I will do what we have to do to keep her safe.”

I ground my teeth. “We need a plan.”



## Chapter Four

“LET ME GO WITH YOU.” JOHN LEANED AWAY from the wall.

I shook my head. “I need you here to help them.”

“I know Rexu. Rexu is why I’m here. I might have been dispatched from Pinao, but I was living on Rexu when I got tossed on that transport with my synthoplas and half a suitcase of stuff.”

Zar pointed at him. “He makes a good point. It would be better if you had a guide while you were there.”

I didn’t know what to do. “You were undercover with me. If you and I go we lose that, and leave only Marin. He wasn’t trying to hide why he was befriending Trill.”

Marin shook his head. “I got this. Aura knows how to get you off Lorn. She was down in the Tunnels a few times before we found her.”

John nodded enthusiastically, and Aura joined him. “I do. I do know where the ships are down there. If you need a captain, I’m sure we can find one--”

“We only need a ship we can buy,” John said. “I got the flying covered.”

“Time frame?” I asked.

Zar looked around. “That I’m worried about. He hasn’t killed since he’s been here, but in the past the pattern was every twelve weeks. We’re at...”

“Three months since we first saw him in the bar,” Marin said.

“Not good. We’re right in the time frame.” I didn’t like this at all. “Look, please promise me that you aren’t going to wait to take him down. You’ll do it even if we’re not back with Min. We can’t let him kill anyone. Not when the Humans here might recognize the kill type and pattern.”

It was quiet a minute before Aura spoke. “In a closed system, that would be a disaster.

The experiment would fail and there’d be chaos under the dome.”

Aura motioned to John and me. “Let’s go. We’re wasting time. We have Trill here and we can watch him. Maybe get some of that tracking shit down his throat. You two need to get off planet, and find out if you can save the angel.”

John looked at her. “Shouldn’t we--”

“You need more than the clothes on your back?”

“Yes,” John stated. “I need synthoplas and my pocket watch.”

Elle snorted. “A pocket watch? With all this tech?”

“It's not his, it's mine.” I kept my voice quiet. “He has to have it if I'm going to be able to leave the planet. I can't be that far away from it.”

“A pocket watch?” Aura wrinkled her nose.

Zar nodded. “It's his lamp. John is his lampmaster. Brilliant, really.”

Elle stared at me. “He's had it all this time?”

John looked around the room. “I've had it since he was eighteen and he was linked to it. His mother and I were friends, and when she died, P'iliktus became my ward. We worked for months on a lamp that wouldn't attract attention or stand out, and yet was small enough to be tucked away.”

“John has always been my lampmaster. I've never had another. I've been lucky beyond reason. I hear other djinn stories about their horrible masters and awful wishes people have made. I cannot travel so far as another world without the watch. I will be pulled back into it.”

“Into the watch? But that's so tiny!” Aura was horrified.

John smirked. “The watch is just a part of his lamp. A mobile part that we can take and keep him safe. The rest is a box, the housing in which the watch rests and recharges.”

“The housing box is large. While I do shrink to accommodate the box, it's a lovely box with furnishings and a bed and even a small computer terminal I designed at the micro level so I could keep in touch. John has never felt the need to confine me save for one time...”

“The trip here.” He sighed. “Look, we need the watch if Pili is to have any chance of getting off world and saving Min.”

Nodding, Aura motioned them to the door. “At least now I understand why you keep that box carefully tucked away.”

We were in to their quarters and back out to the Tunnels in just a few minutes. John and I each carried a backpack full of his synthoplas. He didn't think he was going to need it. But better safe than sorry.

In his pocket, sat my watch. Safe.

The tunnels were at the bottom of the Complex, supposedly shut down after construction, but not really. It hadn't taken long for them to be up and operating after the Move In. All sort of illegal goods and services could be got down below. There had been a robust flesh trade, until John and Marin had discovered it and shut it down to rescue Aura. The slavers had left after

they saw what John had done to two of the bodies in his vampire rage. The rest of it went on.

Drugs, sex, contraband, flights off planet. If someone in the Complex was willing to head to the Underground, they could find anything.

Aura led us through the twisting maze of tunnels that led down deep below and far outside the domes. Once we had cleared a quarter mile from the entrance, there was a hoverform there to speed us along.

The Complex was huge, nearly 45 miles high and 60 miles across. It was less than half occupied, and could have many more floors built into the dormitory domes. We sped out from under one of the farming wings--all the pipes gave that away.

The hoverform zipped along at a healthy pace and before long, it slowed and stopped at a fork in the tunnels. We hopped off, and Aura looked at both tunnels.

"That leads to the water supply and back to the Complex." She pointed to the right. "So, we go this way. We should find another hoverform just a little way down."

"Where are we?"

"Out by the lake. The fresh smokers that supply the water are out here. We'll go under the waterfall in front of the lake, and around the other side. The main off-world market is over there. We would have had to take a different tunnel to get to the on-world one."

As she predicted, there was another hoverform there. I knew from walking around and studying maps, the geology and natural formations of Lorn were damned huge. It was a colossal planet, and everything was upsized. The waterfall was nearly three miles wide, and the specially engineered turbines spun in the liquid to supply part of the backup power. The water was nearly pure alkali. The fresh smokers were tapped below the lake bed and the perfect pH water was pulled out before it could get to the lake. That was what made the Complex possible.

"What the plan?" Aura asked as we moved through the tunnel.

John answered. "We're going to buy a ship and head to Rexu. That's where Min last was."

She choked. "Excuse me? Buy a ship?"

I couldn't stop the laugh. "Yes. Why?"

"Do you know how much--"

Putting a finger to her lips, John stopped her. "You still do not realize how fucking wealthy I am, do you? Yes. We are going to buy a ship. We'll sell it when we get back."

"Shit, John."

He leaned in close to her. "My little succubus, you will want for nothing. Ever."

"Not the place," I mumbled.

John glanced at me. "Actually. We should. If I feed now, I won't need the synthoplas."

I rolled my eyes and sat down cross-legged, facing away from them. Once the vampire got blood on his mind, there wasn't much to stop him. I'd walked in on the trio way too often, and knew that first hand. "No sex, you two. Just take a little blood and move on."

Which was impossible for them. He took blood, she took sex.

Aura looked well satisfied by the time we pulled out of the tunnel and into the cavern where the market resided. John didn't look disappointed either.

I was quickly distracted by the market and the cavern. I wasn't sure what I was expecting, but certainly not the organization I saw in front of me. Everything was clearly marked and there were signs that could be pulled down in moments. There was a hustle and bustle in the little market, and comings and going revealed the stalls and lodgings, and the ship port just behind.

Aura, striding through the market, motioned us to follow her.

"How many times has she been down here?" I asked John, quietly.

"Dozens. She works with the brothel to make sure the employees are safe and not slave traded." He watched her backside as she took measured strides. "I think she also likes the spare sexual energy she can absorb here. She's really embraced that side of her since Marin and I moved her in with us."

"So, they really do crave sex."

Raising an eyebrow, John smirked. "You have no idea. Two of us, and she's always ready to go. Always."

"That is so not a complaint."

"She even likes to watch me and Marin."

"Still not a complaint."

"Hell, no."

“I can hear you.” Aura threw a smile over her shoulder at us. And it was a filthy smile for John. “The port is just ahead. But we're going off to the right, to talk to the captains and dealers.” She stopped and waited for us. “I don't know if you can just buy a ship. I think they all come with captains.”

“Did I hear you want to buy a ship?”

Aura gasped and stepped back against John. There was a tingle in the air, and I knew the two of them were talking in the way mates can...silently, through a link in their minds.

The man there was less man and more toad. He was every bit the slimy, underground dealer. Sizing him up, as if the link he and Aura shared didn't pass him all the information he needed, John nodded.

“We are looking for a ship.”

“Not all ships have captains. Are you a pilot?”

“I am. Do you have anything with Human markings?”

“I may be able to help you.”

“Yes or no.”

The toad-man stared at John, maybe trying to use some psychic influence on him, but failing. Miserably. He finally nodded. “Yes. I have Human. For you and the girl?”

“Me and the djinn.”

His toady little mouth made a perfect O as he turned and looked me up and down. “A djinn.” His hands rubbed together. “For the price of his lamp, I will give you any ship you want.”

“No deal. Currency only.”

He narrowed his eyes. “It will take a lot of currency. His lamp will get you anything.”

“Not for sale.”

The toad-man rubbed his hands together. “What can I give you to reconsider--”

I flashed my magic in the tunnel, easily blinding the toad-man, and when it faded to acceptable levels, a small blue flame burned in my hand. “The lamp is not his to give. You will not ask for it in trade again.”

The creature bowed and backed off. “I do apologize.” But his eyes landed on Aura. This guy was just asking to have a limb ripped off.

John turned to his mate. “We're here now, my little succubus. You can head back. I wouldn't want to distress you when I remove this parasite's

head. As I am planning to do because he keeps casting his eyes on things that are not his.”

The toad-man grunted, and turned to walk away. “Follow me. I will show you what I have. You’d better have the currency, and it had better be good.”

I hurried ahead while John leaned down to give Aura a kiss goodbye and shoo her off back to the Complex. She was in danger here, beyond the market, and I didn’t blame him for sending her off. A moment later he strode up next to me alone, and spoke in a voice that was barely above a whisper.

“We’re looking for anything that looks like a normal Rexu ship might. It’s a middle class planet without much fanfare or wealth. There are wealthy people, but they live in enclaves. We need the day to day workers.”

I nodded, just enough to for him to see that I understood.

The toad-man didn’t disappoint. His idea of a few ships was a full hanger of them, with markings from every planet in the solar system: Pinao, Famiil, Creda, Wreston, Emalo...and Rexu. The Rexu marked ships sat in a far corner. Most of them were in poor to “you’re kidding, right?” shape.

We picked our way through and after just a few minutes I spotted something I thought might actually get us to Rexu without popping a vacuum. I tossed a chin in its direction and John followed.

“How much?”

“For that? The Djinn’s lamp.”

John lost it. He bared his fangs and his eyes glowed red as he slammed the toad-man against the wall. “I am not here to bargain with the djinn’s lamp. I am here to buy a ship from you. I can just as easily drain every last drop of what passes for blood in your body and fly off with whatever the hell I please. Somehow, I think you prefer the money.”

Toad-man nodded and John dropped him.

I raised an eyebrow. “You know I could have done that, too. I’m pretty capable of threatening to kill people.”

“But I rather enjoy it,” John answered, without humor.

The salesman was properly scared, but he did manage to come up with a number. I choked on it, and John just raised an eyebrow. “Really? And you think that’s fair after you tried to buy my friend and ogled my mate?”

“I could take some off the top.”

John glanced over at me. “Would you mind taking a look and giving me a real assessment of what this would be worth?”

Nodding I walked up the stairs into the small ship. And it was a small ship. It would barely hold six people and their suitcases. I turned on some of the systems and checked that there was fuel enough to at least get us to Rexu. It would fly. It was not anywhere near what John would usually demand. He had a vast monetary reserve on all three of the Metas planets. His wealth was sick, and this little ship was way below his norm.

It was exactly what we needed.

Dropping down the ladder I waved my hand. “Eh. So-so. Not the nicest thing I’ve ever seen. A little low on fuel.” I quoted him a number.

Toad-man gasped. “That’s an insult.”

“That’s a gift.”

“Make it half again and I’ll fuel.”

The toad-man and John were in a stare off for just a moment, and then John nodded. “Fuel it. Done.” He slipped the backpack off his shoulder and threw it to me. I didn’t stay to listen to the rest of the conversation. We had a ship and I had to prep it.

# Pragma

## **THREE HUNDRED YEARS.**

From star to star to star, he watched and waited. He never pressed, he never begged. He supported and cared.

Not only for his angel, but his friends. Those who called him family.

He could always be counted on. There was never a question of his loyalty. It ran deep and ran true. For three hundred years, he learned and waited and watched.

He watched me.

He waited for me.

And I did not see him.



## Chapter Five

WE FLEW LOW OVER THE HIGH HILLS BEHIND the Complex. Dodging and darting below the scans from the building, we had to make sure that we were at least a thousand klicks from the exit of the spaceport.

For safety, John took us twelve hundred klicks. Once we hit that, he pulled us straight up and hit the boosters to get us out of the atmosphere.

One might almost think that it was too easy to get out of the Complex. That for all the security inside, it was just too simple to fly off planet like we had. At the same time, though, I knew most of the residents on Lorn were not as wealthy as John and even great power and abilities didn't speak nearly as loud as money.

Still... *fly that way, you'll be good?* Odd, but...Probably money, again, applied at the right time to the right people.

Lorn shrank beneath us. Rexu was on the other side of the solar system this time of year, so we wouldn't have too short of a flight. We had to make an arc pass around the sun, and just as we passed it, I saw all the stars in space appear.

"Shit, I don't want to see that again."

"Three hundred years was a long time to stare at those stars." John nodded, and pursed his lips into a line.

I had to ask. "Do you think that Vaimm is gone?"

"Long gone. The last broadcast from some of the satellites came in last year. It's destroyed itself completely. The atmosphere was starting to freeze and fall to the ground."

That hurt to hear. It had been, in my mind for so many years, a gorgeous place of lush, verdant valleys and hills, with sweeping crystal blue oceans and stark grey peaks. That was what five-year-old me believed it still was.

We'd done the right thing for our people. I hoped.

Rexu appeared in the distant left-hand corner of the window. It was a smallish planet, but not the smallest, and we approached the side that was all water. Dark blue, oddly-tinted almost purple, it wasn't exactly welcoming. John's expert flying skills dove us straight for the center of the ocean, and at the last second, pulled up and had us skimming the surface.

The shockingly clear water revealed a surface full of animals. Raxu wasn't known for the depth of its ocean--and its rich and delicious sea life.

"Where am I heading?"

I pulled out my handheld. "I have her last known address, and we can start there."

"How did you get that?"

I smiled. "Brami. Doing what every little kid does. Repeating their address to make sure they remembered where to go."

"Nice. So Trill doesn't even know you got this?"

"Nope." I handed over the small device, and John tapped in the information. "When I had Marin check the database, this wasn't even the last known. I asked him to work with Kodone to uncover how Trill got there, and where he had come from."

"Do you have Trill's last known?"

"Yeah, it's about ten miles from Min's."

We skimmed along and the ship's planetnav took over for John, flying us a little higher than we had been. We watched the greenish purple land speed by, and within about twenty minutes, just as the sun was slipping behind the horizon, the ship slowed and headed us for a landing area.

The landing pad informed us that the address was about fifteen minutes walk from our location. We walked it, even though the information offered to call a ride for us.

And it felt weird. Very strange to walk down the broad avenue that seemed to be the hallmark of most human settlements. There were residences on either side, and those were filled with common people who did common things.

They all wanted what we wanted: to live in peace. To find love and to find happiness.

Why had we fought? Why had millions of our people died when we wanted the same thing? I couldn't believe these people truly hated us simply because of our powers, or because we looked different. John and I could pass as humans. He had--which was where his trouble began.

How had someone with *wings* managed to live here without scathing hate? Was Min the example we were all looking for? And it wasn't like she hid them--or even could hide them. They were as long as she was tall, and pure white.

And she had lived here with her nephilium daughter.

Maybe, this experiment wouldn't fail. Maybe it was going to work.

The tree lined avenue of homes gave way to a more business feel of the buildings. I saw the numbers climbing on the outside of the buildings and knew we were getting close to the address. When the number just before the one we wanted appeared, there was nothing beyond but a drive and an expanse of grass.

Looming over that well-groomed grass was a massive stone edifice, a fortress with windows.

The sign by the driveway proclaimed, *Raxu-East District Behavioral Home*.

Behavioral home. Another, more polite term for insane asylum.

They had locked an angel in a mental ward.

The breath John exhaled was more than a little displeased. "Just when you think there might be a shred of hope and decency in these Humans, you find something like this."

I stared at the massive building. What a cruel bastard Trill was, to leave his wife here and put a Meta in a Human-run facility like this. *Was she even still alive?*

The door creaked opened on an electric eye as we approached. I had the lowest expectations as we walked into the lobby. The Human stories about places like this were terrifying. The building, the patients, the care, the food... there was a word the Humans had--bedlam--that meant utter chaos. It had been born from the name of one of these asylums.

Humans just couldn't seem to get a grasp on their own health and wellbeing. No wonder their biology morphed when they mated with a Meta. We were just better at the biological thing.

As we strolled up to the desk the attendant looked up. "May I help you? Visiting hours are over."

I cleared my throat. "We're hoping you may be able to help us locate someone."

"Sir, all records are kept confidential--"

I sliced through her words. "An angel."

"Ah." He cleared his throat. "Mini Samarad. I guess..." Blinking a few times, he pulled up something on the terminal in front of him, and grabbed a piece of paper and a pen. A moment later he scribbled something down. "Mini left us about three weeks ago. They moved her to hospice care. There's... Well. She's very sick."

“Hospice?” John looked confused.

“End of life.”

Sucking in a breath, I looked up sharply at the attendant. “End of life?”

“Nothing we did helped her... No meds, no therapy, no exercise, no procedures. She's just gotten more and more sick, and less and less responsive. We couldn't do anything more and had to make the heartbreaking decision to move her there.” He proffered the paper. “This is the home. It's a lovely place on the cliffs over the water.” He sighed deeply. “I have to tell you, the government lied to us about them. The Metas. Mini was nothing but beautiful inside and out. She was gentle, kind, but...so sad. Always sad. She said her husband left her, he took her daughter with him. She had no reasons to live.”

After a quick glance at me, John asked, “Did she try and hurt herself?”

“No, never. And never hurt a soul, either. She was a beautiful creature... Can you save her? Can you give her something to live for?”

I pursed my lips. “I love her. I hope I can.”

“She needs that.” The attendant looked up at the ceiling above him. “They all need that.”

His plea was so earnest. I stared a moment, and considered him. “How would you help them if you could?”

“Make them well, make them respond to treatments and medicines. Give them clarity of mind and drugs that help.”

Jerking my head, I motioned John over. He understood and pulled the watch out of his pocket. “I will give you this for just a moment. Speak exactly as you just did, and then return it to me, speaking aloud you that you're returning it.”

The attendant seemed confused, but took it and repeated exactly what he said.

The real magic burst from every pore in my body, spilling and spinning into the air around us. It whirled viciously for a moment then shot out like a nova, spreading a layer across the floor, out the door, and around the corners until I felt the whole building above me. I reached down, and grabbed the magic, and threw it directly up at the ceiling. It shimmered and exploded, rocketing through the whole building, touching and binding to every soul within--including the attendant and the staff.

Staring hard, the attendant put the pocket watch back in John's hand with a, “This is yours.” Which was close enough to return the lampmaster

to John.

I smiled. "It may not happen all at once, but everyone in here will keep or regain their health. And because your wish was sincere, you'll reap the benefits as well."

"You're a genie?"

"A djinn, yes. You'll excuse us while we go try to save Arahrambramina."

While he was staring at the slight blue glow on his hands, John and I hightailed it out. I threw a little magic around us so the attendant didn't see us again. It was always dangerous to let anyone make a powerful wish. Their greed usually kicked in--or their altruism, which could be just as dangerous.

John nodded at me. "Good call. He was earnest, but..."

"Let's just get back to the ship. Though I'm grateful for their attempt, we need to hurry. We have to hope we can get to her in time."

\* \* \*

The high grey cliffs stared down at the deep purple water. The home was a great white and red affair, with more windows, but not nearly as tall or imposing as the hospital had been.

Comforting. Comfortable. Welcoming. Respite. All the words one associated with a peaceful death.

An angel--my angel--relegated to a Human home for death.

The ship set down in the lot, and we headed out across the walkways to the tranquil aqua colored front door.

The smell of the fresh ocean air hit me hard. I hadn't been assaulted by that since I was a child. On Pinao, I didn't live near the water, and didn't have a chance to visit. But our home on Vaimm had been near the glorious, wide blue ocean and I remembered the salt tang to the air.

The door didn't open automatically this time; we had to pull it open. John and I walked to the desk where a matronly woman was seated wearing old fashioned glasses. I'd always been fascinated by the human corrective lenses known as 'glasses' and that people still wore them when they could have a procedure that would fix their vision in seconds.

"Good evening, gentlemen. How may I help you?"

I nodded in response. "We're looking for a woman name Min Samarad."

The woman pulled off her glasses, a little surprised. “Mini? Yes, you’ve come to the right place. But she’s not...”

“Human, but she is still a woman.” I finished for her.

A nod conceded my point, and the woman tapped on a screen next to her. “Mini is very, very sick, gentlemen. We’re expecting full hospice in a few days. She’s...”

“We know where her daughter and husband are--”

The woman’s words cut through mine. “Please! Whatever you do, please. Don’t mention her husband. It’s one of her triggers. If you can tell her where her daughter is before we lose her.”

“May we see her?” I asked.

John shook his head. “No, Pili. You go. Alone. I will wait outside.”

“You can have a seat in the waiting room.”

With a smirk, John shook his head. “Ma’am it’s best if I’m outside. Trust me.”

Of course. He was surrounded by food sources who soon wouldn’t mind if their life blood was gone. He was definitely better outside. I didn’t know how long this would take.

The woman shrugged as she stood after recording my name in the visitor log and motioned for me to walk deeper into the building. “Mini came to us about three weeks ago. She’s been intractably depressed and has stopped eating. No treatments have even come close to working. Neither at the hospital or here. She--”

“She’s an angel. She’s not going to respond to Human medicine. No offense, but Metas and Humans have different ways of curing their ills.”

There was no missing her sidelong glance. “You are a Meta?”

“As is my friend John.”

She grunted, but kept walking. “We don’t know your medicine, and you certainly haven’t shared any knowledge with us. We don’t have many Metas here, at all. I’m sure you don’t have many Humans.”

“We don’t, and we don’t contract the illnesses you bear. Our ills can be cured directly with what sustains us. John is a vampire, and his ills are cured with blood or synthoplas. His mate is a succubus. She needs sex. My friend is a naiad. She must submerge in water regularly. Without these, we die.”

“Vampire?” She was distressed.

“Don’t fear him. He loves Aura very much and has pledged to never feed from another except in an emergency.”

“Feed from just her?”

Well, there was more to their triad, but one heart attack at a time for this woman. “Yes. The vampire’s bite is very pleasurable.”

“Oh...” She shook off whatever filthy thought went through her head at that suggestion. “And Mini? What is her sustenance?”

“Love. Love in whatever form she can find it. You have an ancient language that chronicled all seven. Philia, eros, agape, pragma, philautia, ludus, and storge. Our angels had such words, but they are unpronounceable because of... well, because of the way they live if they don’t fall. Their sounds are different. And we never had to explain it to anyone until we met the Humans--met you, and you had the words already. It worked.”

“So, what can you do for her?”

“Show her she’s loved. Give her love. Remind her of love.”

“That simple?”

I shrugged. “Of course not, but it’s the best way to describe it. There’s power and abilities involved, as well. Not anyone can remind an angel of love. If that were the case, simply telling her each day would keep her safe. It’s more... complicated.”

“Your magic?”

“Abilities. It’s all biology.”

We walked quietly down the hall, and the older woman was lost in thought. She led me down another hall, and to a door, stopping and studying me. “Mister Alvinad, please do not expect the Mini you knew. She has withered and weathered. Her feathers are not bright as I imagine they once were. She’s gaunt and withdrawn... the stage that we here at this hospice are used to seeing, but most visitors are not. I truly hope this is what she needs. I hope that you have what it is that she has lost.” She laid a hand on my arm. “Go lightly.”

I nodded, and she knocked on the door. There was a faint call from inside and she pushed the door open, motioning me in.

The room was pleasant, in shades of blue and pale yellow. The main room had a couch and bed, and an entertainment center, and beyond that was a small kitchen and bath. To the back of the room, the doors to the outside were flung wide and--I felt her.

She was small and weak, not the shining beauty I remembered. I'd had her in my arms just once, for just a minute, but she had washed over me, dominated everything around me, and I almost couldn't rise from there after she stood and walked...away.

There on the porch outside she was barely Min. She was as far as one could be from being an angel. Arahambamina Oe was wilting, dying as a common human, when her legacy should have been one of a rare Meta. A gorgeous angel who could defy gravity with her great white wings.

I walked slowly toward the doors, to the chair she sat on in the soft salt breeze. The woman who had escorted me shut the door and left me with Min. Mini. Arahambamina.

The angel.

There was a delicate cough and the woman in the chair turned toward me.

She was so close to death.

I swallowed hard and moved toward her. Death surrounded Min and an overwhelming sense of soul-crushing sadness emanated from her.

"P'iliktus..."

My name was like a knife through my own heart. Her eyes welled with tears, her head lolling forward as a sob wracked her body.

Rushing forward, I knelt in front of her. "Min."

"What are you doing here?"

I couldn't answer right away. I'd forgotten just how amazing her beauty was. White blonde hair that rivaled silk, skin like the finest porcelain, and eyes as blue and deep as the oceans of Vaimm.

My dusky coloring was a foil for her perfection. How did I ever think that I could catch and keep this beauty?

"Brami..."

"My daughter..."

"You as well. I'm here for you." My voice and thoughts came back. "I had to find you. When I found out you were left behind to die, I couldn't let you."

She stared at me, her blue eyes curious and sad. "Why?"

What could I say to that? "Your daughter needs you. No one should be left in a house of death alone."

"Pili. I don't deserve better."

"Have you lost all of your love?"



The gasp was weak. Tears welled in her eyes. "I'm irrelevant. There is no use for me anymore. I'm fool, Pili. Find my Bramisamarad, and keep her safe. Call her your own if you wish. I am too close to death."

I shook my head. "I did not risk my life to leave you here to die. I came here because I feared your death. I came here because your daughter needs you."

"There are people better suited to raise her."

"But they are not better suited to love her." I slipped my hand into hers. "Storge. *L'chhik dr'hhand*. Love of child. She needs *you*."

This time, she shook her head slowly, her fine silk locks trembling and catching the breeze. "I know what you are doing, Pili. I have lost all love but my agape. And that cannot sustain me. Storge must go both ways, and no matter how much I love her, she is not here to love me."

"What happened to you, Min? Please. Tell me?"

Her sigh was laced with a reluctance to tell the story of a life that was so close to the end. But she started anyway. "Trill charmed me. His words were sugar and honey to me. He knew what to say, when, where. He knew where to take me, where to meet me. He knew I loved to fly and let me all the time. And when he asked me to marry him, I said yes. I fell for him, I fell into his..."

Her eyes opened wide with realization. "I didn't fall into *his* arms. He wasn't there to catch me at first..." The tears spilled down her cheeks. "I fell into *your* arms. You were there to catch me. You were the one who held me as I trembled and shook and slipped from the grip of the phase."

I knew what had happened, but it didn't matter at that moment. She was so weak. "Go on. Tell me why you think you're too far gone for love to save you."

"Because I'm a fool. I was used, Pili. Trill used me. He tricked me, seduced me, and used me for his awful schemes. We were all warned. Angels and djinn. There were Humans who worshipped us, who thought we were from their God, from their great beyond. Benevolent, powerful, the proof of their life. I know you heard the warnings too. They were right, and I didn't listen. I just saw him. Handsome, Human. He adored me and let me know. He let everyone know. Everyone. Mother and Father came to me, trying to make me forget him, to step away from him. There were so many angels I could choose from. Even more Metas. But a Human they knew nothing about? It hurt my mother so much that I was in love with Trill."

“The Humans aren’t evil.” “Trill is.” The sharp tone in her words snapped off a warning that told me I didn’t know everything she had to say yet. “Trill is very evil. Shockingly evil. I found out. And I deserve to stay here and die.”

“No one deserve to die.”

“P’iliktus. I’m a complete fool. Complete. There is no excuse and no reason for love to rescue me. If you know where Brami is, find her. Raise her as your own. Don’t spare another thought for the fool of an angel who was her mother.”

I stood and didn’t let her hand go. “No.”

She looked up at me. “What?”

“Min, I didn’t come here to let you die. I didn’t come here to let you convince me to take your daughter. I came here for you. To find you, and bring you back to Brami, to the Metas who care for you and love you.”

The baleful eyes stared through me. “Do you love me?”

Gods, that question. “Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

My other hand found her soft, satin cheek. “I don’t remember a time I wouldn’t have given everything for you to fall for me. I knew when I caught you, you hadn’t fallen for me. I didn’t care. I was able to hold you for just a few minutes and see your beauty there. I relinquished you to the man who I knew you loved, and who I thought loved you as much as I did. Because I love you. Because I always will.” I pulled my hand away. “Shit. Damn it. I didn’t come here to confess unrequited love.”

Min pulled my hand back. “Confess anyway. I don’t deserve it, but it will leave me in peace for my daughter’s life.”

“You do deserve it. You deserve every last bit of it.”

“Your confession will not be able to save me. I am nearly dead.”

I pulled her to her feet. She trembled, unsteady on her legs, and watched me, gaze unwavering. With her hand in mine, and another on her waist, I guided her frail, too-thin body to the room behind us.

A touch of magic and the bed made room for us among the pillows and blankets. Making her comfortable as she sat, I pulled her sweater and shoes off. I toed my own shoes off, and with the gentlest of touches guided her to lie on her bed.

While she didn’t resist me--she didn’t have the strength--she did protest. “Pili! What in the name of the gods and stars are you doing?”

“We are resting.” I settled myself on the bed and arranged her to lie comfortably against my chest. “I am not here to seek anything but your life. You need to live, and I have come to make sure of that. Tell me. Tell me how you got here, Min.”

Her hand rested on my chest as her head rested on my shoulder. She breathed slowly, her wings trembling, rustling, then settling. And, then she told me.

## Kenos

**HE WAS SO VERY HANDSOME.** AFTER SO MANY years of traveling on our ship, seeing the same faces day in, day out, he was new and exciting.

As the war consumed us all, we were warned time and time again, the Humans thought differently. The Humans acted differently. But the Humans had only one species, and didn't understand the people of Vaimm with their hundreds of branches of life.

The angels and djinn were doubly warned. Triply warned. There were those among the Humans who worshiped the myth that equated with our kind. They were dangerous. They were not to be trusted.

I didn't listen, and surely Trill was not a cruel man. He was kind. Charming, caring, reliable. He was different. I was enamored by the idea of him.

And so, a year after coming to Seldova, I fell. I read the ancient text on how to turn my very being, and skew myself, dropping back into phase with the rest of the universe. It hurt. Worse than childbirth, which was to come sometime later.

It should have been obvious there and then what Trill was. When he wasn't there for the most painful sacrifice I would ever make in my life, it was a clue. But I ignored it.

I ignored the one who was there to catch me.

The one who had always been there.

The one I walked away from, over and over.

Trill finally arrived, and we were married in just weeks, according to his traditions. My family was not there. They rejected me and turned away. Even those who fell could still talk to and see their family--if they all still chose to. Mine did not. They could see who Trill was.

Trill wanted a child right away. The grace of being a Meta was that we could control completely when we had or didn't have children. That I was willing to have a child immediately and didn't get pregnant for over a year was another sign that this was not a good match.

Still, I ignored it.

Finally, a year and three months after our wedding, I conceived. Trill did not treat me as one who adores their mate ought when carrying their child. He was angry it had taken so long, and was ready to blame me if I lost the child.

Another point of caution ignored: he did not seem to know that angels almost never lost a child after conception. If they did, there was always an obvious reason. My child was a healthy and perfect nephilium girl.

He was delighted when I bore him a little girl, and was even more thrilled when she unfurled her wings after birth. Not all nephilium inherited the wings. My beautiful Bramisamarad Oe had wings.

I dreamed one day of flying with her.

Brami was perfect. She was a good baby, and loved her mother and father. But once I weaned her at just about a year, her father started to take charge of her. I still reached out, desperate to pull my child back to me. I was losing my child and somewhere along the way, I realized, I was losing my husband as well.

Trill started to pull away. He sent me to my own bed, in my own room. He kept Brami in her nursery, but sealed the door to the hall. Sealing her away from me.

I lost love. Love, the one thing angels cannot live without in any plane they might be in. My ludus, my eros, my philia. I was losing agape, philautia, and storge. There was no hope for pragma.

I had only kenos- nothing, empty. What I thought was love was vanity. I had nothing.

Then, Trill took that away.

It was late one night. Sleep had become a struggle, without access to my child, my husband, my life. There were sounds, and I couldn't identify them. Following the noises, I walked into hell.

There was a bloody knife on the table. There was blood everywhere. And there was a head on the kitchen table. A woman's head. Hacked off at the neck. Trilland stood in the middle of the mess. Bloody.

He walked me to the door, with nothing, and pushed me out.

I went to the authorities, but by then the War had started and I was *persona non grata*. I was pulled into a cell, locked up and forgotten in the back of that little hell. No one would listen to me that my husband had killed, and had my daughter with him. The officers fed me and tortured me. They plucked my wings and humiliated me. I was left in such a sorry state

that I was grateful for them being afraid of the Metas. It was only that which kept them from assaulting me more than they were.

I was moved from place to place, from jail cell to jail cell as the war peaked and valleyed. They kept me as ransom, but there was no one to pay it. I was kept weak so that any abilities I had were remnants of what they once were.

And there, in the jail on Rexu, I began to die.

I didn't know the War was over for months. They still moved me around, hoping for ransom. And when finally it was obvious that there was none, they dropped me off at the hospital.

What did I have left? The staff at the hospital tried to find Trill, only to find he'd left the planet taking Brami with him, and they weren't sure where they'd gone. It was the last straw for me, finding out my daughter wasn't even on the same planet. I had no money, nowhere to live, no one to turn to.

I gave up. I had nothing.

It was all gone.

## Chapter Six

**“BRAMI IS WITH HIM.”**

I kept my voice quiet. I didn't want to shatter Min's cocoon. She had wrapped herself tight against me.

“Is she safe?”

“That's why I'm here. We need to get her away from Trill. He's using her as a pawn--a way to defraud believers and fill his pockets.”

“Why chase me?”

I let out a slow breath. “I already confessed my love. Do I need more reason?”

Her beautiful blue eyes looked up at me. “How long?”

“How long what?”

“How long have you loved me?”

“Since the day I first saw you in school.”

“Pili, that's three hundred years...”

I merely nodded.

“I'm a fool.” A tear tracked down her cheek.

I brushed it away. “You're not. We were on that ship for three hundred years, through one thousand stars to find our home. It was amazing we all made it out the other side.”

“Only to fight a war against a people who didn't even try to understand us, who used us.”

The shake of my head was slow. “No, Min. The Humans aren't all like Trill. They just want to live their lives. There are con-men and liars in all races. The Humans that led me here were kind, caring, and tired of fighting. The Complex is proving that we can get along.”

She put her head back on my shoulder. “So you've found a Human then?”

“I've found no one.” I laughed lightly. “How could I find someone who could compare to an angel?”

“A fallen angel.”

I tucked a hand under her chin. “My angel. Is there nothing that will help you believe that there's plenty to love? Plenty reason to go on living our lives?”

Her blinks were slow and the silence was thoughtful. “You love me?”

“Arahambramina...”

She gasped and looked at me. “My name never sounded as beautiful as it just did from your lips.”

“Min, I don't care if you don't or can't love me. But--”

She put a finger on her lips. “I have been a fool for three hundred years, djinn. I have passed a thousand stars. If I do not find and believe the love offered, I will die under the pale yellow star of this world. I am at peace with that. I will die.” She gazed up at me and stared straight into my soul. “I need to be convinced. I gave my heart to someone who smashed it a thousand times--once for each star we sought. I saw him take the life of another woman. He escorted me out of his life. I have no child, I have no family. No friends. No reasons. How can you possibly...?”

“Pragma, Min. Everything I feel for you is solid, carved in the walls of my heart. It's ancient by Human standards. It might be naive by Meta standard. But for all this time, and all these stars, nothing and no one has ever changed my feelings for you. They are steadfast.”

“But you are not alone...You have someone you love.”

“I do love her. But it's not pragma or eros. It's philia, with heaped helping of a good fuck.”

Min trembled in my arms at that word. I didn't like that at all, and I lifted her chin again. “What did he do, Min?”

“That word... he would never call our...relations anything but that. It was never simply sex. It was never making love. He always...*fucked*. I...”

I knew exactly what she was going to say. “He took. He fucked. He never gave. I was always there as a repository for his cum and nothing more...”

She sucked in another breath. “So crude...”

“Filth has its place. It can be very erotic.”

“Nothing with Trill was erotic. Nothing with him was tender or caring. He was a gentleman, then a pig. There was nothing in between.”

“Did he hurt you?”

She stared at me. “He's killed me, Pili. Murdered me. Just as sure as that head sat on my counter.”

I sighed. “Min, I have never asked anything of you. I would've gone through life without you ever knowing I love you. I will still go on with that love unrequited. But for your daughter... for the beautiful creature I wish



was my own, let me save you. Let me show you she's all you need. Let me lead you back to love."

My heart broke as she shook her head, no. "I will not let you lead me back. My daughter cannot be my only reason." Her pale lashes, just an iota darker than her hair, fluttered. "P'ilitkus, I have forgotten what love is."

Stroking her cheek, I was lost. "How do you remind a creature who is made of love what it is to love?"

Her cheek, damp with tears, rested on my shoulder again. I stared at her beautiful hair, and stroked a hand over the silk strands. I did not want to leave without her. She was my ending and my beginning.

My stars.

All of my wishes.

"I would give you everything if I could."

Her chest heaved. There was no way to tell if it was a sigh or sob. I knew what my next question had to be.

"Arahambramina, do you *want* to die?"

Her whole body trembled, and a flood of tears ripped out of her. "I didn't want any of this, Pili. Not one bit of it. I wish I could go back and tell myself not to fall. I don't want to die. I don't want to exist in isolation. I don't want to die alone. I don't know what to do..." She lifted her big blue eyes to me, and there was such sorrow in them, so much pain. "You love me?"

"I always have."

"Why did you come here?"

"Your daughter--Well. No. That's the reason I've been trying to tell myself. The truth is I couldn't imagine letting you die. I don't want to think of a world without you. I don't need you to love me back. I just need to know you're alive and happy."

"You've always loved me."

"Yes."

"Help me live. Help find the love I can't see anymore." She put a finger on my lips as I was about to protest. "I am dying, Pili. Show me I have reason to live."

It hit me what she was asking.

"Min..."

She pressed her lips to my cheek. "Pili. I don't want to die."

"Min, you can't ask me to do this."

“Give me a chance to live. Give me a chance to love.”

I swallowed, hard. “I...”

“Please. Give me a chance to love you.”

My heart, which had been racing out of control, stopped. My breath froze in my lungs. “Min, if I give you what you're asking, and you reject me, I will die.”

Her eyes grew wide. “I didn't know your love was that big.”

“I saw you the first time when you walked into our classroom. I remember the teacher explaining what kind of Meta you were, and how we had to be a little careful around you so we didn't accidentally make you fall. I was shy and scared, and you were oh so lovely. Your wings were still small, and couldn't carry you. You always had a dreamy haze around you, making you seem even more ethereal.

“We grew. I always wanted to play with you, learn more about the angels. I wanted to be near you, around you. Just your presence made my soul leap and jump in joy. I hoped that you would notice me one day, but all the other males grew tall while I stayed, well...short. They had big and strong going for them. I just tagged along so I could see you. You never seemed to see me.

“Chastan told us that you were his girlfriend. I knew it was an exaggeration at best--touching you could have dire consequences. So, when he said he kissed you, I laughed.

“You knew I was there, but I don't know if you ever saw me. The ships were only so big. and there were only so many of us on them. You were one of the only people who said anything to me the day I came back to school after my mother died.

“When we met the Humans I couldn't believe you were charmed by one of them. I guess it was the exotic nature of someone not a Meta. He was handsome, and you were tired of hearing the same crap from the angels you knew. I think you were tired of all of us and this was new and different.

“So when you said you were going to fall for him, I knew I had to be there to support you. Your mother let me read the texts so I could help you. I think she hoped I would stop you from falling.”

Shuddering, she shook her head. “No one could have.”

“You are right. No one could have. So instead, I chose to be there for you. No one else stayed with you. Your parents, your brother and sister, your cousins—they all left you. Only I stayed.

“And when Trilland held his hand out for you...”

“I went.” There was no mistaking the note of remorse in her voice. “I don’t know why I left. I knew it was you that caught me, and I did nothing more than kiss you on the cheek and skip away to Trill like it was some damned fairytale. How did you know where to find me, Pili?”

“I always knew where you lived when you left Pinao with Trill. John followed to make sure we could find you if we had to.”

“And you risk your life to come here.”

“To find you and save you and bring you back to your daughter.”

“I am more than just an angel to you...”

“You are Min. Arahambamina. I may have loved others, but there is no one who compares to you in my heart.”

“Show me.”

I inhaled, slowly. “You will kill me if you turn me away.”

Her hand was soft and gentle on my cheek. “I have always seen you Pili. I have always known you were there. I didn’t realize why you were, but you caught me. Show me. Save me. Make me yours.”

## Eros

**THERE WAS NO HOLDING ME BACK ANYMORE.** This angel was offering herself to me. I would die if she ever chose another. My heart had been hidden behind a wall, and she was now tearing it down.

I laid her back on the pillows, and came over to her. My lips found hers and our kiss was both tender and electric. At first, our lips brushed and danced against each other, but it wasn't enough. The kisses deepened. I tasted her lips, stroking her tongue, savoring her flavor.

The smallest of sighs escaped her and shot through my whole body. I devoured her--her breath, her flesh. I would have taken her soul into me. I didn't want to ravish or frighten her. This was a moment for worship, to show her what love could be, should be.

With careful intent, I moved my kiss down her throat, feathering my touch along the column of her porcelain neck. I pulled back her shirt to expose her collar and continued along that tender ridge.

I found the buttons on the front and carefully pull each open, as I continue to enjoy the feel of her satin skin. Her shirt fell away, and my hand sought the smooth plane of her stomach, working slowly up to the edge of her breast. She didn't have a bra on. Her breasts, full and perfect, seemed to defy gravity itself.

As my hand moved up, my lips moved down to the peak of the dusky nipples that had awoken. They were hard, and begged me to suckle there. How could I resist? Pearled tight, I captured them between my teeth and teased softly with my tongue.

Min's soft, mewling moans were shocks to my system. She was soft, pliable--and if I hadn't known she'd had a child, I would have called her virginal. It was almost painful to me that she had never known a tender touch, a kiss that wanted nothing more than pleasure. Her body was ready for flight or fight because this was not how 'love' had been in her world.

Licking softly, I moved from one peak to the next, and drew that nipple into my mouth. I laved her and enjoyed the softness of her skin on my cheek.

Her breath escaped. "This feels so right and wrong at the same time."

I peered at her, and nipped at the pearl. "It's right. It should never feel wrong."

"Dirty, maybe."

"Human concept," I answered. I blew a stream of cool air over the nipple and Min's whole body twitched. "Angels may not be overtly sexual, but it's not dirty. Never dirty."

My fingers stroked one breast while my mouth was full of her other. I watched her face--her jaw hung slack as her head tipped back. Her breathing was labored. She strained up from the bed. Gods and stars, could I make her come like this?

"Let go, Min." The words brushed over her sensitive skin. "Trust me."

"Gods, Pili...what are you doing to me?"

"Your breasts are amazing. So sensitive."

"Pili! Oh! I--"

Throwing her head back, she let out a soft cry of pleasure. Her body arched up, hands fisting the sheets. It was a sight to behold, my beautiful angel's climax beneath me, from simple worship of her perfect breasts. I splayed my hand wide on her trembling stomach, feeling the muscles there quivering

Lifting her head, she ran her fingers through the sides of my hair, caressing me. "You just made me climax..."

I grinned. "You are magnificent. I love the look of sexual flush on your skin."

"I've never..."

I perked up. "You've never come like this before? No one realized how you were that--"

"Ever. No one has ever made me climax."

That hurt my heart a little, and also made me a little proud. "You will never, ever feel bereft of pleasure with me, Min."

I popped the button on her pants. Her hand stilled mine, and she brought her lips to mine, careful and gentle. "My turn. Please." She found the bottom edge of my shirt, trailing her fingers up my sides as she raised it up over my head.

Her fingers were nimble, but shy, as she explored my shoulders, my chest, my stomach. She brushed the tips over my nipples, and sucked in a short breath.

She pulled her hands back. "Did I hurt you?"

“No, no, it felt good. Very good.”

With a touch of disbelief in her movements, she put the flat of her hands on my chest again, covering the nipples. Her touch roared through me, but I stilled myself so I wouldn't frighten her. It felt amazing, and my body wanted more. But she seemed scared. I pressed my hand over hers, flush against my skin. “What's frightening you?”

“I was not allowed to touch.”

I kissed her forehead. “You are welcome to touch. Anywhere you like, any time you like, as often as you desire. Your fingers are like cool fire... burning me and soothing me at the same. A perfect paradox.”

It was like a floodgate opened. Her hands seemed to be everywhere at once, touching, stroking, *feeling* everything she could. I damn near unmanned myself at her simple touches.

Then her hand found my erection through my pants, and she froze. “Pili, I didn't mean--”

“Stop. You've done nothing wrong. Nothing.”

“Am I allowed...to...touch?”

“Gorgeous girl, I beg you to.” I leaned up, kneeling astride her hips. “Please. Take it out. It's there because of you, and for you.”

Min let out a soft breath and unfastened my pants. Her touch was still apprehensive, but she didn't hesitate for too long. She drew my hard length from where it was waiting, and wrapped a delicate fist around me at the base. Her fingers didn't quite touch.

“Do I have to suck it?” There was pain in her voice, and I had the feeling he'd made her do things she didn't want to.

“Only if you want to. I have better plans for it.”

Fluttering eyelids revealed a gaze that was torn. “I don't want to, but I do want to.”

“Then another time, Min. This is not about me. This is about you learning what Eros really is.” I leaned down and whispered. “I am a patient teacher.”

“Pili, I'm hot, burning. I ache...”

I placed my palm between us, on her mons. “Here.”

She nodded. It was as if she were a virgin. He's used her to create the only thing he needed from her ever: a child. There was no need for love or tenderness.

“It's desire, Min. Lust. The strongest form of eros.”

“You’re doing this to me.”

I nibbled on her ear, lightly. “It’s chemistry. It’s you and me. Heat, fire, flames. I want to quench it for you.”

“How did I never feel this before with--”

My finger covered her lips. “This is us, now, Min. Forget him. He’s not here, he’ll never hurt you again. He’ll never use you.”

“Show me, Pili. Put out the flame. Quench the fire.”

I found her lips again and kissed her, hard. I knew I was stoking the heat more than quenching it, but my hands were busy with her pants as her fingers explored my length. She wrapped her hand tightly around me and moved her fist as if it was second nature to her--and my cock responded by getting even harder.

Once I had her pants unfastened, I kissed my way down her body again, through the valley between her breasts, down her warm soft stomach, moving her pants down her legs and out of our way as I did so. At some point she had to let go of my hard shaft, and it ached when she did. But I knew something even more amazing was coming.

A single kiss on her mons, covered with a tuff of blonde that matched her hair, and I could barely hold myself back. I wanted to taste her, make her come on my tongue, but it wasn’t the time. I wanted her too much.

Tracing a finger over the wet lips that hid her entrance, I dipped just inside and she gasped. Propping herself up on her elbows, she stared down at me, wide-eyed.

“You...touched...”

“I will do more than touch, Min. Right now I want to be inside you.”

“Oh, please, please....” She was begging, but there was no need.

Once again, I found myself hovering over her--but this time, skin was against skin. I could feel the heat from her body, and her breasts heaved with her breaths. Her wings trembled below her, and I watched them, fascinated for a moment.

“Please, Pili, please...”

I smiled as I placed the blunt head of my cock at the entrance of her pussy. She was wet, warm, welcoming and slowly, with utmost care, I slid myself deep inside her waiting channel. There was no resistance, but she held me tight and as I went as deep as I could, her breath became staccato, stuttering the single syllable, “Oh!”, over and over.

We could have not have been designed as a more perfect pair. As I pressed against her innermost depth, I felt her excited lips press their sexual kiss against the base of my cock. I stilled myself, waiting for her to tell me she was ready.

Her hands ran up my sides, and around to my back. “Make me feel this, P’iliktus. Help me know what eros is meant to be.”

I shifted my hips, pulling myself out, and pressing back in. Min’s eyes fluttered, and her wings trembled again. I let my hips thrust in whatever rhythm her body dictated. It knew what to do, what it wanted, and there were no questions asked of me. We moved together, my hips rocking against hers, lifting and lowering, finding our own time. Her nipples were hard pearls and there was no resisting them. I dropped my head and drew her into my mouth.

“Oh, yes, please...” The sounds were lusty, laced with desire. They were music to my ears, and as her walls fluttered around my cock, it took all I had to not come at that moment.

I changed my position just enough to make sure that my erection stroked against her clit as we moved. Her gasps grew louder the faster I thrust, and her hips started to buck against me. “Pili, please...don’t stop. I’ve never--”

I covered her words with a kiss. I wasn’t going to hear it. She was here, now with me, and I would make sure that she always, always found satisfaction. Min grunted against my lips, and in the next instant, she arched up hard into me. I didn’t stop--if anything I went faster, and found the other nipple to tease.

“Oh, gods, Pili, Pili!”

Her hands flew from my sides, out to fist the bedding. The fluttering of her pussy became a desperate beat, and at the moment of her climax, her body clamped tight around me. The velvet heat was relentless, and it was pure delight to be trapped within her.

But what I did not expect, what made sure that I was consumed by this heaven below me, was the way her wings opened as she came. Unfurling to their widest, they stretched up and over her head, and there was no quivering--just the marvelous expanse of her white, white wings arched above her as she soundlessly cried out in climax.

I surrendered my body to her, and spilled my own orgasm within her walls.





## Chapter Seven

**I HELD MIN CLOSE AS SHE SLEPT.**

My fingers trailer over the feathers in her wings. They were indescribably soft, and she seemed to almost purr when I stroked them. I couldn't believe that after three hundred years, I had my angel in my arms.

Her cheeks were pink--not a flush pink but a healthy pink. Her pallor had gone, and her porcelain skin had a new glow to it, a shine from within.

I pressed a kiss to her flaxen hair, and sighed.

This was heaven.

"Pili?"

I hadn't realized she was awake. "Yes, Min?"

"Can you forgive me?"

"For what?"

"For being such a fool? For not seeing that you were there?"

Shaking my head, I chuckled. "There's nothing to forgive, Min."

"You truly love me?"

"I do."

"It's been so long..." She turned to me and I watched as her eyes danced over my face. "It's pragma. Isn't it? What I'm feeling right now? It's a steadfast, deep love that I feel through the little things. Like the way you were stroking my wings, and the way you're so patient with me."

"Pragma." I nodded.

"And Eros, too. No one has ever made my body sing like that."

This time I smirked. "I can do more than that. But that's for another day. You have storge, with your daughter."

Her hand found my cheek and she lay it there for a moment. "Philia. I may not have realized the love, but there was always our friendship growing up. You were always there."

"And, philautia?" I was hopeful.

"I think so. I think I can find that within me. Agape will follow that."

Our eyes locked, and suddenly her lips were on mine. "I've been a fool."

"My fool. That I would wait for eternity for." My whole body was responding to her kiss, and I could feel hers responding as well. I didn't want to break the kiss, but I did. "Your daughter. We need to get her..."

“How? We're here and she's...”

“On Lorn with Trilland. He's using her. He's a deeply psychotic man. We have a ship.”

“We?”

I moved us both so we were sitting. It took all I had not to touch the gorgeous body in front of me. “John came with me. He's waiting in the ship.”

“While we were--” She put a horrified hand over her mouth.

Laughing, I pulled her hand away. “Trust me. Once you get to know him and his mates, him sitting in the ship, playing solitaire is not the worst of it. He's fine. But we have to go. Zar Kodone was worried about what Trill's next move was going to be, and I would like it to be away from Brami.”

“Isn't Lorn where the Complex is?” She gasped. “You're not supposed to be here at all.”

“Not at all.” I climbed out of bed and gathered her clothes on the floor, offering them to her. Once she had them, I gathered mine and dressed quickly. “We have to go. We've been gone just about a day so far, and we have a six-hour journey back.”

“And I just leave here?”

“John can settle up whatever needs settling.”

She was dressed and I offered her a hand. Moving her legs over the side, she stood. She was still weak and unsteady. I had hoped that she would regain her strength quickly, but she had been at death's door. It would take time.

I wrapped a careful arm around her waist and lent her my strength. “Is there anything you want from here? We won't be able to come back for at least a year.”

“Not pressing items. Just... could we ask the staff to store my things until we can get back here?”

“I will see what John can do.”

The elevator let us out into the lobby, and the woman who had shown me to her room gasped when she saw me with the angel.

“Mini?”

“Greeli,” Min answered. “I'm going with Pili. I have to get my daughter back.”

“Yes, of course! But there's paperwork and--”

"I'll take care of it." John was walking in the door. "Pili, get Min settled in the ship. I trust this won't take long."

"Store her stuff?"

"Gotcha."

John sat across from the desk attendant, as Min and I went out the front door. I stopped her and helped her into a sweater I had grabbed. It was chilly out and she was going to be weak for a while.

Settling Min into the seat, I helped her buckle in and secured her. She had a light smile on her lips the whole time.

"Do you feel better, angel?"

"Getting there," she answered.

"I would love you again, to show you, but we don't have time."

Her grin spread wider. "I trust you, Pili. You made me feel the way no one else has. I have never felt comfortable enough to lay naked after..."

"Sex." I supplied the word for her. "Don't be afraid of it. I plan on showing you all the wonderful things a joining between two bodies can be. Slow, fast, erotic, filthy, tender. What two people do is a bond of souls and a show of trust. And it's fun."

She giggled. "Fun?"

I leaned into her ear. "Tell me you didn't enjoy me making you come."

A shiver ran through her. "I did."

"Good. There's more. But right now..." I stood and turned to look in the directions of the hospice. "We have your child to save, and murderer to stop." I glanced back to her. "Hungry?"

"A little, yes."

I dug into the one bag we'd brought, and pulled out some emergency rations. "You're looking a bit better now."

"You've given me back hope, and you've shown me love. I am feeling better. And food helps. Even rations."

John strode in the door. "They will pack everything and send it to my estate on Pinao. You'll be able to get everything there when we're finally released from the Complex. Everything you might have owed to them will be paid through my accounts. That and the outstanding bill from the hospital."

"You should not have done that!"

Min wanted to stand and object, but John was having none of it. He resolutely ignored her and sat in front of the controls of the ship. "All set?"

“All set.” I nodded and strapped myself into my own chair. “Let's go get your daughter back.”

\* \* \*

The stars were bright again as we zipped around the system to head back to Lorn. It was odd that there were no patrols for the planet. Did the people of these planets really just trust the inhabitants to stay there?

It was more a curiosity for me than a complaint. After all it worked in our favor. As Lorn started to loom ahead of us, it was clear why this had been the only unsettled planet--bleak, rocky, enormous. It was daunting, and I guessed there'd been only a passing interest in terraforming. The planet was just too big a to make it economical when there were six other good planets.

John expertly flew us directly back into the same trajectory we'd exited from, and we dove into the landing area at a frightful speed, pulling up at just the last second.

The speaker flared to life on the personal communicators both John and I wore.

“--contact us immediately!”

Aura's voice was frightened and panicked. Even I could tell. They had the message setup to repeat. “As soon as you land, head to the auditorium. We all agree that he's lost his mind. He's up to something and soon. Contact us immediately.”

John keyed in his code as the ship closed down and Aura's voice came over the speaker before he could even say a word.

“We can't stop him!” It was easy to hear the hysterical tears in her voice. “John, they're holding us back physically from getting to her. Please... He wants to kill her.”

I leaned into the microphone. “Kill who?”

“Brami! He wants to send her back to the god who gave her to him.”

“Oh, gods,” Min murmured.

Marin's voice broke through. “It's happening right now! He's got a fucking knife in his hand and the girl is tied to a post.”

Min's eyes grew wide. “Pili... my daughter.”

I unbuckled myself and basically ripped the belts off Min as John got himself unbuckled and got the ship open for us. He slung the bag over his shoulder, and we all went running.

“How far are you?” Marin called over the communicator.

“You’re too far.” Zar’s voice came through the speaker. “They’re just getting into the trade area.”

They heard Aura yelp and Ella’s voice interrupted. “Pili, John! The watch!”

“Holy crap.” John pulled up short and both Min and I crashed into him. He stopped us and pulled out the watch.

My watch.

“P’iliktus, my first wish is for the three of us to be in that auditorium to protect Brami immediately.”

The compulsion to grant his wish--the first wish he had ever made--washed over me. The unlimited power that I had as a djinn to grant nearly any wish bubbled up and with a clap of my hands and burst of blue magic, we disappeared from the underground markets and reappeared on the stage of the auditorium. It took just a heartbeat for the three of us to reorient ourselves to our place in space

Brami was tied to a pole at the center of the stage with the light shining down on her. She was so weak and tired that the ropes were holding her up. Trill stood in front of her with a ritual scimitar in his hand, half raised to fly back and take his daughter’s head off.

Min screamed and jumped to stand in front of Brami. She might have been still weak, but she found all her strength in that one moment. “No!” Min’s hands flew from her side to stop him, her wings stretching their whole length out from her shoulders. “No! Not my daughter, you lying bastard!”

Trill’s sword flew down anyway as the audience behind Trill gasped in shock. The blade sliced into her side below her ribs and this time it was my turn to scream as I ran over to her, only just keeping her from hitting the ground hard and pushing the sword in deeper.

“Are you insane?!” I pulled Min’s head in my lap.

As if to prove my accusation, Trill reached for the sword in Min’s side, fully intending to use it again. If he pulled it out, she would bleed to death before her supernatural body could heal. I grabbed the back of the blade and held it still.

The glare from Trill was laced with hate and murder.

Zar and Marin barreled over and tossed him away from the two of us. Aura and Ella were next to me in a flash. As Ella bound the sword in place,

Aura cut the bindings off of Bami and wrapped her in her arms.

But the homicidal rage that Trilland had fallen into the instant I deprived him of his victim was a sight to behold. He threw Zar, a Human, and Marin, a Meta, away from him in a hard push. Both went flying and Marin landed in a pile of onlookers. Zar fell back on the stairs.

“Give her back to God!”

Someone in the audience yelled the words with a zealous fervor. The rest of the group took up the sycophantic chant a moment later as Trilland marched toward me, Min, and Aura.

Zar yelled from the stairs, where he was struggling to stand. “Martin Alveron, you are under arrest for the murder of Jessika Forlf, Helen Grestin, Jolesi Mgabe, Herino Re--”

Trill’s rage got him, and he double backed to Zar, and kicked his head.

The onlookers were getting whipped up into a frenzy, and they were starting to push forward, shoving the chairs with them in a great press of Humanity. John looked between the situations and stepped forward. He held up his hands.

I felt the wave of his Influence was over everyone in the room. It wouldn’t be as strong on the Metas, but it was still a powerful push that halted the Humans. He glanced back at me. “Let Aura handle Min. You need to deal with Trilland!”

Aura caught my attention. “Go, deal with him. Marin can help her more than you right now.”

I relinquished Min to her and stood to face the incredible monster who was stalking toward us. His face was red and distorted. I’d honestly never seen a psychopath in action before. The rage boiled off him, fighting against John’s Influence to keep the audience calm, the cords of his neck were pulled tight and his chest was heaving.

“I will kill you, djinn. And then I will kill everyone you brought with you. She is *my* daughter and I will do with her as I please! You would not help me in my plans, and I will make sure that you never see the light of any sun again.”

“Trill, what the hell are you thinking?!” I said, taking a few strides away from him towards the stairs--away from Min. “This isn’t you. Who the hell is this? Are you possessed?”

“You think that because we’ve had a few drinks you know me? You think that because I asked for your help, you know who I am? You know

nothing! Nothing! I am Martin Alveron and I am to be feared by all!”

“You tricked Arahambamina into thinking you loved her.”

“Angels are the silliest of creatures. The most trusting. It only took a few sweet promises to convince her to fall.” His steps were deliberate, calculated. I could see he was trying to plan his attack against me. “The bitch took long enough to get pregnant. I would get the dysfunctional angel. All these people are under my thrall now--already afraid of what they’ve seen here at The Complex, they are ripe for hate. They are ripe for war. They are ready to follow me into battle to eliminate the Metas.”

“Why?” I moved my position to keep ahead of him, trying to anticipate any attack he might launch. “Why do you want to eliminate the Metas?”

“Because it fucking amuses me.”

The words hung there. I was expecting more--but there was nothing more than that.

He wanted to kill the Metas off for fun.

His face twisted and there was a knife in his hand as he lunged at me. I ducked out of the way. By the time I turned back to him, he was already launching at me again with the knife. He was fast for a human--

An explosion of blue magic washed over me, and I was then holding a long straight jian--an ancient Earth weapon that needed two hands and a lot of practice to use properly. The beauty of having all the power in the universe meant that I knew how to use the jian.

Djinn couldn’t make wishes like this for themselves, though.

John had used wish number two.

I twisted out of the way of his charge and walloped him on the back hard with the flat of the blade. He barked in pain and spun, jabbing his knife at me. I quickly and easily disarmed him with the sword. Roaring with anger, he dove for the knife where it had clattered to the floor in front of the first row of the audience.

He grabbed it as I charged toward him, the blade at chest level. Throwing himself to his feet, he whipped around--

--and stepped right into the sword.

With no compunction, I pushed it forward. The blade was sharp and slid as easily through his heart and spine as it would its own sheath.

Trilland was an instant deadweight on the sword. It surprised me so much I let the sword slip down, and with the most disgusting squelching



sound I'd ever heard, the body slid down off the sword and collapsed on the ground, blood pouring from the wound in the back.

"Kill him!"

The mad yell came from the spectators. John was having trouble overriding their desires when the shock and anger at Trill's death hit them. I stepped back, still too shocked to think straight.

Marin had at some point stood and made his way to Aura and Min. I had only a moment to glance them at them before the crowd in the room really started to buck John's Influence. He couldn't hold back a room full of anger, hate, betrayal, and shock. They were too strong.

As the crowd approached me, the spark of vengeance in their eyes, I didn't know what to do. I knew that Trilland's death was necessary, but as a Meta, I hadn't realized that this entire crowd was here *because they wanted to be*. There was no Influence or spell cast over them. They were there because they really believed in what he had been peddling.

A few pulled out knives. Another pulled out a gun. More held their fists at the ready.

"I wish all these people back to their apartments with no recollection of the events that went on here tonight!"

John.

The blue magic charged through me and as I dropped the sword, I brought my hands together and saved up the energy there. Once the crowd was close enough, I tossed out the power and sliced through each and every person who had been in the audience with the arc of the wish. It ran through them, covering each with the blue glow, and one by one, each popped out of existence here and into existence in their own apartments in the Complex, with the magic assuring us that they would never remember what happened to Trilland. Martin. The murderer.

The magic was gone.

## Chapter Eight

**I DROPPED TO MY KNEES**, THE SWORD CLANGING to the floor next to me. The room was empty now, save for the eight of us.

Zar stared down at the body of the dead Trilland. “Well. That’s that. I’ll have to search his rooms for his journals, and make up a reason why this man was run through with a sword.”

Marin looked up from where he was kneeling next to Min. “We’ll work on that with the Climindra. I’m not worried about it right now. Right now, we have to figure out how to get *this* sword out without killing her.”

“Mama?”

All of us turned and looked at the little girl that Ella was still holding.

Min held her hand out. “Brami...”

I nodded at Ella to let her go, and she walked to her mother’s outstretched hand. “Mama. It is you. Daddy told me you were dead. That the only way I could see you again was to join you in heaven. He said he was going to send me there.”

“I am here, Brami. I didn’t want to leave you.” She looked up at Marin and I. “I don’t want to leave you.”

Min pulled her daughter a little closer. Marin leaned into me. “Brami. Does she have angel powers?”

“Nephilium abilities are a little unpredictable. She has her mother’s wings, so she probably has some of them.”

“Do you think she can help me heal Min?”

“No harm in asking.”

I knelt next to Brami and Min. “Hi, Bramisamarad. I’m Pili. Marin needs your help to heal your mother. Do you think you can help him?”

“You’re...blue...” The little girl studied me.

“Blue? My magic is blue.”

She smiled and ran her hand over my forearm. “It’s sparkly.”

“She can see auras,” Marin explained.

She looked up at Marin. “You’re orange.”

He knelt. “I am. It’s a bright, happy color, isn’t it? Do you think that you can help me move that orange into your mom? She’s very badly hurt and if we don’t get her to heal, she may die. You’re part angel and that’s what she needs.”

Brami looked at her mother and nodded. "Yes. I'll help. I remember mommy. She was very pretty, and was very nice to me. She loved me. She used to read to me at night."

"I will again, baby." Min smiled, and squeezed her hand.

I sat cross-legged on the ground and motioned Brami to me. "Come sit on my lap. Marin can kneel next to us."

Not letting go of her mother's hand, she plunked into my lap. Marin took her other hand and placed it on Min's hip. Aura was suddenly there with us, and I realized he'd called her over with their mate bond.

"Aura is going to help us, Brami. She's going to slowly pull the sword back, and we're going to lend your mother as much of our power and energy as we can, so her body can heal the wound. Ready?"

The little half-angel on my lap ruffled her wings and nodded.

The shocking amount of power I felt flowing through her in the next instant nearly threw me back. Marin's and Aura's senses joined in, but only as a controlling factor. It took both of them to guide and channel this little girl's power.

It didn't take but a few minutes for them to pull the sword back and we watched as Min's wound stitched together. The child on my lap was amazing in every way.

Aura and Marin help Min sit up slowly, encouraging her the whole way until she was finally seated upright and facing her daughter.

"Do you remember me, Brami?"

"Yes, Mama. I do. You didn't like me when I grew up."

"Oh, Brami... I loved you. I love you. Your father kept us apart."

"Daddy said he loved me but..." She looked over to where John had covered the body with his coat. "I don't think he really did. But he didn't lie about me getting to see you again."

Min and I locked gazes, and I thanked whatever deities there were that it was not the way he had planned.

## Ludus

**I WOULD NEVER BE ABLE TO GET** enough of her lips.

Like the red strawberries from the Human markets, she was sweet, soft, and full of promises. I planned to make her mine forever, and give her everything.

But I was also a male, and that male caressed her breast, exciting the bud.

“Oh, Pili. I don’t have energy.”

I smiled into her hair. “I know, love. I just really like them.” My hand slid to her swollen belly. “I like this more.”

“You need to have a conversation with your son about my bladder.”

“I’ll get on that.”

She snorted and turned in my arms to face the window. “You listen like a brick.”

“Oh, I’m a little more responsive than that.”

“Only a little, and only when you’re as hard as one.”

“I haven’t heard a complaint.”

Leaning back, she kissed me with those strawberry lips.

“Where is Brami?”

“Flying again,” I answered. “Every since she got the hang of it, she goes all the time. Her classmates love it. She wants her mother back out there with her.”

Min’s smile was broad and genuine. “I will be happy once your djinn is born. Flying will get me back in shape.”

“We will all be happy when the baby is here.”

“True.”

I ran a hand up and down her arm. “Are you content here, love?”

“Yes. I will not miss this place when we are gone, though.”

“Oh the Complex isn’t that bad.”

“You like it because your friends are here.”

I cleared my throat. “You know I would like to settle near John, Aura, and Marin when this is all over.”

“Of course you would. I’m not going to object. I don’t have a home.”

I rested my chin on her shoulder. “You have a home. Here. With me. With John, Marin, and Aura. With Ella, and with Brami. This is home.”

“You’ve given me your child but you haven’t given me your lamp.”

I sighed. “There is a reason...”

“Tell me the reason, Pili. I am your mate, I choose life with you. Why haven’t you given me your lamp.”

I paused. “Marin has seen that the djinn powers will be needed again. And before you object— understand that he has seen things that endanger you if I were to give you my lamp right now.”

She blinked a few times at me. “And when can I expect this?”

I grinned. “When I ask your father’s permission to marry you.”

Her eyes welled with tears. “You know my father—my family won’t talk to me.”

Reaching into my pocket and withdrawing a moment later, I pressed a small data recorder into her hand. “Maybe he can convince you otherwise.”

In a flash, she turned back around in my arms, staring at the small black chip sitting there. “How...”

“Zar. He got me permission to talk to your father on the interplanetary channels. That message is for you.”

“You spoke to my father? You found them?”

I kissed my angel’s forehead. “I’ve always known where they were.”

“You really do love me.”

“I love every part of you. That includes the family who wants nothing more than to welcome you back.”

“Thank you for waiting for me, Pili.”

“I would wait a thousand more stars, and thousand more beyond that. I would give you more than all my wishes.”

She gave me a tender kiss. “I have my only wish.”

*The End*

Coming in May 2019  
BRILLIANCE

## *The Complex*

### **Brilliance**

The Complex is in danger of collapse.  
The grand experiment is dying.  
And the smartest detective alive has no idea how to save it.

Zar Kodone had gained special permission to enter the Complex half way through the experiment. The serial killer was after had hidden there. But now, he was stuck on planet until the Complex closed up shop, per his agreement with the Climindra.

Worse, Ellestra was there. The only woman who knew who he really was. And hated him.

Ellestra Nanadorlon knew she was going nowhere. With only a brother who didn't come around much, and no real friends, at least the pay at the Complex was good. It was a great opportunity to use her naiad abilities to help metas and humans alike.

And the perfect chance to get away from Zar Kodone, she thought.

The fates weren't done with them yet. The Complex has an even bigger problem than a serial killer or the illegal markets below the foundations. The residents were getting sick, and some were even dying. There was no way to tell where the illness was coming from, and Zar--for the first time in his life-- is stumped.

Elle is the one person who can help him.

The fate of the Complex rests on Zar, and his ability to convince Elle that he isn't a complete @\$\$hole.

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*About*

## **Katherine Rhodes**

Armed with a pen name, **Katherine Rhodes** has gird her loins and set her mind to writing erotic romances which are kinky, dirty, and fun. As a lackadaisical laundry goddess, and an expert in the profundities of bad music and awful literature-thanks to her husband-Katherine strives to find balance in the universe and time to cook dinner. An East Coast dweller, currently located in the Philadelphia Tristate area, she is the proud servant of three cats and would take a vacation in Prague over a day at the beach any time...

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[Consensual](#)

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[Knots](#)

[Untied](#)

[Lessons](#)

[Now. Forever.](#)

[Inevitable](#)

### **SILVER SOUL**

[Not Quite Juliet](#)

### **CITY OF STEEL (THE VAULT)**

[Innuendo](#)

Double Entendre (December 2019)

### **THE REALM**

[Half-Soul](#)

### **THE CLUB SERIES**

[The Darkest Corners](#)

[Anything for Her](#)

[Teach Me To Sin](#)

[Come Fly with Me](#) with Isobelle Cate

[Sweet Pain](#) with Emily Walker and Jenni Moen

### **THE DA SILVA HEIRS**

[All the King's Horses](#)

[Princess of the Plains](#)

[Empire of Dirt](#)

### **STANDALONES**

[Captain](#)

[Acts of Contrition](#)

[Obsidian Escape](#)



## **PARANORMAL ROMANCE**

### **VAMPIRE CROWN**

[Queen of Gods](#)

[King of Gods](#)

[Death of Gods](#)

[Blood of Gods](#) (Coming Jan 2019)

### **THE COMPLEX**

[Balance Point](#)

[One Thousand Wishes, One Thousand Stars](#)

Brilliance (coming in May 2019)

### **THE JUNEAU PACKS**

[Taming Alaska](#) (Coming February 2019)

### **THE NIGHTSHIFT IN NEW YORK**

[Moonlight Calling](#)

### **THE DEMON SLAYERS**

[Passion Flames](#)