

FIRE AND ICE by Sherrilyn Kenyon Chapter 1 Adron

Quiakides had never been the type of man one approached recklessly. Not if one wanted to live, anyway. And tonight, while he sat alone in a back booth of The Golden Crona nursing a bottle of expensive Grenna alcohol, the last thing he wanted was for anyone to disturb him. His pleasures in life were minimal, and consuming buckets full of the yellow-orange liquid gave him the solace his battered soul craved. Because tonight, more than ever before, his memories hurt. This very hour marked the fifth anniversary of the night he had made the decision he would spend the rest of his life paying for. Adron gripped the bottle tight in his right hand, unable to believe it'd been that long since he'd last walked without a pronounced limp. Moved without pain. Spoken without his throat aching from the effort of it. Five years since he'd experienced any comfort or peace whatsoever. He'd lain in bed for hours trying to sleep. Trying to forget, and finally he'd realized the only way to silence his demons was to drown them out. And nothing worked better than Grenna. Tipping the large bottle to his lips, he let the fire pour down his throat. "Hey, baby," an attractive red head said as she sauntered over to him and propped a thin hip against his table. "You want some company?" "I have company," he said, his raspy voice grating on his ears. "Me, myself and I." She raked a hungry look over his body, then leaned across the table to show him her ample breasts. "Well, there's enough of me to make all three of you happy." There had been a time, once, when he wouldn't have hesitated to take her up on that offer. But then life was nothing if not ever-changing, and usually it altered on the hairpin of a second. She licked her lips. "C'mon, handsome, buy me a drink." Adron glared at her. She wasn't the first woman to proposition him tonight. And in truth it mystified him that any woman would bother given the vicious scar on his face. But then, the women in The Golden Crona weren't all that discriminating, especially not when they sensed money. "Sorry," he said coldly. "None of us are interested." She sighed dramatically. "Well, if any of you change your minds, you let me know." With one last wistful look at him, she headed back into the human and alien crowd that drifted through the packed bar. Adron shifted uncomfortably in his seat as a bone-deep pain shot through his left leg. Clenching his teeth, he growled low in his throat. One would think the amount of pain-killers he lived on when combined with the alcohol would squelch any amount of ache. But it barely numbed his physical torment. And it did nothing for the burning agony in his heart. "Damn it to hell," he snarled under his breath, then he threw his head back and finished off his drink. He grabbed a passing green-fleshed waitress and ordered two more bottles. As he waited for her to return, he saw another woman headed his way. The fierce glare he narrowed on her, sent her scurrying away. He was through playing around. Tonight he intended to get fully flagged and he pitied the next fool stupid enough to approach him. Unless they came bearing more alcohol.

Livia typpa Vista had lived the whole of her life in protective custody. More hostage than princess, she'd long grown weary of everyone's dictates for her behavior, and at age twenty-six, she'd had enough. She was not a child. And she was not going to marry Clypper Thoran in two weeks. Not even if he were the last male in the universe! "You will do as you are told." She winced at her father's imperious command. High Eminence he might be, but she, not her older brother, had inherited his stubbornness. No matter the cost, she refused to marry a Territorial Governor sixteen years her father's senior. Since Clypper had demanded a virgin for his bride, she knew a way to thwart them both. After tonight, she would be a virgin no more. Tomorrow, her father would kill her for it. But better to die than to be married to a cruel, goat-faced ancient who groped her with cold hands every time he got near her.

"The Golden Crona." As the cold rain poured over her, Livia stared

at the sign above her head. Her maid, Krista, had told her about the club. Inside it held all manner of heroes and villains, and though she would rather surrender her virginity to a hero, she honestly didn't care. So long as he was passably attractive and gentle, he would be good enough for the night.

Gathering her courage, Livia opened the door and stopped dead in her tracks. Never had she seen anything like it. A sea of aliens and humans danced and bobbed through the smoky bar that smelled of sweat from many species, and of cheap alcohol. The obnoxious music was so loud, it made her ears throb. A big, orange reptilian male gave her a frown as she hesitated in the doorway. "In or out," he snarled. She took a deep breath to fortify her courage. That, and she mentally conjured an image of Clypper's fat jowls and beady, lust-filled eyes. Shuddering, she stepped inside and let the door pulse close behind her. "Twenty-five credits," the reptile-man demanded. "Excuse me?" "Twenty-five credits. You pay or I toss you out on your ass." Livia arched a brow at him. It was on the tip of her tongue to put him in his place, but then she remembered he had no idea who she was. And she must keep it that way. If anyone learned she was a Vistan princess, she would be sent back to the hotel where they were staying. Not to mention the fact that her time was short. She had to find a man before someone missed her and started a search.

Pulling out the money she'd stolen from her brother, she paid the fee. "Okay," she whispered to herself as she surveyed the bar full of people. "It's time to find him." She walked through the crowd and flinched as several unwashed humans eyed her with interest. Livia quickly amended her list of qualifications to include a man who bathed. A tall, dark human male smiled at her, displaying a set of black teeth. Okay, she would also add one who knew how to use a toothbrush. As she crossed the room, she saw a brunette at the bar who looked like a hopeful prospect. She headed for him. But as soon as she drew near, she froze. It was her father's personal runner. If she knew how to curse, she would definitely curse at her luck. Just don't let him see me. Falling back into the crowd, Livia kept an eye on him while trying to scan the crowd for her target. Surely, there was someone here who could...

A commotion in the entrance caught her attention. Livia turned to look. Oh no! She panicked at the sight of her father's Royal Guard swarming into the bar. Immediately, the gray clad soldiers began questioning patrons as they spread out to cover as much of the bar as they could. She trembled. For them to be here in force and grim meant Krista had volunteered her location and no doubt, her intent as well. Livia groaned at the very thought. How could Krista betray her? Her maid had been so helpful in the planning and execution of her escape. But then for some unknown reason, Krista lived in fear of Livia's father and one scowl from him would have easily caused her maid to tell everything. Right down to the grittiest of details. Livia cringed at the thought of her father's reaction. But at least Krista, unlike her, would be spared his outrage. Krista was protected by their laws. Only a male of her family could punish her, and Krista had no living male relative. Livia was not so fortunate, and there was no telling what her father would do to her for this. Chastity was one of the highest virtues any woman could possess on her world. In fact, men and women were only allowed to mix during meals, chaste, royal functions, and when married couples performed conjugal duties. For a woman to seek out a man not related to her was strictly forbidden. And punished severely. She shook the fear away. She'd known the consequences before she set out. Either way, she was going to pay for her indiscretion, and if she had to pay, then she was going to make sure she completed the deed. Clenching her teeth, Livia scanned the room for a hiding place. At the back of the club were a line of booths. She headed for them. Unfortunately, all of them were occupied. Drat!

"Hey, babe," a rough looking man asked her. "You want some company?" She considered it until he reached out and grabbed her arm. He pulled her toward him, his hand biting fiercely into the flesh of her

upper arm. "C'mon," he said with a slick smile as he roughly ran his hand through her wet hair, "what say you and me head to the back?" She jerked away from him before he hurt her anymore. "No, thanks." Stepping away, she saw the guards heading her way as they skimmed the crowd. Her heart hammering, she ran to the last booth and sat on the empty bench before the guard saw her. "What the hell are you doing?" She shifted her gaze from the guard to the man who sat across from her. Livia's breath caught in her throat. He was more than passable. In fact, she'd never in her life seen a man so incredibly handsome. His features were sharp and aristocratically boned. His dark brown eyebrows arched finely over the most piercingly blue eyes she'd ever seen. Dressed all in black, he had long, white blond hair tied back into a neat queue. Clean-shaven and washed, he had an air of refinement and power surrounding him. But his eyes were cold as he watched her. Guarded. An aura of danger clung to him and by the set of his jaw, she could tell he didn't want company. He tugged at the black gloves over his hands as he eyed her with malice. She should get up and leave, especially since he had a fierce scar that ran across his cheekbone, to his hairline and then down along his jaw. It looked like someone had intentionally carved it there, which made her wonder just what kind of man he was. What had he done to deserve such a wound? Biting her lip in indecision, she glanced back to the guard who was steadily headed this way. What should she do? Adron arched a brow at the woman who had yet to leave him. He was drunk, but not so drunk that he didn't realize the wet little mouse sitting across from him didn't belong in this dive. He could smell the innocence on her. And it turned his stomach. Her dark brown hair was loose, spilling over her thin shoulders in waves. She had large, angelic eyes. Green eyes that had no past haunting her. They were completely guileless and honest. A shiver ran over him. Who in this day and age had eyes like that? And what right did she have looking at him with them? "I'm hiding from someone," she confided. "Do you mind?" "Hell, yes, I mind." Livia frowned at the stranger. His angry tone set her back, and if it wasn't for the fact that one of the guards was scanning the booths, she would have left. Think of something! The guard stopped two booths up and held out a holo-cube to the aliens sitting in it. "Have you seen this woman?" Her plan in ruins, she only knew one way to thwart her father. She got up from her seat and sat next to the stranger. He scowled at her. Before he could say anything, Livia leaned forward and kissed him. Adron sat in stunned silence as she placed her tightly closed lips over his. It was the most chaste kiss a woman not related to him had ever given him. By the way she held his head in her hands, he could tell she thought this was the way a kiss should be given. But worse than the innocence he tasted, he hadn't kissed a woman in over five years and the feel of those plump, full lips on his was more than his drunk mind could handle. And her smell... Lord, how he'd missed the sweet, intoxicating smell of a woman. Closing his eyes, he let go of the bottle, and cupped her face in his hands as he took control of the situation. Livia trembled as he opened her lips and slid his tongue into her mouth. She'd seen people kiss like this in plays and reels, but no one had ever dared such insolence with her before. She tasted the sweet, fragrant alcohol on his tongue, smelled the warm, clean scent of him as he ran his hands over her back and held her so gently that it made her quiver. He was definitely the one, she thought as her body burned from his touch. This was the man she would give her virginity to. A man with tormented blue eyes and a tender touch. A man who made her breathless and weak, and at the same time hot and strangely powerful. In his arms, she truly felt as if she had control of her life. Her body. And she liked it. Adron had never tasted anything better than her mouth. He felt her inexperience as she hesitantly met his tongue with hers. And his body roared to life with a long forgotten throbbing that demanded more than just her lips. Oh God, it was heaven and he'd lived in hell for so

long that he had forgotten the taste and feel of it. "Excuse me," a man said as he stopped in front of them. "Have you seen this—" Adron broke away from the kiss only long enough to pass a lethal glare at the newcomer. "Go away or die." Fear flickered across the man's eyes. It was a look Adron was used to. Without another word, the man left them. Adron returned to her lips. Livia moaned as he deepened his kiss. The guards and her fear forgotten, she sighed in pleasure. Foreign emotions tore through her as he buried his lips against her neck and sent white-hot chills through her. His arms tightened around her waist as her breasts swelled. What was this deep seated throbbing she felt? This unbearable ache? He made her light-headed and breathless. And she wanted him desperately. "Would you make love to me?" Adron pulled back in surprise. Had he been sober, he would have sent her away, but there was something about her that called out to him in a way he'd long forgotten. It'd been an eternity since he last slept with a woman. Years of bitter, aching loneliness and pain. And here she was offering herself to him. Send her away. But he didn't. Instead, he found himself getting up from the booth and leading her through the crowd. Livia didn't know where they were going. In the back of her mind, she was terrified. She didn't know anything about this man. Not even his name. Never in her life had she done anything so foolish. And yet she instinctively knew he wouldn't hurt her. There was pain in his icy blue eyes, but not cruelty. He kept a possessive arm draped over her. And he walked by leaning heavily on a gold-tipped cane. She wanted to ask him what had happened to his face and leg, but didn't dare lest it cause him to reconsider. He led her outside the club, to a transport. After they got in, they rode three levels down to an upper scale apartment building. Livia relaxed a tiny bit as they entered the grand lobby. At least she wouldn't be seduced in a dark, filthy back room somewhere. Krista had well prepped her on what to expect. Right down to an estimation of how long a man would last before he let her go. Taking a deep breath for courage, Livia figured she would be back in her hotel room by midnight. There would be questioning, and eventually her father would learn the truth. God have mercy on her then. But she had made her decision and once her mind was set on something, that was it. She would not be swayed. Without a word to each other, they took a lift to the top floor. He led her into a flat that was almost the size of her palace chambers. And as soon as he closed the door, he pulled her into his arms. This time his kiss was fierce. Demanding. His kiss stole her breath as he pressed her back against the wall. Her head swam at the powerful feel of his hands roaming over her. What are you doing? Shut-up, she shouted at her mind, squelching the guilt and fear. It was her life and she was going to claim it. With that thought in mind, she started unbuttoning his shirt. Adron sucked his breath in sharply at the feel of her hand against his bare chest. Her touch singed him. He could only vaguely recall someone other than doctors, nurses or therapists touching his flesh. To her credit, she didn't cringe or comment about the multitude of scars that bisected his body. She didn't even seem to notice them. That was why he hadn't been with a woman since that long ago night. He hadn't wanted to explain the scars. To recount where they had come from. To have to face his lover in the early morning light. Perhaps that was why he'd chosen a stranger tonight. He owed her no explanation. Owed her nothing at all. He didn't want to see pity or repugnance on a lover's face. But there was nothing in her pale green eyes except curiosity and hunger. Livia had never seen a man's bare chest before, at least nowhere other than on reels. Fascinated by it, she ran her hands over the smooth, tawny skin that was stretched tight over hard, steely muscles. Like velvet over steel. The contrast amazed her. "You feel so wonderful," she breathed. Adron pulled back to look at her. There was a strange note of awe in her voice, a gentle hesitancy in her touch. And in that instant, a feeling of dread consumed him. He was

drunk, but he wasn't that drunk. "You're a virgin." Her face turned bright red. "Shit!" he snarled as he stepped away from her. His erection ached and his entire body burned. Leave it to him to find the only virgin he was sure had ever set foot inside The Golden Crona. Gripping his cane, he limped his way to his bar and poured another drink. But the watered down alcohol did nothing for him. Suddenly, she was behind him, leaning up against his back as her slender arms surrounded his waist. He shook all over from the gesture, from the feel of her small breasts against his spine. And in that moment, he needed her even more. "I want you to make love to me," she whispered in his ear. "Are you insane?" He turned to look at her. She shook her head. "I want to give my virginity away. I don't want it taken from me." "Taken by whom?" She dropped her gaze. "Fine. If you don't want me, I'll go find someone who does." A peculiar wave of jealousy stung him as he thought of someone else inside her. What do you care? And yet for some unknown, stupid reason, he did. He caught her hand as she moved away from him. "What's your name?" "Livia." "Livia," he repeated. It suited her and those guileless sea-green eyes. "Why would you give yourself away so cheaply to someone like me?" Livia paused as she saw the self-deprecation in his icy eyes. He hated himself. It was so obvious and she wondered why. "Because you seem nice." He laughed bitterly at her answer. "Nice? I'm not nice. There's nothing nice about me." That wasn't true. He had yet to be mean to her. He was hurting, she knew that. And it made him snappish. But it didn't make him cruel. "I need to go," she said quietly, regretting that he wouldn't be the one after all. "There's not much time before I have to return, and I have to take care of this by the morning." "Why?" Livia bit her lip as she felt her face flush again. In the morning, she'd be inspected by Clypper's doctors. If she didn't find a man tonight, she was doomed. "I just do." She let her gaze wander over his lush body. He had broad shoulders and a lean, firmly muscled frame. His white hair contrasted sharply to the black he wore. He was gorgeous. But he didn't want her. Adron saw the steely determination in her eyes. She was going to find herself another man to sleep with her. He knew it. He should let her and yet... Why not me? Ever since he'd lost his agility, he'd avoided women. He'd been afraid of embarrassing himself with his stiff clumsiness. But she would have no one to compare him to. Adron gripped his cane. He remembered a time when he could have scooped her up in his arms and ran with her to his bed. But those days were lost to him forever. "My bedroom is this way," he said, grabbing a bottle and heading down the hallway. Livia quivered as she realized he was inviting her to join him. Excited and terrified, she followed him down the elegant corridor and into a room at the end of it. The master bedroom was every bit as large as her own. A king-sized bed was set against the far wall, looking out over the city below them. He set his bottle down on the night stand, then moved to a chair by the bed. His face hard, he sat down slowly. She saw the pain on his face as he bent his leg and moved to take off his boots. She wanted to know what had happened to him, but didn't dare ask for fear of making him angry. So, she went to him and took his foot in her hand. He looked up at her, his eyes startled as she pulled the boot free. "You know, I've never done anything like this," she whispered. "Seeing that you're a virgin, I would think not." Licking her lips, she removed his other boot. Adron could feel her nervousness, her uncertainty, and he wanted to soothe her. "I won't hurt you," he assured her. She smiled a smile that wrenched his gut. How he wished he'd met her before that fateful night. Then, he could have been the lover she deserved. He would have been able to take her all night. Slowly. Teasingly. He had no idea what he'd be like now. But he would try to pleasure her. Do his damndest to make sure her first time was a favorable memory. His groin tight, he pushed himself up and moved to the bed. Before he knew what she intended, she sat in his lap and

kissed him. Adron inhaled the sweetness of her breath as he ran his hands over her back. He'd never expected a virgin to be so bold. And she was a quick learner. She deepened her kiss and teased his tongue with hers. Oh yeah, this could be fun. He unbuttoned her shirt to expose her small corslet. She moaned as he ran his hand over the satin covered breasts and squeezed them gently in his hands. Livia shook all over at the foreign throb between her legs. And when he released the catch behind her back and her corslet fell open, she shivered. No man had ever seen her naked before. He stared at her bare breasts as he ran his hands over the taut peaks. He traced slow, simmering circles around her, sending chills all over her body.

"You are so beautiful," he breathed. Then, he dipped his head down and took her breast into his mouth. Livia hissed in pleasure as his tongue swirled around her flesh, teasing, licking. Never had she felt anything like it. She leaned forward, cradling his head in her hands. Her body was on fire. He trailed his hands over her back, down her hips and when he touched her between her legs she groaned. He looked up at her, his eyes dazed and hungry as he breathed raggedly. He rolled her over, onto the mattress, and turned the lights off. She heard him remove the rest of his clothes in the darkness, but she couldn't see anything at all. Adron

ached to see her naked, but he didn't want any light for her to see his damaged body. His groin hot and throbbing for her, he unfastened the stiff, prickly brace on his left leg and let it fall to the floor. Next, he removed the one on his hand. Then, slowly, carefully, he pulled her clothes from her. He ran his hand over her smooth, hot skin, delighting in her murmurs of pleasure. He'd never taken a virgin before and the knowledge that he was her first lover added even more excitement to the moment. No man had ever touched her. No one but him. Even with his wings broken and clipped, he soared at that knowledge. Livia moaned as he covered her with his long, hot body. She'd never felt anything like all that lean, hard strength spread out evenly against her bare flesh. He kissed her fiercely as he separated her thighs with his knee. Then, he pressed his thigh against the center of her body, the hairs on his leg teasing her intimately. She ran her hand over his back, feeling the rugged terrain of scars, muscle and skin.

"My name is Adron," he breathed in her ear a second before he traced the outline of her ear with his tongue. "Adron," she repeated, testing the syllables. It was a strong name that suited him. He stroked her with his thigh, his tongue and his hands. Arching her back, Livia welcomed his touch. It was so wickedly erotic to feel him all over and yet see nothing of him. It was like a dream. A midnight fantasy. Reaching up, she freed his hair and let it fall around his face, then she buried her hands in the silken strands of it. He leaned down and placed his lips in the crook of her arm where he suckled her flesh. Adron swallowed as he pulled back, wanting desperately to see her face. Instead, he lifted his hand to trace the contours of it. He could feel the tiny cleft in her chin, imagine the small oval face overwhelmed by large green eyes that tugged at a heart he had thought was dead. She was breathtaking. And for tonight, she was his. All his. Closing his eyes, he moved himself down her body, then cursed as a wave of fierce pain lanced up his leg and across his back. She tensed beneath him. "What's wrong?" Adron couldn't

answer. The pain in his leg was so intense that it instantly quelled his desire. He rolled over onto his back and struggled to breathe. "Adron?" The concern in her voice ate at him. "My leg," he said between clenched teeth. "I need the pain-killers on my night stand." "Which leg?" "Dammit, get my medicine." "Which leg!" she insisted. "The left one." Livia took his knee into her hands. Adron cursed as more pain tore through him. "Stop!" he snarled. "Sh," she said peacefully as she massaged the joint. A strange warmth came from her hands, seeping into his skin. Adron frowned as the ache diminished.

Then suddenly, it was gone entirely. For a full minute, he laid there, tense, waiting for it to return. It didn't. In fact,

nothing hurt. Not his chest, not his arm, not his knee. Nothing. "What did you do?" "It's only temporary," she whispered. "But for a few hours, it won't bother you at all." Adron couldn't believe it. He'd learned to live in a state of constant, unrelenting pain. Physical agony so severe that he couldn't sleep for more than a couple of hours at a time. Until now.

The absence of it was unbelievable. His heart swelled with joy. He was free. Even if it was only temporary, he still had a moment to remember what he'd been like before his body had been cruelly, vengefully taken from him.

And it was all because of her. He pulled her into his arms and kissed her precious lips. Livia felt his heart pounding under her hand and she heard the laughter in his voice. "Thank you." She smiled. Until he moved down her body with his kisses. Livia moaned as fierce pleasure tore through her. His hands and mouth felt incredible against her bare skin. This was so much more than she had expected. Krista had told her that a man who didn't know her would be quick with the deed, then let her leave. But Adron was taking his time. He seemed to actually savor her. It was as if he was really making love to her. And she wondered if he was this tender with a stranger how much more so would he be if they actually knew each other? But tonight was all they would ever know. When it was over she would leave him, and this moment would be nothing more than a treasured memory she would carry with her the rest of her life. Tonight, there was just the two of them.

And she would revel in it. Adron drank in the smell and taste of her skin as he nibbled the bare flesh of her hip. The taste of her was addictive, and her smell... He could breathe in the sweet floral scent forever. Her soft hands caressed his hair and neck in a way that made him burn. He'd never thought to have another night like this. A night with no demons. No memories. She engulfed him and he gladly surrendered himself to her. She was his angel of mercy, delivering him from his sins. Delivering him from his loneliness and solitude. He would treasure this peaceful moment for the rest of his life. It would warm him and keep him company when his body returned to being hateful. His heart tender for her, he spread her legs and placed his body between them.

Livia bit her lip, expecting him to enter her. He didn't. Instead, he kissed a small path down her thigh while he buried his hand at the center of her body.

She hissed from the pleasure of his touch. It was sweet, pure bliss. And he took his time circling her with his fingers, delving, stroking, caressing.

"That's it," he breathed against her leg as she rubbed herself against his hand. "Don't be embarrassed." She should be and yet she wasn't.

At least not until he took her into his mouth. Blind ecstasy ripped her asunder. "Adron?" she asked, her voice husky and strange. "Are you supposed to do that?" He gave her one long, deep lick. "Does it feel good?"

"Oh, yes." "Then I'm supposed to be doing it." Without another word, he returned his mouth to her.

Livia writhed in his arms as his tongue tormented her. And when he slid his finger inside her, she thought she would perish from the pleasure. Krista had told her to expect pain, but there was nothing painful in his touch. Nothing but heaven. She threw her head

back as he swirled his finger inside her, around and around, matching the rhythm of his tongue. Assaulted by fierce, fiery sensations, Livia felt her body quiver and jerk as if it had a mind of its own. Her ecstasy

mounted until she could stand no more and then just as she was ready to beg him to stop, her body ripped apart. Livia screamed out as her release came hard and fast.

Still he toyed with her. His finger and tongue pleased her until the sensitive flesh couldn't bear his touch any longer.

"Please," she cried. "Please, have mercy on me." Adron laughed at her tone, and was amazed at the sound. He couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed.

He pulled back, but kept his finger inside her for a moment longer. He could feel her maidenhead still intact. His body burned, demanding he take her. But he couldn't do that. They hadn't done any real damage to her yet.

Once he broke that barrier, there would be no going back. No second chances. It would be like when he decided to...

He flinched at the memory. His life had been completely ruined by one impulsive act. He wouldn't let her ruin hers the same way. She was kind and gentle. A pure heart in a world of corrupt ones. He wouldn't spoil that. Closing his eyes, he was mystified by what he felt for her. At the fact that he was able to pull himself back and reign in his treacherous body. It had been years since he'd done anything noble. Years since he'd wanted to do anything noble. He reached down for the blanket and covered her with it. Livia paused as he spooned up to her back and held her close. She reveled in the feel of his arms around her, but he didn't seem to be making any move to... "Adron?" "Yes?" "We're not through, are we?" He rubbed his cheek against her shoulder. "I gave you your pleasure, Livia. What more do you want?" She turned to look at him, but in the darkness all she could see was the vaguest of outlines of his face. "But you didn't... You know." "I know." "Why?" "Livia, don't you think you should wait until you find someone you care about?" "I care about you." Adron snorted. "You don't even know me." She turned in his arms and reached up to place her hand against his cheek. "You're right, I don't know you. And yet I've already shared my body with you. I want you to finish." He pulled away from her. "Livia—" "Adron. If you don't, then I will be forced into marriage with a man older than my father. I don't want him to touch me the way you have. Please help me." Her words tore through him. An image of Lia flashed through his mind. He'd been forced by Andarion custom to marry her. And she had shown him a whole new meaning to the word hell. Livia skimmed her hand over his chest, down across his stomach. His gut contracting fiercely at her touch, Adron felt her nails brushing at the hairs between his legs until she held him in her hand. His groin tightened and swelled even more. In that instant, he knew he was lost. And when she kissed him, his entire world came undone. Livia was unprepared for his reaction. He growled low in his throat and rolled her over, pinning her against the mattress. He was wild and untamed as he kissed her lips, then buried his face against her neck where he licked and teased her flesh, burning her all over. He reached down between them, stroking her until she lost all reason, all sanity. Then, he spread her legs wider. She felt the tip of his manhood against her core. In a sweet gesture, he took her hand in his and held it above her head. He kissed her lightly on the lips, then slid himself deep inside her. As he filled her, she bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out at the unexpected pain that intruded on her pleasure. He was so large that her body ached at the foreign feel of him. But at least it was done. She was a virgin no more. Adron held himself perfectly still, waiting for her body to adjust to his. The last thing he wanted was to hurt her, but by the fierce grip she had on his hand, he knew what she was hiding. He also knew better than anyone that a person couldn't feel pleasure and pain at the same time. And he refused to hurt her tonight. Reluctantly, he let go of her hand and raised himself up on his arms to look down at her. He was used to the darkness. So much so that he saw her eyes tightly shut. "Don't be afraid," he whispered, then he skimmed his hand down her body until he touched her between her legs. Livia sighed as his hand stroked her nub. The pain receded behind a wave of building delight. "That's it," he said. Then, he slowly started to rock his hips against hers. Livia arched her back as the pain was washed away by his hot touch. He felt so good inside her and every stroke seemed to reach deeper as she clung to his broad, muscular shoulders. She'd never imagined it could feel so wonderful. Adron watched her face as she surrendered herself to him. He ground his teeth at the incredible feel of her. She was so wet and hot beneath and around him. He had forgotten the pleasure to be had in a woman's arms. Had forgotten the incredible feel of someone just holding him in the darkness. He lowered himself and took her into his arms where he cradled her head in his hands. Her breath fell against his bare shoulder, burning him. She turned her head to kiss his neck as she ran

her hands over his back. He growled, scalded by the bliss of it. Livia wrapped her legs around his lean waist. He held her so tenderly that it touched her deep inside her heart. Krista had told her he would use her without any feelings for her whatsoever. But it didn't feel like that.

Not the way he held onto her like he was afraid of letting her go. He returned to her lips and she moaned at the taste of his tongue. He stroked her faster. Deeper. Harder. Livia held him close as her pleasure started building again. Oh goodness, what was it about him that she would feel like this? And this time when her release came, he joined her. He growled low in his throat as he delivered one last, deep stroke, and shuddered in her arms. Adron collapsed on top of her. Completely spent, he laid there, holding her as he waited to drift back down from heaven and into his body. So much for meaningless sex. There had been absolutely nothing meaningless about what they had just shared. And what terrified him most was the fact that he didn't want her to leave. He didn't want to return to the vacant emptiness of his life. He'd been alone for so long. Had lived without anyone other than servants and family. But she had changed that. He didn't want to go back. "That was amazing," she

breathed against his ear. "Can we do it again?" He laughed, and was shocked to feel his body already stirring. "Yes, we can." In fact, he wasn't going to stop until she again begged him for mercy. Chapter

2 Adron came awake slowly to the most incredible feeling he'd ever known. Livia by his side. She lay nestled in his arms, facing away from him. He wasn't sure what time they had finally fallen asleep. All he knew was that he'd never experienced such peace. Such warmth.

And there was no pain. Neither physical nor mental. Reveling in the moment, he buried his face in her hair and inhaled the fresh, sweet scent of her. His body stirred immediately.

How? After the night they had shared, he should be sated for days to come and yet there he was craving her in a way that was almost inhuman. He didn't understand it. He pulled away to kiss her shoulder, then he froze as he saw her skin in the faint morning light.

Frowning, he ran his hand over her bare shoulder and the scars that marred her back. She'd been beaten. Severely by the looks of it. Was she a runaway slave? She sighed contentedly and snuggled against him. Adron forgot the scars as her buttocks collided with his erection. He tightened his arms around her while he nudged her legs apart with his thigh. God help him, but he wanted more of her.

Livia came awake to the sensation of Adron behind her, filling her again. "Oh my goodness," she breathed as he thrust himself deep and hard into her body. Biting her lip, she hissed in pleasure.

"Don't you ever get tired?" she asked with a hint of laughter in her voice. "Not of you, I don't." She smiled at that. No one had ever made her feel so treasured. And she had to admit, a woman could get used to waking up like this. Closing her eyes to savor his long, luscious strokes, she surrendered herself to him. She came an instant before he did. Livia rolled over to see a

gentle smile on his face as he stared at her. "Thank you," he said. "For everything." She returned his smile. "Thank you." She placed her lips against his. Adron's senses swirled as he cupped her head in his hand. He was definitely going to keep her in his bed for the rest of the day. "Adron, you're not going to believe—" His

father's voice broke off the instant his bedroom door swung open. Gaping at them lying entwined, his father froze. Then, all hell was unleashed. Livia dove beneath the covers at the same time a

fetid curse rang out. Adron looked from her cowering under the covers to the six men surrounding his father. Two of them wore royal Vistan robes, marking them as an Emperor and his heir. The other four wore the dark gray uniform of Imperial Bodyguards. "I told you it was

true!" the elder Vistan snarled. His dark brown eyes were filled with hatred

as he tilted his head to look up at Adron's father. At six foot six, and a former League Assassin, his father wasn't the kind of man you addressed in anything except the most reverent of tones. Not unless you wanted to die, anyway.

"The informant was correct when he said your son left with her." Adron arched a brow at the contemptuous sneer on the man's face. And it was then he realized the Vistan Emperor had hair the same color and hue as the woman cowering in his bed. And as he scanned the younger Vistan, he saw further confirmation of who Livia really was.

Shit! "You whore!" the younger man said as he threw the covers back and grabbed Livia. Adron removed his hand from her arm and shoved him back. "She didn't do anything wrong." Oblivious to his nudity, Adron left the bed. "You touch her and I'll tear your heart out."

Rage descended on her brother's face, but Adron saw the fear in the man's eyes as he took in Adron's height, build and vicious scars.

Her father, however, wasn't so easily intimidated. "Take her," he said to his guards.

Livia hung her head as she wrapped the sheet around herself. The guards lifted her from the bed and took her to stand before her father. Adron ached at the frightened look on her face.

Her father raked her with a scathing glare. "Modesty isn't becoming of a whore who spreads her legs for a man she meets in a filthy bar."

Before Adron knew what he was doing, her father yanked the sheet from her body. "Take her outside and beat her." "Damn you to hell," Adron growled as he grabbed the first guard and shoved him away from Livia.

He pulled her behind him and retrieved the sheet from the floor, then wrapped it around both of them. Livia stood so close to his back that he could feel her trembling. And it made him even angrier.

If her father wanted a fight, he was ready to give him one. No one would hurt her for what she'd done. Not unless they wanted a taste of him first.

"Boy," her father snarled. "This is no concern of yours. You've done enough damage."

Her father took a step forward. "Whatever concerns my wife, concerns me." Livia froze as soon as the words left Adron's lips. Last night, she'd had no idea that he was the Andarion heir. But Emperor Nykyrian Quiakides she knew. They had been introduced a few days ago when she and her family had arrived.

Indeed, it was business with Adron's father that had them on Kirovar to begin with.

Now that the two men were together, she saw the similarities between father and son. Nykyrian had the same white-blond hair, the same firm, sculpted jaw. They also shared an identical height and build.

"Is this true?" her father demanded angrily. "Are you his wife?"

Livia swallowed. If she said yes, Andarion law would recognize them as married.

"Adron," his father said sternly. "Do you understand what you're doing." Adron turned to face her. He tilted her chin until she looked up into his icy blue eyes. "It's entirely up to you."

Aghast at his offer, she stared at him. She'd never known a man so honorable. He could have left her to her father's wrath and yet here he was offering her sanctuary.

"Are you sure about this?" she whispered.

"No," he said with a hint of a smile. "But then, I've never been sure about much of anything in my life."

She looked to her father's angry face, and her brother's. If she went home, they would have her beaten until she passed out. But if she stayed... She had no idea what that would be like. The known or the unknown.

"Take her," her father ordered. Adron put himself between them. "Nykyrian, tell your son to step aside. He is interfering with royal Vistan business."

For the first time, Livia noticed the deep, angry scars bisecting Adron's body. His back was completely covered by them. It looked as if someone had once carved him into pieces.

Then, her gaze fell to the dragon and dagger tattoo on his left shoulder that marked him as a League Assassin.

She trembled. She knew absolutely nothing about him.

Nothing except for the kindness of his touch. Nothing except for the way he had made her feel when he kissed her.

The way he made her feel wanted. Safe. And in that instant, she made up her mind. "What happens to me is the business of my husband," she said quietly. Her father's face turned to stone. "Then your ties to our house are severed." He glanced at her brother. "Come, Prinam." Her brother's features softened a degree before he caught himself. Without a word, he followed her father from the room.

Nykyrian stepped forward with an amused light in his green eyes. "Some things must run in our blood." Adron frowned. "I beg your pardon?" "Ask your mother one day how we ended up married." He looked to Livia. "In the meantime, welcome to our family, Highness."

Adron's frown deepened as he regarded his father suspiciously. "You're being awfully understanding about all this. Should I be afraid?" Nykyrian laughed. "Probably. I hope this means you'll rejoin the world again. We've missed you." A tick started in Adron's jaw. His father's face was kind and not the least bit judgmental as he smiled at Livia. "You know, you'll have to bring her to the palace to meet the rest of your wayward siblings." "And Mom?" He nodded.

Something strange flickered across Adron's features. Something Livia couldn't define, but it looked as if Adron wanted to avoid his mother. "When?" "Tonight." "Will Jayce be there?" Adron asked. "He is your brother." Hatred flared in Adron's eyes. "He's your son. He ceased to be my brother the day he refused to uphold the League's Code." Nykyrian sighed, then looked to Livia. "I hope you know what you've gotten yourself into." The bad thing was, she didn't. Nykyrian left them. Now that they were alone, the reality of what she'd done came crashing down on her.

She was married. To a stranger. "Well, isn't this interesting," Adron said, turning to face her. "I don't know about you, but when I went to The Golden Crona last night, I never intended to find a spouse." She laughed. "Since I was there to avoid one, I can honestly say that never crossed my mind either." He cupped her face in his hands, and smiled a warm, dimpled smile at her. And when he kissed her, she quivered at the tenderness of his lips. "God, you taste so good," he said as he nibbled the corner of her mouth. "I could kiss you forever." Desire stabbed her at his words. "You're not so bad yourself," she said. He laughed, then scooped her up in his arms.

Livia gasped at the unexpected feel of his strong arms surrounding her. But as he reached the bed, he staggered. Agony contorted his face as he let go of her and fell to his knees. "Adron?" she asked, kneeling beside him. She could tell by his face that he hurt too much to speak. "Here," she said, "lie on the floor."

She helped him to lie down, then she took his knee in her hand. Livia did her best to summon her powers, but they refused to come. No! Adron held his hand to his head as if something vile was being plunged into his brain. He writhed in misery and she ached that she couldn't help him. Her heart hammering, she rushed to the night stand. "The injector," he snarled from the floor. "There's a bottle for it in the drawer." Livia found them and took them to him. He placed the bottle in the injector, then held it against his stomach and pulled the trigger. Sweat drenched his body as he shook all over. Livia covered him with the blanket and then held his head in her lap. Adron tried not to fight the pain. It hurt less when he did and yet it ripped through him with such a torturous fury that it left him weak. Drained. He stared up at Livia as she brushed her hand through his hair and held him close. He'd never before allowed anyone near him when he was like this. Not when he had a choice about it, anyway. But there was something about her that soothed his tattered spirit.

Better still, he didn't see contempt or pity on her face. A peaceful calm stared at him from her green eyes. After a few minutes, his pain ebbed enough to where he could move again. He

sat up slowly, carefully, but it felt as if every muscle in his body had been shredded again. He started to push himself to his feet. She moved to help him. "Don't," he said with more rancor than he meant. "I can stand on my own." She took his angry tone in stride. "Can I get you anything?" "A bottle of alcohol." He laid back down on the bed. "Adron, it's morning. Shouldn't you eat something?" He glared the glare that had never failed to send his family scurrying away from him. "Get me something to drink." She got dressed, then returned a few minutes later with a glass of milk. "Dammit, Livia! I'm not a child." "Then stop acting like one." Before he could answer, the door chime sounded. "Should I answer it?" she asked. "I don't give a damn what you do." Livia sighed at his hostile tone as he shifted slightly in the bed, then grimaced. She went to the door and opened it to find a tall, attractive brunette barely dressed. The short, red halter was scooped low and the black tight leather skirt would have given Livia's parents the vapors. The woman removed her sunglasses to where Livia could see the red irises and white pupils that marked the woman as a full-blooded Andarion. "You must be Livia," she said cheerfully. "I'm Zarina." Livia cocked a brow at her. "Adron's sister," she added. "Dad just told me about the marriage and I had to come meet you." Unsure what to make of his unconventional sister, Livia let her in. "You're really cute," Zarina said as she stepped inside and dropped her bag on Adron's couch. "But I wouldn't have pegged you for his type." "Excuse me?" "Adron always had a thing for long-legged blondes with the depth of a piece of paper. You look like you actually have both a brain and a soul." Livia arched a brow at her words. "Should I be offended?" Zarina laughed. "Please don't be. The only people I ever intentionally offend are my brothers. And speaking of, where's Big Bad Angry One? Dad said he was actually up and walking around without his cane." Before Livia could answer, a loud crash sounded in the bedroom. She ran back to Adron with Zarina one step behind her. As soon as they entered the room, she saw him leaning with one hand braced against the night stand. Livia gasped at the sight of blood covering him and every time he coughed, more blood came up. "Oh, God," Zarina gasped, running to a communicator. Terrified, Livia went to her husband. He opened his mouth to speak, but only coughed up more blood. His entire body shaking, he fell back against the bed where he writhed in agony. When she tried to touch him, he pushed her away. "A med tech unit is on its way," Zarina said the instant she rejoined them. Livia locked gazes with Adron. She saw the torment and the shame in his eyes. He was embarrassed. But for her life, she couldn't imagine why. "He needs his clothes," she said to Zarina over his shoulder. By the time they'd wiped the blood from him and dressed him, the med tech team had arrived. "I need to call our parents," Zarina said, leaving Livia to watch as the team worked on her husband. They inserted a tube down Adron's throat and gave him another injection while they started an IV. He just laid there and his calm acceptance of their actions told her he was well used to things like this. Dear Lord, what had happened to him? Could it be because of what they'd done? Could having sex with him kill him? The thought horrified her. As the air Gurney went passed, Adron gave her a tired, sheepish look, then turned away from her. "C'mon," Zarina said from the doorway. "I'll give you a ride to the hospital." Livia followed her to a transport and got inside. "What happened to him?" Zarina winced as if the memory was too painful to even contemplate. "Five years ago, Adron was the League Assassin who was assigned to terminate Kyr Omaindon." Livia knew the name well. Kyr's blood-thirsty cruelty was the stuff of nightmares. He'd blazed a two year trail of rape and slaughter through the Brimen sector.

Zarina raked a graceful hand through her hair. "When Adron entered Kyr's home to execute him, Kyr grabbed one of his servants and locked himself inside his study. The woman was pregnant, and Adron blamed himself for letting her get taken." Livia remembered the famous stand-off. There had been hours of media coverage. And it had ended when one of the League Assassins had allowed his hands to be cuffed behind his back, and then traded for the pregnant woman. Now she knew the name and face of that assassin. Worse, she knew his gentle touch.

Zarina drove through the crowded sectors. "Kyr decided to make an example of Adron. He wanted to insure that the League thought twice about sending another assassin after him. So, he tortured Adron for days, then carved him up like a roast. A week after Adron vanished, my brother Jayce found him barely alive inside a dumpster." Livia blinked away the tears in her eyes as she imagined what it must have been like for Jayce to find his brother in such a condition. "Why does Adron hate Jayce?"

"Because, according to League Code, when an assassin finds another assassin who has been permanently maimed or disfigured, he's supposed to terminate him. The idea is to die with honor and dignity."

Livia cleared her throat as she ached for her husband and his family. "Jayce couldn't do it." "No, he couldn't. The two of them were too close. Plus, Jayce would never have been able to face the rest of us if he had killed him, or let him die." Zarina sighed. "I wish you could have seen Adron back then. He was something else." She smiled. "He was always rushing around at warp speed, joking, laughing. Now, there are days when he can't even leave his bed for the pain."

Livia remembered catching a glimpse of that playful Adron last night. "What happened to Kyr?"

"My father tore him to pieces." Livia had never condoned violence of any sort, but after seeing Adron and the constant pain he lived in, she understood his father's reaction. Now, she just wanted to make it better for him. She just didn't know how.

Chapter 3

Adron pushed the oxygen mask off his face.

His doctor gave him a peeved glare. "Would you stop that, you need it."

"I can't breathe with it on." "You can barely breathe, period." Theo put the oxygen mask back in place. Adron narrowed his eyes at the man, but as usual, Theo didn't care. Over the last five years, their battle of wills had become legendary in the hospital gossip mill.

Theo brushed a hand through his graying black hair while he scowled at him. "I can't believe you'd even try to have sex in your condition. What were you thinking?"

Adron jerked the mask off. "I'm not a friggin' eunuch." "No, you're not," Theo said, putting the mask back in place. "You're a man whose internal organs are barely fused together. Their functionality is minimal at best, and any strain on them can kill you. How many times do I have to tell you that you can't put any pressure on your abdomen."

"Well, if I have to die, I'd rather go out with a good bang."

"You're not funny." His throat tight, Adron closed his eyes. An image of Livia drifted through his mind, and he cursed it.

Theo checked his IV. "If you'd wear your chest brace—" "It's hot and it chafes." "Like it or not, Adron, one misplaced fall and you could break and collapse every bone in your chest."

Adron removed the mask again. "I don't care. I'm not going to wear that monstrosity. It makes me look like a freak."

Theo rolled his eyes. "One day, that stubbornness is going to get you killed."

More roughly than before, Theo replaced the mask. "By the way, there's a reason why I don't give you medicine to completely numb your pain. You need to feel it to know the limitations of your damaged body. Tell your wife it was a nice thought, but in the future you better not let her help you. Not unless you want to become my permanent guest here at Hotel Hell."

Theo stopped at the door and turned back to face him. "And the next time you want to have sex, you better find some way to do it without putting any strain on your chest or abdomen." ###

"Hey, big brother." Adron opened his eyes to see Zarina leaning into the room. He tried to muster a smile, but couldn't. "Theo the Bad just said it was okay to see you. How do you feel?" Zarina took a hesitant step inside his room, and it was then he saw Livia behind her. His wife had her long hair braided down her back. The blue pantsuit made her skin glow and those large, cat-like eyes held so much tenderness in them that it made him ache. Adron clenched his teeth as a wave of desire tore through him. He couldn't stand to see her, knowing she belonged to him, and yet he could never again have her. It was the cruelest blow of all. "Get out," he said, turning his head away from them. "Adron?" The sound of Livia's gentle voice washed over him like a gentle caress and it tore through him like glycerin on glass. She came forward and when he felt her touch on his arm... "Get away from me!" he snarled, pushing her away. He glared at his sister as his monitors blared. "Take her to a lawyer and get us divorced. Now!" Theo came running in with two nurses behind him. "Out!" he snapped at the women. "I told you not to upset him." Livia felt her tears swell at the sight of the doctor forcing Adron to lie down and the sound of Adron cursing them all. Her throat tight, she looked up at Zarina. "What did I do?" "It's not you," Zarina said, hugging her to her side as they left the room and headed down the hallway. "Adron is just blaming you for what Lia did." "Lia?" "His first wife." Livia stumbled. "He was married before?" She nodded. "Yes. And she was one serious bitch. Since she was the Wurish heiress, her father had negotiated a marriage between them when they were both twenty. Lia had only agreed because she wanted a trophy husband and as the youngest commissioned officer in League history and heir to my father's empire, Adron was a choice candidate for her. "But they never really got along. Three weeks after he'd been found, my mother, father and I were in his hospital room, trying to give him reasons to live. All of a sudden, she showed up with divorce papers. She handed them to him and told him that she was too young to be some guy's nursemaid." Livia was aghast. "How could she do such a thing?" "I have no idea, but if I live an eternity, I will never forget the look on Adron's face. But then, I personally think it's the best thing that could have happened to him. I just wish the ogress had had better timing." Zarina stopped and leveled a hard look on her. "So, are we going to a lawyer's office?" Livia bit her lip in indecision. Adron had been through so much that she wondered if he was still mentally sound. His physical scars she knew, it was the ones she couldn't see that scared her. She searched Zarina's eyes for the truth. "Tell me, is he psychotic or abusive?" "No. But he is angry and bitter. He was never the type of person to depend on anyone for anything. It humiliates him every time he has to ask for something." She could understand that. "Then, take me home." Zarina smiled. "I knew I liked you for a reason." ### Livia spent as much time as she could learning about Adron while she waited for him to come home. Zarina and his twin brothers, Taryn and Tiernan, were a fount of information. And that afternoon, they had provided her with a box full of disks for a holo-cube. Sitting alone in his viewing room, she pulled out a handful of disks and put them in. The first one was of Adron with a tall, dark-haired man. They appeared to be around the age of twenty. Adron's long blond hair was loose, spilling over his shoulders as the two of them played a board game. Goodness, but she barely recognized her handsome husband. His face intact, his eyes glowed like blue fire. "C'mon, Devyn, move." "Leave me alone, Adron, I'm thinking." "Yeah, I can see the smoke coming out of your ears from the strain of it." Devyn smirked at him. Before Devyn could do or say anything else, water poured down over the two of them. Adron held his hands out. "What the hell?" The men looked up to see a young,

teenaged Zarina with a hose. "Oh, Rina," Adron said with a faked snarl. "You're going to die." Dropping the hose, Zarina shrieked and ran, but Adron caught up to her quickly. "Get her, Adron!" Livia recognized the voice as Tiernan's. He must have been the one filming them. "Make her pay!" Adron slung Zarina over his shoulder as he sprinted across the yard with her. "Put me down, you overgrown bully." "You got it," he said an instant before he flipped her into a pool. Zarina came up sputtering. "Oh, that's it! Taryn!" Taryn came running. Four years younger than Adron, Taryn was all gangly limbs. His dark brown hair was cut short and his eyes glowed with mischief. He grabbed Adron by the waist and the two of them fell into the pool. Adron broke the water's surface, laughing. Taryn grabbed him from behind and dunked him. "No!" Adron's mother, Kiara, shouted as she ran to the pool. Her eyes were wide with fright, and her beautiful face was stern. "No, playing like that! One of you could get hurt." "It's okay, Mom," Adron said. Kiara shook her head, causing her long mahogany braid to spill over her shoulder. "No, it's not. I couldn't live if I lost one of you. Now, get out of there and stop playing around." Subdued, the three of them climbed out of the pool. Subdued that was until Taryn snuck up behind Adron and pulled his shorts down. Livia gaped at the sight of Adron completely exposed. So, her husband had never worn underwear. She smiled at the knowledge. Cursing, Adron jerked his pants up and ran after his brother. "Adron!" Kiara shouted, but the laughter in her voice took the sternness out of her tone. "Don't you hurt him." "I'm not going to hurt him, I'm going to kill him." "Mom!" Taryn shouted. He came running back around and put their short mother between them. "Help." "Adron," she said sharply. Adron paused as he glared at his brother. "It's all right. You have to sleep sometime." Livia laughed at their loving play and as she watched more disks, she realized that Zarina had been right. Adron was a kind, fun-loving soul. Somehow, she was going to find that man and return him to the world. ### It was two weeks, and three more surgeries before Theo finally allowed Adron to leave the hospital. All he wanted to do was go home and be left alone. He didn't want to see any more pity on his mother's tear-streaked face. See the guilt in his father's eyes. He just wanted peace. His brother, Tiernan, moved to help him from the transport. Adron leveled a scowl that made him shrink back. "Jeez, you ought to bottle that look. I know armies who would pay a fortune to have something that toxic in their arsenal." Adron got out even though the strain of it made him sweat. "Why are you still here?" "Dad wanted me to make sure you got home safely." "I'm home, now leave." "Why would I want to do that? I mean, damn, heaven forbid I should be around someone who actually likes me." Ignoring him, Adron made his way to the lifts and did his best not to remember who had been with him the last time he'd crossed this lobby. Livia. Her name and face still haunted him. And in spite of himself, he wondered where she was. How she was doing. "I don't care." Tiernan stepped into the lift beside him. "What was that?" "Nothing." Adron didn't speak until he was back in his flat. He limped to the bar, and searched for something to drink. But there was nothing there. "Dammit, which one of you did this?" he snarled at Tiernan. "I did it." He froze at the sound of Livia's voice behind him. "What are you doing here?" "I live here." "The hell you do." He turned on his brother. "I want her out of here." Tiernan shrugged. "According to your own words, she's your wife." "Tiernan," he said in warning. "Adron," he shot back. Livia came forward and by all appearances, she didn't look a bit shaken by his anger. "Thank you for bringing him home, Tiernan. I think I can handle it from here." Tiernan arched a

doubtful brow. "I don't know if I feel right leaving you at his mercy. He can let blood with that tongue." "I'm used to people insulting me." She directed a meaningful stare at Adron. "As well as being unwanted. I promise you, there's nothing Adron can say to make me cry." And in that moment, Adron felt low. He'd never wanted to hurt her.

Turning away, he headed for the bedroom. Livia said good-bye to Tiernan, then followed after Adron. In spite of her brave words, she was terrified. But then, she was used to living in fear, too. At least Adron wouldn't beat her.

He was lying on the bed with his arm over his eyes. "Are you hungry?" "No."

"Well then—" "I want to be alone." "It seems to me you've spent far too much time alone." "Dammit, why are you still here? Why didn't you do what I told you to?" She

took a deep breath and counted for patience. "Because I have nowhere else to go. My father has disowned me." "If it's a question of money—"

"I don't want money," she said sternly. "Then what do you want?" "You."

He removed his arm slowly and looked at her. "You must be deranged." "Why? Because I want to be with you?" "Yes."

She moved to sit by the bed. "You know, while we were making love, I felt a connection with you. Did you feel it, too?" "No."

"I don't believe you. You were too tender. You held me too close. I might be innocent, but I'm not stupid. I know men don't treat women that way."

He gave her a droll stare. "And how do you know that?" "Zarina told me." He grimaced at her. "Oh, jeez. You discussed it with my baby sister?" "She

was very informative." "I can imagine." "So, are we just going to sit in here all day?" "No, you're going to leave."

"I'll leave when you do." He growled at her. "Do you have any idea how much pain I'm in? It hurts to breathe, so if you don't mind, I'd like to just lie here in silence."

"Fine." She got up and pulled a small holo-cube out of his night stand. "I just wanted to show this to you."

Adron frowned as she handed him the cube and turned it on. Static flickered until the image of a brunette woman and a small, blond girl appeared.

"Hi, Commander," the woman said, holding the girl in her arms. "This is my daughter, Alycia. I don't know if you remember me or not, but I'm the woman you saved from Kyr and this is the daughter I had

six weeks later. Say, hi, Alycia." "Hi, Commander." The little girl waved. "Thank you for saving my mommy and me."

Livia watched the agony play across his face as the woman and child talked to him. Then, he snarled and threw the holo-cube against the wall, shattering it.

"Adron!" she snapped, losing patience with him. He turned on her then with a vicious snarl. "What? Did you think showing me that would make all

this okay? Did you think I'd look at them, then cry and say how grateful I am they are alive while I'm trapped like this? What of the children I wanted to have?"

The bitter misery in his eyes scorched her. "Good God, Livia, I'm only twenty-nine years old and all I have to look forward to is

a future where I will slowly, painfully disintegrate into an invalid."

His words brought tears to her eyes. She had stupidly thought it would make him feel better. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I was just

trying to help. But you won't let anyone help you, will you?" She turned and ran from the room. Livia didn't stop until she reached the

sitting room. She curled up into a ball on the couch and bit her lip to hold back the tears. She wouldn't cry. But inside, she ached for him.

Ached for what he'd once been. Even now she could see him laughing and playing games with his sister and brothers. How she

wished she had known him then. Suddenly, she felt a hand on her head. Looking up, she found Adron standing beside the couch. His brow was damp and she saw the whiteness of his lips as he struggled with his pain.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice tense. "I know you were just trying to help. But I passed the point of help a long time ago."

He shifted

and winced. "Look, I know about your people and customs, and I know you were raised inside a cage. The last thing you need is to be saddled with a man who can barely walk. Why don't you just go and get your own place and live? I'll be happy to put you on all my accounts. You'll never want for anything."

It was a generous offer he made. But she couldn't accept it. "I can't do that." "Why not?" "Because I love you."

Chapter 4 Adron couldn't have been more stunned if she had reached up and slapped him. "How could you? You don't even know me."

"Yes, I do. You try and hide what you are, but I see it. It shines through." He scowled at her. "And what is that?"

"You have a good heart." "I have no heart at all. What I have is a mechanical substitute that pumps blood through a broken body."

She rose from the couch. Adron flinched as she touched him. God, how he wanted to kiss her. She took him by the hand and led him

into his viewing room. "Zarina said that it's painful at times for you to sit, so I thought I'd make a few modifications." He stared at the new

sofa. It was twice the size of his old one and looked more like a small bed. She'd piled pillows up all over it. Adron sat down and leaned

against the pillows, amazed at just how good it did feel. Until Livia sat down next to him. His body reacted instantly to her nearness.

"You're killing me," he whispered. "I don't want to kill you."

She leaned forward and captured his lips with hers. Closing his eyes, he savored the taste of her. Over the last two weeks he'd done little

except dream of her kiss. Dream of touching her again. She ran her hands over his body, making him burn even more. And when she

touched his erection, he cursed. "Livia, stop. I can't make love to you."

She smiled patiently at him. "That's okay. I'm making love to you."

He frowned as she started unbuttoning his shirt. Adron opened his mouth to protest, but then she dipped her head to his neck. He

hissed as her tongue gently laved his skin. And as she nibbled and licked his flesh, she unbuttoned his pants, slid her hand down, and took his swollen

shaft into her hand. His head light, he couldn't speak while she caressed him. Couldn't move. Adron trembled as she blazed a

scorching trail down his chest with her mouth. Slowly, carefully. Her touch blistered him and went so much deeper than his skin. It touched

his soul. His eyes shuttered, he watched her while she licked and nibbled the flesh of his stomach, and when she took him into her mouth, he

thought he'd die from the pleasure of it. Her dark hair was fanned out across his lap and he buried his hand in her soft curls.

Adron ground his teeth as her tongue and mouth massaged him. She was relentless in her tasting. Never had he felt anything like

it. Her actions were so selfless, so kind. Why would she care? Why would she do this for him? I love you.

The words tore through him. No woman had ever said that to him before. Only her. And for his life, he couldn't understand what about him she

could possibly find lovable. Or even desirable. The woman was insane. But she touched him on a level that defied explanation. A

level he'd never known before. Throwing his head back against the pillows, Adron growled as he released himself into her mouth.

Still, she didn't pull away. Not until he was completely weak and spent.

He stared at her in awe. "I can't believe you did that for me."

"I told you, Adron, I love you. I would do anything to make you happy."

"Then, kiss me." She did. Livia

moaned as ran his hand under her shirt and gently squeezed her breast. Bracing her arms on each side of him, she carefully straddled him while making sure

not to put any pressure on his chest or abdomen. His doctor's warnings had been explicit. Adron cupped her head with one hand while he

reached around behind her with the other one and released her corslet.

"I love the way you feel in my arms," he whispered against her lips. "I love the way you look when your cheeks are flushed and your eyes are bright."

He skimmed his hand down over her breasts, to her stomach and the down to where she ached for him. "And I love the way you look when you come for me." He gave her a tender smile. "You make me feel like a man again, Livia. You make me whole." Shamelessly, she rubbed herself against him. And when she came, she cried out from it.

Adron smiled at her then, and held her close. They spent the rest of the day, lying naked in each other's arms, caressing and stroking, and just talking about absolutely nothing important. It was the best day of Adron's life, and he kept her up until the wee hours of the morning for fear of it ending. ### That day was followed by three more days of bliss.

Adron was constantly amazed by the woman fate had miraculously dumped into his life. She was funny, intelligent and so incredibly giving that it made him hurt. How he wished he was the husband she deserved. It pained him to think of her spending the rest of her vivacious life strapped to him. "Hi." He

looked up from the book he was reading to see her standing in the doorway. Her hair was still damp from her bath and her eyes glowed mischievously.

"Hi," he said reservedly, unsure of what that look might herald for him.

She walked slowly toward the bed. "Would you like to go out for a bit today?" Yes, he would. More than she would ever know. "I can't."

"C'mon, Adron. You told me your therapist said you needed more exercise." "Not today. My leg is too stiff. Why don't you call Zarina?"

"Because I'd rather be with you." The woman was the biggest fool he'd ever known. She sat beside him. "Here." She placed her hands on his knee. Adron tensed as the

warmth seeped into his leg. "How do you do that?" he asked as the pain ebbed.

"My mother taught me. She comes from a long line of great healers." She gently massaged his knee and leg. "I wish I could get you to her. She'd be able to heal you in an instant." "Really?"

She looked askance at him. "You don't believe me?" "Let's just say I have a hefty dose of skepticism. I only believe what I can see and touch." She rolled her eyes at him. "Feeling better now?"

"Yes." "Then, join me." How could he say no to that? Besides, he hated being home all the time. He left the

bed, but didn't go far before she stopped him. "You still have to use your cane. I don't want you back in the hospital." He growled as she

handed it him. "I hate this thing." "I know." She wrapped her arms around his and took him outside for the first time since he'd returned from the hospital.

"So, where are we going?" he asked.

She hailed a transport. "I want to go to the park." "Why?"

"Because, and I know this is a new concept for you, but we might actually have fun." He touched her cheek and watched the

way her eyes sparkled with life. "I've never allowed anyone to talk to me the way you do." "That's what Zarina said last night. She also said

she was amazed I was still alive." He laughed at her as the transport pulled up. Once they reached the park, he allowed

Livia to lead him toward the large pond. "Want to try a paddle boat?" she asked. "I'm too old for a paddle boat."

"You're twenty-nine, Adron. Not an ancient by any stretch of the imagination." "I'm too old for a paddle boat," he reiterated.

"And even if I wasn't, I couldn't pedal it anyway." "I'll do it." "I'm not helpless." She glared at him. "I know

that. It's okay to let others help you from time to time, Adron. Why are you so afraid of it?" He clenched his teeth, and looked away.

She took his chin in her hand and turned his head back to where he met her questing gaze. "Answer me." Rage clouded his vision as agony

coiled inside him. "You want to know what I'm afraid of? I'm afraid every morning when I wake up that this will be the day when I can no longer move for myself. I know it's coming. It's just a matter of time until I have no choice, except to have someone else clothe me, feed me. Change my diaper. And I

can't stand it." "Then, why don't you kill yourself?"

"Because every time I think of doing that, I can hear my family praying over me while I was in the hospital. I hear my mother weeping, my father begging me not to die." He swallowed. "I could never intentionally hurt them that way."

The love in her eyes scorched him. "You are the strongest man I have ever known." "Weakest fool, you mean." She shook her head and gave him a tender smile. "Come, husband." She led him to the paddle boats. Reluctantly, he got inside one and let her take them out to the center of the pond. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?" she asked. Adron leaned back and stared at the sky. The light blue was covered in soft, white clouds and the warmth of the sun felt good on his skin. "It's okay." She rolled her eyes at him. "You're such a pessimist." In spite of himself, Adron ran a hand down her bare arm that was exposed by her sleeveless tunic. He touched the faint scar on her shoulder and frowned. "Who beat you?" A hint of sadness flashed on her face, but she quickly recovered. "My father."

"Why?" She leaned forward and whispered as if imparting a great secret to him. "I tend not to do what other people want me to do."

"I noticed." He laced his hand through her hair. "But I think I like that about you." She smiled, and instantly the day was brighter. Livia watched the way Adron leaned back on his elbows as he stared at her. His white shirt was pulled taut over the muscles of his stomach and chest. His broad shoulders were thrown back and his biceps were flexed with the promise of strength and power. The wind teased the white-blond queue. Goodness, he was gorgeous even with the scar on his cheek. "Tell me something," she asked as she paused in her pedaling. "Why was a royal heir in the League?" He sighed. "I wasn't the heir at the time I enlisted." The knowledge surprised her. "No?" "I used to have an older sister." The pain on his face was profound and went deeper than the one he wore when his body hurt him. "I'm sorry. What happened to her?" "She and my father fought over Thia's choice of a husband. In a fit of anger, she stormed out of the palace and vanished. My father's been trying to find her for years, but we've had no word of her." Now it all made sense to her. That was the real reason he hadn't killed himself. His family had already lost one child, and he had seen their grief first hand. Had felt it himself. "You miss her," she said, noting the agony in his eyes. "A lot. She used to arm-wrestle me to the ground." She smiled at the teasing in his voice. He sighed. "She was the best confidant I had growing up. I could tell her anything and know it would never reach the ears of my parents." She reached out and took his hand into hers. "Tell me something, Adron. Something you've never shared with anyone else. Not even Thia." "I'm the one who glued Zarina to the toilet seat when she was seven." Livia burst out laughing. "I was serious." "I am, too. I'd meant to get Jayce, but she made a mad dash for the room and ran into it before he did. Poor Taryn ended up taking the blame for it." "And you never confessed?" "If you've ever seen my father truly angry, you'd know the answer to that. I was only thirteen and my father was a giant to me back then." "So what happened to Taryn?" "He was restricted from playing ball for the whole summer season." Livia frowned. "That doesn't seem so bad a punishment. Why were you afraid to own up to it?" "Because I knew my father would punish me twice as severely since I not only did it, but I let someone else pay for it. My father is a firm believer in justice." He squeezed her hand. "It was a cowardly thing, I know, and I spent the whole summer, staying home with Taryn to make it up to him." "Did he know you were the one who did it?" He shook his head. "No. It's always been my guilty secret." And now it was hers, too. "What of you?" he asked. "Tell me who you were running from at The Golden Crona."

Her face flamed. "It was horrible. My father was going to marry me to Clypper Thoran." "The Giradonal Governor?" "Yes."

Adron frowned as he stared at her. "Good Lord, he's what? A hundred and fifty?" "Eighty-two." His jaw dropped as he

shuddered. "Your father was going to marry you to an eighty-two year old man?" She nodded. "He wants a trade agreement with them, and Clypper wanted a young wife."

"No wonder you didn't mind me," Adron said with a snort. "One way or another, you were bound to end up as some man's nursemaid." She lost her temper at him, then. "You know, I'm tired of your self-pity, Adron. Instead of thinking of all the things you no longer have, you should concentrate on what you do have."

"And what is that?" "A family who loves you. And though your body is damaged, at least your mind isn't."

"Yeah well, trapped in an invalid body happens to be my worst nightmare." Livia glared at him. "I would rather be crippled than mindless. My worst fear is ending up as a vegetable trapped in a whole, sound body. So, from where I'm sitting you have nothing to complain about."

His frown deepened. "Why would you fear something like that?" "I saw my grandmother die that way. It was terrible. She lay in a hospital bed, hooked to monitors and machines for almost a year before they finally let her die."

"Why did they do that?" "Because they couldn't let her go." Her look intensified. "If your mind was gone, Adron, you couldn't be here with me now. You wouldn't be able to see the sky above us, hear the children laughing or anything else. You would be trapped in cold, awful darkness."

"Okay!" he said, wanting this conversation to end. It was too gruesome even for him to contemplate. "You made a good a point." She'd obviously given this a lot of thought. "You're right, I am a self-pitying bastard. But I will endeavor to be a little less so."

"Promise?" "As long as you're with me, yes." "##" Weeks went by as Adron tried to keep his word to her. Some days it was easier than others. And today it was particularly difficult.

"Come on, Adron," his therapist said as she increased the weight on his leg. "You can lift it."

Grinding his teeth against the pain, he hated the patronizing tone Sheena always used. Like a mother coaxing a small child. "That's it. You're doing fine. Good boy."

"Go to hell," he snarled. "Adron!" Livia snapped at him as she came forward to stand beside him. "You behave."

Adron curled his lip. This was the first time he'd allowed Livia to come with him to his therapy in the hospital. And if she kept that tone up, it would be the last. "It's all right," Sheena said. "He says that to me a lot."

Livia reached out and took his hand in hers. Adron's heart pounded at the softness of her touch. God, he'd gotten so used to her. Had become dependent on her and that terrified him more than anything else.

"Be nice," she said. Holding her hand over his heart, he nodded. And then he lifted his leg. "See, I knew you could do it."

He ignored Sheena. "Okay, let's try some pulls." Adron let go of Livia and sat up slowly. But no sooner was he upright, than he felt the familiar burning in his chest. Two seconds later, his nose started bleeding and he coughed up blood.

"Dammit," he snarled as Sheena grabbed a towel. He laid back down while Sheena ran to get Theo. Livia brushed his hair back from his damp forehead. The tenderness of her touch and look scorched him. And it made him yearn even more for a way to love her like she deserved to be loved.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "I just damaged another internal organ. Who knows which one. Since they're all pretty much soup, it could be..." His voice trailed off as Theo came in with a Gurney and three orderlies.

"You know, Adron," Theo said as the orderlies picked him up and placed him on the Gurney, "if you want to spend the night with me, there are easier ways of going about it. You could just ask."

He wasn't amused by Theo's playfulness. "I want to go

home." "Maybe tomorrow." Theo put an oxygen mask on his face.
Adron pulled it off. Livia put it back on.
Adron met her gaze. "I'll call your parents." Holding his hand, she walked beside him as Theo wheeled him through the familiar hallways.
When they reached the scanning room, Adron reluctantly let go of her.
Livia's heart was heavy as she watched the doors close behind him. How she wished she had her mother's healing powers. Her mother could make him whole again. So could you. True, but if she did, she'd lose him forever. ### Adron spent two days in the hospital before Theo let him go home again. While he'd been in the hospital, Livia had stayed with him the entire time and though it was selfish of him, he loved it. As soon as they were back in his flat, they had gone to bed and hadn't emerged except to attend basic needs like food and drink. ### Livia came awake slowly. She blinked open her eyes to find herself lying in bed, wrapped in her husband's arms. Adron was still asleep, but even so, he had a tight grip on her as if he was afraid she'd vanish. Smiling, she picked his hand up and placed a kiss over his scarred knuckles.
Then, she heard someone in the outer room. At first, she assumed it was the cleaning lady who came twice a week, until she heard Taryn call Adron's name. "Hey, bud," he said, throwing open the door, "I need..." Taryn took one look at them lying naked in the bed and turned around to give them his back. "Sorry, Livia," he said. "I assumed by three o'clock in the afternoon the two of you would be up." Adron rubbed his stubbled cheek against her shoulder as he came awake. "I need to learn to lock my door," he said. She laughed. Taryn snorted. "I'm going to go out here and wait until you two get dressed."
Adron brushed his hand over her hair and she felt his erection against her hip. "Why don't you keep walking until you get to the other side of the front door?" "Ha, ha," Taryn said as he closed the door. "By the way, your wife has a great body." Heat exploded across her face.
Adron gave her a stern frown. "Say the word, and I'll kill him for you." She smiled. "It's okay, if you did that, Tiernan would miss him." Adron rolled over slowly and reached for his injector and medicine on the night stand. Livia cringed as he gave himself a shot in the stomach. How she wished he didn't have to do that every few hours. Unfortunately, he would have to do it for the rest of his life. His features strained, he left the bed and dressed.
While he went to speak to his brother, she headed into the bathroom for a shower. She took her time, letting the hot water cascade over her, until she felt someone watching her. Turning around, she saw Adron leaning against the wall, staring straight at her. "You startled me," she said while the hot water slid against her back. "Sorry, I was just wishing I could join you." It amazed her how comfortable she'd become around him. Her nudity in front of him had long since ceased to bother her. As did his. In fact, she'd learned every dip and curve of his tawny flesh. Every scar. She glanced over to the tub a few feet away. "Want me to join you?" He smiled. "Yes."
Livia turned the shower off, then ran them a tub full of water. Adron got in first, then pulled her in on top of him. "Careful!" she warned as a wave of panic went through her. "I don't want to hurt you."
"You could never hurt me," he said, then he claimed her lips with his.
Livia moaned. Oh, but she would never get tired of his kiss. His touch.
Pulling back, Adron stared at her in awe. Her lips were swollen from his kiss and her cheeks red from his whiskers. He ran his hand over her ravaged skin. "I'm sorry," he said, reaching for his razor in the cubby hole in the wall above his head. She sat beside him, watching him shave with a frown on her face. "Wouldn't that be easier with a mirror?" "Probably." "Then, why don't you use one?"
He paused and looked away from her. "I don't like looking in

mirrors and I damn sure don't want to do it first thing every morning."

She took the razor from his hand and to his shock, she shaved the scarred side of his face. "You are incredibly handsome." Adron stared at her doubtfully. "When I was younger, I was really vain about it. Zarina used to tease me that I looked at my reflection so much that one day the Tourah beast was going to come and steal my face from me." He dropped his gaze to the floor. "I guess she was right. He did." Livia rinsed the soap from his face. "You know, there is a bright side to all you suffered." "And that is?" She hesitated as if gathering her thoughts. "Tell me truthfully, Adron. If Kyr hadn't scarred you, would you have taken me home that night at The Golden Crona? Would you have even looked twice at me?"

Adron opened his mouth to deny it, but he couldn't. She was right. She was beautiful to him now, a vital part of his life, and yet he would never have looked twice at her before Kyr had crippled him. That thought cut him all the way to his soul.

"I wish I could be whole for you," he whispered. "I wish I could hold you and dance with you, take you in my arms and make love to you the way I want to."

"And I'm just grateful I have you, at all. It's not your body or face that I love, Adron. It's your heart, your soul, and your mind."

He trembled at her words, then he pulled her to him and kissed her. She moved carefully into his lap. Adron nibbled her lips as he felt her sliding her hand over his shoulders, down his arms. She lifted her hips, then impaled herself on him. They moaned simultaneously.

Bracing her hands on the edge of the tub, she rode him hard and fast, making him blind from the pleasure of her body surrounding his. And for the first time, he was grateful to Kyr. Grateful he'd found Livia.

God help him if anything should happen to her. She was the one thing he could never lose. The one thing that could truly destroy him. His throat tight, he watched her as she climaxed in his arms. The pleasure on her face tore through him. And as he felt her body tighten around him, he surrendered himself to his own release. Livia started to collapse against his chest, then barely caught herself before she hurt him.

She smiled at him, but she saw the turmoil in his eyes, felt him go rigid over her action. It always hurt him when he realized the frailness of his body. She would give anything to remove that look from him forever.

Would you give your life? "I love you," she said.

As usual, he said nothing as he shifted away from her. Livia sighed. She hadn't meant to hurt his feelings. But it was too late, he was closed off from her again. ### By

the time they dressed, it was nearly dinner time. "You want to go out to eat?" Adron's question startled her. "No, it's okay."

He looked at her skeptically. "C'mon, you can't spend your life locked in this apartment." "Are you sure you feel up to it?"

"Truthfully? I hate being stuck here all the time. I was never a home-body." They didn't go far, just a few sectors over to a quaint restaurant.

Adron sat beside her with his arm wrapped around her as they waited for their food. "I don't believe it." Adron went rigid at the voice. Livia

looked up to see a man who looked so incredibly similar to her husband that she knew he must be Jayce. Jayce's green eyes were warm with friendship. He extended a hand to her. "You must be Livia."

Before she could move, Adron knocked his arm away. "You're not welcome here. Why don't you slink off into the hole you crawled out of?" "Oh,

that's real original. Look, can't we just put it behind us?" Adron's response was so crude that it sent heat over her face.

Jayce went flush with his rage. "Fine, wallow in your self-pity." He turned to leave. "That's right," Adron snarled, "turn your

back on me, you coward. That's what you were always best at."

Jayce whirled about and grabbed Adron out of his chair. Livia gasped as she rose to her feet. "Don't you ever call me a coward. You, of all

men, know those are fighting words." "Why not? It's true, isn't it? You dare wear a League uniform yet you betrayed your oath to them and you betrayed your oath to me. You are nothing but a self-righteous coward."

After that, everything happened in a blur. Jayce bellowed, then swung.

Adron ducked and caught Jayce a staggering blow against his jaw. Trained and honed as an assassin, Jayce acted on auto-pilot as he returned the blow with one of his own. A fist straight into Adron's heart.

Livia heard the horrendous sound of bones breaking. The force of the blow knocked Adron back, into the table.

Before he hit the floor, Livia knew he was seriously injured. "Oh, God, Adron," Jayce gasped as he knelt beside him. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to. It was completely reflexive. Oh, God, I'm sorry." Adron couldn't answer.

Livia watched, horrified by the paleness of Adron's face as his breath rattled loosely in his chest. She'd never seen panic in Adron's eyes, but she saw it now and that scared her most of all.

Jayce called for a med tech unit, but it was too late. Adron's breathing was growing shallower. He started coughing up blood.

Livia cupped his face in her hands. Adron touched her arm and tried to memorize her features before he died. He should never have goaded Jayce. His brother had always let his temper get the better of him. But now it was too late. Jayce had finally done the one thing he was supposed to have done when he found him lying in the dumpster. He'd killed him.

Adron reached up and placed a hand to Livia's face. His angel of mercy. At a time when he had wanted to die, she alone had given him a reason to live. He didn't want to leave her. Couldn't stand the thought of not having her with him. But it wasn't meant to be.

Her face faded from his sight, then everything went black.

"No!" Livia screamed as his hand fell from her face. "Don't you dare leave me!" Jayce laid him on the floor, and prepared to resuscitate him. "Dammit!" The agonized cry tore through her as Jayce realized he couldn't give him CPR. Adron's body couldn't sustain it.

In that instant, Livia did the only thing she knew to do. She reached down deep inside her and summoned all the power she possessed. She didn't care what it cost her. She couldn't live without Adron. And if it meant her own life, so be it. Almost instantly, her hands were hot. Hotter than they'd ever been before. She placed her hands against Adron's chest and willed her life force into him.

Jayce leaned away as an orange halo of healing surrounded Adron's body. ###

Adron came awake with a jolt. At first, he thought he was dead. There was no pain anywhere in him. His body felt strange. Different.

It felt whole. Then he became aware of Jayce touching his face, and of a strange weight on his chest. "Adron?" Jayce gasped in disbelief.

Looking down, Adron realized the weight on his chest was Livia. His heart pounding, he sat straight up with an agility he hadn't had in five years. And in that instant, he knew what she'd done. She'd healed him again.

As he pulled her to his chest, he saw his blood-covered hand. The scars were completely gone from it. Not even the scars on his knuckles remained. "Livia?" he asked, holding her against him.

She didn't answer. Adron tilted her head and saw the ghostly paleness of her face. "Livia?" he tried again, shaking her gently. She didn't respond. The

med techs came in and he released her to their care. More terrified than he had ever been before, he followed them out of the restaurant. ###

For the first time in years, Adron sat in the antiseptic waiting room while Theo tended Livia. He finally understood some of what his parents had felt while they waited for word of his multiple operations.

The fear and uncertainty tore him apart. And he and Livia had only known each other a short time. How much worse must this have been for his mother?

"Adron?" He looked up as his mother and father joined him. Kiara took his face in her

hands and stared at his cheek. "What happened to your scar?"
"Livia cured him," Jayce answered. "I don't know how she did it, but one minute he was practically dead and in the next, he was perfectly fine."
"What did the doctor say?" his father asked. Adron pulled back from his mother's touch. "He wants to do tests on me later." He didn't give a damn about himself. Livia was all that mattered.
"Did you call her parents?" his mother asked. His chest tightened at the memory. "I tried. Her father told me she was no longer his concern."
Kiara scowled. "How could he?" Adron shrugged. He didn't really want to talk at the moment. Then again, Livia was the only person he liked to talk to, period. His father smiled as he passed a glance from Adron to Jayce. "It's good to see the two of you in the same room without bloodshed."
Adron exchanged a wary, shamed look with Jayce. Jayce turned away. His parents went to get something to drink. "I'm sorry about all this," Jayce said when they were alone. Adron glared at him. He was tired of Jayce's excuses. "If you'd killed me when you were supposed to, none of this would have happened."
Jayce curled his lip as his eyes blared a cold, harsh rage. "Tell me honestly, could you have killed me if you'd found me lying half-dead and helpless?" "Rather than see you suffer, yes."
"Then you're a better assassin than I am. Because I would never have been able to live with myself had I killed my own brother."
"Adron?" He looked up as Theo joined them. Theo hesitated in front of him. "This is weird, isn't it? I'm not used to having discussions with you while you're dressed and upright."
"You're not amusing." Theo looked apologetic. "Sorry, nervous humor." He cleared his throat and a feeling of dread washed over Adron. Theo was avoiding something bad.
"Well?" Adron prompted. "She's firmly in a coma. Whatever she did, it caused a great deal of neurological damage to her. Honestly, I've never seen anything like it. It's as if she burned up part of her brain."
Adron choked on a sob as he thought of her lying helpless. It was her worst fear. Why had she done it? For him...
Oh God, he couldn't breathe for the agony in his heart. He wanted to scream out at the injustice. Wanted to rail against everyone and everything. He leveled a fierce stare on Theo. "Will she come out of it?"
"Honestly, no. There's too much damage. She's only alive right now because of the machines." Theo gave him a hard stare. "My professional opinion is that we should turn everything off and let nature take its course."
Adron fell back against the wall as heart shattered into a thousand pieces. He felt the tears in his eyes, felt the bitter, swelling misery that overwhelmed him. He couldn't let her go.
But then, he couldn't let her live when he knew she wouldn't want to. And all he felt was a pain so deep, so profound, that it made a mockery of the one he'd learned to live with. He grabbed Theo by the shirt. "Don't you dare let her die. You hear me?"
Theo looked aghast. "Her mind is already gone." "Only half of it, right?"
"Well, yes." "Then there's a chance." And half a chance was better than none. "You keep her heart beating until I get back."
"I'll do my best." And so would he.
Releasing Theo, Adron ran from the hospital with a strength and agility he hadn't known in years. Livia had one chance for survival, and no matter what, he was going to give it to her. ### "What are you doing here?" Livia's father demanded as Adron forced his way into the throne room where he was overseeing his advisors. Oblivious to the roomful of men who gaped at him, Adron approached his father-in-law. "I have to see Livia's mother."
"It is forbidden." "The hell it is. Livia's dying and her mother is the only one who can save her."
Her father's face stoic, he seemed completely immune to the news. "If she dies, so be it. She has disgraced us with her disobedience. I told you and her

that she was forever severed from us." "I need to see her mother." "Guards!" he called. "Remove him." Adron

knocked the guards back, until they called for reinforcements. Seriously outnumbered, he fought as best he could, but eventually they seized him.

"You can't let her die," Adron said as he struggled against their hold. "Had you wanted her to live, you should never have shamed her." "Damn you!" Against his will, Adron was

pulled back from the throne, but as he fought against the guards, he saw a teenaged servant girl watching him with concern and pity on her face.

Adron met her frightened gaze. "Tell her mother, Livia needs her. Please." "Krista!" Livia's father snapped. "Get out of

here." The girl scampered off, and the guards threw him out of the palace.

Adron struck the closed door with his fist. He bellowed in rage. "So help me, if she dies, I'll see all of you in your graves!"

But no one heard him. Defeated, he turned and headed back to spend as much time with Livia as he could before death stole her completely away from him. ### Adron paused in the

doorway of the hospital room as he listened to the familiar monitors beep and hiss. Only this time, they weren't connected to him. He knew from

his own experience that she could hear them. Knew what it felt like to lie there unable to communicate. Alone. Afraid. He wanted to scream.

His throat tight, he crossed the room and sat on the bed beside her. "Hey, Sweet," he whispered, taking her cold hand into his.

He cupped her face with his other hand and leaned over her to brush his lips against her cool cheek. "Please open your eyes, Livia," he

whispered as tears blinded him. "Open your eyes and see what you did. I'm actually sitting here without grimacing. There's no pain at all. But you know that, don't you?" He traced the outline of her jaw. And then he

did something he hadn't done in a long, long time. He prayed. He prayed and he yearned to feel her sweet arms wrapped around him. To hear the precious sound of her voice saying his name. Hours went by as

Adron stayed with her, talking more than he had ever talked before.

Sitting by her side, he held her hand to his heart and willed her to wake up. "I don't know why you stayed with me, Livia. God knows, I wasn't worth it. But I don't want you to leave me alone anymore. I need you. Please open your eyes and look at me. Please." "She can hear you." Adron

tensed at the voice behind him. Assuming it was a nurse, he didn't bother to look. "I know." "Are you going to unplug her?"

He choked at the thought. And for the first time, he understood exactly how Jayce had felt when he'd pulled him from the dumpster.

God, he'd been such a fool to hate his brother for loving him.

"I can't let her go," he said between clenched teeth. "Not while there's a chance." "It's what she wants." "I

know." He knew it in a way no one else ever could. He'd been there.

The nurse came forward and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. "She wants me to tell you that she is with you. And that you were well worth it."

Frowning, he turned around to see a small woman wearing a cloak that completely shielded her identity from him. "Who are you?"

She lowered the cowl. Her features angelic, he knew her in an instant. She was Livia's mother. And he saw the silvery-green eyes of a race that

was more myth than reality. "You're Trisani?" She nodded.

Adron gaped with the knowledge. The Trisani were legendary for their psychic abilities. So legendary that they had been hunted almost to extinction. Those who survived, were very careful to stay hidden away from large populations where they might become enslaved or killed by those who wanted or feared their powers. She stepped to Livia's side and

removed the IV from her arm. Then slowly, piece by piece, she took the monitors off. "It's time to wake up, little flower," she

whispered. She placed a gentle hand on Livia's brow. Stunned,

Adron watched as Livia's eyes fluttered open. "Mama?" she breathed.

Her mother smiled, then kissed her on the forehead. She passed a hand over Livia's body. Adron felt weak in relief as joy spread through him. Livia was alive! Her mother took his hand and Livia's and held them joined in hers. Adron's heart pounded at the warmth of a touch he'd thought was lost to him forever. Livia looked from him to her mother. "You had Krista send me to The Golden Crona, didn't you?" Her mother nodded. "You two were destined for each other." She looked at Adron. "And to answer your unspoken question, yes, it's permanent. Livia healed you, but..." she turned a sharp glare at her daughter. "You are not to call on your powers anymore. Your human half isn't strong enough for them." "I know, but I couldn't let him die." Her mother nodded. "Now, I have to return before I'm missed." She paused in the doorway and turned back. "By the way, it's a boy." Adron frowned. "What's a boy?" "The baby she carries. Congratulations, Commander. In nine more months, you'll be a father."

Epilogue One year later Livia paused in the doorway as she watched Adron giving their infant son his three a.m. feeding. Propped against pillows, Adron sat on the bed, wearing nothing except a sheet draped modestly over his lap as he held the bottle and stared adoringly at Caillen. He laid his cheek against the top of the baby's bald head and held him close. "I've got you, little bit," he whispered. "Yes, I do." She laughed. Adron looked up and smiled. "I didn't know you were back." "I can tell." She moved to sit next to them. Then, she leaned against Adron's raised leg to stare at the beautiful baby on his unscarred chest. Caillen cooed at her as he wrapped his tiny hand around her finger. Adron brushed a loving hand through Livia's soft, mussed hair. Thanks to her, he'd come a long way from the bitter alcoholic she'd found tossing down drinks in the back of The Golden Crona. She'd found a broken, bleeding man and she had made him whole again. Not just in body, but in his heart. She had reunited him with his family and with his soul. Over the last year, he'd watched her grow ripe with his baby and had held her hand as she struggled to bring Caillen in to the world. Life turned on the hairpin of a second. He'd always known that, but on one rainy, cold night in the backroom of a filthy dive, his life had taken a sharp turn into heaven. Livia looked up from their son. "What are you thinking about?" He traced the outline of her lips with his fingertip. "I'm thinking how glad I am that I traded myself for that woman. How glad I am that my brother couldn't kill me. But most of all, I'm thinking just how damn grateful I am that you saw something in me worth saving." He leaned forward and kissed her gently on the lips. "Thank you for my son, Livia, and for my life. I love you. I always will."

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