

Prologue

Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 1863

I am too young for this, have not witnessed enough, but what I see now, even without my gift, tells me the world is in serious peril. Even as I stand here amidst the shattered bodies scattered over this bloody field, I know this fight has been for a greater good which will be realized only as this young country matures.

Horrible, stupendous evil approaches. An evil that believes in the supernatural, and will attempt to seek out the Sorhineth and use it for impossible gain. And while the name of this madman is shrouded, his face and ultimate goals are as clear as if he were standing before me. The cunning lunacy gleaming from mud-brown eyes, his vision of the death of millions by starvation and worse, so much worse. The sigil of his madness, the warped cross, fills me with an unfamiliar loathing, and my ears ring with the phantom sound of jackboots.

In this future, I see no sign of the Terrans who act as stewards of Mother Earth and mankind as a whole.

The Terrans no longer even attempt to right the balance, to seek out injustice and impropriety, and because of that—and the future I see so darkly beckoning—I have no recourse but to bury the identity of the Wardens who hold the Sorhineth, our most valued treasure. The Terran soul has become almost irreparably stained.

Clan Kennedy shall emigrate here, to the new world, and begin their lives anew ... hidden from even the potential of danger. And should it arise, in the form of a Destroyer, then they will know intuitively, and keep the sacred book safe.

If I hide the Sorhineth, then a new future comes clear ... over a century from now, a Spirit Talisman will rise and put right the imbalance, beginning the arduous task of bringing the Terrans back to what they hold most closely, their love of Mother Earth. The final moment of atonement will take place within the great pyramid, on the western shore, and the fate of millions will rest in the hands of two.

* * * *

San Francisco, California, 1989

The Destroyer stood on the top floor of the Transamerica building, clenched the ancient paper in his fist and heard the brittle crunch as it disintegrated. At long last, the Sorhineth. There would be no Spirit Talisman, or any Talisman for that matter, interfering in the dynasty he'd spent decades building, what the Keepers Of The Environment—KOTE—with him at the helm, continued to build. Giving up the piece of his soul that tied him to humanity was of little consequence compared to the profit.

Talisman, he thought with a curl of his lip. They were a phantom of memory, supposedly tapping the true, uninhibited power of their signature element. Only called upon in the world's greatest moment of need; one hadn't been even whispered of in over a century. And if he had

anything to do about it, their memory would molder with the Sorhineth and its Warden in a locked dungeon.

The Sorhineth was almost as much of a mystery as the Talisman ... even his oldest scribes and seers only knew it held their history, their spells, their prophecies, and was an immeasurable source of power. Until now, until this missive from the past, he had never known its location, and he'd spent a large portion of his long life and considerable resources in the attempt. But now, it might very well finally be within his grasp.

Clan Kennedy couldn't be very difficult to find, not with his vast assets. When he tracked them down, he'd send a nice, clean non-Destroyer to pick the book up. And as soon as it was in his hands, safe in the City, he would dispose of everyone who'd dared cross him over these many years.

Victory would be his at long last, and as he gazed out over San Francisco Bay and the Golden Gate, he smiled.

Now all he had to find was a Terran with enough skill to convince the Warden of their need, but not one smart enough to realize he wasn't retrieving it for his own means.

Chapter One

San Francisco, 1989, 7:35 am

Donovan Callahan leaned back in the seat of flight 1245 and closed his eyes as the plane leveled off. It was 21 December and the aircraft was full of families on their way to holiday festivities around the country with a stopover in Boston. He wondered if he'd make it through six hours of spoiled, screaming kids and numb parents without completely losing it. How he could stomach artillery shells and bullet ricochets, but still be annoyed by silly little things, was a mystery.

It wasn't that he disliked flying specifically, since he'd seen the evolution of flight firsthand. The difference between the Kitty Hawk and the 747 he was on was nothing short of amazing. What he was about to do fell into that category as well. Protectors like him had become almost obsolete in the last fifty years, not really giving a shit what happened around them, as long as their piece of the pie was safe ... and lucrative. For him to be heading out on his own was probably nuts, but it was something he knew, down in his bones, he had to do. He hadn't felt this much conviction since World War Two, and it gnawed at him, pushing him toward acts of selflessness he'd given up long before Tunisia and Cambodia.

He'd spent the last fifteen years in private security, bodyguarding whiny, spoiled celebrities, and he was tired of it. So tired he'd left the business in the hands of his second-in-command, Mark, for the duration.

He reached into his coat pocket and ran a thumb over the smooth triangular jewels on his key fob. It had been a gift from a client just three weeks ago—a quirky old Terran who'd required only that they drive him around the City. It had been too expensive to accept, but as soon as his fingers closed over it, something deep resonated within him. Even now a feeling of peace, of purpose, settled over him. If nothing else, the key chain could serve as a personal reminder of exactly who and what he was. He would do what needed to be done.

He shut out the input, noise by noise, just as he'd learned to do in Tunisia, and felt himself

beginning to drift, knowing what he would see in his dream, even as the vision came.

Jenalee's stunningly beautiful voice beseeched him through the telephone lines, brought his father's Protector nature to the fore as his mother's Earth Elemental genes surged to tamp it down. As always, Protector won, even in the safety of his own home, with no visible threat.

"You need to snap out of this. This 'noble cause' is going to get us both in trouble. I want my old Donovan back."

"You didn't have any complaints when I was buried balls-deep in you last month." His words and tone were cruel. More cruel than Jenalee deserved.

She let out a short, bawdy laugh which totally contrasted with her usually melodic voice. "Oh, don't get me wrong, I've got no objections when it comes to that, lover. I miss you, miss talking to you, miss all of the things we used to do together as friends."

Donovan just sat in silence and waited. He and Jenalee had been many things over the last eighty-five years, but lately, friends wasn't it. Occasional fuck buddies, yeah, but he was through taking care of Jenalee when her flavor of the week didn't turn out to be exotic enough. No woman was worth this kind of drama, and their shared childhood was the only thing that kept him coming back, even if he hadn't seen her in over three weeks.

"That damned earthquake. It changed everything." Bitterness tinged her words.

"Loma Prieta should never have happened, at least not to that extent. Never mind the other shit that went down this year which didn't directly affect us. As Terrans, we know what we're supposed to be doing, and it isn't shopping Union Square or having lunch at the Yacht Club. I've just started acknowledging it, unlike everyone else.

"KOTE feeds us shit and we're happy to eat it because they take care of everything. They hide up there in their ivory tower making pronouncements from on high. It's wrong ... they're wrong!" All the anger, the disgust he'd been feeling since the 17th of October poured out, vitriolic and piercing in the close air.

"Hush, Donovan. You don't know who's listening."

"Don't you understand? I don't give a shit. I've had it."

Jenalee was quiet for a long moment, then spoke quietly. "You're not the only one Donovan, but you're definitely the loudest." Her tone went almost sad, as if she was imparting something painful. "I heard something the other day... Promise me you'll come see me first when you return."

Her voice was close to tears now. She wasn't above using hysterics to make a point, but this was extreme even for her. And, as always with Jenalee, he caved in.

"I promise."

"Boston. You'll find the Sorhineth—and Warden Brenna Kennedy—in Boston."

Donovan awoke with a start, heart pumping furiously as Jenalee's words echoed in his mind. The Sorhineth. The Book of the Terrans. The collected *true* works of his people. Just the tool he needed to put shit back on the right track.

* * * *

Boston, 4:30 pm

Brenna Kennedy pulled the can of Mace out of her purse, and *then* took the time to fully survey her living room from the front door. The place had been utterly trashed, stuffing torn from the couch cushions, pictures ripped off the walls, broken glassware from the wet bar glittering on

the Berber carpet. The big-screen TV was still in place, as was the state-of-the-art VCR. Her Pioneer sound system sat intact in its rack, and her Nikon hung on the hall tree, undisturbed.

She started to shake—not with fear, but rage. This was no ordinary break-in. She only hoped she was dead wrong about why her privacy had been violated. And if she wasn't, then at least the Sorhineth was safe and sound, hidden in the most likely place someone could look, and therefore wouldn't.

Ears attuned for the slightest of sounds, she backed out of the doorway slowly, looking warily down the long hallway where the baddie might still be lurking. When her pumps crunched on the scree of snow bordering the sidewalk, she sidled toward the safety of her Bronco, ignoring the snow falling around her in heavy sheets.

Brenna swung into the truck, jammed the keys in the ignition and sank down in the seat until she could just see over the dashboard, then fumbled for the massive “mobile” phone nestled in its travel case on the floor next to the gearshift. She didn't give a damn if it was expensive as hell, she was using it, and dialed her brother with trembling fingers.

She pushed the fury out of her voice when he picked up, because if there was one thing she didn't want, it was Tommy and half the freakin' engine company hitting her house like the Patriots' offensive line.

“I need you over at my place ... now.”

To give her older brother credit, he didn't ask questions, just hung up the phone.

Her heartbeat bumped back down and she began to doubt herself, doubt the reality of what she'd seen. R.E.M.'s *Stand* mocked her from the tinny speakers. What if she'd called Tommy away from the 'house for no good reason? What if the rigs had to roll on a blaze and someone *died* because she was acting like a frightened little girl? When was she going to start acting like the Warden she was, rather than falling back on her brothers?

She straightened in the seat. According to family lore, it had been almost two hundred years since a Destroyer had “visited” Clan Kennedy, and that had been an ocean away. What made her think she, of all the Wardens, would be the one called upon? Especially when she was so woefully unprepared?

She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel, considering and rejecting going back inside her home. This would be the last time she leaned on Tommy, but right now she needed his strength behind her.

The legacy of the Wardens went back so far their origins had been lost in the mists of time. If her grandmother hadn't been so resolute about the reality of Terrans and Destroyers in the stories she'd told, and the information passed to Brenna's mom on Gram's deathbed, Brenna would have written the whole thing off as a family fancy, and to be honest, had, to a certain extent. Until today. The reason her home had been violated wasn't as simple as a break-in ... it just didn't feel like one. No, this was about her ... about the Sorhineth. She could feel it in her all-too-human bones. And if it was a Destroyer who had left that feeling, she had a lot of catching up to do ... as of yesterday.

The indescribable value of the Sorhineth, even if she couldn't read more than a few words of it, demanded she keep it out of the wrong hands at all costs ... even at the risk of losing her life. The tome had its own protection built in—it faded from sight, and any Terran's enhanced perception—the moment she was more than three yards from it. Apparently the Terran who'd just ransacked her house wasn't aware of that little tidbit.

It was always the youngest of the Clan who held the title of Warden, the baby. And for the

last two incarnations, they had been female. Women in families dominated by hulking men who delighted in protecting what they considered theirs. And until today, no one had ever challenged such an ancient right, because there'd been no need to. Gram had died suddenly before Brenna was old enough to walk, making her the de facto Warden without ever really knowing what it meant, and leaving her with almost absolutely nothing to go on but the Sorhineth ... which none of them had been taught to read. They'd figured out a tiny bit on their own, but not enough to really understand what the book held. She often wondered if Gram had seen her own death at the hands of a drunk driver, and had begun passing information on to Mom, but it wasn't nearly enough, especially not today.

Yeah, her brothers had taught her the skills to protect the precious book—deadly combat techniques, defensive driving and the like—but she sure as hell had never taken it seriously. It had been more like a game, humoring an old woman's hasty commands. It wasn't as if she, as a librarian, would ever kill anyone ... she would never ever do such a thing. Lose her own life protecting her heritage, yes. Kill someone ... hell no.

One thing was certain. The destruction inside hadn't been caused by a Terran. They were too cultured, too well-mannered for that kind of behavior. If and when a Terran ever showed up, they'd be up front and possessive as hell, at least from what Gram had told Mom. She'd been quite adamant on the difference between Terrans and Destroyers, one of the few things she'd been fierce about. She'd also made it clear Brenna would know, instinctively, who and what one was. One of the "gifts" of being a Warden.

From what her family had imparted over the years, Gram's idealized conception of Terrans was little more than a fantasy. The modern-day Terrans had no respect for human life, and had turned their backs on everything right and good. In short, they were no better than the Destroyers Gram had claimed they fought against. They were just as much to blame for the human lives lost in natural disasters as a common murderer on the street. And Brenna despised everything they were.

But her legacy, her heritage, demanded she safeguard the Sorhineth for the moment one of them came calling, and lend them her presence should they want to view the Sorhineth. It grated that the Terrans were destined for such access, even as she recognized the Sorhineth could never fall into the hands of a Destroyer. Their magic, just like their name, was tainted by evil, and they were the reason the Sorhineth and Clan Kennedy had been hidden away for so very long. If the Sorhineth fell into their hands, it could very well mean the end of civilized life as the world knew it.

The first time she'd heard the ominous warning, she'd almost laughed aloud. She wasn't laughing now. She strained her mind to recall everything her mentor had passed down, but her inner vision kept flashing back to the living room, thwarting her efforts.

Tommy's massive truck pulled into her driveway, coasting to a soundless stop, engine muffled by the dense snowfall. She'd made the right decision, because of all four brothers, Tommy was the one who believed in her role as Warden the most. Unfortunately, he was also the most protective because of it.

She stepped out of the truck, lowering her voice to an urgent whisper. "Someone broke in and trashed the place. Didn't take anything fencible, though."

Tommy's face took on a grim cast. "The Sorhineth?"

"Yeah, that's all I can figure. But I didn't want to go in there alone."

"I would have kicked your ass if you had, little sister." He walked to the back of the truck

and pulled out a hooked grappling bar. Brenna realized he'd pulled it off the rig on his way out the door and hoped to God—again—he or his crew wouldn't need it in the next few minutes. A gun wouldn't have made much difference unless it was a head or heart shot—the Destroyers were *that* tough—but the fireman's tool was something only used for good, for right, and therefore had karma beyond belief. Or at least that's what Gram had said... "Always use karma." She hoped against hope her wise old grandmother had been right.

Gripping her useless can of Mace, they walked to the front door side by side and slipped in.

Brenna grimaced again at the mayhem done to her living room. Stilling, she did what she should have done the moment she'd stepped foot into her home, but had been too scared to try alone. Some Warden she was. She closed her eyes and *felt* the interior of the house.

Nothing here right this moment, but she could scent a faint trail of energy, viscous and putrid green, painted on the air. Only a being of evil would leave such signature. She'd been right ... it had been a Destroyer ... she felt it deep in her bones.

"He's long gone, but let's be careful."

"Damn straight." Tommy advanced into the house, weapon extended, and cleared each room with Brenna a step behind. Every single one of those rooms had been trashed. Whoever had done it left their nastiest surprise in her bedroom.

"Fuck, Brenna. What the hell?"

"You can say that, bro," she breathed, staring at the writing scrawled on the wall above her bed in scarlet.

WARDEN—I'LL BE BACK.

"Shades of *The Terminator*, eh?" Brenna joked, though her voice wavered.

"This is serious." Tommy's voice sounded—dare she even think it—scared.

"Yeah, no shit." She swiped a shaky hand through her hair, pushing sweaty blonde bangs off her forehead. "I wish Gram was still alive, 'cause this is seriously bad ju-ju."

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Donovan paid the cabbie, oblivious to the icy air and falling sheets of snow, and looked over the little turn-of-the-century house on the corner with a tactical eye. It was well-kept, suburban, and the very last place he would have expected to find a book of lore. A big-ass truck and a little Bronco were parked in the driveway, doors still open as if the occupants had left in a hurry—or been pulled from within. The innocent appearance of the building had already set his senses on alert—it was too innocent looking, too staid, too perfect as a hiding place. The two vehicles simply confirmed his unease.

With a stealthiness born of too many years of combat, he sidled to the sidewalk leading to the house, breath pluming in front of him. The front door was wide open as well. Was he too late?

As he entered the interior his hackles rose. The place had been tossed, no doubt about it, but the untouched television and stereo screamed it wasn't a burglary, or at least not a normal one. What if the Warden had been harmed? What if the criminals were still in the house?

Scanning the room with his Protector senses, he detected something "off," but it was nothing he'd ever experienced before. His recent work in the earthquake relief efforts had given his Earth Elemental side a taste of despair, of fury, of sorrow, but not anything resembling this. Even his

days as a soldier through three bloody wars hadn't felt like this.

Voices from the back of the house caught his ear.

Donovan tensed, then shrugged out of his jacket. He wasn't above using the skills he'd excelled at on the battlefield and his Protector power to snatch the Sorhineth and fly his ass right back to San Francisco, weather notwithstanding.

Drawing a well of energy from within, he walked silently down the hallway toward the voices. The key fob in his pocket grew strangely warm against his thigh, but he shook it off as a consequence of drawing power.

Two figures stood in the farthest bedroom—a man and a woman. They both exuded a quiet, competent energy, though it was tinged with anger and more than a little fear. But nothing else ... these two were human as could be and therefore not the threat he'd sensed.

From behind, they were as different as night and day. The woman, Brenna Kennedy he assumed, was tall for a human female and of medium build, with hair the pure, untainted color of sunshine. The man was huge, heavily muscled, and dark as the night.

Donovan drew more power. If it came down to a fight with this man, he would need all the help he could get. Then he saw the words written on the wall and felt a wash of certainty—the woman was indeed the Warden he sought. Behind the surety came a bit of wonder stained with a faint curl of apprehension. What he had sensed before could only be one thing ... a Destroyer. Until this second he'd thought them nothing more than a myth meant to scare Terran children into being good little preternaturals.

All the evil he'd seen in his life, the experiences which had irreparably marred his soul, had been human, not Terran. Why something different had occurred now was ... worrisome.

“Brenna Kennedy?”

Both humans whirled, and the behemoth brought a wicked-looking weapon to bear.

Donovan made a show of not flinching, of not even turning his gaze to his opponent. “I mean you no harm. Are you Brenna Kennedy?”

“Who in the hell are you?” the man growled as he shifted the hooked staff up just beneath Donovan's chin.

Donovan ignored him, focusing on the woman in front of him instead. She looked at him with a startled expression. Eyes which had been widened in fright now dawned with a kind of resigned awe. Aye, she understood what he was. Knew it because it had been bred into her, carried down in genes centuries old.

“It's all right, Tommy.” Her smoky voice slid over him, setting his body jumping in a way he hadn't felt in a very long time. Over forty years, as a matter of fact. Since Angeline.

“You know this guy?”

Donovan answered for her. “I am Donovan Callahan, of the Protector and Earth Element clans. I am Terran.”

Tommy backed up two steps and sat down on the bed hard, suddenly deflated. Interesting. So the male knew the history as well. Good. It would save them all unnecessary explanations.

Brenna Kennedy still stared at him, breath hitching in her throat. He swept her body in one assessing glance. Nice, very nice. Rounded in all the right places, but not something he would

usually notice, not after being around Jenalee and her groupies for as long as he had. But notice he did.

He berated himself. He wasn't here to scope out the local hot chick, but to take back his heritage. With any luck, he'd be on the nine oh five flight back to San Francisco tonight. Then his self-imposed mission of restoring order could begin in earnest. He hadn't decided yet if it was a fool's errand, but some part of him, one that hadn't been burned away by death and destruction demanded he try. His dedication to humans—not Terrans—drove his actions now. The Terrans, with the exception of Jenalee and a few select others, didn't deserve a fragment of his attention. Their dereliction of duty—and his—left a sour taste in his mouth he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to get rid of.

“You're here for it.” Her tone was resigned now, but underneath it he sensed a hint of ... disgust?

“Yes.” He gestured to the words above her bed. “And given what I see behind you, I've come just in time.”

She sighed and sat on the bed next to Tommy. Donovan noticed the similarity in their faces for the first time, now that he wasn't being threatened with bodily harm. Siblings. It was the facial structure, he decided. Unusually shaded blue eyes above high cheekbones and strong mouths. What should have looked masculine on Brenna instead made her appear strong-willed and sexy as hell. Yeah, her mouth was definitely something that caught his attention.

She cast a look at her brother, then her eyes met Donovan's. Her stormy gaze brought to mind rumpled silk sheets and long, sultry nights. Tangled, sweat-slicked bodies and moans of completion.

“You know I can't just hand it over, right? I need to meet with my family, and then I'll have to accompany it.”

Donovan shook his head, both to deny her words and banish the image of her spread out like a feast. “No need, Warden.”

“Uh-uh.” She stood, crossed the space between them in one long step and poked him in the chest. In pumps, she only came to his nose. Donovan bit back an unexpected smile. Feisty, wasn't she? Apparently her earlier discomfiture didn't extend to fear of who and what he was, even when he towered over her by a good six inches. When was the last time someone had stood toe-to-toe with him, unafraid?

Her scent, light, airy, with a hint of jasmine, curled around him, teasing his senses before settling deep in his lungs. His cock jumped in response, and it took an effort not to lean in and find out if she tasted as good as she smelled. Somehow he didn't think she or her brother would appreciate the action.

“The Sorhineth doesn't leave my sight, ever, unless I'm dead. My Gram was exceptionally clear on that point.” Now her voice was flat, brooking no argument.

Donovan tamped down his temper and his body's rapidly rising response to her. Now was not the time. He'd never heard such a thing, but it wasn't surprising, since the Sorhineth and the Wardens had become little more than myth over the last century. Hell, as far as he knew, no one had even tried to contact a Warden in well over a hundred years, and what had happened this year

could only be a direct result of that. Perhaps the direct approach was best.

“You have seen the destruction wrought this last year.”

“Yes I have,” she replied, anger snapping suddenly in her eyes. “And if the Terrans would get off their asses and do their jobs, I’m sure Loma Prieta and Hurricane Hugo wouldn’t have been as bad.”

Donovan dipped his head in acknowledgement and did what he’d always found the hardest. “And that is the reason I am here. Will you help me, Warden Kennedy?”

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Holy shit, a Terran. And what a Terran he was. Big, well-muscled, and tall in a holy-crap-this-guy’s-a-Sequoia way which spoke of outdoor exercise rather than hours spent in a gym. Wearing tailored dark slacks, an immaculate dress shirt and a hideously expensive silk tie, he looked every image the successful businessman ... until he moved. Then you saw the feline grace beneath the suit. The hint of danger. The curl of sensuous lips that could easily be cruel if the situation warranted it. He reminded her a bit of Tommy actually, all dark and brooding and dangerous, but without the massive upper body strength.

And even as she appreciated Callahan as a fine physical specimen, her conscious mind told her that he was scum. Just like the others, letting the world go to Hell in a handbasket and not giving a shit, as long as it made a profit.

She cast a quick glance at her brother. He looked as shell-shocked as she felt. Even with the lore her Gram had passed down, she’d never expected to actually meet one of them in the flesh. It was so much easier to believe in the evil of the Destroyers and the—at best—ineptitude of the Terrans after the awful things she’d seen year after year. And that brought her back to her original accusation.

“That’s all well and good, but where in the hell were you during hurricane season, or in October?”

Callahan exhaled heavily, and she could hear frustration in the sound. He obviously wasn’t someone used to being questioned. She didn’t give a damn. While she might have written off the Sorhineth as a joke before, it sure as hell wasn’t now.

“It’s complicated, and more than I’m willing to go into when *that*,” he gestured to the blood-red letters on the wall, “is staring me in the face. Is there somewhere we can go to talk this through? Somewhere safe?”

Tommy rose, having regained his composure. Now he bulled up to Callahan in a *mano-a-mano* display.

Brenna sighed. They didn’t have the luxury of time for this macho crap, even if she agreed with Tommy for standing up to him. Someone needed to, and it looked like it was going to be her distasteful duty. She raised a hand, stopping her brother before he began to speak. Blown away though she might be, the threat was very real. Only the Terrans, the Destroyers and her family knew of her status as a Warden, and by extension, what the Sorhineth was, according to lore. No one else could have trashed her place and not taken a damned thing.

“Tommy, he’s right, and I don’t want to endanger the rest of the family by showing up at Mama and Papa’s. We can use one of the rooms at work. It’s neutral—and where we need to be. Get the rest of the family together in an hour. We’ll meet you there.”

“I don’t want to leave you alone with this joker. We don’t know enough about him yet.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. He’s Terran, and it’s his right. You know it as well as I do, can feel it as much as I. I need to do this, Tommy. By myself. It’s my heritage. He’s not dangerous to us, just an obligation.”

Tommy looked hard at her, obviously considering her argument, then shrugged, but the motion was forced. “You’re the Warden.” He stooped, giving her a quick, fierce hug. “Be careful, little sister.” Then he turned to Callahan. “I’m holding you personally responsible for her safety. Understand?”

Callahan nodded, one swift movement of his head. Sure, strong, invincible. Too bad that didn’t extend to doing his damned job. “Protecting is what I do best. Have no fear, Tommy Kennedy, we’ll be at the rendezvous site.”

Tommy hefted the grappling hook, propped it over one shoulder and walked down the hall, his shoulders tense, back ramrod straight, as if he was abandoning his duty by leaving her behind. Brenna shook her head. She appreciated the sentiment, more than Tommy would ever know, but it was time for her to stand on her own two feet. Time for her to learn exactly what her legacy meant.

“C’mon, Callahan, let’s boogie before *he* comes back.” She motioned to the ruined wall above her bed with a quick flick of her hand.

He moved quickly enough, and was good to his word. He ranged in front of her, blocking the hallway with his body, a picture of coiled, ready ferocity. If a Destroyer showed up now, she had no doubt Callahan would take care of it, just as he’d promised Tommy.

He retrieved his suit coat, and when they reached the front door, she felt the weight of a protection spell settling over her. It wasn’t something she’d ever experienced before, but recognized nonetheless on almost a cellular level. It felt ... funky. Strange and tingly, as if insects were crawling over her. It wasn’t unpleasant, just ... weird.

“Do you really think that’s necessary?” *Since you haven’t given a shit about any human’s safety ... ever?* She tried to keep the sarcasm out of her voice—if not her thoughts—and must have succeeded, because he just shot her a glance over his shoulder.

“It certainly can’t hurt.”

Good point, that. “How’d you get here?”

“Cab from Logan.” He shouldered through the door, then stopped, blocking the doorway. “Shouldn’t you be retrieving the Sorhineth right about now?”

“It’s not here, otherwise you’d probably sense it.”

“Then where is it?” There was a thin thread of desperation in his voice. Interesting. The Sorhineth meant more to him than he was letting on.

“Safe. No worries, Terran, it’s secure.”

He assessed her with a long look and stepped out into the twilight. She locked the door behind her and hefted her purse on one shoulder, then slid in behind him as they moved toward her Bronco. When she was safely ensconced inside, he slammed the door and moved quickly around the front of the truck, folding himself into the passenger seat and buckling in.

They backed out of the driveway and scooted down the residential street. Brenna looked in the rearview mirror, wondering if it would be the last time she ever saw her house again.

Panic clutched at her chest. She’d never asked for this ... privilege. Why couldn’t her mother have held the position? Then it would be passed on to one of her grandchildren. Instead, the situation was hers to handle. She would succeed or fail on her own.

“How did you find me?”

“KOTE has probably always known the location of the Warden; they just chose not to share it with me, and obviously didn’t feel the need to call upon you. I found you through my best friend, who’s pretty well connected. I’m not sure how she found out.”

“What is this KOTE, and why would they keep me a secret? Heck, why would they even know who I am? We’ve been buried deep for a long, long time.”

Callahan shifted in his seat, stretching his long legs and getting comfortable in the tight confines of the truck. “Keepers of the Environment. Though they obviously haven’t been doing much of that lately. They’re basically the ruling body of Terrans, and have been incorporated as a nonprofit environmental organization since the turn of the century. An Air Keeper by the name of Carlyle Winthrop heads it up now. You’ve probably seen him on television.”

Brenna heard more than a trace of bitterness in his tone, and it surprised her a little. He was right about one thing; she had seen Winthrop on the tube, usually with the starlet of the month draped on his arm. She opened her mouth to ask what in the heck an Air Keeper was, when he continued.

“As for you, they’re perfectly happy in leaving things as they are. We’ve been living with our heads in the damned sand for decades, maybe even centuries. After Loma Prieta I thought they’d *do* something. But no, they just keep on keepin’ on. I couldn’t—won’t—stand by anymore and watch them destroy the earth and humans through sheer apathy. And even though no one really knows what the Sorhineth is anymore, a friend suggested I start with tracking it down.”

Well, that was one hell of a speech. Brenna studied him discreetly, a bit discomfited by his words. Although his tone had remained even, color flagged his cheekbones. He was obviously upset, and while she could certainly understand why, something didn’t jibe.

“Well, I’ve certainly never even heard of KOTE, even though Carlyle Winthrop is a news hog. I wanted to ask you about something you said earlier. What’s an Air Keeper?”

“Air Keepers are Terrans whose signature element is Air; they own their environment and can control it at their disposal.”

Brenna hummed noncommittally and turned his words over in her head. They were *so* in deep shit. She knew next to nothing, and his little rant had thrown her for a loop. He wasn’t what her family had led her to believe. “You’ll have to fill me in on all this ‘Keeper’ stuff as we drive, so I know who and what I’m dealing with.”

She was tempted to let it go, but something still struck her...

“If KOTE’s inaction bugs you so much, why didn’t you do something before?”

He waited a long moment before answering, as if pondering her shift back to their original subject, and when he did, his voice was tired. “Because until a few months ago I was just like them.”

* * * *

Donovan realized he had to be up front with Brenna if he was going to convince her to return to San Francisco with him willingly, but saying the words aloud pained him more than he’d imagined. It was hard to admit you hadn’t given a damn until devastation unfolded in your own backyard.

He’d hardened his heart to everything after World War Two, having seen too much, experienced too much, for anything to faze him anymore. But Loma Prieta had changed that,

given him back a measure of humanity he thought he'd lost in France.

For her to understand what she was getting into, he had to tell her the rest. But first...

"How did the Destroyer know to find you?"

"I don't know, but it's weird they'd be searching for the Sorhineth within hours of your arrival, isn't it?"

Donovan cocked his head and looked at her. She was beautiful in an understated way, with classic features artfully emphasized by careful make-up. Highlighted blonde hair was held back in a chignon, leaving her face open to his inspection. His first glance back at her house hadn't done her justice. Her overall "look" was accentuated by casual yet elegant clothes ... form-fitting tan slacks and blazer and a tailored eggplant blouse. He smirked. If it weren't for Jenalee, he wouldn't know eggplant from fuchsia, but spending almost ninety years, off and on, with a singer who reveled in the finer things had definitely broadened his palette.

Regardless of how Brenna looked, she exuded a quiet strength and competence he recognized in male and female warriors the world over. And her question deserved an answer, even if he didn't have one.

He rubbed a hand over his face tiredly, the adrenaline leaking out of his system like a balloon. He shouldn't be this fatigued. He'd seen and done things that would make most men wet their damned pants, but this trip, and the concept behind it, had taken more out of him than he'd imagined possible.

"Weird ... the Destroyer and I arrived almost at the heels of each other? Yes, definitely. I wish I had an answer for you, but I don't. While I know, instinctively, that a Destroyer was in your house, I've never dealt with them personally, at least not to my knowledge."

Brenna merged onto the freeway seamlessly, windshield wipers pushing away fat flakes of snow as they plopped on the glass. He wasn't so wasted that he couldn't appreciate her driving skills.

"Then it appears we've got a lot to figure out from each other, because it sounds like we're in the same boat. Gram passed some of her knowledge down to me through my Mom before she died, but I can't even read the Sorhineth. Trust me, I've tried."

"Then let's hope I can."

*

Brenna punched the accelerator and wove between the thickening Friday afternoon traffic slowed by the storm, her attention flickering between the traffic ahead of her and the side mirror. As much as she disliked everything Donovan Callahan stood for, his protestations notwithstanding, she still had a job to do. "Sedan following us, two cars back. You can look, windows are smoked."

Callahan twisted in his seat, glanced out the rear window, then faced forward again.

"Any chance you can you lose him?"

"Hell, yeah."

"Even in this weather and traffic?"

They were approaching a traditional Boston bottleneck ... the approach to the Central Artery and the stop-and-go construction that always seemed to be in mid-phase. If she was going to do

something, now was the time.

“*Especially* in this traffic. If he ain’t local, there’s no way he can tail me, and even if he is, this snow will make it much harder.” It sounded like bragging, but she’d been driving these streets for almost ten years. It didn’t hurt that her oldest brother Terry was a cop and had taught her more than most defensive driving courses ever could. Of all the training she’d struggled through, driving was what she’d been best at, the thing she felt most comfortable with.

Zippering in between smaller cars, she waited until the sedan was in the middle lane, then flipped the truck into four-wheel drive, rumbled over the freeway shoulder, and gunned down the median past gaping construction workers before thunking back onto the freeway ahead of the pack. Thank God for Ford’s new on-the-fly drive train. There was no way in hell a sedan would be able to get into the median with its low clearance, and as she’d said, the snow made it an even bigger deterrent.

Disengaging the four-wheel drive, she floored the accelerator, flying down the sparsely populated lanes and onto the elevated freeway, leaving their pursuer far behind.

“Damn, woman, that was slick.” Callahan grinned at her unabashedly. It was the first time she’d seen anything but consternation or a carefully blank expression on his face, and it made her heart beat faster than their little expedition into the grass.

“Aim to please.” She smiled back without thinking, adrenaline spiking through her body.

“So, where exactly are we going?”

“Where do you go when you want a book?”

He looked at her blankly.

“The library, of course!”

Chapter Two

Donovan breathed in the scent of books and knowledge, truly comfortable for the first time since he’d boarded his flight. He might have spent his formative years on the battlefields with Patton, in the trenches with the Legion, and as a mercenary in Cambodia, but he hadn’t totally ignored his brain. His checkered past had led to a degree in International Affairs quite nicely. Not that he’d used it, but it had come in handy once or twice when he was guarding some of his more high-profile clients.

Brenna walked beside him, heels clicking on the parquet floor. She surprised him, this Warden. She’d shown no hesitation in losing their pursuer, using offensive driving moves which rivaled his men’s—in the middle of a snowstorm, no less—and now strode through the library as if she owned it.

When they reached the checkout desk he understood why.

“Dr. Kennedy, you’re back.” The teenaged male clerk greeted her with an infatuated grin.

“Hey, Art. My family will be rolling through in a few minutes. Shoot them back to the reference room, all right?”

“You got it.” Art eyeballed Donovan in a decidedly unfriendly fashion, undoubtedly seeing him as competition. After this afternoon, Donovan wondered if he wasn’t right, at least a little bit. Where Brenna had been pretty in an arresting way before, now she was downright commanding, and her surety was a total turn-on.

If it weren’t for the circumstances, he’d consider pursuing her. He and Jenalee had never had

a binding relationship, especially not lately, and each dabbled as they wished. Never mind the fact she played the field far more often than he these days. It hadn't bothered him then and didn't now. Neither of them had ever wanted more, and it sustained their friendship. Hell, Jenalee was his best friend, even if they'd diverged more often than agreed lately. She always had been, probably always would be.

Many thought it strange that someone with his past had formed such an attachment to someone as gloriously feminine as Jenalee, but when you spent as much time with men as he had, seen the downright ugly shit he'd lived through, reveling in the sweet scents, soft bodies and totally different minds of the female of the species made perfect sense. It was also an amazingly good way to forget, and he'd excelled in it for the last fifteen years.

They entered a cavernous room centered by a long oak conference table. Books crowded every conceivable space. They weren't the bestsellers lining the shelves out in the main room, but rather tomes which showed their age and importance in every wrinkle of the leather, every crease in the spine. There was so much mortal knowledge here it sent a shiver up Donovan's spine. *This* was power.

"All this is yours?"

She turned and smiled, and it was the first genuine emotion he'd seen from her. It lit the room. "In a way. I've been the head librarian here for two years, but worked the stacks through high school and college."

"Let me guess, Harvard?"

"Naw, too snooty. Boston College."

Donovan laughed, and it echoed, picking up energy as his life force melded with the ancient authority of the words in the room. Ah yes, this was power at its finest and it coursed through his body, centering on his talisman of choice, the key fob. He could stay here twenty-four hours a day and never tire of the rush.

"How did you do that?" Brenna whispered.

"Not sure, but damned if it didn't feel good."

Another voice interrupted them. "Brenna, you in here?"

"Hey, Terry, c'mon in."

Donovan turned and saw a hulking cop, blue uniform bulging at the shoulders and arms. He felt an instant kinship with the man, recognizing a fellow warrior in his stance and bearing. After meeting Tommy, it made him wonder if Brenna was the only human-sized person in her family.

His question was answered as Tommy, construction worker Troy and cardiovascular surgeon Tim entered, just moments apart, all equally large. Since all were still in uniform, it was easy to identify them even without Brenna's introduction. When her parents entered the room and took their seats, their odd little circle was complete. The men favored their father, Brenna her stylish but simply dressed mother, and the love between the whole unit was obvious. It reminded Donovan of his own family, but without all the siblings.

And in that moment, he missed his mother and father so much it was almost a physical ache. He would have gone to them for counsel on this whole situation, his recent change of heart, everything. But they were in the Amazon on their latest crusade to save the rain forests, and completely out of touch. They probably had no idea Hurricane Hugo or Loma Prieta had even happened ... they would have been home in a flash if they had.

"So, Brenna girl." Kennedy senior—Michael—took control of the meeting and scattered Donovan's morose thoughts into the wind. "What's this all about?" He threw a pointed look at

Donovan.

“Allow me to introduce you to Donovan Callahan. He’s come from…” She paused and looked at him quizzically. “I don’t rightly know.”

“San Francisco,” he supplied with a tight smile.

“San Francisco. He’s here for the Sorhineth.”

Total silence met her statement, and Donovan felt six pairs of eyes boring into him, measuring him. None of those gazes were overly friendly.

He looked at each face in turn, making eye contact, making no pains to hide the aura of power he usually subdued so as not to frighten humans.

“Ah, at long last, a Terran.” The declaration came from Maggie, the matriarch. Her voice was pleased, but wary, as if she’d been waiting for—and dreading—this moment.

Donovan cleared his throat. He hadn’t dealt with many humans who understood who and what he was. “Do all of you have the sight?”

Michael answered, his tone bland. “All but me.”

“Not quite,” Maggie cut in. “The boys and I can tell what you are, but Brenna is the only one with full Warden perception. It was passed down from my mother, as was the family name.”

“Enough niceties,” Tommy cut in. “We all know he’s Terran. Brenna, tell them about your house. About the Destroyer.”

Maggie’s admonition on his manners was overlaid by four male voices demanding an explanation.

Donovan quieted the melee by casting a silence spell. It wasn’t his forte, but it worked. When he was certain they got his point, he lifted the enchantment.

They all stared at him, mouths agape. Brenna recovered first, and with admirable aplomb.

“A Destroyer ‘visited’ my house, obviously looking for the Sorhineth. Trashed it pretty good, and then Callahan showed up.”

“Are you all right?” asked Tim, his doctor’s instincts obviously kicking in.

“Yeah. He was long gone by the time I got home, but someone followed us from the house.”

“What?” Tommy bolted upright, fury and fear slamming off him in waves.

The man was definitely protective of his sister, even more so than the others. While Donovan could appreciate the emotion, he didn’t have the time or inclination to deal with it right now.

“It’s cool, I lost him back at the Central Artery.”

Tommy settled back into his seat, but still glowered.

“So it’s begun,” Maggie said quietly.

“Mom?” Brenna asked.

“You’ll need more than the Sorhineth for this journey, for this trial. You’ll need this.” Maggie pulled a slim book out of her handbag and slid it across the table.

Donovan felt a curious sensation against his hip, and dipped his hand into his slacks pocket. The key fob gifted to him by the old Terran buzzed against his palm, sensual, warm, and curiously comforting. Even though he could recognize, in his conscious mind, that the journal Maggie had handed over was important, his talisman reinforced it, acknowledged it. He wondered what in the hell the old Terran had given him.

Brenna picked the book up and ran her fingertips over the cloth cover. “Is this what I think it is?”

“Aye,” Michael replied. “Your mother found it earlier today, in a box pushed into a corner of

the attic. A box all of us mysteriously overlooked for years.”

Donovan’s thoughts raced as he withdrew his hand and ran it through his hair. A time capsule spell? He vaguely remembered one of his friends in the City mentioning something about it, but that’s where his recollection stopped. At the time, it hadn’t seemed important. Now, given the timing and the curious reaction of an inanimate object? He didn’t believe in coincidences. “What is it?”

“A diary of sorts, something even my mother had never seen. But she knew about it, told us stories,” answered Maggie. “I felt it pulling at me the second I went upstairs. To be honest, I have no idea what I even went up there for.”

Donovan tried to picture the cultured woman sitting across from him crawling through a dusty attic of her own volition. “It was bespelled, I’m sure,” he offered, “for you to feel it calling to you today, of all days.”

Michael grunted in agreement while Maggie simply looked at him with her daughter’s clear blue eyes and a shrewd soul all her own.

“How is it you’ve come to us, Terran?” The question was from the cop, Terry, and given the human’s occupation, was something he could understand being asked.

“Something needs to be done to restore balance. It’s not just the environment, but the geopolitical undertones, as well. Tiananmen Square should have never happened and don’t even get me started on the Valdez. That was one of the biggest fuck-ups I’ve ever seen. Loma Prieta was it for me. I need the Sorhineth to figure out what to do, and have a trusted source in the City that’ll help us decipher it.”

“So it’s San Francisco, then?” Brenna asked, her voice all business.

Donovan shifted his attention back to her, and was struck once again by not only her beauty, but by the air of confidence she wore like a crown. “Yeah, at least for starters. I’ve got a nine o’clock flight out of Logan. Point me to a phone and I’ll get you on it.”

“Ah, small problem. I don’t fly.” Her voice was one tone shy of being embarrassed, but her gaze was straightforward, unflinching.

“Pardon?”

“She’s afraid to fly, numbnuts.”

Donovan held his patience in check. Barely. Tommy obviously didn’t like him much. The feeling was definitely becoming mutual.

“It doesn’t matter anyway,” Terry broke in. “All flights out of Logan are cancelled due to the weather.”

“Fine. I’ll get a rental car.” At this point, Donovan would hire a damned rickshaw to shut Tommy up.

“We can take my truck,” Brenna offered, extending an olive branch while she shot a dirty look at her brother.

“No, he knows what it looks like, or at least someone does. Actually,” he mused, “road travel is probably better. It’ll give us time to figure out how to read the Sorhineth and your book.” He waved a hand at the slim tome sitting in front of Brenna. “If this Destroyer knows I was coming here, we’ll probably need that knowledge when we get to San Francisco.”

“I guess that rules out me going back to my place for my stuff.” Brenna’s tone was rueful.

Donovan thought fast. “Unfortunately, yes. We’ll pick up some things for both of us on the road.”

“Tonight? I was hoping you could at least stay for dinner.” Maggie’s voice was plaintive,

and Donovan guessed she wanted another night with her daughter.

“They can’t.” Terry’s words rung with conviction.

“Why the fuck not?”

Yeah, Tommy was definitely the hothead of the family.

“Tommy, watch your language.”

“Because they know who she is, and by extension, us as well. They need to leave now, and so do we. Brenna was headed this way, and if they could find her at home, the library isn’t much of a stretch, nor our homes.”

Shit. Donovan hadn’t thought of that. It had been enough to get away, to set his plan in motion. It had felt so good to do something that mattered again, he hadn’t taken the time to plan. Instead, he’d simply acted, and in doing so, could very well have led a Destroyer straight to the Sorhineth. The lack of attention to detail galled him; he’d spent too many years pampering celebrities who didn’t really need security, but felt they deserved it as a perk.

“Damn, boy, you’re right. Call your families and have them pack a few things. We’ll head up the coast to the cabin. No one’s going to find us unless they plan on skiing in.” Michael Kennedy wasn’t one to waste action either, apparently. “There’s no need to rent a car, you can take the Jag. It’s registered to the firm, so tracing it would be more trouble than our Destroyer is likely to make. Plus, it’s more than heavy enough to make it through the snow.” He dug in a pocket and tossed the keys on the table.

“Sir, while I appreciate the gesture, I can afford to rent a car.” Donovan forced his voice to remain respectful, even as he resented the control being wrested from him.

Michael pushed away from the table and stood, followed by the rest of his family. “But you can’t afford the time, son, none of us can. You’ll have your mobile phone, Brenna?”

Donovan rose to his feet as well, a bit bemused by the quick turn of events. In retrospect, this meeting would probably be amusing, given the fact he’d totally lost control of it, but right now his own sloppiness was pissing him off.

“Yeah, Dad, I’ll transfer it over from my truck.” Brenna walked around the table and gave her parents, then her brothers a hug. The family began to file out of the room. All except for Tommy. He stood in the doorway, filling it.

“I meant what I said before, Callahan. You fuck this up and I’m coming after you. Then I’ll let the rest of the boys have a turn.” His voice with rough with possession and something else, maybe a hint of jealousy because Donovan was taking care of something he couldn’t.

So Donovan answered in kind, letting Brenna’s brother know exactly where they stood. “Not that it’ll happen, but I might just enjoy that.”

“I don’t give a shit what you are, Terran. You bleed just as easily as the rest of us.” He turned and left, leaving Donovan and Brenna alone.

“Sorry. He gets overprotective.” Brenna turned to the wall of books and pulled out a small, unremarkable tome. Setting it on the table, she rooted behind where it had been placed and removed a much larger book, its cover worn smooth by the passage of time and loving hands. The red leather cover almost glowed under the institutional lighting, giving the impression it lived and breathed. Power seethed for a moment, expanding throughout the room before flashing back into the book as if it never was.

“Holy crap. It’s never done anything like that before.” Brenna’s voice was awestruck—and something else Donovan couldn’t put his finger on.

She gathered it to her chest as if protecting it and turned to face him. Tears winked briefly in

her eyes, then were blinked back.

“Brenna...” Her expression cut something loose inside him, had him stepping forward to comfort, to offer reassurances ... about what he had no idea. Protection was about physically securing the client, not seeing to their emotional needs.

She swung out of reach, giving him her back as she scooped up her enormous purse. “No worries, Callahan. It just snuck up on me for a sec. C’mon, let’s hit the road.”

* * * *

And so they did just that. Brenna dumped the mobile phone case in the back seat and slid behind the wheel of the Jag, inhaling the rich smell of leather and old money. That entitlement had been her legacy, her normalcy, since she was born, as much as the title of Warden. The engine turned over noiselessly and she pulled out of the parking garage.

Fast. This was all happening so freakin’ fast it made her head spin. She wasn’t remotely prepared for this, but knew what she was doing was right. It felt right. Even if Donovan Callahan made her body do a quick rumba.

The man in question shifted in the seat, and the clean, spicy scent of him wafted through the close air of the car. It set her senses on fire as her mind rebelled. “Can I borrow your mobile? I need to let my people know of the change in plans.”

She gulped, then answered quickly. “Sure. The bag’s on the back seat.”

She watched him gingerly root around in the big bag and grinned, though the action was a complete contradiction to what was going on around them. What was it about men and purses? While the carryall wasn’t a purse, he was sure acting like it was.

He finally found it and punched in a number, then held it to his ear. The enormous phone looked almost small in his huge hand.

For all his dark coloring, his eyes were amazingly light, almost topaz. And that voice, holy cow. Gravelly and tough, even when he was being polite, as he had with her parents. With Tommy, though, he’d been totally in control, and more than a match for her hotheaded bro.

The tone of his voice now brought her out of her musings.

“Where’s Jenalee, dammit!” She could hear a tinny reply, but couldn’t make out the words.

“Don’t give me that shit, Mark. Tell me and tell me now.” A pause, then, “Oh, Jesus.” He dropped his forehead into his palm. “No, I’m driving back. Long story. I’ll be there within the week, depending on road conditions. Listen, I know you weren’t a hundred percent behind this whole search, but it’s obviously put a bug up someone’s ass. Jenalee was the only Terran who knew exactly where I was going, and the Warden’s place here got turned upside down as well. There’s no doubt it’s a Destroyer; he left a message on the wall above her bed. Watch your step, and don’t tell anyone what Julian found at Jenalee’s, all right? Just tell everyone she’s sick and went down to her place in Mexico to recoup. Tell them I’m with her. And call me at this number if you hear anything.”

He gave the number, disconnected, then swore as he raised his head, a long colorful string of Gaelic curse words Brenna had heard coming from her father, but never dared ask the meaning of.

“What’s wrong?” He didn’t look good. Not good at all. Coming from a man as decidedly alpha as Donovan Callahan, it was more than a little unsettling. It also blew her preconceived notions about them not giving a shit completely to hell.

“I think I know how the Destroyer found you.”

“Come again?” That was certainly not the response she’d expected.

“My best friend, the one who sent me to you, disappeared, and it sounds like her place was just as trashed as yours.”

“And they have no idea where she is?” While Brenna found it odd a man as virile as Callahan would have a woman as a “best friend,” something else in his conversation had caught her ear.

“No.” His reply was curt.

Then it jelled in her mind. San Francisco. Jenalee.

“Not *the* Jenalee? She’s Terran?” Brenna pictured the woman’s face, beautiful and ethereal, remembered her as she’d seen her on TV earlier this year, belting out an award-winning song at the Grammy’s.

“Yeah. And now *the* Jenalee is missing. Not that we’ll get any help from KOTE—they don’t care about anything but the bottom line.”

“It sounds like this KOTE of yours needs to be kicked in the ass. They should be out looking for her.” As soon as the words were out she wished them back. She didn’t know enough about KOTE or Donovan Callahan to make such brash statements.

“But they won’t. They never do anything.” His anger was palpable, and easier to take than his well-hidden concern had been.

“How did Jenalee know where I was?”

“I told you earlier. Jenalee travels in higher social circles than I do, with Winthrop and the mucky-mucks. I don’t screw around with politics.”

His voice was flat, deadly calm, and she knew with utter certainty he was telling the truth. Donovan Callahan didn’t play well with others, at least when they had an agenda he thought was bullshit. That heartened her, if nothing else, because she could understand it. And when he continued, it was in the same tone.

“She’s probably always known where you were, but didn’t give it to me until she thought I couldn’t take any more. She was right.”

Interesting, but even more so was this sudden insight into his personality. This guy was exactly the opposite of what she’d been led to believe would appear on her doorstep someday. She wondered if he was as accomplished an actor as his “best friend.” “So who did you talk to just now?”

“Mark Winbolt, my second-in-command. He’s the primary while I’m gone.”

“So that’s something, right? I’m assuming you only hire the best.”

“Yeah, but I should be there.”

“And instead you’re stuck here with me because I’m afraid to fly and Logan is snowed in.”

He twisted in the seat, his face stark in the greenish lights of the dashboard. “Don’t even think that. You certainly can’t control the weather, and your fear of flying wouldn’t have mattered, considering Mother Nature.”

Brenna took a moment to consider the dichotomy of his statement. Donovan Callahan was alpha as hell, but didn’t hesitate to say when he didn’t know something and exhibited a concern

for his friend she found ... reassuring. Yeah, he rang all her bells all right, and in more than a physical way as each word dropped from his mouth.

They were on the interstate now, and Brenna gunned the accelerator. Full winter darkness had fallen and the roads were mostly clear on this side of town.

Donovan leaned back against the headrest, and Brenna could see the lines of fatigue bracketing his mouth and eyes. He probably thought they were hidden by the darkness.

"I know this is probably late to ask, but do you know the fastest way to San Francisco? You heard what I told Mark about our timeline, but I'd like to be there as soon as possible."

Brenna's lips curved into a smile. "No, but there's an atlas in the glove box. We'll figure it out after we get out of Boston. How long have you been up, anyway?"

"Since about four this morning, Pacific time."

"Rest for a bit. I'll wake you up when I need a break."

"I couldn't sleep. Too much going on in my head."

"Try. If we're going to make a speed run to California, you'll need to be rested to take over the driving. Go ahead, just close your eyes."

He did, and within five minutes was fast asleep.

Brenna glanced at him, and suppressed a wince. How could her body so totally react to this Terran when her conscious mind found his kind so abhorrent? Even if his words and actions had redeemed his people marginally, he was still Terran, still part of a race that had turned self-interest into a badge of pride. His own words confirmed that.

So why could she so easily picture herself twined in his arms, fucking in positions she'd only read about? Just the thought of it quickened her breathing, made her pussy clench with sudden, flaming desire. Callahan's scent curled around her, and suddenly she wasn't just thinking about his embrace, she felt it, even though he was still slumped against the seat, asleep.

Brenna shook her head to clear the image. She needed to concentrate on the road, not the disturbingly sexy man lying almost comatose beside her.

But as much as she tried to ignore it, her skin tingled and burned as if his fingers were inscribing playful, passionate circles. She barely fought off a groan of pure ecstasy when that warmth moved to her breasts, bringing her nipples to hard, aching peaks, then moved leisurely to her clit and then her pussy. What was happening to her? This was much more vivid than her usually imaginative fantasies ... disturbingly so.

She pulled the car to the side of the turnpike and rolled down the window, letting the frigid air and the occasional snowflake cool her overheated body and mind.

And when she felt almost normal again, she pulled back onto the road while Callahan slept, completely oblivious to what he'd done to her.