

Royal Affliction

By Jennifer A Marsh

Chapter One

The mist was thick, encasing the field in a haze and masking every shape or shadow. Though it was hard to judge, I knew that it was not of this world, but neither was it of my own. I was caught somewhere between Kortis and the human realm. I grabbed the thin, silver chain around my neck, pulling the six-inch knife from between my breasts and removing its sheath. My reflection in the blade was as blurred as my perception of this place, only the glowing sapphire of my eyes echoed back at me.

This golden knife was a parting gift from my mother. It had been a not so subtle indication that I was not going to be safe in my choice to leave. We'd all heard the stories of the lives this blade had taken in the past. It had once brought back peace to my world during the Boru's attempt to rise.

"Hello?" My voice reverberated back at me. But another voice caught my attention, a gruff, masculine one telling me someone else was present. "Hestruda ger mahl, termalas de cakra."

The language he spoke was not one I knew, but seemed so familiar I was sure I did. The long hisses with groan-like undertones echoed in my brain, stirring memories of Kortis I didn't know I had. Louder and louder the voice grew, flowing more freely and becoming more of a rhythmic chant with every word. I clasped my hands to my ears, willing the noise to stop with my head and screams. And then, with one last hiss, "Siqu, Quartessa," it did.

Complete silence resumed. This man knew my name, and, without understanding how I

knew it, he wanted me dead. I grasped the handle of the blade tight in my fist, poised to defend myself. My ears were alert for whichever direction he might attack.

The sky shifted from nothing to scarlet, casting an eerie red glow on everything around me. A breeze blew in, dispersing most of the fog, yet still revealed nothing to be seen. A flash of yellow through the ruby sky left me blinded, my vision returning in time to leap back as the light hit the dirt an inch from my feet with such severity that it shook the ground, cracking it in two.

My instinct for survival was the only thing keeping me upright as the floor crumbled away beneath me. I took off at a sprint, desperate for an escape.

There was a rock on the floor and though my eyes missed it my foot did not. I took to the air but hit the ground hard. My outstretched palm and knife-laden fist struck first before my face and body joined them. Then, I slid.

The pain was beyond anything I'd ever known. I could feel the skin separating from the muscles and the blood flowing freely down my face and wrists. I tried to fight back the tears. I failed. I tried not to look at my wounds, giving me deniability that they were real. My hands crunched beneath the weight of something heavy, forcing my eyes and mouth to open wide. A pair of black shiny boots were standing on my mutilated hands. I tried to look up but my neck protested and my face hit the ground with another thud into my own pooled blood. I was on my back before I noticed being moved, staring up at the man now standing over me. This was no human, but I'd long since ruled out that possibility.

The man was man in gender alone. The material covering his body was not skin, but green glowing scales. His pupils were blood-red and diamond shaped, surrounded in an oval of toxic-waste. His hair was the color of weathered algae but softer, as if spun from silk and nearly half the length of him.

“Dekem?” The word rolled off my tongue. I knew the name from tales of my home but had no idea of how my brain had connected it with this man. Once said out loud I was certain it was him. This was the former King of the Boru? Only after my eyes caught sight of the gilded weapon in his slender fingers, did I notice that my hand now lay empty. He possessed the blade, the one that, by my father’s own words, had killed him some centuries before.

The figure smiled, flashing his elongated, knife-sharp teeth. “Dekem?” he repeated with somewhat of a scoff. “Not quite.”

“Fuck you! My father killed you, Boru!” This I knew as fact. King Dobbin, my father and ruler of my kind, was many things, but he was no liar.

A boot to the cheek was his first retort. The left side of my head cracked my own shoulder bone. He watched me with unnatural enthusiasm. I couldn’t give up. I’d fought too hard to have my own life that I alone could control. I wasn’t about to let this prick take that away from me, not after all that I’d sacrificed. I brought my knee up hard, aiming for the weakness between his knees. He caught it before it made contact and the loud crack that followed was drowned out by the sheer volume of my scream. My leg fell to the floor, a tangled mess.

“Thank you, Quartessa.”

“For what?” I spat through clenched teeth while analyzing the situation and how I could make it to my advantage. There was none. I was too wounded to fight, he had taken my only weapon and since he had brought me here I was certain he’d allowed for no escape.

“Yes, your father did kill Dekem as you have so...tactlessly stated. With this very knife, in fact.” He drew the knife closer to his face, evaluating the oceanic designs inlaid in the hilt. “How fitting. I am also honored you find me so highly in my own father’s likeness.” He gave a small bow that showed just how proud he was and despite my agony I rolled my eyes. “And

though my kind was banished long ago from Kortis, we have a new hope for retribution...you.”
He leaned in close, his face just far enough from mine to keep me from biting him and his voice softened a bit. “And that is why I must thank you, Princess. But, let me thank you properly.”

I gasped as the knife pierced my chest, the very same that I’d held against my heart these few years as a sense of security. With a grunt he pulled the knife from my body. My head grew lighter as he raised his palms to the bloody sky and said an incantation.

“Getalsias guis termalas sis que cakra.”

The ground trembled once again beneath my body that was giving way to its bitter death. Memories flickered in and out of my vision, my mother, my father, my brother, my best friend and my home, not until now did I realize just how much I missed them all. My heart stopped, my eyes, still staring in horror at this creature that was Dekem’s son sought on revenge, glazed over, and as my mind faded it clung to the last words he spoke: “The spell is complete. We now move forward.”

My eyes had not yet opened but my body was already alert, shaking with the amount of adrenalin pumping through it. I hadn’t even realized that I was sitting straight up in bed until the room, not the ceiling, came into focus before my eyes. My breath was short and labored as beads of sweat dripped down my brow, stinging my eyes.

I’d like to say that this was a rare occurrence, but I’d given up on that prospect a while back. This blessing had become a morning ritual, but something I’d be more than happy to live without. My nightgown clung to my damp skin so I tossed it on the floor before heading for the bathroom.

Sleep was a necessity that I lacked, and it showed in the deep bags under my eyes. I

ignored the mirror, splashed some cold water on my face and sat down on the edge of the bathtub to think. The details of this evening's nightmare were no more memorable than the one the night before, or the night before that. For three weeks now I'd tried to remember why I was being jerked awake but the details of this dream, like all the rest, were leaving my head faster than I could grab hold of them. In the end I remembered nothing.

It was four a.m., another familiarity I was not fond of seeing on my clock. Whereas I'd tried to go back to sleep during the first week of these bouts, I'd come to the sad realization that these nightmares had become my alarm, without a snooze button. A run was always good for clearing my head so I threw on some sweats and did a quick glance in the mirror to make sure I looked halfway decent before heading out.

If someone were to look at me, they would see an attractive, twenty-three-year-old woman with medium brown hair, luminous blue eyes, and a slender form with subtle curves. The shape of this person might have been me, but the features were far from it, well, except for the eyes, those were all mine. I wore a gold band on my middle finger, the word "Quartessa," engraved on the underside. This was my connection to this world, hidden within it was a concealment spell which hid my true appearance from being shown to the public at large and outing me as some sort of freak or alien.

Though mirrors reflected a false image, I could see my real self if I looked hard enough. Whether it was me I was seeing or just what my brain remembered me to look like, I didn't know. I wouldn't have called myself beautiful, but I'd always thought myself pretty. I loved my eyes most because they weren't your average human blue eyes. They were both bright and vibrant, standing out on my face like two shimmering pools of water. My hair was a dark shade of turquoise with subtle sapphire highlights, falling just to my shoulders with a little natural wave

near the ends. My skin had just a kiss of pale blue over a flawless white backdrop. It was shade I dearly missed. It was weird knowing that, when others looked at me, they didn't see...*me*.

I'd lived in this human world for a little over three years now, but it had been about a month since I'd moved into this quiet apartment complex in Folsom, California. I loved the area. The people were nice, but typically minded their own business, the weather was pleasant, no real extremes, and the scenery was just beautiful. It was nothing compared to the home I'd left behind though, a place so vibrant, it could never be of this world, but it wasn't. Though I'd accepted this as my home now, I did miss Kortis.

As I tiptoed down the stairs, trying not to wake my still sleeping neighbors, someone said, "Hey Tessa," and I automatically grunted in reply. It was *way* too early for some morning chitchat, but I turned around anyway despite my urge to keep on walking.

It was Clifton Hurst, my downstairs neighbor. He was sitting on the half-wall of his small patio and smiling at me in a way that told me that he'd already been up for hours. No one looks that perky at four a.m., *no one!*

Clifton was a nice looking man. He was a little older than me with long, dark-blonde hair that fell well past his shoulder blades. The thing that always caught my attention first were his eyes, they were such a dazzling shade of green that they seem too bright to be natural. I always assumed he wore color contacts.

It was obvious that Clifton was interested in me, he'd made that evident on the first day I'd met the guy. He'd spotted me hauling my stuff up the flight of stairs and just about tripped over himself in his haste to help. I had to admit to myself that I'd thought of taking him up on one of his offers to hang out but my resolve was stronger than my libido. It wasn't that I didn't like him. I did. But I'd only had one real relationship and it had ended in a way I'd wished I

could forget. I didn't feel like being forced to move again because of a failed tryst with my neighbor. *It's stupid to get involved with someone you would see on a regular basis, right?* Though that wasn't all that kept me from him. The fact that I wasn't human was my biggest hindrance.

"What are you doing up this early?" I asked with a sly tone. We had kind of an odd relationship as neighbors. He liked me and wanted to get to know me more; I kept from letting him know that I liked him and avoided long exposure to him whenever possible.

His smile widened. "Are you coming to my party tonight?"

"Probably not, I have to work and I'll be home late." I didn't tell him my estimated arrival time and hoped he didn't pry.

He looked, it seemed, through me rather than at me. It almost felt as if he was seeing me as I really was, not the mask I wore. That gaze made me feel both uncomfortable and vulnerable.

Without another word I turned away from him, shook off the awkwardness, and continued my way down the stairs and along the cement path. "I'll be up late! Stop by when you get home if you feel like it!" he shouted after me, not bothering to keep his voice down. A dog barked in the near distance and the lights turned on in a few homes, not to forget the loud "Shut up!" that someone yelled. With my back to him, I raised my left arm straight in the air, letting him know that I had heard him but not implying if I would go or not. When I reached the edge of the complex, I put my headphones in my ear, cranked some old Nine Inch Nails, and took off at full speed.

I am a Zolera, another species of beings not from this human realm in which I currently reside. In Kortis I was a woman in a man's world. I had no choices of my own. Everything was

done for me and I hated and resented that fact. Two days before my nineteenth birthday my father had told me the news that had sealed my decision to leave: It was decided that I would wed his best warrior, Kafkus. He'd asked for my hand and I had no say in the matter. My only choice had been to go, to leave the safety and comfort of the only world I'd ever known for the prospect of freedom. I had made a vow to myself to never take that freedom for granted.

I adapted with some effort and loved being able to figure things out for myself for a change. Daily chores like cooking my own meals and even cleaning my own clothes held meaning to me when others would gladly hire someone to do them. I loved running most of all, there was just something so liberating about it. Though no matter how fast I ran, I could never escape myself.

I took the same route that I always did: through the park and along the river, and stopped at a park bench in front of the Folsom dam for a breather. The sounds of running water mixed with the morning chirping of the birds were just mesmerizing. The sun had just broken through the trees, showering me with little bits of light and warming my body. I took it all in and dazed off in a peaceful bliss for a while before a familiar memory snuck into my conscious mind.

I was swimming in the ocean with my best friend Violet when Quino, a member of my father's royal guard, had called out to me of a meeting with my father. It was not an uncommon occurrence so I headed towards the shore without a second thought.

My father's study was just as it ever was, full of parchments and books with spells and the history of my world. One thing that struck me as odd though, was the fact that guard members were never invited to this room, yet Kafkus stood next to the window overlooking the ocean. His turquoise hair framed his face in an arrogant sort of way and his eyes were on me

though I'd only glanced at him.

"You asked for me father?" I gave a small curtsy to Kafkus and he gave me an overdone bow in return. My father gripped both my hands tight in his own that were much larger than mine. His eyes were happy, the edges of his lips turned a tad upwards. I stared at him, not sure what to think as he had given me nothing to expect. "Father?"

He glanced at Kafkus who had stealthily moved closer to me before speaking. "Tomorrow shall be a glorious day."

"If you are talking about my birthday celebration, then yes, it should be...pleasant."

He looked a bit conflicted, as if he'd forgotten. "Yes, your celebration, among other things." My father took my hand, placing into the palm of the man next to me.

"No," I whispered, still unable to believe what was happening. Did my father not know me at all? I ripped my hand from Kafkus', not even bothering to look at him.

My father's face turned ridged, his voice quite stern. "You forget your place, daughter."

"Daily. You cannot and you will not choose my husband, father. I would sooner sever my own hand from my wrist than let you give it to this man." I didn't look at Kafkus though I could feel his hurt eyes.

"If I may, my King, ask for a moment alone with your daughter."

"It seems I, her father and her King, cannot force her to do anything." He shoved an intrusive finger in my face. "Ask her!"

Kafkus' face turned to me though I still did not return the gesture. "Princess, may I please speak with you in private so that I may express my intensions in a way th—"

"There will be no need," I interrupted before addressing my father. "Did you expect me to let you decide my future without a fight?"

“Your future was decided before you were born! I expect you to act like the princess you are and fulfill your rightful duties!”

“And what if I no longer wish to be your princess?” My words were blasphemy. I knew that, but I didn’t care. All my life I’d been told what to do. Rather than embrace it, I rebelled whenever I could. My father’s face was unreadable, as it typically was, but I knew my words had cut deep. This had not been our first disagreement about my royal duties.

“I shall take my leave,” Kafkus said, breaking the silence but not the tension. Neither I nor my father made any attempt to stop him, nor a sound to each other until the oak door clicked shut.

“A life among the humans is sounding better than the last time I brought it up.” I was just fueling the fire now.

“If it is your desire, so be it! Let a Boru teach you the respect whereas I have failed.”

“If you would make me a portal, I will be gone as soon as possible.”

“You do not wish to stay for your celebration?” He was baiting me, hoping that if I stayed for that I may reconsider leaving in that time.

“No, I would like to gather a few of my belongings and see Violet as she has mastered concealment spells, and I will be off of your land and away from your rule.” This was no bluff.

“I shall meet you at the shore.” His voice might have sounded as resolute as mine to someone who did not know him as well as I did. I knew he was hoping that I would change my mind before we made it there.

This memory plagued me like no other. If nothing else it was a good reminder of why I’d left my home, but it often overshadowed the happy times of my life growing up in Kortis. I’d

thought of going back to at least visit from time to time, but this memory made the concept vanish before it could solidify.

A lone jogger's breeze caught my face as he blew past, bringing me back to the current state of things. I'd been gone for a couple of hours now, it seemed time had run away from me as it often did when I thought of the past. I pushed myself off the bench with some effort and started building momentum for the trip home.

When I got within viewing distance of my apartment, Clifton was standing in front of the sliding glass door, eyes focused on what could only be me. I averted my eyes, pretending that I hadn't noticed him. Even though I wasn't looking, I could still feel his stare. It penetrated me in a way that no stare should.

I walked up the stairs two at a time, trying to appear as if I had important things to do. Work wasn't for hours and it's not like I had plans before that but that wasn't the point. As I had learned in my time here, appearance was everything, sometimes far more than it should be.

Just as I'd slid my key into the door I felt those intense eyes on my back and spun around to face Clifton.

"What's the matter?" he asked with that handsome grin of his. His eyes lit up when he smiled, making him harder to rebuff.

"Nothing,"—I only half-lied—"just got to get a lot done before work."

"Oh, I won't keep you long then. I was just wondering if you had a big punch bowl that I could borrow for the party tonight. I forgot that I chucked mine last time I cleaned house." Sad puppy-dog eyes followed as he added a, "pleeeeeease?"

"Oh, alright," I grunted, mad that I'd let him guilt-trip me. "I'll see what I got." I opened the door, walked through it, and shut it right in his face.

“I guess I’ll just wait out here then,” he shouted through the door and I just smirked.

The punchbowl was in the last cabinet I checked, and, of course, all the way in the back. I had to take just about everything out before I was able to get to it. I didn’t even know why I had the damn thing. I never threw parties.

Clifton was leaning against the frame when I opened the door. “Here you go,” I said while shoving the bowl into his hands with unnecessary force. “It’s a bit dusty. You’ll need to wash it first.”

“Thanks.”

“Why do you need it anyway? I think your guests will be expecting more than just punch.”

“I’m making sangria.”

“Oh, that sounds...good.”

“Will you be there?” he asked again and I knew it was coming. I still had no better answer than, “I have to work.” My voice was not as resolute as I meant it to sound. The part of me that wanted to give in to him was surfacing. I shoved it back fast.

His face fell, showing the honest emotion of someone reaching out and being struck down. “I know, but you’re *always* busy. When will I ever have the time to get to know you when you won’t even give me a chance?” He stared at the ground for a moment before raising his eyes back to mine. I could see every ounce in him pleading for me to open up to him but I just couldn’t. I settled my eyes on the window of my neighbor’s unit instead. He was human. I was not. Small talk was all I would ever have with this man, no matter how much he tried for more or how much I wished that were not true.

My attention averted, I failed to notice his hand moving towards my face. His fingers

brushed against my cheek and that little touch did so much. It sent shivers of pleasure down my body, hardening my nipples yet making the hair on the back of my neck stand up. I just stood there, frozen, unsure of what to do or what to think. It's an odd sensation to be frightened and turned on at the same time.

I mumbled something under my breath that wasn't quite coherent but managed to get "I need to take a shower" out before slamming the door in his face again. I slid down the door until my butt hit the floor. My heart was pounding so hard it was all I could hear. *What the hell was that about?*

After a few minutes of contemplation I managed to get a grip on myself and started my daily chores. I washed the dishes, did a load of laundry (which overflowed with bubbles as I'd put too much soap in the machine...*again*) and even watched a little television before heading to the bathroom for my long overdue shower.

A shower never felt as good as it did when you were icky. The warmth of the water caressed my skin, cleansing me of the remnants of my nightmare and my odd encounter with Clifton. To me, a good shower was just as refreshing as a goodnight's sleep. Though, the fact that my water heater sucked, I never got as long of a shower as I would have liked.

I wasn't poor, but I lived like I was. My home was a small, modest, one-bedroom apartment and my job was as a simple waitress at the diner up the street. Though my life seemed average my bank account told a different story. My mother had stuffed my bag with as much gold as she could fit when my attention had been averted while saying my goodbyes. It was money I had, but money I hated using. I wanted to earn my own money. I no longer wanted to be taken care of and I tried not to use it whenever possible. Sometimes I had no other choice, like when my pitiful income wasn't enough to make ends meet (not too rare of an occurrence).

I was a waitress at Logan's, a diner up the street, and I liked my job, despite the long hours, all of which were on my feet. It wasn't my dream job, but it at least gave me something to do until I figured out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I had options now. Home, I would have just been a princess for the rest of my life whereas my brother, Gader, would someday replace my father as King. The only way that I'd ever be a queen was if I married a prince of another species, and that would never happen. All of the inhabitants of Kortis prized themselves on purity of blood. There were very few cross-species births in existence that I was aware of, and none of them were living.

My car was parked in my designated parking spot: right in front of Clifton's apartment. I didn't check to see if he was watching me as I walked to my car, but the unmistakable chill running down my spine told me he was. I ignored him as I got into my Prius, a gift I'd gotten for myself a couple of months beforehand.

The first car I'd bought had been a real piece of junk: an old, pink Bug. I hadn't known much about cars when I'd first arrived as the concept of a vehicle was foreign to me. I'd thought it was cute when I first saw it but it soon turned out to be more hassle than it was worth. It broke down on me every other day and I got stuck stranded on the side of the freeway many times before it died completely. I gave it a frustrated kick on the last day of its life and the front bumper fell off. I couldn't help but laugh out of frustration. So I tapped into some of the money—that I didn't like to use—to buy my brand new Prius. I was much happier having a dependable car, even though every time I used it I remembered how I hadn't earned it. Not something a normal princess would dwell on.

My car was unlocked, something that wasn't necessarily a problem as I'd been known to be absentminded when it came to locking things. The envelope taped to my steering wheel,

however, was a bit unnerving. “Tessa Turner” was written on it. The last name “Turner” I’d adopted when I’d moved here as an attempt to seem more human. (No one in Kortis had a last name, or a middle name for that matter. We didn’t have need for such things as everyone’s name was unique enough that we didn’t need to distinguish ourselves by a second one, or a third one.) I knew deep in my gut that no good could come of opening this.

Knowing that I didn’t need any more stress at the moment, I tossed the envelope in my purse and headed for work. The drive took mere minutes and before I could open the diner door, Carol, my coworker, opened it for me and gave me a big, welcoming hug.

Carol was much shorter than me and a hug from her was a bit awkward as her face came into my breasts. It never seemed to bother her but I always tried to pull away as soon as possible. Her eyes and hair were that of dark brown, both from her Mexican heritage. She was older than me, about thirty-five, with a soft, trusting face and a genuine nice personality. Everyone walked all over her because she didn’t stand up for herself, but I tried to get people to stop using her if I could.

Carol was the closest thing I had to a friend here, though sometimes she felt more like a mother. She was the one who got me my job here and even went apartment hunting with me before my last move. This woman taught me more than she ever knew though. She’d taught me how to fit in with the human population, and for that alone, I could not express my gratitude.

“How are you doing, chica?” she asked, squeezing me tight. She looked up into my face and her own fell. “What’s wrong, Tessa?”

“Nothing, just nightmares waking me up at all hours of the night, as usual.” I tried to contort my face into a happy-go-lucky smile, but I guess it didn’t work since her expression didn’t change.

“Are you remembering them yet?” she asked. I shook my head and she grimaced.

“I’m fine,” I reassured her, trying to convince myself as well as her. “Just a little tired.”

I left her there because I didn’t feel much like talking about my problems at the moment. Not that I could talk to her about my underlying issues, or anyone for that matter. I was alone. There was no one that I could confide in with whatever was going on in my life because I could never give them the whole story. I felt a little lonely for that fact. Not lonely enough to return home though which said a lot.

I made my way to the back of the building, put my purse inside the locker that Carol and I shared, and glanced into the large mirror that hung on the door. It looked like I hadn’t slept in about a week, and I felt like I hadn’t either. I tried to make myself look happy and unbothered. It took all my effort but I managed.

The first half of my shift went fine. I helped a few regular customers who were always pleasant, and tipped very well, and I even took it upon myself to reorganize the counter so that it looked more inviting. Anything to keep me from remembering how tired I was. When I came back from lunch, however, I was unhappy to see a man that I knew, and despised, sitting at the counter.

It was Brent Fowler, the one and only human boyfriend I’d ever had and a good reason why I wasn’t looking for another one any time soon. He looked up from his plate and flashed me a smile, the kind of smile that said, “I know you don’t want to see me, but here I am.”

Brent was a big man, not fat, but muscular. He always took pride in knowing that he was stronger than most men, and I knew that he was. He wasn’t exactly what you would call “sexy,” but he’d been sweet, at least in the beginning.

We’d dated off and on for a year and a half now and were off at the moment. When he

was nice he was a great guy that you just wanted to be around, but when he wasn't...he was the biggest dick on the planet. Not the kind of man you wanted to marry and I wasn't sure why I'd gone back to him so many times. Familiarity? We'd been apart for a few months now and he was most likely here because he thought that it was time to give it another try. I didn't.

Since I saw no easy way of avoiding him, I approached him. "What are you doing here Brent? You know that I have asked you several times to stay away from me."

He arranged his face into the look of that innocent little boy who never did anything wrong. He'd used this look on me far too often while we were dating for me to know that it wasn't genuine. My face hardened.

"It's not against the law to eat pie, is it?"

Brent was one of the jealous types but I'd chosen to look past his faults. There is nothing stupider than a young woman in love. But everyone has their limits to what they will take, mine had been Brent putting my co-worker, Jacob, in the hospital. I'd moved to another apartment complex a month beforehand just to put some distance between us, shoulda found a new job too.

"Brent...just go."

He stared at me for a minute, his eyes softening the longer they stayed linked to mine. Without another word he slinked off his chair, pulled some money out of his wallet and dropped it on the counter. "I will always love you," he muttered under his breath as he walked through the exit. I don't think he meant me to hear him, but my species had excellent hearing.

Someone came to stand beside me. It was Carol. I could tell by the unique perfume she always wore. It was a mixture of lavender and vanilla. It was a welcoming scent. "Are you ok, dear?" she asked, bringing her hand to rest on my lower back in a comforting gesture.

"Yeah, I just don't know what I ever saw in him." My eyes were still focused on the

door when I answered, my mind reliving all the happy times we had shared, opting not to think of the bad at the moment. I had loved this man at one point and I knew some part of my heart would always beat for him whether I wanted it to or not. His eyes had told me just how much he was missing me, just how much he cared.

Two men walking through the front door brought me back. They grabbed a small table in my section so I picked up a couple menu's and headed for them. "What can I get for you guys?" I was relieved to hear my voice come out pleasant and not as exhausted as I felt.

"Just some coffee please, Tessa. Regular, I think," the older of the two said with a smile. It always unnerved me when people I didn't know called me by my first name despite the fact that my nametag displayed it to anyone caring to look.

"Sure thing, I just brewed a fresh pot." They looked antsy and didn't talk to each other while I was filling their mugs, not something I was at all bothered by. Some people just liked their privacy. They both smiled so I headed back to the counter to return the pot to its home.

"Zolera."

It was just a whisper, but I heard it. I froze, my fingers loosening around the coffee pot until a loud crashing noise echoed around the room.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Tessa, clean that mess up," Gus, one of the busboys, said and it jarred me enough to regain composure. "Think I got some bacon grease on the handle, sorry guys," I said loud enough to get everyone's attention off of me. It worked. Gus handed me a broom and a dustpan and I thanked him for it.

There was no way I heard what I thought I heard, but I had to be sure. As I swept I kept my ears as open as I could. After a minute or two I caught the voice again and snuck a glance at my two new customers.

“We’ve been looking for weeks and we haven’t found any. At this rate they’ll be on to us before we find out where they’re meeting,” the older one protested.

The other male nodded. He was much younger than the first man, probably close to my age where the other guy looked old enough to be his father. Then he spoke, and the words took my breath away. “The Boru King won’t be pleased if we come back empty-handed again.”

The room started to spin and darken before my eyes as my legs gave way. I dropped to my knees, breathing hard but feeling as if no oxygen was entering my lungs.

Dekem was the former ruler of the Boru, a species long since purged from Kortis. My father had killed Dekem with the weapon that now belonged to me. The other three kings of Kortis had banded with my father to banish the rest of them to this earthly plain. They had no King. This was common knowledge among my kind. They had been cast out with no way to return, and were forced to live amongst the humans. They had chameleon abilities which helped them to blend in with the human population. The Boru would love to see all of my kind dead for sealing their expulsion and executing their King. But since they were no longer able to get to Kortis they were quite content with killing any of my kind that they could get their hands on (i.e. those of us who decided to cross over).

The sound of chairs scraping on the floor brought me back to the present, and when I looked up, the table where the two had been sitting was empty.

Damn! I should have paid more attention to what they were talking about.

I knew that they were trying to find a group of Zolera that were meeting for some reason. From what I knew, the few of my kind that came to this realm tried to blend in with humans. *Why would they be meeting?* I knew none of my kind here because I would only recognize another Zolera if they had no concealment spells on. None of us would be foolish enough to

walk around like that, an open target to any Boru let alone exposing ourselves to the unknowing human race. *Why were these humans looking for them? Were the humans working for the Boru, if so, why?* So many questions were flying around my head that I couldn't hold onto one of them.

"You look like you're going to be sick," Michelle, another fellow waitress commented with concern. "Go home and try to get some rest, Tess. I got it."

I couldn't argue with her so I nodded, muttering a "thanks," before heading back for my purse.

As soon as I took one step outside, my senses heightened and my eyes darted around the parking lot at the instant twinge of fierce, looming eyes. Something was watching me.