

Chapter 1

“Oh come on, it was funny,” I said at the indignant look on Kafkus’ face.

“I found no humor in the film. It portrayed warriors dancing around like buffoons and kissing each other.”

“It was showing them out of context, that’s what makes it funny.” He really didn’t have much of a sense of humor.

“Well, I did not find it humorous.”

“Oh lighten up, Kafkus, or I will have to find someone else to watch movies with.”

“Hmm...find better movies to watch and maybe I will enjoy them more.”

I smiled at him, staring into those beautiful navy colored eyes of his. I raised my arm and ran my fingers through his long, silky, dark brown hair. I loved this man, though I had resented him for many years prior for being the man in my “would have been” arranged marriage. But something had changed about a month ago, something that had opened my eyes to his loving nature. I now saw him for who he was: a caring, sweet, slightly cynical man that I loved more than I thought I could. He was now one of my two Zezkas (my chosen lovers), the closest thing to marriage that I was comfortable with at the moment.

Kafkus smiled. “I love you too, my tasteless Princess.”

I glared at him. Kafkus had the power to read minds, well not anyone’s mind...just mine. It gave us a connection that I could share with no one else, though it did annoy me at times, times when I wanted to think to myself without being overheard. I didn’t feel like being eavesdropped on right now, especially by someone who had just mocked my taste. “I’ll be out back if you choose to change your attitude and join me.”

My backyard was large and beautiful. I’d hired a landscaper to do it just the way I wanted it, a pretty demanding order. There was an oversized, lagoon-shaped swimming pool in the center of the yard complete with a rock waterfall cascading into it. Lots of vibrantly colored trees and plants decorated the scene, making it a tropical oasis. The nice sized deck with a full outdoor kitchen brought in that extra charm but grounded the space to this world. My design was to remind me of Kortis, my real home. Though it wasn’t quite the same, it was a comforting substitution in times when I needed it. Clifton, my other Zezka, was standing in front of the grill working on something that smelled delicious.

I crept up behind him and wrapped my arms around his chest. “Whatcha cookin?”

“Ribs,” he replied before turning around in my arms. “Is your movie over?”

“Yes, but Kafkus didn’t like it. He said that I have no taste.”

“Well, I happen to think you have excellent taste, Tessa.”

I inhaled deeply, taking in that pleasant aroma of Clifton’s culinary skills. It was hard not to drool. “How long before I get some of that?”

“Probably a half-hour or so. Why don’t you go for a swim? I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

I stared up into his soft handsome face. His brilliant emerald eyes sparkled in the afternoon sun. His long, light brown hair brushed against my shoulders as I stood there. The man standing before me now was the reason that I was here today. He had given me a reason to live when I’d had none. He was the product of a forbidden union between my kind, Zolera, and my kind’s worst enemy, Boru. Not that we needed to worry about the Boru anymore seeing as how I had caused them extinct. Clifton had somehow managed to live through the ordeal, erasing that side of him. I was thankful that those eyes I loved so much remained from the change. They were the only things that had. Violet’s charm versus his Boru illusion of

humanity was just not the same and it was nice to have something to hold onto.

He mostly just moped around the house since he'd healed completely. I only ever saw him leave when he was working on side construction projects for our neighbors. He was currently building a deck for the Williams' who lived a few houses down. I figured that he just wanted to feel useful, but I tried my best to make him feel needed.

His mother—who had supposedly been dead—was my father's first wife and she'd come back into both of their lives only about a month ago. My father, King Dobbin, had taken her back to Kortis as his second wife. My men and I had attended the ceremony that I hadn't approved of about a week prior. I wondered how my mother was coping with the new/old addition to the family. Did she mind sharing her husband or was she as open as my men were with me? At least they had a choice, I know my mother hadn't.

"Have I told you that I love you today?" I asked before planting a sweet kiss on his full lips.

He thought for a moment. "No, I don't think so, not today at least."

"I love you, Clifton Hurst. You are my thoughtful, smart and funny man that I couldn't picture my life without."

He smiled and then kissed me, telling me without words just how special I was to him. But he pushed me away when he realized that I was severely distracting his cooking and he resumed his chef duties. It didn't bother me. Burnt is not my favorite flavor.

I disrobed down to my bikini, spanked him hard on the butt and dove into the pool before he could get me back. The weight of my body carried me down to the bottom, and I just stared up at the sparkling light refracted from the sun through the clear water.

Since the pool was saltwater, I had chosen many fish to make it feel like the ocean, and it did...well, as much as it could for an in ground swimming pool. I watched the fish swim around above me as I breathed in the crisp, clean water. My species could live in the ocean, and many did. While I appreciated my life outside the water, I did seem to lose track of time when I was in it. It was nice to relax in it for a while. It soothed me.

A splash broke the surface, rippling the tension of the water as bubbles swirled around the figure. When I saw that it was Kafkus swimming towards me, I cast him a devious grin. *So, I guess you have decided to drop the attitude then?*

He nodded and flashed those over-the-top remorseful eyes which made me smile. I pulled him to me, wrapped my legs around his back and together we sunk to the bottom of the pool, each lost in the other's eyes. His eyes said more than he could ever speak. There was such devotion with the way he looked at me. He would never leave me.

I love you so much, my beautiful princess. I do not deserve you, I heard Kafkus say, though it seemed to come from my head rather than his mouth.

I stared at him with surprise. *How did you do that?* He looked confused. *How did you project your thoughts into my head?*

You heard what I thought? His voice and words came through my head again, like it was my own inner monologue.

I nodded, baffled by what had just happened.

He stared off into the distance and began thinking so fast it was all I could do to keep up with him. *She can hear my thoughts, but how can that be? The transferring of abilities is not a common thing. There have been only a few records that I have heard of. When Quartessa regained her power back from Lynth, she had said that she felt more powerful than before. Had Lynth been able to absorb powers, and had Quartessa simply acquired that ability when she*

killed him? Or, was this a lingering reversal of power from the Ring of Eccus? She is able to change her appearance at will now which is a Boru trait. How do I even know that she merely hasn't acquired the power of telepathy? It is rare but far more likely than the fact of her copying my own ability. Maybe we should test out this new power, see if it is just me that she can hear. His eyes darted to me. *Are you listening to me now?*

Yes. Do you really think that this could be a skill that I could have just acquired on my own?

I do not think that we will ever know for sure, but I would like to know if it is just me that you can do it with. Let us go up.

Clifton was standing at the water's edge when I broke the surface. "I was wondering when you were going to come back up, I've been calling you for the last ten minutes." He smiled. "Food's ready."

I stared up into Clifton's face and concentrated hard, squinting my eyes and scrunching up my face with the effort. I'm sure that I looked pretty stupid, but I didn't care. I tried so hard to hear what Clifton was thinking, but I heard nothing but the annoying barking of my neighbor's dog.

I guess it is only me that you can hear.

Yes, it does seem that way, but doesn't that make it more likely that I acquired the skill from you?

"Are you ok, Tessa?" Clifton asked. "You look...sick."

I arranged my face back to normal. "Yeah, just spaced out for a moment."

I wasn't sure if I should tell him about my new ability. I still hadn't told him that Kafkus could read my mind, thinking that he might feel left out. Though I was sure that he might suspect something was going on with how Kafkus always seemed to know more than he should.

"Well come and eat before it gets cold," Clifton said with a suspicious look at Kafkus and I silently wondered if he knew as I climbed out of the pool.

No, he does not know, but you should tell him.

I don't want to hurt him. I know that he'll be jealous of something that he and I will never be able to share.

"He deserves to know," Kafkus said, speaking out loud for the first time. He made sure that Clifton would hear him, giving me no option but to either lie or come clean about what was going on.

Clifton abruptly turned around at once and stared at Kafkus. "I deserve to know what?"

I hung my head, staring at the ground rather than him as I spoke. "Kafkus can read my mind, and from what he has told me, he's been able to do so for quite some time."

I glanced up at Clifton and saw that he was staring at Kafkus with jealousy prominent on his handsome face. "I knew there was something going on between you two that I didn't know about." His words held just the slightest trace of anger.

"That's not all, Clifton," I said reluctantly.

"Then tell me," he said, a more pronounced form of anger in his words.

"Just now, underwater, I became able to read his mind as well."

Clifton no longer looked jealous or angry, he looked sad. "So, you two now share this intimate link into each other's mind."

"Clifton, I didn't ask for this." I felt ashamed even though I had done nothing wrong.

Tears welled up in his eyes. "I willingly bow down from being your Zezka. I will never be the man that you deserve." He turned and began to walk towards the front door when I

stopped him by grabbing his arm and spun him around to face me.

“Clifton, you are my Zezka, my first true love. You are more than I could ever deserve in a mate. So what if we can’t read each other’s minds, we still share a bond. A strong one. I know that you think yourself weak after losing your Boru half, but I see strength inside of you still.” I had to make him believe my words.

He shook his head. “I am undeserving of you, and I know it. I’m sorry but I think that it would be better for you if I left. Kafkus is obviously the man that you were meant to be with, not me. I wish the best for you both.” He ripped his arm out of my grip and began walking towards the front door again.

“Do you know what I cherish in my memories?” I shouted after him. I had to convince him to stay. I couldn’t picture my life without him. Kafkus and Clifton completed me, without either of them I wouldn’t be who I was. Clifton validated me in a world that I didn’t feel I belonged to. Personality wise, Clifton and I connected better. I needed his love, and felt as though I would die without it.

He didn’t turn around, but he did stop with his hand on the doorknob. “What?”

“One night I was attacked by a Boru, and, when I returned home I found a man sitting on my bed. I was oddly drawn to this man, though I was slightly afraid of him. He exposed his soul to me and told me things from his life that drove him to tears. I felt a connection with this man that I had never felt with another. He was so kind and loving. And even though I knew that I shouldn’t love this man, I did. I loved him more than I thought I was capable of loving another. He gave me, not only a reason to live, but a reason to thrive. I swore to myself, and to him, that I would never be without him.” I paused, tears falling to my feet. “And now you tell me that I must live without you. I don’t think I can. I feel as though I will cease to exist if you are not with me. Please don’t go.”

His hand inched away from the door and he brought his eyes to mine. “Do you really mean that?”

I nodded, the tears flowing faster with no sign of slowing. “I do, Clifton, every word.”

He stood there for a moment, thinking. I silently wished that I could read his mind like I could with Kafkus. I would have given anything to tap into his thoughts at that moment.

“You really want me to stay?”

“I never want you to leave, ever.”

His eyes fell to the floor. “I still don’t think that I’m worthy of you.”

“What can I do to convince you otherwise?”

He looked me in the eye. “You could marry me.” It wasn’t a very romantic proposal, more of a muttering of words that caught me by surprise.

“You know how I feel about marriage.”

“You don’t have to marry me now. It would be enough for me to know that someday you would be my wife. I wouldn’t mind a long engagement. I would wait a hundred years if I had to.”

I didn’t know what to say. I would probably be ready for marriage before a hundred years. I guess I could say yes to a pre-commitment like that, especially since he was willing to wait for me to be comfortable with it. “You would really wait until I was ready, and not pressure me?”

He took one last glance at the door and then began walking back towards me. My heart started pounding in my chest as he sunk down to one knee in front of me. He gazed up into my face as he took something from his pocket. It was a small, red, velvet box that he held out to me

as he spoke. “Princess Quartessa, would you do me the honor of being my wife, sometime before I die?”

I smiled at him and plucked the box from his palm. Opening it revealed a beautiful platinum ring with a princess cut diamond in the center and three small sapphires set on either side of it. “It’s beautiful, Clifton. When did you buy this?”

“I started saving up when I first met you, and I was finally able to get it about a week ago. That’s why I’ve been doing all of those side jobs. I wanted to pay for it myself, I think it means more that way.” There was a moment of silence before he said, “Well?”

I stared at the gorgeous ring that I held in my hand, it made me feel happy, not anxious as I thought it might. I sunk down on my knees so that I could see him better and stared into those brilliant emerald eyes. “Clifton, I would love to marry you sometime before we die.”

He placed both palms on my face, wiping the tears that remained and pulled me into a romantic kiss. His sadness was gone, the kiss felt of relief mixed with happiness.

I pulled away from him and he slipped the ring on my left ring finger. “Are you happy now?”

He positively beamed at me. “More than you could ever know.”

“Good.”

I would have asked her to marry me a long time ago if I thought that she would have said yes.

I stood up and turned to face Kafkus. “Is there something that you would like to ask me?”

His eyes widened in surprise. “Really?”

I nodded.

He ran up the stairs and out of sight, returning in ten seconds flat. “I have dreamt of this moment, my Princess. Quartessa, would you make me one of the happiest men in both of the worlds in which we live, and be my wife?”

“Of course, Kafkus, sometime before we die.”

His face lit up with a magnificent smile. His eyes softened and his facial scar became a little more pronounced. I’d never seen it as a deformity. I saw it as a kind of badge of honor. It was the price of his many years of duels back home, proving his strength.

He held his fist out to me, palm up, and slowly opened his hand. In it was a beautiful ring. It was solid gold with a heart-shaped, sapphire diamond set in the center. Though gold wasn’t really my color, I couldn’t help but admire the ring’s beauty. “Thank you, Kafkus. It’s beautiful.”

“It was my mother’s. She gave it to me when we returned home for your father’s ceremony.” He slid the ring on my other ring finger. “She had hoped that I would give it to a worthy woman one day, and now I have.”

I took a moment to stare between my two new rings. Both of them were special in their own way, each distinctly reminding me of the man who had given it to me. Today was a good day, a day that I would remember until the day I died. I held my arms out wide and they both hugged me at the same time. Never before had I felt more loved than I did at that exact moment.

My stomach growled, breaking the silence. “Well, I’m sure that the ribs are cold by now, but I’m starving.”

Clifton could *really* cook. I’d told him that he should have looked into a culinary job, instead of construction, but he was perfectly happy with being the household chef. No complaints here.

I heard the front door open and Kyle walked into the dining room looking very nice in a blue dress shirt and black slacks, quite a different look than I was used to seeing on him. He normally wore faded jeans and metal band t-shirts.

Kyle was a human that I had sort of adopted after the ordeal that we had just gone through. He had been working for the Boru—so that he could acquire a cure for his father's illness—but had come over to our side when he began to distrust them. He had been right to do so as the Boru had killed his father even after he'd helped them further. After all was said and done, all he had left was me. I loved this red-headed, freckled man standing before me, but I felt sorrier for him and the crappy life that he had prior to our meeting. I was currently in the middle of helping him get his life together, and I was paying his way through technical school so that he could get a good job. It was something that made me happy and I was more than willing to do for him. He was pretty good with computers already, something that I lacked. Technology and I had a love/hate relationship. I could work a television and a telephone and was content with that.

"Hey, Kyle, how was school?" I asked feeling remarkably upbeat.

"Ugh, too much crap to remember. I got a "C" on my last test."

"Don't worry, you'll get it. I have complete faith in you."

"Thanks. What smells so good?"

"Clifton made ribs. Grab a seat."

Kyle joined the table and I resumed eating.

"The computer is being weird again. Would you mind taking a look at it for me?"

Kyle laughed. "I honestly don't know what you keep doing to it, Tess, but I'll see what I can do."

"I didn't do anything to it," I snapped defensively. "I was just trying to use the internet and it froze up on me."

"Did you try restarting it?"

I slapped myself on the forehead in an over-the-top fashion. "Now why didn't I think of that? Of course I did. You're lucky that I didn't chuck the damn thing out the window. Actually, you should thank Clifton for that since he's the one who pulled me off of it."

Kyle laughed. "It probably just needs to be updated or defragmented. I'll take a look after I eat. Would you pass the corn please?" I reached out to grab the bowl when he gasped. "Wow! What's that you've got there?"

I blushed and fanned out both of my hands, showing off my new adornments.

"Are, are you engaged?"

"Yup."

He looked at the two rings and then between Clifton and Kafkus. "Two rings, does that mean that you're engaged to both of them?"

"Yes, are you ok with that?" I wanted to take his feelings into account since I didn't want to hurt him. He liked me, but we didn't have that same connection I shared with my two men.

He shrugged. "You know how I feel about you, Tess, but as long as you're happy I'm happy for you."

There was something that he wasn't saying. I could just tell. "What is it?"

He blushed. "Well, there is this girl in my class...and well..."

"You like her?" I asked, hoping that he had found another interest.

He turned an even brighter shade of red, answering my question without even saying a word.

I leaned forward. "What's her name?"

He hesitated before answering. "Kate."

"Well, tell me about this girl that has sparked your interest." I was happy that I didn't have to worry about him being jealous of Kafkus and Clifton anymore.

"Uh...maybe another time. I'm going to go check on the computer." He stood up and walked out of the room, leaving behind his plate of food he'd barely even touched.

That was odd. Why didn't he want to tell me about the girl he liked? Maybe he thought that I would be jealous? I wasn't. I just wanted the same thing for him that he wanted for me: to see him happy.

I cannot believe that he thinks this Kate person is worthy of replacing Quartessa. No one can compare to her beauty or personality, not to mention that sensual body of hers. I am glad that Kyle has stepped aside though, not that he was much competition.

I glared at Kafkus. *What makes you think that she isn't a good substitute for me, except of course for my sensual body?*

He looked surprised. Seemed he'd forgotten that I could now hear his thoughts. *I can see how this does have its drawbacks.*

I grinned. At least now he knew how it felt to be eavesdropped on. "So, what do you guys want to do for the rest of the day?" Since I no longer worked I was beginning to go a little stir crazy from being home all of the time. Lying around and doing nothing was nice at first, but now some days seemed to drag on from it if I didn't find ways to keep busy.

"We should do something fun to celebrate our engagement," Clifton said excitedly.

"Sounds good to me, did you have something in mind?"

"I know just the place." He smiled wide. "Even Kafkus will have fun."

What did he mean by that?

Oh lighten up, Kafkus. You know that you're a killjoy when it comes to having fun.

The only things that Kafkus seemed to actually enjoy were weapons and sex but I didn't mind, he was raised in Kortis to be a warrior, and that's what he was. He didn't seem happy to be in the human world as I was. The only reason he was here at all was because this was the place I chose to be.

I am happy here.

It wasn't very convincing but I didn't give it another thought as I didn't want to start a fight.

Clifton took us paintballing and he drove since he'd finally gotten his driver's license three days ago after my constant nagging. Kyle stayed behind to work on his homework and I didn't mind because school was important. I had a blast and Kafkus thrived in his natural element. I was thrilled that Clifton had thought of Kafkus' interests when he'd picked out the activity. It reassured me that I had made the right decision about marrying the both of them...sometime in the future. It was hard to share myself between two men, but things like this made me feel like everything was working itself out.

By the time we were done, I was covered in multicolored splatters. There was barely an inch of me that wasn't covered by paint. My whole body ached and I was pretty sure that I was going to have some nasty bruises when I took my clothes off.

When we got home I went straight to my room to take a bath in my big spa tub. My whole old apartment could have easily fit into my new bedroom. The walls and ceiling depicted the moving ocean like a reverse aquarium, reminding me very much of home. My best friend Violet had done this for me to match my bedroom in Kortis, and sometimes, when I woke up in

the middle of the night, I would think that I was there. I did miss my home, but I was happy here.

I disrobed and checked myself for bruises. Yup, I had a ton, but they'd be gone in an hour or two so I didn't mind. I sunk down into the warm water and leaned my head back, relaxing to the feel of the jets.

I'd just begun to doze off when I heard someone call out my name. I sighed, got out of the tub and wrapped a towel around me. "What?" I yelled out, but no one answered me.

"Quartessa? Can you hear me?" I heard a familiar feminine voice ask. It was coming from the solitary lilac rose in the vase that sat on my nightstand.

I smiled, walked over to it and picked it up. "Violet?"

"Hello, Quartessa. How are things going on your side?" she asked merrily.

Violet had been my best friend since I was about six. She had come to this world to help me with our previous task, but had returned home when the job was done. She could never be happy living here like I was. But she did keep in touch using the spell that she'd placed on this rose, and I was very happy about that. I'd never had such an easy way of talking to those I had left behind. This rose was like a direct phone line to my world...well to Violet at least.

"Great! Anything new going on in Kortis?"

"Nothing much, except for the fact that I am getting married!" She squealed.

"That's great, Violet! I am so happy for you! I assume that Quino is the man you are marrying?"

Quino was one of my father's guards. He too had come here to help me but had returned home with Violet. Quino, unlike Kafkus, actually liked it here. He would have probably stayed if Violet hadn't wanted to return home. He returned for Violet like Kafkus had stayed for me.

"Of course!"

"So, when is the big day?"

"The day after tomorrow. You will come won't you?" There was a hint of desperation in her voice that I didn't quite understand.

"Of course we'll come. I wouldn't miss it for anything. Have you picked out a dress yet?"

"Oh no, I completely forgot. I need a dress!"

"It's ok, Violet, calm down. The dress will be my present to you. I'll go shopping in the morning and we should arrive sometime in the evening tomorrow."

"Really, you would do that for me?"

"Of course Violet, I couldn't have my best friend get married in just any dress. I know what you like, and I will pick out something that I'm sure you'll love."

"Thank you, Quartessa. I cannot wait to see you. We are having a banquet tomorrow evening, so be sure to come as early as you can."

"Ok, Violet. I'll see you tomorrow." I put the rose back in its vase and sat down on the bed.

Wow, Violet's getting married. In my mind's eye I could see the six year old Violet playing dress up in her mother's gowns pretending to be a bride and I smiled at the thought. We had come so far from that time. I could have told Violet about my own engagement news, but I chose not to. I didn't want to distract from her special day. She would probably find out when I arrived and spotted my two new rings though.

I was exhausted after our little excursion. It wasn't late, but I could have fallen asleep sitting up, so I laid down on top of the covers without bothering to get dressed. I enjoyed my

oceanic view for a moment before closing my eyes.

“Going to sleep already?” Kafkus asked.

I opened my eyes and noticed that he was laying next to me. I hadn’t even felt him get on the bed. “You guys wore me out on the paintball field,” I said with a yawn. “Violet is getting married the day after tomorrow.”

“That is great news. I had a feeling that she and Quino would be wed soon.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Clifton said from the doorway. “Does that mean we’re going back to Kortis?”

Clifton *really* liked Kortis. Though I grew up there, Clifton was raised here like a human. He had gone home with me on two occasions, and clearly, he liked it there better. I seemed to be the only one of my kind to actually enjoy it here—aside from Quino that is.

“Yes, we will leave tomorrow after I go shopping for a dress. He came to lay on my other side and I was now sandwiched between my two favorite men.

I love you more than anything, my princess.

“I love you my strong, cynical, and handsome warrior,” I said aloud without opening my eyes. “And I love you too my sweet, sensitive, and slightly needy man.”

Though my eyes were closed I could feel both of them smiling.

“Good night, Tessa.”

At that moment in time I didn’t have a care in the world. I had two men that I was now engaged to, Kyle had hopefully found a replacement for me, and I had a beautiful home. My life was absolutely perfect...well, as perfect as it was going to get. I fell asleep with a smile on my face, completely oblivious to the fact that my life was about to drastically change.