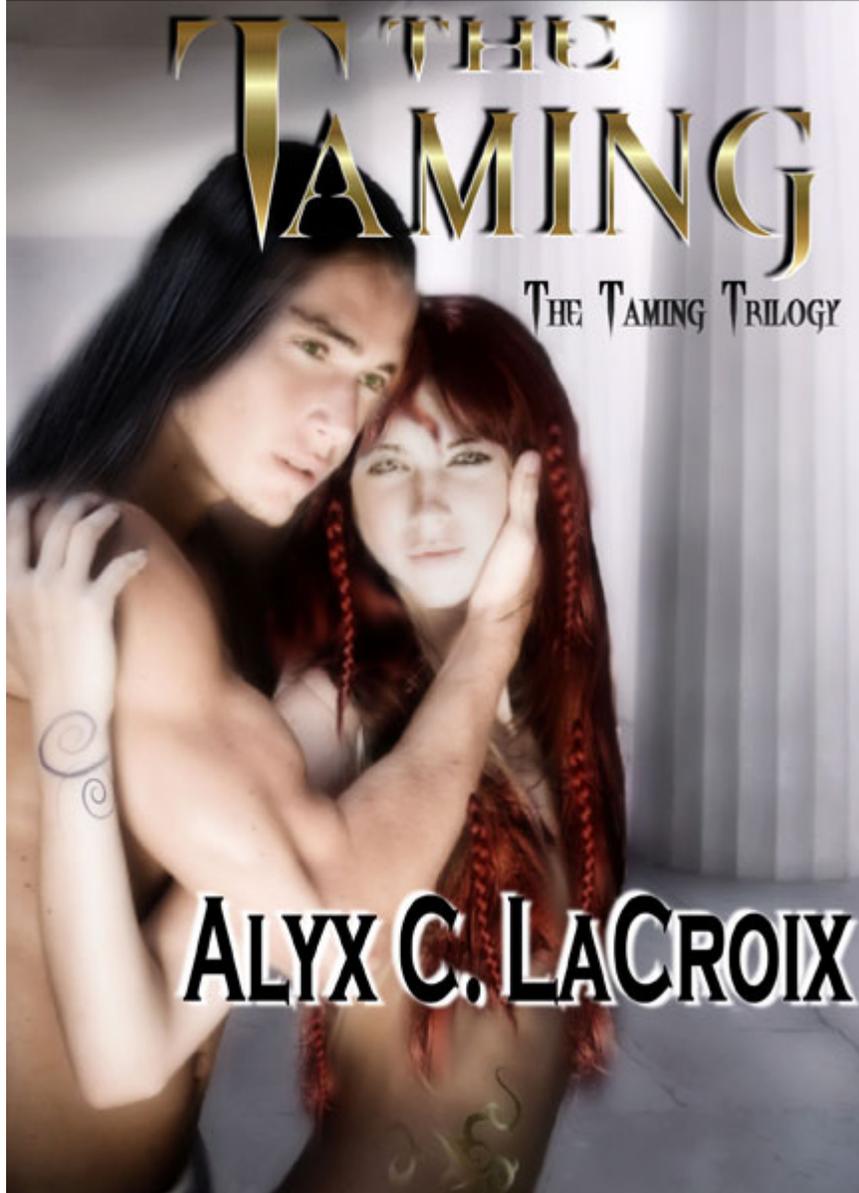


Siren Publishing

*Ménage Amour*

# THE TAMING

THE TAMING TRILOGY



**ALYX C. LACROIX**

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**Alyx C. LaCroix**

**MENAGE AMOUR**



**Siren Publishing, Inc.**  
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**A SIREN-BOOKSTRAND TITLE**

IMPRINT: Ménage Amour

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E-book ISBN: 1-60601-206-1

First E-book Publication: January 2009

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

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**PUBLISHER**

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[www.SirenPublishing.com](http://www.SirenPublishing.com)

# **DEDICATION**

To Meg-You know this one's for you.

# THE TAMING

ALYX C. LaCROIX

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## Prologue - Punishment

A woman who was deceptively petite in stature stalked around a man who stood much taller than her own frame, which barely grazed five feet and five inches. The man was naked, and a fine trembling made him seem to be a container of an impossible amount of motion. Tension rode their air like velvet lightning.

“Ismet. Kiet.” The woman spoke in a sweet voice that was temptation turned into sound as she motioned two scantily clad men over to her. “Tie him.” She gave the order in a sugary tone that contradicted her words. The men moved swiftly, practiced in the art, spreading the man’s legs and placing them snugly against a pair of metal poles that stood on either side of him. His hands were already secured, metal wrist cuffs encircling them like a lover’s eager fingers. The chains attached to the ceiling, obviously able to be raised and lowered at will.

“My queen,” he began in a pleading voice. “I beg your forgiveness. I meant no offense.” The woman, obviously the queen, laughed, and the sound was like silk on naked flesh. She traced one finger down his chest, and the two men, Ismet and Kiet, tied the man’s ankles to the poles with straps of thick leather. Now, there was no true pain, but it was impossible for the man to move.

“As I mean no offense, Malon. However, you must be taught a lesson. No matter how lenient and open our kingdom is, if someone tells you no, it means no.” Her last whisper slid across his skin, sounding more like a

provocation than a scolding.

“How long for the punishment, your highness?” One of the men asked. She tilted her head to the side in a pondering gesture and shrugged daintily.

“You may decide, Ismet. My ruling would be five days, as is consistent with our laws, but I give you leave to make the decision.” Ismet nodded.

“I shall adhere to your will, my lady. Five days is the punishment.” The queen gave Malon a swift kiss on the mouth and moved to a table near the door. It had ominous-looking instruments on it, and Malon struggled against his bondage to no avail. She tsk-tsked as she turned back to him, holding a small device that looked like two connecting rubber rings.

“I want you to use this,” she told Ismet and Kiet in a purring voice. “And this.” She held up a short slender bar that looked to be made of some kind of flexible metal. Ismet and Kiet nodded, obviously used to the forms of punishment they were ordered to use. Kiet, who had darker hair and eyes than the other man, who was obviously his brother, stepped closer to the queen.

“Will you be partaking in the retribution today, my lady?” The queen smiled but shook her head.

“No, Kiet. We have some guests I must meet with. Have fun with our bad little boy.”

## **Chapter One~ Visitors**

“Hold fast, your highness. We’ve spotted land ahead.” A woman who stood about five feet three inches tall, with stunning silver eyes and a cascade of molten hair that looked like a spill of fire-red magma against the stark white of her simple, conservative gown, moved from her seat and walked over to the helmsman. Her hair, loose and free-flowing, brushed her hips as she walked the short distance and stood next to the bronze-haired man with a stunning olive complexion who had spoken to her. He looked to be later in his years, perhaps fifty years old.

“What did we hit, Majit?” she asked in a soft voice that smacked of a superior upbringing. The helmsman, Majit, shook his head.

“I don’t know, princess,” he replied, turning the wheel slightly. The princess smiled and sighed.

“Majit, when will I break you of this awful habit? Call me Eudora, please.” Majit chuckled and patted her hand, which rested on the seat next to him.

“I served your father and mother before you, little highness. I know what proper respect I must bestow upon your title.” Eudora rolled her eyes and seated herself elegantly in a chair beside Majit.

“I feel as though I owe you much more respect than you owe me, my friend. Would you at least not call me ‘princess’ or ‘highness’ at every opportunity?” He gave her a chiding look out of the corner of his eye and a small inclination of his head.

“Indeed, little majesty,” he agreed. She laughed, full-throated and jovial. The line of land became more solid against the misty grayness of the sea, and Eudora stood to gaze over the side of the boat. It was a small vessel, accommodating only the princess and her escort of five men and five women. There were two floors. The top, which was open to all the

thrashings the ocean could deal out, was where Eudora and Majit stood. The lower floor was where the rest of the crewmembers were stationed. Three of the men were working on repairing the hole in the ship's hull and simultaneously trying to keep them afloat long enough to reach land. The rest, five women and two men, were packing up belongings that weren't lost when the hull was damaged and hauling them up to the higher level.

Eudora's carefree grin, gracing her face because of the gentle, rhythmic rocking of the waves and Majit's conversation, melted away to be replaced by a cool look of indifference as she spotted the inhabitants on the shore of the island. She could only see their outlines, so she didn't know what they looked like. However, she was a royal of Cieala, the kingdom she hailed from, and she needed always to set an example for her subjects. Therefore, she always appeared cool, contained, and not easily brought to any emotion.

The ship nestled itself against the shoreline within moments, and the characteristics of the natives, before now blanketed by fog, began to reveal themselves. Eudora was stunned at their attire, or lack thereof. The women wore little to no clothes, and all had decorations of some kind on their bodies. The hair of each woman was pulled up and away from her face or cut very short so that the upper part of her torso was almost on display. Some of the women wore tassels on their breasts, and dainty chains of silver or gold encircled some of their slender waists. A few of the women wore coverings, but they displayed everything that was decent and needed to be concealed with slightly less blatant obviousness than those who wore no clothing whatsoever.

The men were hardly any better, and while the women's nakedness offended Eudora more so than their male counterparts, she was sure it was the opposite for her court members of the less fair gender. Most of the native men had thick leather collars on which rested a silver ring. Attached to the ring was a strap of leather that made its way down the chest and stomach, there ending in another ring attached to that which made Eudora blush and turn away. Some of the men wore gauzy, see-through loincloths and a collar sporting a ring but no strap down the chest and stomach. These collars looked more suited to be hooked to something, like a leash. Only a few of them wore shoes, and those who did were either clad in light slippers or sandals that tied up to the knee.

Majit held out his hand to Eudora, silently urging her to take his escort

and allow him to lead her off the boat. She regained her sense of dignity and held her head high, allowing the elder to escort her down the steps. When her entire court flanked her from behind, Eudora cleared her throat to speak.

Before she could open her mouth, however, a delicate-looking woman of nearly Eudora's size made her way through the crowd, not pushing, but lightly touching anyone she wanted to move. They parted for her like the red sea for Moses. Her eyes were the color of sunset, a flawless ruby red, her flowing mane of hair the liquid ebony of a starless sky, so dark that it flickered with natural violet undertones. Her smile was brighter than either her hair or eyes as she extended one jewel-bedecked hand to Eudora. The princess took it and, debating over custom and protocol, shook it tentatively. The woman threw her head back and laughed. The natives echoed her, and soon laughter that almost had a taste, like aged wine on the tongue, resounded around the foreign court.

"That is not the gesture of welcome we use, sweet flower." The woman purred. Eudora's posture stiffened.

"Forgive me. I hail from the kingdom Cieala, and I am a stranger to your land and customs. Please, demonstrate how I should greet you, so that I might not insult any of your people." The woman smiled and studied Eudora like a dog breeder looking for the best female, or a potential suitor surveying the delicious prize she hoped to claim.

"You would not insult one of them, sweet flower, only me, for I rule the Isle of Passion. I am Wyanet, queen of desire and pleasure." Eudora became even more uncomfortable; amazed that it was even possible.

"Well then, your majesty, please demonstrate how I should greet *you*." Wyanet grinned softly, like a jaguar about to rip out the throat of an unsuspecting victim or initiate the mating ritual with an unwilling partner. She moved closer to Eudora, and the princess marveled at her attire. The long, clinging gown she wore exposed all areas a gown was meant to cover and left nothing to the imagination. A bracelet wrapped its way up her left arm, and a stunning crown was set amidst her sea of ebony locks. She was beautiful, the kind of beauty that was tempting, dangerous, and intimidating.

"The gesture is quite a simple one to learn." Wyanet took Eudora's chin gently into her hand, cupping it as one would cup the precious face of a lover or child. Seeing as the queen was taller than the other woman by a few inches, Wyanet leaned into Eudora and touched her lips to the princess's.

Eudora jerked back as if she had been burned and had to use every ounce of resolve she harbored not to gape openly at Wyanet. The queen shrugged elegantly. “You will catch on soon enough. Come, we will hold a banquet in your honor. You will dine and be introduced to our way of life.”

Eudora, after recovering from her shock, ordered her court to gather the bags and follow Wyanet to wherever the queen was leading. While on the way, the court passed many of the houses that graced the Isle of Passion. They were lovely and quaint, made of stunning silver and flanked by great trees with leaves of silver and laden with heavy-hanging fruits colored deepest crimson. The rooftops were black and looked like ebony glass. Eudora wondered if they were obsidian, a glassy rock found near volcanoes. She had only seen obsidian once, in the kingdom of fire, Karaphel. Eudora was in awe at the beauty of the place, but still stinging from Wyanet’s kiss. She shook herself out of her unease as she observed more inhabitants, all dressed as scantily as the ones on the beach had been.

“Why do your people dress so, your highness?” Eudora asked. Wyanet gave the princess a small, secret smile.

“Call me Wyanet, please. And I could ask the same of your people.” Eudora sighed and returned her attention to observing the natives as she passed. She saw many similarities to her own kingdom, when she thought about it. There was a baking hut, a seamstress at work on her loom, a carpenter showing his young son how to hold a tool, and a blacksmith lost in his world of clanging iron and dancing sparks. The princess almost smiled when she saw a group of children fawning over a litter of newborn kittens. Their nakedness did not offend her as did that of the adults. Eudora bit her tongue to keep from gasping when she turned to look past the small village and caught sight of the focal building of the island.

“Welcome to the Palacio de Deseo, the Palace of Desiree,” Wyanet murmured as she gestured to the towering ivory structure. Eudora had thought she had heard a flowing accent in the queen’s voice, but hadn’t been sure until now. The queen of the Isle of Passion sounded like those of the Spanish Isles, and the language was, thankfully, one Eudora knew.

“It is lovely, Wyanet.” The doors swung open silently, and three beautiful women, each holding a leash attached to her own collar, glided out and knelt in front of the queen.

“These are my pets,” Wyanet explained as she stroked the faces of the

women. “They are Jarah, Islet, and Isadora. Rise, *mis tentadores*.” The women rose as one being, and Wyanet took each of their leashes. Eudora fought not to look at them, but her curiosity overcame her discomfort.

Wyanet had pointed to each of them when she made the introductions, so Eudora knew that the tall blonde with legs that went on forever was Jarah. She had a tiara of emeralds that perfectly matched the shade of her stunning eyes. Her hair fell to her knees in silky waves, the first Eudora had seen loose and free on the island. She wore nothing except emerald green tassels, a golden chain around her waist, and a light, diamond starlight shawl that covered absolutely nothing. It brushed along her hips in an inviting way as she moved to embrace her mistress. When their lips met hungrily, Eudora looked away, embarrassed. Wyanet nipped at Jarah’s chin as Eudora focused on the second woman, Islet.

Eudora was able to study Islet without interference. She seemed to be waiting patiently for something. Her silver hair was shoulder-length, done in an elegant half-up, half-down style that showcased her near perfect features. The curves and planes of her face were straight out of someone’s vivid wet dream, and her ice blue eyes looked like those of a dog Eudora had seen once in a foreign kingdom. Islet and Jarah seemed to be exact opposites, for where Jarah was golden, Islet was silver. Her tiara was silver with icy blue gems, her tassels were the same frozen aqua of her eyes, and the chain around her waist was of the same precious metal her tiara was fashioned of. Her lips were painted the same bright color, while Jarah’s matched her hair. When Wyanet drew Islet to her, Eudora’s gaze fled to Isadora.

Her hair was done in the style Eudora had seen on the other inhabitants of the island and was the lightest color of lilac that could be managed without being termed white. Her eyes were a vivid contrast, a perfect, flawless violet that matched the flashing highlights Eudora had glimpsed in Wyanet’s hair. Her tiara had deep purple gems, and she wore earrings to match, long, sparkling things that nearly brushed her shoulders. She wore no shawl but had a jeweled loincloth that covered her in front. When she moved, one caught subtle glimpses of what rested beneath. Perhaps Wyanet liked to be taunted, Eudora mused before scolding herself. She focused her attention back on Isadora, who wore sandals that matched her hair and tied above the beauty’s knees. The others were barefoot. All of them, however, were exotic and gorgeous.

Wyanet finished greeting her second servant by running her hands suggestively down the curves of the other woman's waist and hips. Islet closed her eyes and shuddered as Wyanet turned to Isadora.

"*Mi tentación bonita,*" she whispered before gently licking Isadora's lips, which were painted a deep lavender. Eudora had no excuse to avert her gaze this time, so she watched as Wyanet mated Isadora's tongue and hers. She ended the gesture by running her mouth in a hot, wet line down Isadora's neck. The servant sighed, closing her eyes. Wyanet's eyes were slightly glazed as she turned back to Eudora. Her lips, full and cherry red from her pet's kisses, turned up in a provocative smile.

"Come," she purred, extending her free hand to Eudora. The other still held the leashes of the queen's pets. The princess took the offered hand, and Wyanet twined their fingers together, dropping the handles of the leashes. The queen drew Eudora close to her body and was quick to explain when she felt the princess stiffen.

"This symbolizes that you are of title, equal status. No one may lay claim to you now, unless he or she holds a higher position than I do." Eudora still moved as though her spine had been replaced by a metal pole and spoke heatedly.

"So you have laid claim to me instead?" Eudora nearly snarled. She then breathed deeply to calm herself. She was setting a horrendous example for her court members. Wyanet laughed musically as she gestured to a giant winding staircase that disappeared into a fold of the wall maybe twenty feet up from the floor.

"Your servants may follow Matteo. He will show them to your rooms." Eudora let a sigh of relief slip from her lips when she was allowed to separate from Wyanet.

"They are not my servants-they are my council and my court. They will be treated with the proper respect while we stay here, Wyanet. That is the only thing I ask of you." The queen moved around Eudora, and the princess cared too much for protocol to turn with her. Wyanet laughed again.

"That sounded more like an order than a request, sweet flower. I find your authority quite...appealing." Eudora instinctively knew that Wyanet had another word in mind.

"Well, I request it now. Do not do anything to my court that will hurt them or anything they do not wish to do. May I have your word on that?"

Wyanet smiled slyly as she finished her round and stood directly before Eudora.

“For a price, I will grant your request.” Eudora gave Wyanet cool eyes and nodded.

“Name your price,” she declared. Majit’s eyes flashed sullenly, but he knew better than to interrupt or argue. Wyanet’s smile was devious and impish.

“A kiss. A simple kiss.” Eudora began to nod again, but Wyanet held up a hand. “However, there are rules. You must keep your hands at your sides at all times, and I am allowed to do whatever I want. You are not allowed to fight me, and you must show feeling. You cannot remain impassive, or else I will not honor your request.” Eudora opened her mouth to protest, but then thought better of it and remained silent. She nodded slowly, and Wyanet brightened. “*Maravilloso*,” she declared. Wyanet brushed Eudora’s hair back so that she could rest her hands on the princess’s shoulders.

She held out one hand while keeping the other on Eudora. A manservant glided over with a knife in his grasp. The queen took it by the hilt when it was offered to her and shook her head as Eudora tried to jerk away. The blade slid easily through the fabric of Eudora’s dress, and in seconds the high collar was nonexistent. Wyanet slid the cool metal along Eudora’s naked flesh, and the princess shivered.

“A kiss, Wyanet. You said just a kiss.” The queen laughed, and the sultry sound was almost touchable.

“Indeed, I did. However, I did not specify where the kiss was to be.” She slid the knife, the tip touching the fabric of Eudora’s gown, down to her navel. The dress fell away like flower petals from the center bud. Eudora struggled not to cover herself as Wyanet slipped the ruined dress off and let it pool around the princess’s feet. Eudora grabbed Wyanet’s wrist when the queen went to touch the princess’s face.

“Tell me where you plan to kiss me,” she commanded. Wyanet smiled wickedly.

“Here,” she murmured, touching the tip of her blade to Eudora’s breast, which was held by a lacy white corset. Eudora flinched as Wyanet dragged the dagger down, down to touch the curved tip of the rigid device. “And here.” She whispered the words like a promise of erotic fantasies brought to life.

“One kiss,” Eudora exclaimed firmly. Wyanet laughed again, sexily, deviously.

“Yes, sweet flower. I will stay within the rules. As long as my lips do not leave your honeyed flesh, I am still giving you but one kiss.” Eudora’s eyes darkened, but she nodded.

“Go on with it, then,” she said. As invited, Wyanet leaned over and pressed her lips gently to the inner curve of Eudora’s breast. The princess stiffened but, wisely, didn’t try to move away. She did, after all, still have a knife at her navel. Wyanet touched her tongue lightly to Eudora’s nipple through the corset, wetting the lacy fabric as she did. Eudora fought not to gasp. This was an unfamiliar position for her, and, to her dismay, it felt amazing. Wyanet made her way down the princess’ stomach, staying true to her word and never once removing her lips, teeth, or tongue from Eudora’s skin.

The queen fell gracefully to her knees, keeping her lips fastened to Eudora’s navel. She licked her way around the princess’s belly button, making Eudora shudder before she could temper her reaction. Wyanet massaged the skin just beneath Eudora’s panties with her teeth, making the princess jerk slightly, not comfortable with the unfamiliar feelings sweeping into her lower abdomen. While keeping her mouth on Eudora’s skin, Wyanet reached up and eased the princess’s lower undergarments down until they joined her dress on the floor.

The hair that covered her womanhood was the same fire-red as the flowing locks that spread around her shoulders and cascaded down to brush her hips like a flaming velvet cloak. Wyanet moved lower and flicked her tongue over the sensitive folds of, before now, untouched and unexplored flesh. The princess might have fallen if Quimat, her most valuable court member, hadn’t rushed over to hold her up. Wyanet broke away to breathe, and Eudora bunched her fist in the queen’s hair.

“Your kiss,” she began breathlessly, “Is over. I followed the rules, and you got what you desired from me. Now, stand. I must replace the clothing you have destroyed.” Wyanet rose like an elegant marionette on her strings and bowed her head slightly. Her nipples stood like small, hard pebbles through the thin see-through cloth of her dress as she ran her hand down the curve of her hip.

“I will find you clothing as a peace offering, to make up for what I have

so carelessly ruined.” Eudora’s mind worked frantically. When Wyanet offered it that way, she couldn’t refuse, or else it would be seen as a direct insult. Seeing no alternative, she sighed.

“Thank you very much, Wyanet. What would you have me do until then?” The queen smiled.

“There is no need to worry. I have taken steps to prepare for your arrival.” Eudora gave her a queer look but said nothing about how Wyanet had known to expect them. Wyanet clapped twice, and two women, completely naked save for slender collars and crystalline hair jewels, came over holding a long silver box. Wyanet lifted the lid with a flourish and backed away to allow Eudora to look inside.

The dress was soft to the touch, light silk or some material like it. The color was dark as midnight; it nearly matched Wyanet’s hair. What Eudora was afraid of showed through the black. There were silver see-through patches on the sleeves, shoulders, and from the neck to nearly mid-thigh. A silver tiara with gems that perfectly matched Eudora’s eyes, a flawless deep winter snow gray, sat atop the mound of fabric, glinting in the soft lamplight as if starlight had been poured over top of it. Eudora took a deep breath, let it out and nodded to Wyanet.

“I will need assistance. And I want to go to another room to dress.” Wyanet smiled and nodded.

“As you wish. I myself will be your personal assistant.” The princess nodded again and stepped away from her ruined clothing, even leaving her underwear on the floor.

“Then please lead the way,” she offered. Wyanet smiled, and two servants opened a door to their left.

“Follow me, sweet flower,” the queen invited as she sauntered through the doorway. Eudora made gestures to her nervous court, and they began to haul the luggage up the stairs. Eudora walked confidently with her head held high into the room where Wyanet stood. The queen was holding her dress out and smiling serenely. “Come, sweet flower. We must clothe you for the banquet.”

Eudora’s gaze snapped to movement on the room’s only bed. A blush stained her cheeks as she turned away. A man with long velvet hair the color of the eye of midnight stood without bothering to cover himself. He pressed a lingering kiss to Wyanet’s cheek while observing Eudora.

“I will leave you to your pleasures, mother,” he declared, smirking at the princess. Eudora’s indignation overcame her embarrassment, and she faced the man with a scowl.

“I am not here for your mother’s pleasures, sir.” The man raised his eyebrow and let his gaze slide down over Eudora’s mostly naked frame.

“Then, pray tell, whose pleasures are you here for?” he leered. Eudora began moving and stalked past him to take the gown from Wyanet.

“My own,” she snapped before thinking about what that reply might *imply*. To cover it up, she quickly demanded, “Leave while I dress.” He grinned as if she had amused him.

“I am the prince, Aja, and you will not order me to do anything.” His tone dripped arrogance, and Eudora rolled her eyes. He was just like her cousin, who was prince of the kingdom close to hers. Egotistical and narcissistic. Men like those two were not few and far between. To be honest, they were agonizingly common in the circles Eudora traveled.

“Wyanet-” Eudora hated to ask the queen for anything, fearing the payment she might be forced to give. However, she knew that she did *not* want to deal with Aja at the moment, if ever. Wyanet gave her son a gentle push and small smile.

“Go prepare for the banquet, my child king.” He nodded and gave Eudora one more obvious, lewd once-over. She refrained from screaming curses at him...barely. When he was gone, she could think, grudgingly, of course, on how lovely he had been to look at. The casual nudity of the kingdom had ceased to shock the foreign princess, even if it still offended her. Even with it being offensive, Eudora had been unable to resist looking at Aja as he left.

He had a broad, muscular chest that had flexed beautifully when he lifted himself from the bed. His eyes were as green as the leaves of summer under a frost, icy and lively all at once. His waist was tapered, and his hips had a slight flair. His legs were long and captivatingly muscular, every line and curve carved stunningly by a master artist. His smile, which Eudora had glimpsed only briefly, was lovely while being annoying and alluring. It held a deep knowledge and a desire to be bad, very bad. Eudora hated how her stomach fluttered when she thought of that smile being directed at her. She was a princess, damn it! She wasn’t allowed insane flights of fancy.... Still, were she to venture lower in her recollection of lovely body parts Aja had to

his credit. she could.... No, no...can't go there.

Eudora sat in the chair Wyanet directed her to and allowed the queen to play with her hair. She didn't care how she was going to look. She knew that she was going to be uncomfortable no matter what Wyanet did.

"There you are," Wyanet declared softly when Eudora's silky masses of hair were piled atop her head around the tiara. The princess stood and allowed Wyanet to pull her dress on. Eudora was impressed. The queen didn't try anything sneaky. "You are ready," Wyanet said as she stepped away from Eudora and gestured to a full-length mirror.

Eudora steeled herself and lifted her eyes up hesitantly. She nearly gasped at how different she looked. Her eyes were like pewter, while her face looked pale and elven when not framed by her locks of hair, which now looked like liquid fire. It spilled around and over itself in a clever design that looked about to collapse yet was held quite securely. Her dress revealed curves Eudora hadn't been aware of. It clung to and lifted her breasts subtly so that they were perfectly formed and exposed to the fullest advantage. The dress made her legs look longer than they were and gave the impression that she was long and curvy all over. Eudora recovered from her shock and nodded her thanks.

"It will do. I thank you for the gesture of kindness." Wyanet beamed and let her hand trail down Eudora's shoulder and back.

"You look stunning," she purred. She then bowed, keeping her eyes fixed on Eudora's gaze in the mirror. "Anything in my kingdom, your highness is welcome to enjoy." The queen could make even an innocent statement seem suggestive, though Eudora doubted there was anything innocent about her offer.

"Thank you, Wyanet. Now, would you join me in the banquet hall? I'm sure the mouths of my court are watering at the promise of food." Wyanet laughed but opened the door.

"I know that you simply do not wish to be alone with me, sweet flower. Perhaps your ideas will change after your stay here is complete." Eudora smiled politely as she followed Wyanet to the banquet hall.

"I doubt that, Wyanet," she declared as the two women walked boldly into the room, which was full of people. The prince, Aja, sat at the head of the table. His eyes swept gracefully down Eudora's body, and when they met hers, he gave her a small, complimentary smile. She responded in kind

with a cool look of indifference. His smile melted away, and he met her indifference with irritation. He obviously wasn't used to being scorned.

"Mother," Aja began as he stood to help Wyanet to her seat. "The princess came into our kingdom without offering a gift. Protocol has been discussed, has it not?" Wyanet gave her son a dazzling smile and then turned that sly glance to Eudora.

"I had almost forgotten, Aja. Thank you for reminding me." Eudora allowed Quimat to help her to her seat and folded her hands on the table before her.

"Whatever we hit on the journey tore a hole in the hull. The gifts we were to offer the foreign kingdom we were visiting were lost to the sea." Laughter filled the hall, spinning around the foreign court, who remained uncomfortably silent.

"We are not inclined to accept material things, sweet flower. Our gifts are usually beautiful, warm, *alive* things." Her eyes swept over three of the maidens from Eudora's court as she spoke. Eudora bristled indignantly.

"Are you insinuating that I must give you liberties to rape my court as a 'gift'?" Rarely did Eudora speak so freely, but she was furious and obviously insulted. Wyanet stopped smiling as the food was brought in on silver platters. Eudora noticed that it was all fruit and vegetables. She didn't comment on the lack of meat; she was too infuriated.

"We do not mean to insult you, Eudora, but you insult us, as well. Rape is near the most heinous of crimes committed against a person. It would never be rape with one of my people." Eudora relaxed, regaining her previous icy control, and nodded as a plate was placed before her.

"You may ask my court. If they agree, then you may do what is required to make up for the oversight." Wyanet nodded and smiled graciously as she began to eat. Pausing, she looked over Eudora's court. Of the women, Keeran and Sagira met her gaze, and of the men, Janson and Malcolm did not look away.

"Those who kept my stare are the ones we would have you honor us with. And yourself, of course, sweet flower." Eudora immediately shook her head.

"I am a princess. I am not offered as a gift to anyone. If the members of my court that you have selected are willing, then that is fine. If not, we must find another way. I refuse to force my court to do anything they are not

comfortable with.” Wyanet’s grin was peaceable.

“Take me at my word, sweet flower-they will not be uncomfortable for long. As for yourself, perhaps you will simply watch?” Eudora hesitated; she really did not want to agree to that. “I’m sure your court will feel more secure with your highness present.” Wyanet had the ability to make every sentence a direct challenge to protocol and Eudora’s own personal value. If she refused, it would appear that she didn’t care for her court. Finally, she nodded while sighing inwardly.

“That will be fine, Wyanet.” The queen’s eyes gleamed with anticipation. She clapped twice as Aja began to eat his food.

“Then, please, relax and enjoy the palace entertainment while you eat. Afterwards, we will proceed to *Lujuria*.” Eudora didn’t think that sounded promising. *Lujuria* was the word in their language for ‘lust.’

“And what exactly is the *Lujuria*, Wyanet?” The queen held up one finger and then placed it against her lips as music filled the room and the lights dimmed. It was slow, exotic, and seemed to carry heat on the notes. Dancers drifted into the room from two doors, one on either side of the staircase that bisected the far wall. They each wore only a piece of see-through cloth that flowed down and around their bodies, billowing and fanning out as they moved. There were men and women, and all had incredible grace. Sensuality practically clung to them like a pleasant scent.

A woman stalked down the stairs, dressed in straps of leather that covered her waist and propped up her full, pale breasts. Her womanhood was exposed, and the leather covering her thighs formed very short shorts that cupped her buttocks, leaving the lower curves bare. She unfurled a whip from its holder on her side and snapped it once. Eudora flinched at the sound and focused on the male dancer the woman had hit.

His eyes fluttered shut, and his lips parted slightly. His expression was one of ecstasy. The woman snapped the whip three more times, and three more of the dancers mirrored the first. They continued to dance, though, and began to choose partners. The music became frantic, like a lust-filled, animalistic urging to mate. The woman stalked around the table while Eudora pondered how anyone could accomplish stalking barefoot. When she reached the princess, the woman held out the whip and dropped to her knees. Eudora eyed Wyanet suspiciously. The queen was smiling in a very satisfied way.

“The *Castiga Picante* is offering you an honor, sweet flower.” Eudora looked at Quimat and Majit, who both gave her helpless glances in return.

“What do I have to do?” Eudora questioned with a sigh. Wyanet’s grin widened. In the flickering candlelight, she looked like a black panther ready to pounce.

“Punish someone who has been naughty.” Eudora almost shook her head but knew refusing would be thought of as yet another insult. Protocol was really beginning to infuriate her.... Standing; Eudora took the whip and wrapped her fingers around it gingerly.

“And who am I to punish, Wyanet? Anyone in this hall?” Wyanet’s smile couldn’t get any wider.

“Yes,” she nearly hissed, probably hoping Eudora would punish her. “You may punish whomever you choose.” Eudora nodded and moved over to Aja’s chair.

“Then stand, child king.” Aja looked completely floored. After exchanging a glance and a nod with his mother, Aja did as told, brushing along Eudora’s body as he stood.

“Do you really intend to punish me, fire rose?” His voice held the edge of scorn. Eudora nodded and readied the whip. When the music was at a standstill, she snapped it once. It licked a fiery line across Aja’s chest. He didn’t make a sound or move to protect himself. He simply stared a hole through Eudora.

“Is that all?” the princess asked, choking on her pulse. Wyanet shook her head, grinning as the music began again.

“The *Castiga Picante* will show you what to do next.” The woman, the *Castiga*, stood and approached the first dancer she had ‘punished.’ Moving with the music, she undulated against him in a way that was clearly sexual. She pressed her lips to his and trailed her hand over his chest and stomach. When she covered his groin and squeezed gently, he moaned and rocked against her, keeping time with the music, which throbbed with living passion. When it stopped, the *Castiga* moved on to the second dancer, who was a woman. The music and the process began all over again. For the female, the *Castiga* stroked her breasts and then buried her fingers in the silky mound of flesh between the dancer’s legs while kissing her deeply. She moved onto the third and fourth dancers, and then it was Eudora’s turn. She was nearly sick facing what she had to do and screaming curses in her

mind. She did *not* want to do this! Not with Aja, who was smiling like a pleased imp. Arrogance sang through his body.

“So, fire rose,” he murmured as he pressed his cheek to hers. “Shall we dance?” She wasn’t even going to ask Wyanet if this was necessary. The queen would make up some excuse. The music started again, and Aja led Eudora away from the table, so that everyone could see them. She couldn’t lead the dance, though the *Castiga* had, but Aja took care of that. He pulsed and ground against her, making her so uncomfortable that she nearly pulled away, but Aja covered her lips with his, smothering her in a way that was strangely exciting to the princess. He pried her mouth open so that his tongue could intrude and, against her logical self, Eudora allowed him entrance. She then put her hands on his shoulders and pushed, putting up the fight she knew was expected of her, but he took her hands and led them downward. He pressed Eudora’s fingers to his manhood, and she gasped, trying to jerk away from the hot, hard flesh.

“No, no, fire rose,” he purred, holding her closer. “We must finish the dance. One of us has to mark the other.” Eudora glared at him.

“I already marked you,” she protested as she touched the line of red across his chest. Aja grinned down at her.

“It does not count if you use a weapon,” Aja replied as the music stopped and he dipped Eudora forward. “You must use your body.” He leaned down, presumably to ‘mark’ Eudora’s neck with his teeth, but she raked her nails down his chest, drawing eight deep furrows that quickly pooled with blood. Anger and surprise chased each other through Aja’s gaze, but he nodded and released the princess. Showing the scratches to the audience, he bowed and took Eudora’s hand, forcing her to do the same. The natives applauded boisterously while Eudora’s court sat in stunned silence. Both the prince and princess returned to their seats, Eudora faintly trembling. The *Castiga Picante* approached Eudora, holding out the whip like an offering.

“It is yours, sweet flower,” Wyanet declared softly. Without even a whisper of protest, Eudora took the whip. Aja stomped out of the room, and the lights flared back to life. The dancers all bowed and filtered out of the room. Wyanet followed her son with a worried gaze. “I would like for you to go and speak with him, Eudora,” Wyanet told the princess, who sighed openly and nodded again without protest.

“Of course, Wyanet. What do I need to talk to him about?” Wyanet shrugged and smiled.

“You have offended him, sweet flower, hurt his pride.” Eudora stood quickly, and her chair clattered to the floor. She didn’t try to apologize or make up for the lack of decorum.

“Fine. Where is the wounded prince going?” Eudora asked. Wyanet looked sternly disapproving.

“This is a serious matter, Eudora. Aja is arrogant, and he does not believe that his future wife should have the audacity to insult him.” Eudora’s heart and thought process came to a standstill long enough that it became necessary to catch her breath.

“I’m going to forget you said that,” Eudora whispered. She didn’t even know if the words were spoken aloud. “I’ll go find Aja.” She fled the room and wandered blindly through the hallway Aja had disappeared down. She wasn’t looking for him, though. She wanted out-she wanted away. This kingdom was so terribly different from her own. She wanted to go back to the things that were familiar to her. To her dismay, she collided with the one person she never wanted to see again.

“Hello, fire rose,” Aja said softly, holding her in place. Eudora pulled away from him and glared, trying with all the will she possessed to remain cool and impassive.

“Hello, prince,” Eudora replied in an icy voice. “Your mother told me I have insulted you. She also told me to come speak with you because you are an arrogant child...as if I needed her to inform me of the fact....” How quickly anger could leap into his eyes! He’d donned a jeweled circlet that, shockingly, did not take away from his masculinity. On any other male, it would be just...strange. Aja wore it very well. Perhaps it was the cloak of self-confidence and assurance he always wore that made him seem comfortable in any outfit, from jeweled circlets to complete nudity. He’d also put on a robe...of sorts. It was basically just strips of fabric that covered the wrong spots and exposed those Eudora would rather not see. He smiled once and stalked away. Eudora chased after him.

“Where are you going?” she asked. He stopped to answer, rolling his eyes.

“Where else, fire rose? I am going to the *Lujuria*, and you are accompanying me.” Eudora glowered at him.

“At the moment, I would rather be dragged than go anywhere willingly with you.” Aja nodded, looking thoughtful.

“Would you prefer chains, as well?” Eudora gave him a look of incredulous disgust.

“That, prince, in my kingdom is called ‘sarcasm.’” Aja laughed nastily, spinning away.

“As it is in mine, princess,” he shot back over his shoulder. “Now, come. You said you would sit and watch. And so you shall.” Eudora nodded, sighing, and followed him to the *Lujuria*.

## Chapter Two~ Passion Play

Wyanet, Janson, Malcolm, Keeran, and Sagira were already inside the *Lujuria* when Eudora entered. The princess gasped as she looked around her. The room was a gigantic fountain. Water cascaded down the walls. When she touched it, Eudora found that it was the perfect temperature, not too hot or cold. In the very center of the room, there was a tall fountain that spilled steaming water over glistening black rocks. It was beautiful, exotic, designed for sensuality and sexual exploration.

Wyanet, who smiled invitingly at the princess, was wearing a shimmering slip that looked like it was melting where it touched the water. She lifted one sleeve up and placed it in her mouth, letting the obviously edible material dissolve on her tongue as her smile became seductive.

“It tastes like passionfruit, sweet flower. Would you like to taste it?” Eudora saw a couch in the corner that didn’t look like it was getting wet. Instead of responding to Wyanet’s offer, Eudora sprawled over the couch and kept her gaze away from Aja.

“You may begin, Wyanet. The fruit of my kingdom is offered as a gift to your pleasure.” Wyanet nodded graciously and moved over to Sagira. The maiden was shivering, not because of the room temperature, which was perfect, but because of nervousness. The queen draped herself over the smaller woman and gently kissed her neck.

“Be calm, small one. You will enjoy this.” She motioned once, and four palace servants slipped into the room from doors hidden by the water. It looked like they had simply walked through the cascades of crystal liquid. A woman wearing nothing except see-through lace slip embraced Sagira. She was perfectly Sagira’s height. While others approached the remaining court members, the first moved suggestively against Sagira. Wyanet held out her hand, and Aja brought her two things: a dagger and a device that looked

evocative and frightening.

Wyanet took the dagger first and tore Sagira's dress right in half. She threw the pieces to some distant corner of the room and ran her hands over Sagira's breasts, now exposed. They were small and shapely, and Sagira made soft sounds in her throat as Wyanet moved away momentarily to strap the device around her lower navel. The palace servant who embraced Sagira ground against her harder, forcing the smaller woman to open her legs. Sagira obliged as Wyanet roughly turned the maiden's head and claimed her lips hungrily. The queen then inserted the device she was wearing into the warm channel the palace servant had been rubbing herself against, making Sagira cry out.

Aja watched Eudora as Eudora watched another female servant drop to her knees before the already naked Janson and take him fully into her mouth. She worked his flesh expertly, letting him slide fully in and out of her, and soon had him screaming. He clawed at the air and then found meat to latch on to in the form of a male servant. He moved behind Janson and thrust himself into the other man. Janson cried out as the female servant rose fluidly, wiping her mouth and smiling. She fondled Janson until he was hard again and then pulled him down to the floor on top of her. She guided his shaft into her soaked, heavy channel and rocked upwards as the other servant, on his knees between Janson's legs, pounded into him.

Malcolm, in the care of another male servant, arched his back as orgasm overtook him, brought on by the other man's mouth. Aja had Keeran pressed against a wall, water pouring over both of them as he thrust into her. She writhed against him, digging her nails into his back and shoulders. When she climaxed and then collapsed against him, he gently lowered her to the floor and then approached Eudora.

"Are you enjoying the show, fire rose?" he purred. His erection stood like a brandished sword, looking more like a weapon to Eudora than an instrument of pleasure. It was right at eye level for Eudora, so she looked away while she answered.

"It is rather interesting," she said coolly. Her voice didn't betray the fact that she could taste her pulse and there was a strange tingling all through her body. Aja smiled knowingly.

"Would you like to join?" he offered, to which he received a shake of the head from Eudora. She was watching Wyanet and Sagira again. Both

women shouted as a liquid fire pulsed from their bodies.

“Well, I must finish,” he said, making a gesture to his manhood that meant, ‘obviously.’ With this, he approached Malcolm and thrust into him from behind. Eudora thought it was meant to shock her, and it did. Strangely, though, she wasn’t disgusted, only...excited. When Aja turned the other man’s head roughly to seal their mouths with a fierce possessiveness, Eudora watched, finding a strange appreciation for the beauty of the two men pressed so closely, so intimately. He finished with a primal roar, and Eudora sat still as everyone either collapsed on the floor or against a wall, panting.

The prince was the first to stand, and he came towards Eudora. He was no longer erect, but he was still impressive. He trailed one hand from her shoulder all the way to her foot and then left. She waited until he was gone to shiver.

Eudora fled to her room after the little display in the *Lujuria*. She didn’t want to be around any of them, even her own court members. Servants with lowered eyes and prettily displayed bodies greeted her on the way to her chambers, which she found with some difficulty. Even if she couldn’t escape this dreadful island, at least she could lock herself in her room and avoid contact with all others.

“Majesty,” Quimat exclaimed when Eudora collided with him. He had been looking for her. After her episode in the banquet hall, Quimat knew she would be furious with herself. He didn’t want her to be angry, so he was hoping to speak with her. She had always taken protocol far too seriously.

“Quimat.” Eudora replied on the end of a gasp. She looked frazzled and worried, about to fall apart, which was quite unlike her. Quimat felt that it was time to tell her exactly how they had ended up on this island and why. Taking her hand, he led the princess into her room.

“I need to speak with you, highness. Could you spare a moment for me?” Eudora nodded, locking the door. She was glad to be away from all the curious gazes-and mostly to fully naked, hauntingly beautiful people.

“What is it, Quimat?” Eudora said in a much calmer voice, sitting on her bed and placing her hands demurely on her knees. Quimat sat beside her, trying not to look at her. The dress looked amazing on her, though Quimat would never tell his pretty sovereign that. She would be highly offended.

Because Quimat was closest to Eudora in age, he was the court member she was the most familiar with. Therefore, he had been told of the king's plan. Majit, the oldest member of the court, had also been informed, but Quimat was the person Eudora trusted most. Because of this, he was the one with the responsibility of letting her know exactly what was happening.

"We are not here by accident, majesty," Quimat began, keeping his gaze fixed on the farthest corner of the room. Eudora touched his chin, turning his face gently in her direction.

"It is rude to look away when you are speaking with someone, Quimat. You taught me that when I was barely three feet tall. Don't tell me you forget your own lessons." Her smile was sweet and encouraging, and for the first time, Quimat was angry about the plot she was unwillingly participating in. He sighed, regretting the fact that the childlike, innocent Eudora was going to have to grow and wise up far too quickly.

"Your father has come to an agreement with Wyanet, princess. You have been given as a gift to Prince Aja as his bride. The king has done this because the Isle of Passion is home to the most advanced, organized military force out of all the seven kingdoms. Karaphel has declared war on Cieala, and our neighbors to the north and east refuse to aid us. By forging a union between our kingdom and that of the Isle, your father has constructed the most powerful army in the seven kingdoms." Eudora was sitting in obvious shock. Her hands had moved from her knees to her throat, and her mouth had fallen open.

"How could he do this to me?" she whispered in a horrified voice. "How could he condemn me to this?" Quimat, sensing his princess's distress, took her hands and spoke quickly, trying to say anything in hopes of removing that terrible look from her face.

"When you rule the Isle of Passion with Aja as your king, you will stand allied with your home kingdom. You will be able to keep your people safe, your highness. Right now, they are standing in between two great kingdoms, both vying for power. Hate your father for this, hate *me* for agreeing to do this, but think of your people. You will be granting them safety, security, and peace. Wouldn't you do anything to know that your people are safe, princess?" Eudora nodded and stood. Her eyes were terribly cold and dark. They looked like heated metal boiling in the black pit of midnight.

"Leave me, Quimat. I must be alone to think on this." Quimat,

understanding how she must feel, stood also and touched her cheek.

“I have always thought of you as a sister, your majesty. I wish I could protect you from this. I wish I could keep the hurt from your eyes, but I cannot. Tonight, Aja will come to claim what he believes to be his. It is my advice for you to restrain yourself. Do not fight him. However-” His last two sentences were joined with a small smile. “It is my knowledge that you would kill him before you’d look at him. Just try and think of the good you are doing and stay strong.” Squeezing her hand once, Quimat left, closing Eudora’s door softly on his way out. Once he was gone, the princess locked the door, threw herself on her bed, and cried until there were no more tears left in her body.

Eudora slept through the night and awakened very late in the morning. She found herself crying again for no apparent reason and then felt shame for behaving like a child. Eudora took quite a while to regain her cool sense of self and to touch up her appearance. Because of how hard she’d cried now and the night before, the princess had destroyed the careful make-up job Neviah, the court maiden Eudora most respected, had toiled over on the voyage. Searching through her belongings, Eudora found none of the tools or powders Neviah had used. Sighing, the princess finally allowed a palace girl, who had entered through the servant’s entrance to her room, to apply her make-up for her.

“Thank you,” Eudora said softly as the servant bowed and left as quietly as she had come in. The princess looked at herself in the mirror and groaned silently. No matter how subtle the coloring, Eudora noticed a severe difference. Her usual make-up was pale and skin-toned. It very softly enhanced the perfect curve of her eyes and cheeks. This, on the other hand, what the servant girl had applied, flaunted it. There were soft reds and silvers to showcase her eyes, and the deep crimson lipstick she now wore had flecks of starlight in it. Rolling her eyes, Eudora simply sighed and left her room.

“Wyanet.” Eudora entered the banquet hall radiating purpose and authority. The queen smiled as she waved servants away, who had just about finished a thorough cleaning. If there was one thing Eudora liked about this place, it was how smoothly everything was run.

“Yes, sweet flower?” Wyanet purred. Eudora flinched inwardly. Willing to suffer a little injury to her pride rather than ignore protocol, she leaned forward and touched her lips softly to Wyanet’s in greeting. The queen looked pleasantly surprised and gestured to two chairs in the corner of the room. “Sit, sweet flower, and we will discuss what is on your mind.” Eudora nodded as they sat. Wyanet was able to drape herself suggestively over the chair, while Eudora looked like an uncomfortable doll forced into a position she did not like.

“I have recently been informed,” Eudora began, “that my father the king of Cieala has given me as a gift to Prince Aja for his bride. Is this correct?” Wyanet, for once, looked less amused and seductive and more confused.

“This is correct, Eudora, but you are telling me you just now found out? Your father told me he had discussed it with you and you were in agreement.” Bitterness flooded through Eudora, nearly closing up her throat, but it did not enter her voice.

“My father discusses nothing with me, Wyanet. He is much like the prince. He told me the day before we set sail that I was to be envoy to a foreign kingdom and that Quimat would be able to get us there. He did not mention you or Aja or his little plot.” Wyanet looked truly concerned and put her hands over Eudora’s.

“Forgive me, princess. I was not aware that the king had not informed you. He told me that he would introduce you to our culture so that you would have the opportunity for the shock to be lessened. This certainly explains your behavior...” Wyanet stood and swept into a low curtsy. “I am deeply sorry, Eudora. Ask for anything that can be done to make up for this oversight. If it is within my power, I will grant it.” Wyanet stayed in her curtsy, awaiting Eudora’s answer.

“I do not wish to marry Aja,” Eudora immediately replied. Wyanet frowned and stood.

“I am sorry, sweet flower. That is one request I cannot grant.” Eudora sighed. She had already known what the end to that demand would be. The princess nodded and thought for a moment.

“I would like you to do what my father promised you he would. I want to know about your kingdom, your laws, and your people. If I am to rule, I must know what I am ruling.” Wyanet smiled, and, amazingly, it was a simple smile. There was no suggestive gleam in her eyes and no playful lift

of one corner of her mouth. She looked genuinely pleased.

“Now, that is one request that I would be more than pleased to grant. Even if you do not trust me, Eudora, I believe that you are going to make a very good queen of the Isle of Passion.”

Wyanet led Eudora out of the palace and back to the beach. Eudora smiled at the natives as she passed, wondering how she could have gone from blushing violently whenever she saw them to curiously wondering all about their ways, habits, and everyday lives.

“We will begin at the beach, sweet flower, and go through everything just as you did earlier. Only, this time, I will treat you as the pupil, not a spoiled, arrogant princess.” Eudora made a sound of protest, and Wyanet shrugged. “I thought that you believed yourself above us. Of course, I now have been otherwise informed. There is little difference between feeling different and feeling inferior, sweet flower, and our people like neither emotion. Perhaps once you have learned about us, you will be more accepting and understanding of our differences.” Eudora allowed herself to smile.

“I never felt superior, Wyanet, simply shocked and terribly alien. I was confused at your culture and ashamed that I did not know of your customs or lives.” Wyanet smiled back.

“Well, you will now be given the opportunity to learn.” She gestured to the far sides of the beach, to the towering trees that stood like loving sentries. Eudora noticed that she could not see the village through the heavy leaves and thick trunks. “We have guards stationed in many of the trees. They are swift, silent, and well trained. Were an intruder to come on the beach, he would be killed or apprehended before he could even set foot in the village.” She gestured for Eudora to follow, and they once again walked the path to the village.

“What are your houses made of, Wyanet?” Eudora asked, admiring for a second time the intricate and breathtaking beauty of the smooth walls and expertly fashioned roofs. Wyanet seemed deeply proud of her people, of the land she ruled. It made Eudora respect her more. Most of the royals she knew felt they were *entitled* to rule and therefore could do so any way they saw fit, usually in a way that did not benefit the people. Wyanet was obviously different.

“We all labored for many weeks to forge our homes. The ivory tower was an ancient piece of architecture which already stood where it is, and I and my king could have taken up our place of residence and left our people to fend for themselves.” She smiled distantly, and Eudora found herself captivated by everything—the beauty of this place, the quiet, comfortable ease in which the people worked, and the devotion that she saw on Wyanet’s calm face. “But Thiery and I think of our people as not only our subjects, but our family and special friends,” the queen continued. “Everyone worked tirelessly, commendably, and soon our home was complete. The homes of the people are fashioned of silver. The roofs are obsidian. We found it near the base of the volcano that graces our island.” She gestured to the smoking mound, which looked more like a protective guardian than a dangerous time bomb.

“Do you not fear the volcano’s wrath, Wyanet?” Eudora questioned. Tales of the fire kingdom had taught the princess to be wary of anything dealing with fire. A royal of Karaphel could control deadly flames and scorching lava. She, Eudora, could not. Wyanet seemed to read her thoughts and stared ponderingly at the volcano.

“It has shown no hostility towards us since we adopted the island as our home. Just because one can use something for evil does not mean that is its intended purpose, sweet flower. Fire, in the hands of an Element Tamer who does not wish to cause destruction, could be a valuable asset to many. How do you think we managed to build these houses in such a short amount of time? A weapon of war can quickly become a means of peace if transferred to another hand.” Eudora felt guilty and didn’t know why.

“You have Element Tamers on the island?” the princess questioned. “For some reason, I thought that those were things of legend.” Wyanet shrugged.

“Our people have many talents, princess. I believe that you will find them very interesting, once you sit and discuss things with them.” Fear jumped into Eudora’s throat. Sit and talk with these strange creatures? She immediately chastised herself for thinking so cruelly. Here, Wyanet was a more gentle and devoted ruler than any Eudora had ever known, and she had the audacity to believe herself above speaking with some of the natives.

“I would enjoy that, Wyanet.” The queen smiled knowingly at her.

“No, not at first you won’t. You have been denied the simple teachings

of friendship and communication. You were taught to be a ruthless ruler, holding your people loyal with fear and respect. We are not this way here. It will be hard to find a place in our society that you are comfortable with, but believe that there will be those more than willing to help with your adjustment.” Eudora nodded, feeling strangely relieved.

“If possible, I would like to talk with the Element Tamers,” Eudora asked hesitantly. “My father once told me it was an Art that could be learned. I have always been fascinated by....” Wyanet cut her off by smiling broadly and gesturing to her left.

“Here is the leader of our Element Tamers, sweet flower. You may speak with him. And there will be no need for introductions. You know each other quite well.” Eudora felt slightly surprised when Aja stopped near his mother and bowed his head to Eudora.

“So, fire rose, you’ve taken an interest in something besides ruling armies and ignoring your servants?” Eudora fumed inwardly. Everything about him was so spiteful!

“Yes,” Eudora replied coolly. “I have indeed. However, I would like to talk to someone who is a Tamer of some friendlier element, perhaps Wind or Light. The Tamer of spite and simple-mindedness is not one I would be particularly inclined to have a discussion with.” Aja looked like he wanted to kill Eudora but nodded and gestured to a tall man with deep, sea blue eyes.

“This is Oceanus.” Aja pointed to the woman who stood beside Oceanus. She looked delicate in his shadow. “And his wife, Amana. He Tames Water, and she Tames Wind.” Eudora could have guessed that from the way they looked. Amana had eyes light like opals, and her fine hair was the color of diamonds on a sandy beach. They both bowed as they were introduced, and Eudora found herself liking them immediately.

“I am Eudora,” she told them in a soft voice. She didn’t know how to greet them or how they would greet her, so she just stood there, slightly uncomfortable. Oceanus moved toward her first and kissed Eudora’s forehead. That was all right. She liked that gesture. It reminded her of her grandfather, who had denied the throne to explore the deep reaches of the sea. Wyanet held up a hand as Amana started to approach.

“He kissed you on the forehead because even though he is much wiser and older than you, you are still above him in rank. Also, because he was in the presence of his wife, whom he much adores. She may become jealous if

he greets a pretty woman such as yourself informally. Now, Amana's greeting can do many things. She can give Oceanus permission to be less formal with you by kissing you on the jaw, palm, or the inside of your forearm. Only another royal would be allowed to kiss you on the lips without your permission. If she does not want to grant this to Oceanus, she will kiss the back of your hand, showing respect with not much trust, or your wrist, which shows respect and trust that she expects to be returned. Amana, proceed." Amana, who was taller and wispier than Eudora, leaned down to press a tender kiss to the princess' jaw.

"As our future queen, you should be a trusted friend, not a doubted enemy," Amana explained in a voice that did not fit her look. Her voice was strong, confident, and completely eliminated all thoughts of weakness. She was, after all, a Tamer and, on a more basic level, a woman. She *was* strong, and no delicate appearance would change that.

"You are welcome to come study with us, princess. We are always happy to have pupils." Eudora looked cautiously at Wyanet.

"May we continue this another time, Wyanet? While I am utterly fascinated with your culture, I desperately wish to spend some time with these two. I am feeling as though a fairy tale once told to inspire me has come to life. I would hate to miss this opportunity."

Wyanet nodded graciously and gestured to the tower. "When the shadow touches the band of ebony, dinner will begin. It would be considered bad form were you not to attend, so make haste when you see the sun falling." Eudora looked at the tower. The shadow had just touched the highest tip. She had a good two hours. Smiling broadly, Eudora hurried after Oceanus and Amana, who had begun walking back to their home. She felt better than she had since arriving on the island.

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"Now," Oceanus begun, sitting beside Amana in the middle of the first room in their home. Eudora guessed it to be the living room. "Taming is a delicate Art, one which takes many years to master if one does not already have an affinity with a particular Element. I have called the rest of the Tamers to us, and when they arrive, we will be able to determine which, if any, Element you possess." Amana smiled gently at Eudora.

“And do not feel discouraged if you find you have no Element at all. As Oceanus said, it is a delicate Art. You will have many good teachers for all the years it will take to master one of the forms of Taming.” Eudora nodded raptly.

“Years which I will be most delighted to devote to the Art,” the princess declared. “I believed it to be a myth. Is that why the fire kingdom is so powerful? Does Karaphel use its power over the flames to destroy countries that become too powerful?” The eyes of both Oceanus and Amana darkened as they nodded.

“The fire kingdom and the rock kingdom, Gailenna, have always been power-hungry,” Oceanus declared sadly. “In the Dark War, which was after the War of Elements, they united as one force to destroy all Tamers of Elements not their own. This is why the Wind, Water, and Light kingdoms have scattered to the far corners of our world. The Darkness Tamers are solitary creatures as it is and were not involved in the war. And the Legendary Tamers, those who can Tame any given Element, well, they never really allied themselves with any kingdom before the Great War, did they? They scorned the dueling Tamers and lost themselves to legend. Only one Legendary Tamer from ages past still exists, and he is...incapacitated. All we have as far as Legendary Tamers go is the son of one.” Eudora became immediately suspicious.

“Don’t tell me that...Aja?” Oceanus nodded solemnly as three more people entered the tent. One stood taller than the others and had bright orange hair. Her eyes were deep crimson and seemed to dance with flames. She smiled and bowed her head to Eudora. When the Fire Tamer, for that was who she surely was, sat by the princess, she kissed the sovereign’s forearm and nodded to the man who entered after her. He therefore brushed a kiss over Eudora’s chin and caressed her neck. He had been granted a less formal greeting when the Fire Tamer, perhaps his wife or partner, had kissed Eudora’s forearm. This man also looked to be a Fire Tamer, and Eudora found herself wanting to meet one of a different Element, perhaps Darkness or Light, even one of the Lesser Elements which her father had once mentioned in passing but never fully discussed. The last looked to be an Ice Tamer, judging by the shocking pale blue of his eyes and startling snow-white of his hair.

“We have several Lesser Tamers on the island, Eudora,” Oceanus

commented, apparently reading the princess' thoughts. "How do you think we controlled the mist and the waves to guide you here? We also call upon the storm in dry seasons or coax the flora and fauna to grow in strength. We have created a thriving community by bonding together members possessing different assets and talents. Ah, here are the last two Tamers I called to us." The Ice Tamer who had entered with the Fire Tamers greeted Eudora with a kiss on the forehead as the last two came into view.

The Tamers entered one after the other, both eyeing each other warily. Of all the displays Eudora had seen since she arrived on the island, suspicion had not been included. It could, of course, be due to the fact that they were in direct opposition considering the Elements each Tamed. He was a Tamer of Light and she of Darkness. Removing the black hood that she wore, the Darkness Tamer hissed at the Light Tamer in a way meant to taunt him. He gave her cool eyes and sat beside Oceanus. He greeted the other man with a kiss on the lips while Eudora pondered over the fact that the Darkness Tamer was actually covered by her hood and cloak. She removed it when out of the light, however, and Eudora was immediately thrust back into the unease she had greeted the kingdom's casual nudity with.

Eudora had barely even noticed the other Tamer's nakedness, but theirs was much more subtle than that of the Light and Darkness Tamers. All of the Tamers were decorated with paint signifying them as masters of their Art. The paint was a clever substitute for the clothing, or lack thereof, which the other natives wore. The Darkness Tamer was covered in silver and black paint; markings of a language Eudora had never seen and could not understand. She wore a black leather garment around her breasts that pushed her dark nipples forward and displayed them in a way that was forcefully erotic. The leather made its way down to halfway cover her womanhood, but the dark curling hair and silver rings that pierced the delicate flesh were proudly flaunted. Silver swirls trailed over her strong thighs, and a long dagger was strapped to one of her calves. She looked like a dark goddess of war and passion, one who would drink the blood of her enemies and laugh as the liquid splashed over her full breasts. Eudora shivered at the image and focused on the Light Tamer as he moved in a graceful crouch towards her, intent on greeting the reluctant royal, most likely.

His member brushed along the floor as he moved towards her like an

elegant leopard, and the chains of gold that covered his lower body as a pair of highly breakable underwear made noises like small bells. He had gold and white paint swirling all over his chest and stomach. The golden hair that covered his impressive manhood and looked so soft and inviting to Eudora was sprinkled with some kind of glitter. He also had a piercing in a place that Eudora cringed to even imagine receiving. The Darkness Tamer advanced as well, and Eudora found her breath catching at the so very different and yet identical beauty that they both emitted.

The Light Tamer reached her first. Almost as if he were taking in her scent, he moved from the area of Eudora's groin up to her neck, breathing deeply and closing his eyes. He swirled his tongue around her collarbone and raised her hand up so that he could suck on one of her fingers while holding her gaze, which was flickering nervously from Oceanus, to Amana, to the Darkness Tamer, patiently awaiting her turn, and back to the man before her. The Light Tamer finished his greeting by kissing Eudora gently on her moist collarbone.

The Darkness Tamer came next, moving as gracefully as the Light Tamer had. She licked Eudora's cheek and placed gentle kisses on both her eyes. The Passion Kingdom's customs just got stranger and stranger to the foreign princess, but she did her best to remain calm and open-minded. The Darkness Tamer finished her gesture by cupping Eudora's breast and squeezing, nearly making the princess yelp with surprise.

"Yuri." Oceanus said the Darkness Tamer's name in a tone that carried warning. Yuri bowed her head and moved away from Eudora, who was breathing a little more rapidly than she liked.

"May I hear the others' names, please?" Eudora requested, mostly to take her mind off the Light Tamer's impressive equipment and the Darkness Tamer's overtly sexual offer. The Light Tamer stood and bowed low for Eudora.

"I am Dinesh, Tamer of Light." The two Fire Tamers who had entered first nodded to Eudora.

"I am Zasha," the woman said. "And this is my husband"-she pointed to the other Fire Tamer-"Kamali. We are both Fire Tamers." Eudora looked pointedly at the Ice Tamer.

"And you?" she asked politely. "What is your name?" He smiled at Eudora and gave her a small inclination of his head.

“I am Arian,” he replied with amusement entering his stunningly pale eyes. “It is a pleasure to meet you, princess.” If no one in that kingdom ever said ‘pleasure’ again, it would be too soon for Eudora.

“Thank you all for telling me your names. I am Eudora,” the princess declared, earning small nods from the Tamers. “Now, Oceanus, why did you summon them all here?” Oceanus stood and motioned for the others who were still seated to do the same.

“We are going to call your soul and, in doing so, reveal any Element you may possess.”

## **Chapter Three~ Elements and the Prince**

“What exactly do you mean, ‘call my soul’?” Eudora asked as she arched one eyebrow and followed Oceanus to his feet. The Water Tamer stroked one hand in front of the princess’s face and smiled softly at her.

“We need permission to be completely informal with you first, your highness.” Eudora didn’t like the sound of that.

“Does that mean I give any of you permission to...uh...” That was the first time Eudora had ever verbally hesitated in her life. She didn’t like it. “That I would be giving you the option of having sex with me?” Oceanus and the other Tamers laughed as if she had made a truly funny joke.

“There are no hidden obligations tied to this, princess. Any of us would be willing to have sex with you, of course, but that is a very different procedure. This will merely allow us to act as equals and not as subjects. Anyone of lesser status than yourself could not perform this ritual because it involves very intimate touching.” Eudora had figured that much. Everything about this kingdom seemed to have something to do with ‘intimate touching.’ The princess sighed.

“How much intimate touching?” she asked. Oceanus smiled as if she were really amusing him as he gestured to the Light and Darkness Tamers.

“Call your Elements in order to show the princess how the procedure is performed.” They both nodded and turned to each other. Eudora could almost see the animosity flaring between them. The Light Tamer moved first. He ran his hands over the Darkness Tamer’s breasts, tracing the Element insignias that had been painted onto her skin.

“We wear our markings on or near the areas where our power is based.” Oceanus commented as the Darkness Tamer reached down to cup the Light Tamer’s hardening cock. She ran her long nails gently over the painted

symbols. Eudora thought she would faint if that was what they had to do to her. The Darkness Tamer's hands moved to caress her opposite's chest and stomach. "These areas are, of course, where the power of our kingdom is based as well," Oceanus continued. "All of the inhabitants of the Passion Kingdom can in some form or another Tame Passion." The Darkness Tamer used the delicate gold chains wrapped around the Light Tamer's groin and hips to pull him to her. Their lips didn't meet, they collided. They didn't embrace, they melted into each other. Eudora could see the power play between them. What she had mistaken for spite and hatred was actually their conflicting Elements. She was breathless with the mystifying beauty of it.

"And I have to do...that? With each of you?" Oceanus shrugged elegantly.

"Only a true Tamer can call your soul. It works best to recognize Elements if the opposite of your core Element performs the ritual. That is why I have called a diverse group of Tamers together. It is almost guaranteed that you have a Lesser Element, but we are searching for Greater Elements right now. Shall we begin?" Eudora took a deep breath.

"I have no paint, no markings," she declared, pointing out what she thought would be a problem. Oceanus took Eudora's hand, after the princess initially jerked away from him, and ran her hand over the 'paint' on his chest and neck.

"This is not paint, princess. It is a branding from within. When each of our souls was called for the first time, our markings appeared. We proudly wear them always. These marks distinguish us as possessing a great and powerful Talent. Now, I will call you first. Fire and Water are the Elements which seem to conflict the most after Light and Darkness. Both of the latter are relatively rare, so we will wait until the last to try and call either. Now, do you give us permission to be informal with you?" Eudora hesitated, looking around the group. She was desperately afraid of having to let her barriers down for this, but what she was experiencing was the thing of legends. This was a fairy tale she had been told since she was little yet never believed to be true.

"Yes." Her voice was the softest whisper possible. Oceanus smiled comfortingly and drew her to him with the hand he still held.

"Be calm, princess. We will not hurt you." Eudora wasn't afraid of being hurt. She was afraid of being compromised, of losing everything she

had ever been taught, ever loved. She nodded anyway, and Oceanus eased the dress she was wearing down to pool at her feet. She stepped out of it when he urged her to and shivered as he moved slowly to his knees. He splayed his fingers over her hips and gently kissed her navel. Eudora trembled as Oceanus made his way up her body, placing delicate, soft kisses in random places. When he reached her breasts, he mirrored what the Light Tamer had done and cupped the warm globes, flicking his thumbs over her nipples. Eudora felt something shift inside of her, a not so gentle jerk that had her moving forward before she could stop herself. She met Oceanus' lips, and, as with the Darkness and Light Tamer, it was a melding, not a kiss.

Eudora felt something not unlike fire tear itself through her body and force itself out of her mouth in a shrill shriek. Oceanus held her in place as flames tried to eat their way out of her skin. She remained silent through this, fuming over the fact that she had been caught so by surprise at the first rush of pain that she had cried out. When it had faded to a dull throbbing, Eudora looked down to the swirls of vibrant crimson that now encircled her breasts.

"Only one mark?" Amana questioned as Oceanus backed away. He looked confused.

"Perhaps she Tames more than one Element," he replied. "For certain, Fire is hers to call." Instead of joy, Eudora felt fear. Control Fire? Like the ruthless, greedy rulers of Karaphel? She didn't want that. The two Fire Tamers approached her, smiling as they read her thoughts. Apparently, all Tamers could read the others' thoughts, especially those of their Element.

"It doesn't matter if you want that, child," the woman, Zasha, told Eudora.

"You are a Fire Tamer now," her husband, Kamali, agreed. "However, according to Oceanus, you control more than that. Let's see if Water is also yours to call." The two approached Eudora as one and each took a hand. Eudora looked to Oceanus, and he raised his hands for her. While his markings were also on his chest and stomach, they were most vibrant on his wrists. He was telling her that this was where the marks of a Water Tamer would show most prominently. Zasha and Kamali moved perfectly in rhythm. Both kissed Eudora's neck on either side and then trailed their tongues over her breasts. While Kamali kissed her wrist and teased the flesh

with his tongue, Zasha claimed the princess' lips and poured the power of flames into her.

While Eudora did, in fact, react to the power of Fire that was now coursing through her veins strongly enough to recognize it in another Tamer, it was doused with the cool strength of the Water Element, which joined the heated flood. The Elements met in confusion and seemed to battle for a moment, causing Eudora to whimper in pain. On accident, she bit down on Zasha's lower lip hard enough to draw blood. The Fire Tamer drew back with a smile curving her mouth. She touched Kamali on the shoulder and gestured to Eudora's wrists. The mark of the Water Tamer had blossomed onto her flesh. However, like with Fire, that was the only place the mark had appeared.

"Is it possible that..." Amana began, but Oceanus shook his head.

"We know nothing yet," he said sharply. "Arian, see if she can call Ice." Eudora was confused. Arian was an Ice Tamer. If one called opposites.... "There is no direct opposite to Ice," Arian commented, sensing her confusion. "The Element Ice best recognizes is itself." Eudora nodded, not understanding, but feeling more fear and less excitement with every Tamer who stepped forward. She had, as usual, taken something for granted. Eudora had thought that this would be a time to sit and talk about the Tamers, as she and her mother had done long, long ago. Apparently, the Tamers thought like her mother and desired action versus words. This was just another problem to add to Eudora's ever-growing list.

Arian approached the princess with a ferocity the others hadn't had in their eyes. He looked...cold, and it had nothing to do with his Element. Arian pulled Eudora close to him and let all of him press against all of her. He moved, causing his dick to brush over her navel. She was about to push him away, but Oceanus stopped her with his eyes as Arian lowered his mouth to the princess's breast. He supported her with his arm around her waist as he sucked at her nipple, pulling it taut between his teeth. This caused Eudora to gasp, and the Fire Element flared indignantly to life. It was as close to an opposite as Ice had, and it fought against Arian as he locked his and Eudora's lips. A painful chill swept through the princess, and she thought she'd be pulled apart by all the conflicting feelings. Ice, Water, Fire...they surged to life within her, closing up her throat, burning her chest, tightening her muscles to the point of cramping.

“Stop!” Eudora gasped as Arian pulled his lips away. She was shivering, and her teeth were chattering. It was so cold, it felt as if an icy blue flame was thrumming against her skin. The painful, vicious chill stayed with her as Arian stepped away from her. He ran his fingers down her neck, and she knew by looking at his, where the white-blue mark stood out brilliantly even against his so-pale skin, that she had the mark of an Ice Tamer.

“Three Elements...” Oceanus murmured. “How incredibly rare. Amana, if you would.” Oceanus let the invitation hang on the air as his wife stepped forward. She brushed her hand over Eudora’s face, and her biting chills subsided. Amana was not cold like Arian. She would not hurt Eudora. Even after just meeting her, Eudora trusted the Wind Tamer more than any other of the Passion Kingdom.

“Be calm, princess. There are only two more Elements after me.” Fear, more acute than before, leapt into her throat. She would have to see if she could Tame either Light or Darkness? She didn’t want to be able to touch either.

Amana ran her hands down Eudora’s waist and kneaded the flesh of the princess’s hips. Running her mouth down Eudora’s neck, Amana let a bit of her power trickle over the other woman’s skin. It was soothing, calming, a rush of purity that Eudora much appreciated. Amana’s kiss, though gentle, was still a force that sucked the breath from Eudora’s chest. She felt a howling wind seep through her pores, race through her veins. When Amana pulled away, Eudora knew that her right leg, like Amana’s, was covered with the swirling, dancing mark that signified the Wind Tamer.

“A Le-” Oceanus gave his wife a sharp look, and she quickly cut off her sentence.

“Yuri, Dinesh, call her,” Oceanus commanded. Eudora, lost in a haze of Elements that were each trying to rule over her, found herself wondering if Oceanus was the leader of the Tamers. He smiled gently at her as the Darkness and Light Tamers approached. “I do not lead, they follow. I am oldest, wisest, so I am the one who carries the most respected position. It comes naturally, princess.”

Dinesh met the princess first, and even though Light was a good Element, Eudora still didn’t want to be able to Tame it. Kingdoms had been destroyed in the stories her mother had told her over the Light and Darkness Tamers. They wielded extraordinary power, and Eudora wanted nothing to

do with it. Because the mark of the Light Tamer covered their genitals, Dinesh stroked his fingers over Eudora's softly curling pubic hair. He practically fell to his knees, but no movement so graceful could ever be considered falling.

Yuri draped herself over the princess's shoulders and bit down gently on her neck. The mark of the Darkness Tamer was on the chest, right below the throat. Massaging Eudora's collarbone, Yuri gently trailed her lips over the smaller woman's jaw line and throat while Dinesh touched his mouth to the tender flesh beneath Eudora's moist pubic hair. Against her will, her knees buckled. Yuri was there to support her and to cup her breasts, rolling Eudora's nipples between her fingers. Oceanus looked very interested in the fact that Eudora refused to cry out.

"Call her first, Yuri," Dinesh ordered in a breathless voice. "And then I will, as well." Moving his hand up Eudora's thigh, he slid one finger inside her, causing the princess to squirm and attempt to twist away from them. Yuri prevented that by fastening her mouth hungrily on Eudora's. The princess shouted into the contact as Dinesh roughly worked his fingers in and out of her tight opening. He found her bud as the Darkness Element swam up from the deepest reaches of Eudora's soul and consumed her. She screamed as loudly as possible as black flames engulfed her body.

Yuri broke away from the contact while Eudora continued to scream and Dinesh pulled himself to his feet like a marionette without strings. They switched tasks fluidly, Yuri cupping and kneading Eudora's pussy while Dinesh claimed her lips. Light exploded behind her eyes, and there was confusion, pleasure, pain-it all collided and became one blinding mosaic of too many different, conflicting feelings. Liquid heat rushed out of Eudora's body as she rode her first painful orgasm. Dinesh pulled away from her, and she knew without asking that all the Elements that had been called, she now wore evidence of.

"Get away from me," Eudora commanded harshly. Her voice sounded distant and gravelly. Her body was aching, her head was pounding, and air was squeezing its way in and out of her chest in a desperate, agonizing rhythm. Dinesh and Yuri both stayed where they were, and fury swept through the princess. Not being able to control the violent, terrible emotion, she simply let it burst out of her. "Get away from me!" She shrieked, and Dinesh and Yuri were knocked away from her by some invisible wind.

Grabbing her dress and pulling it on hastily with shaking hands, Eudora fled from Oceanus and Amana's home as everyone called for her to come back.

Eudora found her room again, this time with little problem, and slammed the door shut as she entered. She locked it with fingers that were still violently quaking and rested her damp forehead against it before turning to see Aja sprawled over her bed.

"So you..." He trailed off in shock as he looked at her, presumably at the Element marks. "What happened?" Eudora gestured to her body in disgust, wanting nothing more than to bathe and get rid of the stench of too many hands and mouths on her.

"The Tamers called my soul. Apparently, I call Wind, Fire, Water, Ice, Light, and Darkness." Aja looked stunned, floored. His mouth fell open, and he stood, not advancing towards her.

"You...this is a joke! You can't be a Le..." He trailed off, swallowing the word before saying it as Oceanus had forced Amana to earlier. Eudora gave him a scathing look and then a pointed one to the door.

"Please leave, your highness. I would like to bathe before dinner commences." She then observed him curiously, baffled by the lack of Element marks.

"They told me you were a Legendary Tamer, Aja. Where are your marks?" The prince finally seemed able to collect himself, and he sneered nastily at her.

"I *am* a Legendary Tamer. Use the pampered, tiny brain in that pretty head and figure out what that means." Eudora shrugged and moved to the large bath that sat in the corner of her room. Fascinated at the tap, she touched it hesitantly. She didn't know how to work it. Aja hesitated and then made a disgusted sound as he knelt next to Eudora. "Call the water, like this." He placed her hand on the tap and then put his hand over it, demonstrating how to call the liquid, instructing her through their touching skin. She felt how to do it and saw the Water mark flare to life on Aja's skin.

"You Tame all the Elements," Eudora began as clear water splashed into the tub. Aja, without telling her how, made it steaming hot for her and then stood.

"Yes. Please, inform me of something unknown to me," he snarled,

crossing his arms over his lean, well-muscled chest. Eudora glared at him and gestured to the marks, which began to fade from his wrists.

“You can disguise the marks when you aren’t Taming an Element. That means you’re very powerful, doesn’t it?” Aja, who enjoyed any coddling his massive ego received, smiled down at her with hints of spite playing along the corners of that lush mouth.

“Very good, *estudiante*,” Aja said in a malicious voice. “At least you’ll learn to think for yourself before ruling here. My people do not need an ignorant queen.” Eudora stood, scowling at Aja.

“Too bad they are cursed with the misfortune of having a pig-headed and cruel king,” she retorted. Aja’s fingers encased her neck like bands of steel, and Eudora found her air supply immediately and painfully choked off. His hand on the mark of Ice seemed to bring the Element surging to life, and before Eudora could Tame it, a freezing chill swept into Aja’s flesh, rushing up his arm in a surge of pain. He jerked back as if scalded and glowered at her.

“You must go to the other Tamers. You’re a danger to anyone who touches you until you’ve learned how to fully control your Elements.” He frowned and turned her around suddenly, as if just realizing something. Eudora was about to protest when Aja spoke again. “They didn’t call you for Rock, Instinct, Prophecy, or Time?” he asked. Eudora shook his hands off her waist and turned back to face him.

“They did not have a Tamer for any of those Elements available at the time, and, besides, I don’t want to be able to Tame any of them.” Aja looked curiously at her.

“Why not? We protect our kingdom with our Taming. Our people are safe because we can call the Water, the Wind, the Light, and Darkness. If you are to be queen, the more Elements you can call the better. Having a Legendary Tamer as both queen and king will bring my people a feeling of security and protection.” Eudora put a finger on his chest, and a spark of fire jumped between them before she could help it. Jerking her hand back, she shot him another scathing look.

“*Our* people, child king. If I am to be queen, then I will be allowed to actually rule, not just to sit by your side as the doll you play with or the ornament to decorate your hall.” Aja glared at her, and Eudora wondered how she could feel such hatred for the man she would soon call husband. He

spun around instead of replying to that cut and spoke over his shoulder as he left.

“Tonight, I will come to claim what being your king entitles me to claim. You will be here after the banquet and, after calling your soul for the other Elements, I will take what belongs to me.” He slammed her door shut, and Eudora fumed angrily. A pot of flowers burst into flames near her, and she quickly smothered the blaze with a jet of cool water. She didn’t know how she had done either thing but rationalized that fire, at least, was called by the whim of her emotions, most particularly anger. The calling of water had been an instant reaction to a potentially dangerous situation, instinct more than any logical thought.

Growling her disgust and frustration, Eudora slid out of her dress and slipped into the tub. She scrubbed at every inch of her skin until a light pink tinge accompanied her new decorations. She smiled ruefully, thinking of how Quimat and Majit were going to react upon seeing her tonight. After taking her hair down from its elegant up-do, Eudora rinsed and washed that as well before going at her face with a wet rag. She felt *dirty*, and she hated the feeling.

“Eudora.” The door suddenly flung open without warning, and Eudora felt a mixture of emotions as she hastily covered herself: surprise and outrage at being burst in upon, anger at Aja for leaving the door unlocked, and annoyance with herself for not noticing that it was unlocked.

“Yes, Wyanet?” the princess said with all of her emotions barely contained underneath the calm of her voice.

“Ye Gods...” Wyanet breathed, eyes flying over Eudora’s new marks. “So it is true. This must be why your father thought we would want you as our succeeding queen. He told me that there was more to you than your pretty face. What Elements have they called, child?” Growing more and more at ease with Wyanet, Eudora pointed to each mark as she named them.

“Wind, Fire, Ice, Water, Light, and Darkness. I can Tame all of them.” Wyanet nodded and knelt by Eudora’s bathtub. The queen stroked her lithe fingers over the Water mark and smiled as her own mark flared to life.

“I also Tame Water,” Wyanet declared, moving her hand over the liquid in Eudora’s tub. She swirled her fingers, and an orb lifted itself from the surface. There was almost joyful about the way it met its Tamer’s fingertips. She played with it over her palm, rolling it around as if it were actually

something solid. She then held it out to Eudora, who tried to take it and promptly let it splash back into the water.

“I can’t do anything yet...unless I feel a strong emotion associated with the Element. Anger, Fire, that pair seems to work best for me,” Eudora acknowledged regretfully. Even though this was so far from what she believed to be normal, she still felt it lamentable that she couldn’t even control what she had obviously been gifted with. Wyanet shrugged gracefully and stood.

“It comes with time, sweet flower. The Tamers will help you learn control, but you must first learn acceptance. Oceanus told me of how you fled. Most unfortunate, really. I thought that perhaps you were adapting more quickly than even I expected.” She shook her head and smiled down at Eudora, who felt, of all things, guilty. “Get ready for dinner, then. We’ll expect you in the hall in no more than one turn of the clock.” Eudora nodded as Wyanet began to walk away and then hesitated before speaking.

“Wyanet?” The queen turned back, a shadow of her original smile playing over her lips.

“Yes, sweet flower?” she replied in a purring voice. Eudora stood and reached for a towel without bothering to cover herself. The queen had seen, and touched, practically every inch of the princess, anyway.

“Will you help me get ready, please? I find I have no talent for it.” There, it was a small gesture, but a gesture nonetheless. Wyanet tipped her head graciously, and her smile became one of full-fledged seductive amusement.

“Of course, sweet flower.” Wyanet sat cross-legged on the bed while Eudora dried off, looking at her dress and then at the queen.

“Wyanet, is there anything else I might wear? I have my own suitcase, but if you want me to dress in the fashion of your kingdom...” Wyanet gestured to a closet in the corner of Eudora’s room, and the princess went to open it. Inside, she found scores of beautiful dresses, all designed in the kingdom style. There were dresses to match, compliment, and enhance her hair, eyes, and curves. Eudora chose a silver dress with patches of red see-through areas. At her feet, she saw three boxes full of jewelry, crowns, necklaces, earrings, and bracelets; a stunning array of flashing, shimmering silver, red, and black.

“It is all yours, sweet flower. A gift from your future husband as a

wedding present.” Eudora hesitated and then slipped the dress over her head. Her hair was still wet, and Wyanet paused before adding, “You know, you can use your Taming to dry your hair if you’d like. A warm wind would do the trick...” Eudora shook her head, flicking droplets of water away from her sodden locks.

“I do not wish to use the Taming, Wyanet. In truth, I wish the Tamers had never called my soul.” Either Eudora was getting better at reading the fiery and yet quite contained royal, or she was forcing the queen to express more hesitancy and careful word placement than she was comfortable with. Wyanet hesitated again before speaking.

“Eudora, as I’m sure Aja has told you, we think of Taming as a great gift. It helps the royals to protect our people, the warriors to fight our wars. The only reason we are all still alive and free is because of the Tamers. As the next queen, it is very fortunate for you to have so many Taming abilities. It is even possible that you are a Legendary Tamer. Aja will call your soul again tonight to see if it is so. One Legendary Tamer has a certain reaction to another, so if you *are* a Legendary Tamer, then you will most certainly know.” Wyanet touched Eudora’s hair and sighed before arranging it around the elegant silver tiara that she plucked from the largest of the three boxes.

“I do not wish for Aja to call my soul, Wyanet,” the princess argued. “I honestly do not care if I am a Legendary Tamer or not. I have been well taught to rule. Taming or not, I will be a good queen for your people.” Wyanet smiled as she finished the princess’s up-do.

“They are your people now, as well, sweet flower. There, stand and tell me if you approve.” Eudora did as she was told, amazed that she could be even remotely comfortable around another woman with barely any clothes on. Gazing into the mirror, Eudora nodded her approval. The dress fit stunningly, and Eudora knew that her father had sent measurements over so that a wardrobe could be provided for the foreign princess.

“What...” Eudora trailed off and nearly laughed at herself. She had been about to ask, ‘What if they don’t want to be my people?’ When was she ever concerned with how people, especially subjects, viewed her? Why did she care if they accepted her?

“What were you going to say, sweet flower?” Wyanet asked as she surveyed the princess. Smiling her obvious appreciation, she waited for Eudora to answer. Eudora sighed and shrugged.

“It sounds foolish...” she began hesitantly. “I was just going to ask, what if they do not want to be my people?” Wyanet smiled and nodded again.

“Just for wondering, it makes me think more of you. It is true that someone of your heritage, someone with no knowledge of how my people live their lives, will not be widely accepted, at first.” She emphasized ‘at first’ and looked pointedly at Eudora. “It will take much patience and much effort on your part, working with incredible difficulty day by day. I have faith in you, though, which is saying quite a bit, in my opinion.” Eudora graced the queen with a small smile and a tip of the head; then she looked once more at herself in the mirror.

“Thank you,” the princess said. She was thanking the queen for more than helping make her appearance acceptable, and she hoped that Wyanet knew that. “I feel completely incompetent, but I cannot do my make-up either. Do you think...” Wyanet motioned, and the servant who had assisted Eudora earlier in the day just seemed to appear. Wyanet smirked at Eudora’s surprised expression.

“She Tames Wind on a very small scale and can move through a room using her Taming. Our servants are those who have limited talents in Taming. The washers Tame Water, the servants who work in the kitchens or in the blacksmith’s huts or weapons designing stations Tame Fire, things of that nature. To move unnoticed through rooms, servants like this one here”- Wyanet ran a hand through the woman’s hair and smiled-“tame Wind. This one is one of the most advanced, actually, and she could move easily through a crowd without being noticed, except by other Tamers. Go ahead.” She gave a short nod to the servant, who began to apply Eudora’s make-up.

Wyanet began to walk away and waved at the princess. “I will see you in the banquet hall as soon as you are finished. You will see two displays of our customs at dinner. I believe you will be most pleased by one. The other...well, we will have to see about that.” Before Eudora could question her, Wyanet was out the door, and it was closed behind her. Eudora sighed agitatedly, frowning. The queen really was so difficult....

Eudora entered the banquet hall without an escort, something that would have seemed preposterous even to consider in her home kingdom of Cieala. Wondering why hers, so it appeared, was the only kingdom without Tamers,

Eudora strode confidently to her seat, nodding to the prince and the queen as she sat. Quimat and Majit stared in open-mouthed horror, presumably at Eudora's new marks. Giving them looks that told them she would explain later, Eudora followed Wyanet's gaze.

"Lirit," the queen began, motioning to a man who stood in the center of the room. "Offer your talents as a gift to your future queen." She cast a glance at four servants holding musical instruments and nodded once.

"Begin," Wyanet commanded, sweeping gracefully back into her seat.

Music immediately poured into the room, coursing through it as it had the night before. However, this music was gentle, ebbing and flowing in a rhythm that was soothing, romantic, with only a hint of underlying passion and eroticism. Lirit moved fluidly and, if Eudora could guess, she would almost say that he could Tame the music. Was music an Element? Could it possibly be tamed?

Wyanet nodded in Eudora's direction, as if answering the princess's question. So, Lirit was indeed a Tamer. He certainly had more control over his enchanting grace-muscular, feline, intese-than any of the other dancers had. When he began to sing in a low, pulsating chant, Eudora had no doubts as to how great his talent truly was. Lirit had the voice of a god, or appeared to because of his Taming abilities. Eudora was captivated by the display and scanned the beautiful man for a mark of his talent. Near his eyes, silver lines caught the light, sparkling enthrallingly. They swam down his skin like living tears, and Eudora felt a strong surge of some unidentifiable emotion. She felt connected to this man because of his Taming, and because of the sorrow that seemed to be portrayed by the placement of his mark.

The music seemed lessened in the presence of Lirit. He shamed the pure notes emanating from the instruments the other servants played. The grace that the notes flowed with was willingly overshadowed by the elegant, fluid man who spun around the floor as if he were dancing only for the one he loved most. Eudora guess that the one he loved was actually not one of flesh and bone. He loved the music, completely, and that was why he had developed such a strange form of Taming.

Eudora applauded politely along with everyone else when Lirit finished his performance, bowing as he left the floor. She had never seen such amazing beauty. It seemed wrong for it to be contained within a body, as it was wrong to cage a bird of rainbow plumes that sang purer than any angel.

Wyanet gave Eudora a meaningful look as the doors on the far side of the banquet hall opened. The princess studied the room while three men and one woman moved to the middle of the floor. She wondered what Wyanet's pointed glance had meant. Eudora went back to her observations and realized that the hall was designed almost as an auditorium. The area containing the next set of what Eudora assumed were performers was raised slightly up above the rest of the hall, almost like a stage. The doors leading to it were hidden by great silk curtains that looked heavier and darker than they really were. The dark crimson splash of fabric against the smooth ivory of the walls reminded the princess of blood on pale flesh.

"Before our evening meal commences," Aja began in a powerful voice, "We will see the punishment of two criminals. Both have committed heinous crimes against our people." The child king moved to the 'stage,' his easy, carefree pace not betraying the fine tremors of energy moving through his body. He was holding, to Eudora's horror, a long, jeweled sword. Aja held out his hand, and one of the men gave him a long shaft made of iron. Eudora recognized it with some repulsion as a branding rod.

The man and one other, who held another one of the instruments, were holding a third man and the woman in chains of gold. The criminals, for that was what they had to be, were fully naked and cowered on the floor in front of the child king. Aja looked down on them with barely concealed contempt flaring in his frosted green eyes. The fires of wrath had melted the ice that covered his gaze, and his eyes were now shining like healthy green leaves. Eudora focused on the prisoners rather than the intriguing and arrogant child king.

"The charges, your majesty," One of the men, who had handed Aja the first branding rod, announced, "Are rape and treason." A murmur of shock and outrage rushed through those seated at the table. Apparently, crimes such as these were not to be dealt with lightly, nor were they often seen. Eudora's confused gaze traveled around the people, both her own and the inhabitants of the Passion Kingdom, and wondered exactly what the punishments for such crimes were.

"Have you nothing to say about these charges?" Aja asked the accused man and woman. Both remained silent, and Eudora wondered with what she considered a sick curiosity who was being accused of which crime. Aja nodded and raised the branding rod. The mark of Fire flared to life on his

chest, and the rod began to glow with heat. Eudora had to literally bite her tongue and hold the table's edge in a death grip to keep from standing and shouting at Aja. The man was branded first, on the forehead, and he shrieked as the heated metal devoured his thin flesh. A repugnant odor filled the room, and Eudora held herself with furious control to keep from gagging. The other rod was heated and then administered to the woman, only she was marked over her left breast. She howled, as well, and both of them collapsed after the branding was complete.

"These criminals," The second of the sentries started. He and the other man looked extraordinarily like siblings. "Are sentenced to branding and death." Only Quimat's hand clamped on her leg kept Eudora from standing and rushing the child king, who was raising his blade. The princess refused to look away or even to blink as the sword came down, slicing cleanly through the neck of the man. The woman was next. Neither uttered protest or sound. Eudora, who had lived all her life in a kingdom where public punishment was unheard of and crimes punishable by death were nonexistent, was thoroughly stunned.

"Criminals," she whispered, looking at Aja as though he were a cold-blooded, merciless killer. "But they were your people as well." Standing, Eudora rushed out of the banquet hall and down twisting corridors to her room, while those still sitting within watched her leave in silence.

## **Chapter Four~ The Price of War**

“Princess,” Quimat said softly as he entered Eudora’s room. He had recently received a message from the king of Cieala, Eudora’s father, by means of one of the many intelligent hawks the royals of Cieala had tamed. Quimat needed to discuss this particular message with his female sovereign, because the order enclosed was one he simply could not follow.

“Go away, Quimat,” Eudora grumbled. She had been crying again. It seemed to be the only constant in this confusing whirlwind of emotion and rules that was the Passion Kingdom.

“I have news from your father, my liege,” Quimat declared, sitting on Eudora’s bed near her. He hesitated, wanting to lay a comforting hand on her, but knowing that she would be thoroughly insulted. No matter that they were in a foreign kingdom so different from their own, it seemed it could not be made of people hailing from the same species-Eudora felt strongly about the protocol she had so dutifully obeyed in her homeland. Touching was considered taboo unless by close family or a spouse. Therefore, Quimat sat in silence until Eudora sat up, drawing her knees to her chest, and looked at him.

“What does my father say?” she asked in a quiet voice. Quimat hesitated and looked away. His sovereign had the most piercing, molten metal eyes, and what made them thus was a profound innocence coupled with experience and knowledge. It made for a very intense gaze, one which made many uncomfortable.

“I should not tell you this, your grace, but our lives are different now. For how close you once were with your mother, her world seems alien compared to what we must now acknowledge to be our daily life. Your father, although a good king, was never a good father. He lied to you, hid things about your people that you should have known. He bartered you in

order to gain better tactical standings against Karaphel and Gailenna. He sends orders to have your marriage...consummated as soon as possible. He tells me that after you bear a son to succeed the throne, you are to be killed.” Eudora sat silently, numbly, waiting for that information to somehow take hold of her logical mind.

Her father wanted her dead? Yes, as soon as her purpose on this miserable little planet was fulfilled, there would be no more need for her. Bear a son and she was past her use. She was expendable. She was an asset to win wars, not a queen to rule her people, not a woman to be loved and cherished, not a person to be respected and appreciated. She was nothing.

The thoughts swirled through Eudora’s mind, and tears flooded her eyes. Anger swept through her, intense, poisonous rage, and the bed ignited with blue flame. Quimat cried out and, instead of jumping off the bed, pulled Eudora into his embrace. Icy water flowed over the ruined blankets and doused both Eudora and Quimat in its coolness. The princess realized she had reacted instinctively to the fact that she had foolishly put her trusted friend in danger. Deeply ashamed, Eudora was also grateful to her Water Taming. The water marks on Eudora’s wrists flared to life, glowing strongly against the fire marks. They seemed to war, both shining as brightly as possible for a moment, and then they faded back.

Eudora sighed loudly as the Wind Tamer who had helped her twice with her make-up swept into the room. The delicate-looking girl raised her hands, and everywhere the water had touched became dry. Eudora felt the warm wind brush across her face and shook her head. She hated it here.

“Quimat, send a message back to my father. Tell him that you will comply with his demands. After I give birth to a son, you will kill me.” Quimat just stared at Eudora, obviously confused.

“You wish to die, your grace?” Eudora glared at the man who was her most trusted advisor and best friend.

“Don’t be daft, Quimat. You will send back the sacred urn containing ashes and tell him that you killed me in the traditional way.”

Quimat interjected, “We no longer have the tradition of killing our princesses, your highness. The very thought is barbaric. Your father will not believe you dead.” Eudora smiled grimly, thinking of the criminals she had seen executed, and took Quimat’s hand.

“He will see what he wants to see, Quimat. I am a foolish child, and you

are an obedient servant. My father sent me here to gain him the power to win wars. He shall not have it. As soon as he attempts to invade the Passion Kingdom, he will see the power he thinks he now has set against him. I will give him his war, and I will see to it that he is not the victor. These are now my people. I will rule the Passion Kingdom, and if my father wants to bring war upon us, I will also rule Cieala, after we defeat his army." Quimat sat silently for a moment, completely floored.

"Many will die, your majesty. Many of the people you wish to protect." Eudora nodded, looking tormented as well as wrathful.

"As many as possible, Quimat. There is more than one way to keep my people safe. I shall make this war so gruesome, so violent, that no kingdom will dare challenge either of mine. Aja and I will lead our army to victory, the most violent, bloody victory we can manage. The very thought of war with the Passion Kingdom or Cieala will be so repulsive that no kingdom will dare challenge us." Quimat nodded.

"But at what price, your grace? How will we keep this battle from spilling over innocent ground? How will we keep people who are not involved in the war from being swept into it against their will?" Eudora stood, deciding that the time for tears and childishness was over. Her home was no longer thus. It was a place of danger-it was the home of the man who would kill his own blood to secure power.

"Send the queen to me, Quimat. And tell no one of my father's message. If word gets out that he has enough faith to give you orders like this, then you will be killed." Quimat looked stunned.

"You are sure of this, your majesty?" Eudora nodded.

"If I can tell one thing about the child king, it is that he has no mercy for those who betray those who trust them. Were it to appear that you have more loyalty to the king than to me, you will be executed for treason. Now, go and find Wyanet. Send her to me and speak to no one while on your way. It would do nothing for my nerves were you to be killed as a traitor." Eudora gave Quimat a wan smile and motioned for both him and the girl to leave. The Wind Tamer bowed as she left, and Eudora sat back on her bed to wait for Wyanet.

"You called for me, sweet flower?" Eudora nodded as she gestured for Wyanet to sit in a chair near the princess's bed.

“First and foremost, Quimat is not to be executed as a traitor. It is he who has brought this to my notice, and I have complete faith in him.” Wyanet gave a cautious tip of the head and waited for Eudora to continue. “My father has sent word to Quimat that I am to be killed as soon as I bear a male child to take my throne and thus secure my father’s hold over your kingdom. He sent me here simply to gain a better military standing. Are we in agreement so far?” Wyanet had to take a breath to calm her laughter. This woman who was supposed to be all rules and protocol was fire and ice contained in a body. She could no more have lived her life among the straight and narrow people of Cieala than Wyanet herself could.

“Of course, sweet flower. I also received notice. Your father, apparently, has heard of your recently required abilities and knows you to be a threat.” Eudora frowned.

“Then that means there is indeed a traitor in our midst, or a very misinformed council member. My father is receiving updates from someone, and I do not doubt for a moment either Quimat or Majit.” The princess placed stress on the names and gave Wyanet a pointed look.

“I harbor no suspicions towards either of them, sweet flower. Were I to cast a wary eye on any of your court, it would be upon the silent warrior, the one who says nothing yet observes all.” Eudora nodded thoughtfully.

“While Pallaton can seem...different at times, he has served me loyally. He has saved me twice from death and has always been a trusted friend. I would no more have doubts about him than you, Wyanet.” The queen seemed to agree with her, but she shrugged.

“Then that leaves only two whom I have any reason to mistrust, sweet flower. I believe you called the one with those very lovely amber eyes Malcolm. And the little girl with spun gold for hair-what is her name?” Eudora was shocked that Wyanet would be suspicious of the court maiden, who was little more than a child.

“Minjonet is friend to my cousin, Sagira.” Wyanet smiled in a way that said she was remembering a much-missed lover, and Eudora realized that Sagira was one of the woman who had been a gift to Wyanet’s pleasure. Eudora cleared her throat uncomfortably. “The girl has hardly reached the first horizon of adulthood. She has no age behind her to encourage treachery. Were she a wilder child, I would suspect some mischief, but never treason.” Wyanet shrugged gracefully again and stood.

“Malcolm has very cold eyes. He, like your warrior, Pallaton, observes and yet does not participate. I feel Pallaton sits on the outside because he fears his own shortcomings. Malcolm, however, has the look of a man who scorns the rest of the world. He seems concerned only with himself. The court maiden, Minjonet, is a different story altogether. She appears to be very intelligent and has the look of a woman who knows of her beauty and uses this to her advantage. You say she is friend to your cousin? What better way to strike at one’s heart than through the use of one’s closest companions? I assume you care deeply for your cousin simply because you brought her here with you.” Eudora nodded, and the queen smiled brightly. “But those are simply my thoughts.” The queen dismissed the entire conversation with a short wave.

“Your thoughts are much appreciated, Wyanet,” Eudora said with a small, guarded smile. “I will be sure to keep a wary eye upon both Malcolm and Minjonet.” Wyanet nodded and touched Eudora’s hair in a way that was almost motherly. The sly ripples of seduction gliding through her eyes, of course, betrayed any motherly thoughts, and Eudora gave the queen a short bow before the other woman moved away.

“The Tamers wish your company in the morn, sweet flower. You are to be taught how to control your Elements.” She smiled in a way that conveyed much good-humored amusement at the princess’s expense when Eudora’s gaze darkened. “Do not fear. The teaching itself is much less based upon the principle of intimate touch than the soul calling. Which reminds me, Aja should be here shortly.” Wyanet waved once more on her way out as Eudora frantically tried planning some scheme to evade the handsome prince. “Good evening, sweet flower. I wish you most pleasant dreams.” Eudora replied with words implying the same thoughts and then looked at the servants’ door. Where would that lead to?

Eudora tried going through the door, but it seemed locked from the inside. Frustrated, she pounded on it, hoping someone would answer and allow her through. No one came, however, and the princess growled her indignation. She was supposed to be able to slip silently from the room and avoid the prince with frosted emerald eyes. When the door opened again, however, Eudora spun around, clasping her hands behind her back, as if she hadn’t been doing anything. Her expression must have conveyed some childish guilt, though, and Aja raised an eyebrow at her.

“And what are we doing, fire rose? Trying to escape me?” Eudora stood noticeably taller at that and glowered at him.

“I needed assistance with....” She allowed herself the briefest pause and then continued in a more determined voice. “Obviously, I left the banquet hall in quite the hurry. My stomach has just now begun to inform me of how much a hurry I was in. I am hungry, and *your* servants seem rather inept.” Aja shrugged.

“The people eat together, fire rose. Unless one is very ill, meals are not brought to rooms. Therefore, it is *you* who are inept, not my servants, for *you* have not made the effort to know our customs and rules.” He looked rather smug after that, and Eudora fumed. Her anger, in danger of once again setting fire to something in the near vicinity, was quickly calmed by the rigidly-controlled princess. It wouldn’t do to set flame to the carpet or the lovely dresser on which her make-up and small trinkets now sat.

“What do you want, child king? I am exhausted and wish to retire.” Eudora glared pointedly at the prince, knowing full well what he was there for, and crossed her arms underneath her breasts in order to keep Aja from seeing her shaking hands. The prince, however, merely gestured Eudora over. He frowned when she remained where she was.

“Come now, fire rose, I won’t bite. And I’m not at all like your brute of a father, if that’s what you’re thinking.” Eudora glowered at him, feeling a pang of regret concerning the truth of Aja’s words. After much deliberation, Eudora moved towards Aja as she spoke.

“Though I would not like to believe it of my future husband, I am sure you are just as bad or worse than my father.” When she stood not a foot away from Aja, Eudora stopped, unfolding her arms and staring Aja very steadily in his cold eyes. “You do not frighten me, child king. And you, unlike my father, will never have the pleasure of hearing me beg. Anything you must do to me, I will accept willingly as a dutiful wife. You will never be able to kill my spirit, however, as seems the goal of *your* kind.” She spoke the words with heated malice. Aja looked shocked and angry.

“We will call your soul another time,” he snarled. “For now, get in the bed.” Eudora refrained from trembling and gave him a blank, uncaring look.

“Would you rather I undress first or not?” Either irritated with her words, the princess herself, or the situation, Aja seemed to be able to stand no more. He made a sound of disgust and stalked out the door. Eudora

waited a few minutes, standing rigidly, listening for sounds of Aja returning, but he never did. The princess collapsed on her bed, fully clothed, and fell into a restless sleep.

“Your highness-” Eudora was roused very gently from sleep. The person doing the waking was making half-hearted attempts at best, as if they really didn’t want her to get up. “Your highness, the Tamers are clamoring for you.” Thinking she must be having a bad dream, Eudora rolled over and pulled her pillow over her face. She was at home, in Cieala, and she was having a bad dream. Tamers were things of myth. She was quite content to be here, home, safe from the rest of the cruel, cold world.

Suddenly, someone, not the person who had originally been trying to rouse her, pushed her quite forcefully. She hit the floor rather hard and made an angry sound of pained protest. Opening her eyes, Eudora stared at early morning sunlight, which had just begun to filter into her room.

“I’ll have your hands for that,” Eudora growled as she stood. Finding that she had become tangled in blankets, however, the furious princess simply ended up back on the floor when her twisted feet betrayed her.

“Get up and out of bed, fire rose. Gods, you really are as bad as I thought you’d be. Come to think of it, you’re *worse*, and I didn’t believe it was possible.” Eudora ignored Aja’s insulting musings and stood, this time more carefully. The child king was standing with Quimat and Oceanus. The latter bowed before Eudora and then stood, brushing his lips along the princess’ jaw line.

“It is a beautiful morning, your highness. Please join us at the beach and your training will begin.” Eudora nodded as Oceanus left the room. Aja gave the princess a nasty, scathing look.

“Your manners are abysmal, fire rose. Dress and bathe quickly, please, the Tamers do not need to wait longer for you than is absolutely necessary.” Aja spun on his heel and followed Oceanus out. Eudora rolled her eyes to hear him shouting something to the Water Tamer about not having to address the ‘spoiled, pampered, ignorant child’ with any kind of respect. Eudora didn’t wait to hear Oceanus’s reply, so she simply slammed her door shut, breathing heavily with rage.

“Uh...your...majesty?” Quimat looked downright fearful. Thinking that the very carpet he was standing on might explode with flames if the princess

were further provoked, Quimat moved very slowly towards Eudora, who breathed to calm herself and gestured to one of two chairs in the corner of her room.

“Sit, Quimat. I must bathe, and then you can escort me to the beach where I’m sure Aja is waiting for me so that he can do some dastardly thing in front of those...those *people*. They already think less than highly of me. What makes him believe he has to make matters worse by...Oh, by the Gods, Quimat, you’ve seen me naked before. It isn’t like this kingdom would see it as being inappropriate, anyway. Wyanet just happened to mention in passing that a man or woman can have intimate relations with *anyone*, even if married, as long as both spouses approve. Can you believe it? What kind of lunacy is this? I mean, honestly. Quimat, for the love of the Gods, stop acting like a child.” Quimat had his face buried in his hands and was apparently ignoring the princess while she bathed. The tub had already been filled with water for her. The water was rather cooler than she would have hoped, but she feared using Taming, so she didn’t object.

“Forgive me, your majesty. While you have...adjusted to this kingdom, I still hold true what your father told me many years ago.” Eudora paused in her hasty scrubbing and gazed pointedly at Quimat, who looked miserably in another direction.

“What did he say?” she asked quietly. Any mention of her father sent spikes of pain through the princess’ heart. True, he had never been a very good parent, but he was her father. Between parent and child, there is usually an unconditional love, marred or destroyed only by something that is greater than either party. “Quimat, what did he say?” Eudora’s voice was tinged with anger now, her words pronounced in a more dangerous tone.

“He told me were I ever to look upon you with anything other than respect or brotherly affection, then he would kill me slowly and painfully. As you are now naked and confident and...well, let us simply say that it would now be impossible to look upon you with only brotherly affection.”

Eudora felt a crazy urge to giggle about this. Everything had changed so suddenly in her world-her entire life had flipped upside down. The rules she had so strictly followed all of her time in Cieala seemed useless, pointless, meant to control the weak and timid. Eudora was neither, and the longer that information was kept from her father, the better.

“Then keep your gaze turned,” Eudora finally said, smirking. “I have to

get out and dress.” Quimat carefully did as instructed while Eudora slipped into a dress that matched her fiery red hair. Instead of see-through patches of cloth, however, this one was more holes and less fabric than anything Eudora had ever worn. It made her feel dangerous and sexy. The Wind Tamer entered the room without being called for and began applying Eudora’s make up. The princess shook her head when the servant tried to fix the princess’ hair up around the crown.

“Please, do my hair in the way the other women have it. No crown-I just want to look like my people.” A smile overtook the Wind Tamer’s face, transforming her more surely than anything in the world could.

“You are not arrogant at all like he says,” the Tamer said in a voice that was strong. It didn’t seem to suit her incredibly fragile-looking frame and soft, doe-like eyes. Then again, it seemed to suit her perfectly. Eudora gave a grateful nod and a return smile.

“What is your name?” Eudora asked, instead of commenting on what were obviously Aja’s thoughts. The Wind Tamer giggled, and that seemed to fit her perfectly. Light, child-like, and pure, the tinkling laughter seemed meant to spill from those pouting lips.

“You and the child king do not seem to have much respect for each other,” the Tamer noted as she worked expertly with Eudora’s hair. “My name is Mora.” Eudora smiled again.

“That’s very pretty.” Mora beamed.

“Thank you. The queen herself named me. My mother died giving birth to me, and Wy Janet has been the only thing that comes close to a parent for me. My father died in the last war, shortly before my birth. My name means ‘sweet berry.’ I like it very much.” Eudora felt a pang of sympathy for the girl.

“My name means ‘honored gift,’” the princess told Mora, feeling a wash of anger when she suddenly realized why she had most likely been named thus. “I like my name, but the meaning does not suit. I am not a gift to anyone. I am a person, and people cannot be given as gifts. They are not objects lacking feeling or emotion.” Still angry, Eudora crossed her arms under her breasts heatedly.

“It is a pretty name,” Mora commented as she finished Eudora’s hair. “If you are to blend in with your people, I suggest this, as well.” Mora slipped a jeweled collar around Eudora’s throat and fastened it with her small, lithe

fingers. The Wind Tamer also hooked earrings, each holding two teardrop-sized rubies, onto Eudora's earlobes. "There, you are ready." Smiling broadly, Eudora turned to Quimat and spread her arms, seeking his approval.

"So, how do I look, Quimat?" After giving her a quick once-over and then looking as though he'd rather flee the room than answer, Quimat gave a short, pained nod.

"Very fetching, princess. Now, may we leave? The Tamers would like to begin preparations." Eudora frowned. Although she enjoyed teasing Quimat more than she ever could have imagined, she didn't like what his words implied.

"What do you mean by preparations, Quimat?" Eudora questioned as Quimat stood and held open the door for his sovereign. Quimat sighed loudly as Eudora walked into the hallway.

"Rumor spreads very quickly through these halls, highness, and you do tend to talk rather loudly. Gossip concerning a full-fledged war on Cieala is racing through rooms and corridors as we speak. The Tamers hope to prepare you, as the new queen, to lead the Passion Kingdom's army." Eudora grasped Quimat's arm tightly, causing him to cry out. Eudora wasn't concerned with his pain, however. If rumor got to Cieala, her plans would be ruined.

"Silence them at once, Quimat." Eudora spoke quickly, in a voice that was deathly quiet. "Go to the queen and do whatever it takes to quell this talk immediately. The war will be lost before it is begun if we do not have at least one year to prepare for it. My father's army is great and, Tamers or no, we will be crushed if he strikes without warning." She waved him away. "Now, go. I can find the Tamers on my own. Go to Wy Janet and suppress these rumors." Quimat nodded once and moved away quickly to follow Eudora's orders. He better than most others knew how vital it was to keep Cieala ignorant in this matter. If the king could give orders to have his daughter killed for no apparent reason other than political gain, then it was well within his limits to annihilate an entire people were rumors of war to reach his ears.

Eudora reached the beach where the Tamers were waiting for her within minutes of her conversation with Quimat. While earlier Oceanus had greeted her cordially, the other Tamers seemed cold and cautious towards the

princess. After having Dinesh playfully nip her chin, he was the only one acting downright friendly towards her, Eudora bowed low for all of them.

“Before the teaching commences, I must apologize for my behavior yesterday. I was shocked and a little overwhelmed. I promise, no matter what it takes, I will be a good queen. If the Taming will help me be a better ruler, then I will do everything my teachers are kind enough to instruct.” Amana moved over to Eudora, still in her bow, and touched the princess’s forehead.

“Your apology is much appreciated, majesty. Come, into the water. Water and Fire are the easiest Elements to learn how to Tame. Oceanus and Zenevieva will assist you.” Eudora looked absolutely hopeless after hearing the name of the female Water Tamer standing next to Oceanus. She had been introduced as his sister and had the same cobalt eyes. Zenevieva smiled exuberantly at Eudora before kissing her neck in greeting.

“Call me Zene,” the woman offered on a giggle. “Everyone else does. Now, come on, into the water, princess.” Taking Zene’s proffered hand, Eudora stepped off the warming sand into the chilled water, which swirled around her feet playfully. Oceanus took her other hand as he joined the princess and his sister.

“Before Taming, you must first understand, accept. The water needs to think of you as friend, not master, and you to think of it as friend, not servant.” Eudora could not stop her words as they moved out further.

“The water thinks?” She wanted to smack herself on the forehead. She was here to learn, not ask imbecilic questions. Oceanus smiled benevolently at her.

“Of course it does,” he replied in a tone of voice one would use with a silly child. “You must open yourself to it, to the thoughts and emotions of the world around you. It takes more than intelligence or bravery or strength to Tame anything. You must have an openness of spirit, a connectedness in soul.” The water was lapping at Eudora’s breasts now, and the princess shivered. The morning sun had not yet warmed the freezing waves.

“We’re going to open you right now,” Zene told Eudora. “We’ll call the water while touching you, and you feel it through us.” Eudora nodded, gripping both their hands a bit more tightly.

“Just relax, princess, and try to feel, not think. Close your eyes and breathe.” Following Oceanus’ instructions, Eudora closed her eyes and

focused only on breathing, only on feeling. She felt the cold water moving around her, almost in a teasing way. Light-hearted, joyful. That was a good start, Eudora thought. The water *felt* light-hearted and joyful. Eudora tried taking that into her, tried feeling what the water was feeling, and was shocked by how easily it flowed into her, like liquid light. The water was happy to have Tamers within it happy to have the Tamers using their Art.

*Friends...* it felt very strange to Eudora, the water thinking of her as a friend. But that was what the Tamers were. They weren't master, wielding the Elements like their own personal weapons or training them to do tricks like a dog. The Tamers were friends of the Elements, friends on the most basic, intimate level, and the relationship so interconnected both parties that the Tamer simply *asked* and the Element *obliged*.

Eudora had always thought that the Tamers controlled the Elements by sheer strength of will and mind, but such was far from the case. The Elements were almost like another part of the Tamers, a part of their energy and essence.

Eudora was shocked to find when she opened her eyes that they were standing on top of the water. The surprise almost tore her connected soul away from the water long enough for the princess to fall back through. Oceanus and Zene both held her tightly between them, however, and sent soothing waves of reassurance through her until the princess was once again joined with the essence of the ocean.

"Now," Oceanus began slowly, using measured control, so as not to startle Eudora further. "Zene and I are going to take our Taming away. This means that you will have to take what you have felt and experienced through us and channel it into your own power." Before Eudora could object, both the Water Tamers stepped away from her, breaking the lovely flow of power the contact had provided. The princess gasped as she sank to her knees, but the little remnants of energy Oceanus and Zene had allowed her to be a part of held her above, if only for a few seconds.

"What do I do?" Eudora gasped as she began sinking up to her hips.

"*Feel* the water." Zene replied. "*Ask* for it to support you." Eudora nodded and closed her eyes as the last traces of Zene's and Oceanus's power vanished. The princess sat completely still for a moment, scarcely daring to breathe. She tried to close out everything else except the feel of the water, its energy and emotions. A deep peace stole through her, and liquid warmth

lightly kissed the skin on her wrists. Everything felt slower, more languid, as if Eudora had taken a piece of the ocean into her, locked it away and simultaneously shared it freely with the source.

Peeking one eye open, Eudora was amazed and relieved to find that she was once again standing on top of the water. The waves danced around her with a kind of giddy amusement, and Eudora couldn't help but laugh. She was attuned to the water now and felt that it was happy for her accomplishment.

"This is wonderful!" Eudora exclaimed. "I've never felt anything like this before!" Oceanus and Zene smiled at the princess wistfully.

"I remember my first true Taming," Zene declared, raising a hand so that a column of water rose up to greet her fingertips. "I never wanted to let go of it." Eudora knew exactly what the other Tamer was talking about. She felt so proud, so awed, so...*humbled* that she never wanted to feel anything else.

"All right, princess," Oceanus began, and Eudora grinned happily at him. "This is a true test. Not many first time Tamers can simply walk across the surface without losing their control. I want you to walk to me." It seemed such an absurdly short distance, perhaps three steps. Eudora beamed more widely, feeling that she would be able to achieve what others hadn't. Moving her right foot forward, the princess promptly splashed through the surface and found herself sputtering, drenched in icy water. The gathered Tamers laughed quietly, perhaps remembering their first failed 'test' of Taming.

"Oceanus was the only one out of all present capable of passing his first test," Zene admitted.

"And do you know why, princess?" Oceanus asked as he helped Eudora to shore. Eudora shook her head, shivering slightly because of her newly developed chill. The water was *cold!* Zene laughed, and Eudora almost wanted to laugh with her, for no apparent reason. She felt so connected to these people, just as she felt connected to the water. It almost hurt her to leave the gentle waves, no matter how cold they were.

"Why couldn't I do it?" Eudora asked, directing the question at the patient-eyed Oceanus. "It was such a short distance. As soon as I moved..." The princess gestured helplessly to her soaked clothing, and Zene laughed again.

“As soon as you moved, you focused on yourself, not on the water,” Oceanus continued. “You must make your Elements a part of your mind and soul, princess. The water did not know that you wished to remain above while walking. After your initial request of simply staying above was granted, the water was waiting for what you would next ask.” Eudora nodded, beginning to understand.

“And I didn’t ask, I assumed. I assumed that because I knew what I needed, the water would, as well. It seems terribly arrogant, when I think of it now.” Zene and her brother shared a kind of secret smile and nodded.

“By nature, we are arrogant. We must learn to give and take, to ask and receive. The Elements are more than glad to help a Tamer. However, because we are so focused on ourselves, we do not grant our Elements the simple benefit of asking. That is the most important part of the Tamer/Element relationship. Your Elements will eventually become so attuned to you that they will *sense* what you need or want, but that comes much later on, after you have given a part of yourself to the Taming. Without that, we are nothing more than friends with the Elements, friends who are granted favors when they ask. After you truly come into your Taming, you will actually *be* a part of your Element, and it of you. It simply takes time, princess. Time and energy.” Eudora nodded again as Amana approached, smiling benevolently.

“Now, let us see how well the Wind Element takes to you. Be forewarned, princess. Taming the Wind is no easy feat. It requires not only an unclouded and open mind, but a strong purity of soul.” Sweeping her hand over Eudora’s face, Amana continued to smile while pouring part of her energy into the princess. “Feel its warmth, the way it moves over your skin. The Wind is not like the Water, ebbing and flowing within you. It encompasses, envelops. The Wind is all around you. Take it into you. Taming the Wind is touching what you cannot see, trusting that which you can only feel. Now, breathe.” Amana intertwined her fingers and the princess’s as Eudora closed her eyes again.

Breathing deeply, Eudora tried simply *feeling*, as she had with the Water. The Wind was not only peaceful, it was so serene, such perfect silence within sound, motion within stillness, that it momentarily stole Eudora’s ability to think, which was good. She felt light, weightless, surrounded and filled by such amazing tranquility that it brought tears

springing up beneath her eyelids. The Wind was separate from the Water because, while the Water moved through Eudora, teasing her with its joy and happiness, the Wind cradled her, spinning a web of safety and calmness around her. Both Elements were peaceful, but the Water also held the excited joy of life. Wind seemed rather impartial, although Eudora sensed a distinct hint of adoration for both the Tamers.

“The Wind has much love, but only for things worthy of it.” Amana spoke in a soft voice, full of the tranquility that Eudora felt spiraling through her heart. “Only a Tamer with a pure soul and true heart can Tame the Wind. That is why there are so few Wind Tamers. Now, open your eyes. While a Water Tamer can control the waves, a Wind Tamer can fly.” Eudora did as Amana instructed and eased her eyes open. They were hovering about twenty feet above the other Tamers, a fact which made Eudora’s heart drop into her stomach. Quickly quelling the fear that bubbled up her throat, the princess tried to recover the deep serenity she now associated with the Wind.

“I feel so...calm, Amana. Is Taming the Wind always like this?” Amana smiled and nodded.

“Indeed, princess. Even when you are not Taming, you can simply call upon the Wind to bring peace to your soul. Each Element has its own special attribute that you do not need to use Taming in order to access. Fire can seal bodily wounds, Water can connect and heal energy, Ice can increase mental clarity, Rock can harden resolve and solidify one’s bravery, Wind, as you now know, can calm the spirit and pacify the soul.” Eudora nodded, understanding.

“Are you going to let me go, to see if I can Tame the Wind of my own accord?” Amana smiled.

“I would not be so anxious if I were you. Taming the Wind, though easier than Taming the Water with the right purity of heart and soul, is not a trifle. Even the slightest misstep can have the most skilled Tamer tumbling out of the sky.” Eudora felt a fine trembling break the light blanket of peace that had settled over her.

“I must learn sometime, Amana. A fall from this height will not kill me. It will simply hurt.” Amana laughed, and that beautiful serenity stole over Eudora again.

“As your teacher, I could not allow you to fall. I will be here to catch

you should you fail to Tame the Wind.” With this, Amana stepped away from the princess and broke the connection. While she had not been ready with the Water Tamers, she expected being forced to use her own powers now.

*‘Hold me aloft,’* she pleaded silently. The Wind, amazingly to Eudora, obliged, and she neither fell nor wavered from her place in the air. Amana had her hands out, ready to catch the princess should she fall, but smiled broadly as Eudora made another request. *‘Lift me higher.’* The Wind thrummed against her as if insulted, thought not enough to send her plummeting downward. *‘Please,’* Eudora added hastily. She felt satisfaction on her skin in a tender brush of warmth as the Wind gathered itself up beneath her and pushed upward. Eudora could scarcely believe that this was happening because of her, because of her own power. Joyfully, she sent out her last request. *‘May I please join the others on the ground?’* The Wind swept her lower in a wash of grace. Eudora touched down lightly and smiled at Oceanus. She was glowing, nearly overwhelmed by her emotions.

“Very good, your majesty,” Oceanus declared as Amana landed softly beside the princess. “You are an exceptionally fast learner.” Amana placed one of her hands on the princess’s shoulder and squeezed lightly.

“Splendid,” Amana agreed. “Simply splendid.” Eudora’s momentary euphoria was shattered when a rather unpleasant voice brought her back to reality.

“She hovered instead of falling, Amana. That isn’t an accomplishment exclusive to her. Many first time Wind Tamers have kept themselves aloft. I saw her little display in the water. She couldn’t Tame the waves with the most advanced Water Tamers as her guides.” The Tamers around Eudora bowed to the prince as Eudora glared at him, trembling with fury. Amana, however, simply shrugged.

“Perhaps another test, then?” She gestured to Eudora, and the princess ignored Aja as she took the other Wind Tamer’s hand. “Ask the Wind for what you desire,” Amana said softly, and a spot of warmth lit in Eudora’s palm. Realizing that her dress was still soaking wet, Eudora took her hand away from Amana’s and reached out for the Wind. The Element came to her in a rush, exuding a kind of languid eagerness.

*‘I need a warm wind, please, to dry me,’* the princess requested, trying to convey her desire to the Wind in a way that wouldn’t insult it and, at the

same time, adding a bit of desperation. She didn't want to fail again in front of the arrogant child king. For a moment, the air around Eudora was completely still. Then, a soft breeze swirled around her. It wasn't hot enough to burn, only to dry her clothing quickly. The Wind almost seemed to carry a sense of disappointment, as if it was expecting a more difficult task. Eudora couldn't help but thinking of the Element as a kind of child-like entity. It had emotions, to be certain, and tried desperately to please. At the same time, it practically emanated the indifference of great age. The Element felt like wisps of wisdom combined with a natural innocence alien to humans.

After her dress was dry, Eudora yielded to the Wind and gave it a more difficult feat to perform. The princess wasn't exactly sure how she had gained such a quick and unmistakable insight into the Element's feelings or why she was so sure of what she was doing. The Element felt like a precious friend to her, however, and she wanted to give whatever she had to bring that peace, that joy, back into the Element and, in doing so, into herself.

*'Fly with me,'* Eudora whispered to the Element that she felt all around her. *'Let's soar into the clouds. That would be fun, wouldn't it?'* An instantly recognizable, pure elation seemed to supercharge the air around her. Without more warning, the princess shot into the sky, cradled tenderly by the Wind, which she realized she would never truly *tame*. She wondered how the name Tamers came to be. This was not Taming. This was acceptance, connectedness, being a part of something much bigger and more beautiful than oneself. Eudora flew up, up, until she could feel the heavy moisture in the crystal clouds spattering her face. Laughing, she threw out her arms and felt as if the Wind echoed her joyful noise.

Peace, undeniable, nearly painful serenity stole through her. The only thing the princess could think to compare it to was how she used to feel sitting in her mother's lap. For hours, the two of them would sit in silence or in talk and laughter, brushing each other's hair, reveling in the love only family can give. This, flying with the Wind, felt like her mother's hand and voice. If she closed her eyes, Eudora could almost hear her laughter, smell the scent of her perfume.

*'This is amazing.'* Eudora tried to let the Wind feel how happy she was at that moment, happier than she had ever been. *'Thank you so much.'*

"It seems as though she is adapting very well, your highness," Oceanus

commented to Aja as they stood on the ground, more than one hundred feet below Eudora.

“She is a spoiled child. She will never make a good queen for my people,” Aja retorted, furious that Eudora was excelling more surely than any Tamer before her had. Even Amana, the most skilled Wind Tamer on the Isle of Passion, took weeks to learn how to soar on the Wind as the princess was now doing. Deciding that he had to do something to discredit Eudora in the eyes of the other Tamers, Aja gestured to Amana. “Bring her down,” he ordered. “Let us see exactly how gifted the prodigal little princess is.” Amana nodded and swept into the air, quick to oblige her ruler. She returned moments later with a tousle-haired, rosy-cheeked Eudora.

“That was wonderful!” Eudora exclaimed as soon as she touched the ground. She ran over to Oceanus and nearly attacked him, bringing him into such a tight hug that shock blossomed onto his face before he smiled broadly. The princess then turned to Amana and hugged her, as well, and then Zene. “Thank you so much! I want to learn *everything*. Oceanus, Zene, I’m ready to try the water again. I think I know now.” Oceanus was still smiling, and he brushed Eudora’s disheveled hair away from her cheek before responding.

“What do you think you know, princess?” Eudora shook her head, practically gulping air. She felt elated, excited, overjoyed, and delighted. *This*, she knew, this was her life. This was what she was meant to be. It was so shockingly clear to her now that she could almost cry with the joy of it.

“Please, don’t call me princess. Call me Eudora.” When Oceanus opened his mouth to argue, Eudora took his hand and held tightly. “Please, Oceanus, please!” she begged. “All of you.” She turned to the other Tamers. “I feel so inferior compared to you, with your abundance of wisdom, acceptance, and grace. If anything, I’d like to be equal with you.” She paused when Oceanus grimaced. “As a pupil to the teacher, then. But, I beg of you, Oceanus, do not treat me like a princess.” Amana approached Eudora and gave the princess a swift hug.

“As a friend, Eudora. That is the highest honor anyone can do for another.” Beaming, near tears, Eudora hugged the Wind Tamer again. She then hugged Oceanus and Zene, who was laughing, as she seemed constantly ready to do. These people, so full of happiness and experience, seemed closer to family than anyone except her mother had ever been.

“Enough.” Aja spoke sharply enough to stop even Zene’s laughter. “The Water Taming can wait until later. Now, we try Fire.” His voice was acid-it dripped with malice and dimmed Eudora’s acute joy.

“As you wish, child king. What would you have me do? I have no knowledge in the art of weapon-making, but I could possibly....” Aja cut her off with nasty laughter.

“Fire Taming is good for two things, fire rose: injuring and healing. We use Fire Taming to wage wars. If you are to be queen, you must learn to wield your weapons as a part of your own body. Now, begin!” Oceanus stepped between the two of them as Aja flicked his wrist, causing a tongue of flame to appear and act as a whip for the prince.

“No! Not this, your majesty.” Oceanus exclaimed, bringing up a wall of water to defend Eudora when Aja snapped the flaming whip in her direction.

“Stand aside,” Aja growled to the Water Tamer, but Oceanus stood firm.

“Using your Taming in anger is a great insult to your Element, your highness. I’m sure your Fire Spirit is much agitated as of now.” The water made its way back to the ocean from whence it had been summoned as Aja’s fire whip disappeared.

“Catori understood that I was trying to teach a lesson, Oceanus. Besides, she is not at all like Bahari. Your Element Spirit is more inclined to wallow in the waves with the dolphins than come to your aid when you need him.” Oceanus glowered with rage, and Eudora was amazed to find that he was allowed displays of emotions towards the prince like this. If someone looked at her father that way, murderously, they would immediately be imprisoned.

“Bahari is not a weapon I use at my leisure, your majesty. Nor is he a shield to defend me against attackers. Bahari is a part of my soul, and I treat him as such. To you, Catori is nothing more than a means of violence. I believed I taught you better than this.” Eudora looked confused, so Zene held up a hand.

“I don’t mean to interrupt, Oceanus, your highness, but Eudora seemed lost. Might one of you explain about the Element Spirits?” Thankful to Zene, Eudora shot her a look of gratitude, which earned another trilling laugh from the Water Tamer.

“Of course, child.” Oceanus sighed. “There is much that you have to learn. A Tamer that is connected enough to his or her Element sometimes gains the greatest gift Taming can offer: they gain an Element Spirit. While

Taming calls on the whole of an Element, an Element Spirit is an actual being. Because the prince is a Legendary Tamer, he has a Spirit for all of his Elements except one.” Eudora looked probingly at Aja.

“If I could guess, I would wager Wind.” The prince looked mightily insulted, but Oceanus looked impressed.

“Correct, your highness. Why did you guess that?” Eudora tried to think, and a whisper went through her mind, bringing her thoughts together in a pattern easily explained.

“Because when I was Taming the Wind, I felt a joy that was child-like, all-encompassing. It took me releasing all of my protocol, dropping all of my barriers. No matter how different our homes are, Aja and I are much alike. I didn’t think that he would be able to fully give himself over to the Wind, and I think that is what a Wind Spirit would require. Fire needs anger-he seems to have plenty of that. For Water, wisdom-and, although I’d like not to admit it, the prince seems moderately wise to me, although rather lacking in common sense. Rock needs bravery, and any ruler, to properly rule his or her people, needs to be brave. So on and so forth. To make things simple, I do not see the prince as having what is necessary to gain a Wind Spirit. One must be able to give oneself freely, without any misgivings. The Wind deems anything less than complete surrender of oneself unworthy.” Amana applauded lightly and touched Eudora’s forehead.

“You mastered the Taming of the Wind more quickly than any I have ever seen. Do you hear things in your mind now? Soft whispers, tender breezes?” Eudora nodded, and Amana gave her a beaming smile. “You have gained the attention of a Wind Spirit. The more you Tame the Wind, the clearer the voice of your Spirit will be. Eventually, you will be able to call just your Spirit. It will be yours and yours alone to Tame. No other Tamer, Wind or any other Element, will be able to touch it.” Eudora felt that spinning joy crash into her again.

“A Wind Spirit? My own Wind Spirit? When can I speak with it? When will I learn its name? Do you have a Spirit? Who of the Tamers here have Spirits?” Amana laughed, and Zene joined her, followed by Oceanus.

“I do indeed have a Spirit, Eudora,” Amana told the princess. “His name is *Ciro*.”

“I don’t,” Zene interjected sadly. “I’m hoping one day I will.” Oceanus began pointing around the circle at some of the other Tamers.

“Dinesh and Yuri both have very powerful Spirits. Dinesh’s Spirit’s name is Misae- he is one of the most powerful here, second only to Yuri’s Spirit, Chapa. She is by far the strongest I have ever encountered.” Yuri raised her hand, and a black shadow boasting the shape of an impossibly large cat, bigger even than the largest tiger Eudora had ever seen, appeared beside her.

“Chapa means ‘superior,’” Yuri explained, grinning at Dinesh as she stroked her Spirit’s fur. Her hand seemed to glide right through the shadow, but the great cat gave a pleased growl before fading back into nothingness. “Chapa is a magnificent Spirit, and she is my very closest friend.” Dinesh snorted in derision.

“As if you could consider that beast a friend. Misae, now he is magnificent.” Dinesh gave a short whistle, and a burst of sunlight blinded everyone in the near vicinity momentarily. When Eudora could see properly, she beheld as Dinesh had stated, a truly magnificent creature. He looked half man, half bird, with shining gold wings and the head of a great eagle. Holding a staff or spear, Eudora couldn’t tell which, in his left hand, Misae looked like the bringer of light and defender of all peoples.

“He is stunning, Dinesh. And Yuri, Chapa is absolutely gorgeous. Will my Spirit take a form like that? Can I choose the form I want?” Oceanus smiled and pointed to Arian, Zasha, and a male Tamer Eudora hadn’t met yesterday.

“Arian and Zasha both have Spirits,” Oceanus continued without answering Eudora’s questions. “Tavon-he is a Rock Tamer and will call your soul after we are done with this-also has a Spirit.” Eudora looked eagerly at the three of them, ignoring the fact that she was required to have her soul called again.

“May I see yours, please?” she implored. Zasha and Tavon beamed at her, while Arian rolled his eyes. Eudora really did not care for the Ice Tamer.

“My Spirit’s name is Kiri,” Tavon declared. “She is small, but very handy to have around. I care for her more than I care for myself.” He tapped his foot on the ground, and it erupted, clearing the way for a small creature made of stone-colored wisps of light that looked like a toothless serpent with legs. She was about the size of a small dog and looked more friendly than any of the other Spirits had.

“She’s adorable!” Eudora declared. Tavon laughed, a deep, jovial laugh that seemed to fit his broad chest and shaggy features. His brown eyes sparkled as Kiri nuzzled against his leg and then disappeared back beneath the sands.

“The Fire Spirit I call is very stubborn and rarely likes being summoned simply for introductions,” Zasha admitted. “But he is my very best friend. I trust him even more than Kamali.” Her husband rolled his eyes.

“And I’m never allowed to forget that, believe me,” he told Eudora, who giggled. Zasha, with more trouble than the others had had, called her Spirit forth.

“His name is Rydan, and he is what it means. Completely wild! Taming is not the word I would ever use to describe our relationship. He just keeps me around because...well, I don’t even know.” A great phoenix, taller even than his Tamer and made of white and orange fire, swooped down to sit near Zasha. Rydan had a very arrogant tilt to his head, and Eudora laughed again.

“He may even be more arrogant than you, Aja,” the princess teased. She then bowed low to Rydan. “You are incredible, and very handsome. What a treasure, Zasha. I envy you so.” Rydan’s feathers ruffled appreciatively, and he tipped his head ever-so-slightly to Eudora.

“He thanks you for your honest compliments,” Zasha said with a slight frown. “Huh. He usually attacks when people try to be nice to him. Stubborn bird that he is...” Rydan nipped affectionately at Zasha’s hand as she went to pat his neck, and then he shot back into the sky. When he was gone, Eudora looked to Arian pointedly.

“May I see your Spirit?” she asked. Arian, acting as though it was a great and pointless effort she was asking of him, waved his hand absent-mindedly.

“If you insist,” he replied. Arian gave a low, hissing call that brought gooseflesh sweeping over Eudora’s skin. A deep chill curved around her, encircling and enveloping her in the cold. A quiet, threatening hiss echoed in her ear, and she fought not to squeal as the tongue of Arian’s Spirit flickered against her neck. He was made of Ice, a serpent made of Ice. “Hielo is a very smart boy and very friendly when he senses power,” Arian declared with a smirk. “You can pet him. He won’t bite.” Looking at Arian, shivering because of the chill Hielo radiated, Eudora thought that the Spirit might not bite, but the Tamer definitely would.

“He’s beautiful,” Eudora told Arian in a cool voice, stroking her hand down the side of Hielo’s flat head. “He seems dangerous, though. How do you control him?” Arian shrugged and nodded to Hielo, who slithered around Eudora’s shoulders and then vanished into a wisp of chilling air. Without the Spirit there, Eudora could breathe.

“You must have strength to control the Spirits, princess. I would not expect you to know the secrets of Taming, novice as you are.” Hmm-Aja and Arian seemed to be forming a united front against her.

“Well,” Eudora began, “I will learn quickly how to Tame my Elements and my Spirit. It is a pity, of course, that one cannot learn common courtesy and civility. I have a feeling you would not excel quite so well in that field.” Arian hissed loudly at her, and suddenly the princess was choking, unable to draw any breath. It felt as though her throat had been frozen shut. She clawed at her skin before remembering that she was a Tamer now. This was just another test, and she would be damned if she was going to fail it. Searching for the essence buried inside her, she called out to the Spirit she knew now that she possessed.

*‘Please, I know this is unprecedented, but I need your help! I need to be able to Tame you now!’* Coughing, losing focus of the other Tamers, who were shouting at Arian, Eudora felt a definite presence within the confines of her mind. Then it was without, outside her body, near her, defending her against her assailant. *‘Arian, turn his focus away from me! Please, do something! I need you!’* The Ice Tamer was obviously shocked as Eudora’s Spirit surged over and into him, breaking his connection with his own Spirit. The pressure on Eudora’s throat lessened as she called out for her Spirit.

“Ayasha.” Although she spoke in a voice that was more a hoarse croak than anything, nothing had ever sounded so beautiful as that name. “Ayasha, come to me.” Eudora’s Spirit, a beautiful female entity in the shape of a great, glorious hawk larger by far than her Tamer, swooped back over to her.

*‘I am here, Eudora,’* Ayasha spoke as a whisper of wind in Eudora’s mind. *‘You did what many other Tamers do not realize they need to do. You called for me, but not because you wanted power or control. You needed help, you needed me. You did not want to wield me as a weapon or use me as a shield. No matter what, I will always be here when you call now.’* Eyes burning with tears, Eudora reached out a quaking hand to touch the

dreamlike feathers on her Spirit's neck, soft as air and just as insubstantial. Ayasha was warm, however, and Eudora pressed herself against the Spirit before she could temper her reaction. Ayasha wrapped one of her wispy wings around the princess, and they stood like that for a moment before Amana approached.

"She is breathtaking, Eudora," Amana declared before touching the princess lightly on her shoulder. "I am amazed that you have excelled so quickly. If any Element, I would have believed you to shine in Taming Fire. However, it seems that Wind is the Element you share the closest bond with." Amana then shot a withering glare at Arian. "If we are through with foolish power struggles and useless demonstrations of idiocy, I would like to continue Eudora's teaching. Arian, seeing as you are the only Ice Tamer on the island, we will need you as an instructor. I would ask for you to refrain from attacking your pupil." Arian glowered but nodded, nonetheless, as Ayasha brushed through Eudora and vanished.

*'Remember, Eudora,'* Ayasha began, and Eudora felt her Spirit's presence in her mind. *'I am always here. If you need me, simply call.'* Eudora had no doubt that she would.

## **Chapter Five~ A Time for Tears**

Eudora turned to Oceanus and beamed at him after her Element Spirit had departed. She felt like there was purpose in her life now, and she was not going to be hindered by either the arrogant child king, Aja, or the jealous Ice Tamer, Arian.

“The Water, Oceanus. I would like to try and Tame the Water again.” Oceanus laughed as Aja stalked away, anger radiating off his skin.

“Do not be overconfident, child,” Oceanus warned in a light voice. “The discovery of your Wind Spirit under such circumstances is not likely to be duplicated. Even though you do show amazing talent for Taming, this is still going to take much work.” Eudora nodded, her grin not faltering in the slightest.

“I know, Oceanus. But I have an advantage over other Tamers, even over the prince himself.” Oceanus arched one eyebrow at the princess.

“Do you indeed?” he questioned, causing Zene to laugh again. Eudora felt like her grin was threatening to split her face, but she nodded.

“I do indeed,” she affirmed. Oceanus joined his sister in her laughter.

“Have I told you yet that I think you will make a splendid queen?” Eudora, momentarily taken aback, shook her head.

“No....” She sounded stunned. “I didn’t think anyone on the Isle wanted me to be queen.” Zene slung her arm around the princess’ shoulders and led her to the water’s edge again.

“You mistake our people for your own, Eudora. Until you give us a reason to, we will not distrust you. I must agree with my brother on this. You will make an excellent queen. Now, into the water. There is a nice trick I think you will be able to easily master, after seeing your display with the Wind.”

Zene and Oceanus worked with Eudora for another hour, teaching her

how to ride the waves and draw oxygen from the water like the sea-dwelling animals did. After they left the water, most reluctantly on Eudora's part, it was time for luncheon in the palace, and the princess was blissfully exhausted.

"Such a fast learner," Oceanus declared as the Tamers entered the palace together. "Even the child king had trouble when he was a new Tamer. You have much to be proud of." Eudora smiled in a dreamy kind of way, drying her hair with a short blast of hot Wind. She thanked the Element and sat at the table while she replied to Oceanus.

"Much to be grateful for is more like it, Oceanus. I never knew there was so much to live for. How could I have gone through my life without having this as a part of me?" Searching for Ayasha's essence, Eudora was overjoyed to find her Spirit nearby. "How could I have lived without Ayasha? It seems like everything I have ever done was for naught. This, all of this, the Passion Kingdom, the Taming, this is what I was meant for. How can one live without what they are meant to do and not even feel its absence?" Amana sat on Eudora's other side as the princess waved to Quimat, Sagira, and Majit, who were all looking at her curiously. Eudora realized that she still hadn't told them anything and resolved to corner them all after dinner later on in the evening in order to discuss things with them.

"More of a mystery is how one can experience what one is meant for and turn away from it," Amana said softly. "That is what the child king was expecting you to do, Eudora. He is angry that he misjudged you. I admit, it would be easier for the Kingdom were you to throw a childish tantrum and refuse to rule. Were you to return to Cieala, it would be much simpler for the Passion Kingdom." Eudora looked confused and hurt, so Oceanus and Amana gave her comforting smiles.

"But easier is not always better," Oceanus declared. "You will be a great asset to the Passion Kingdom. A fair and just ruler, you will bring success and prosperity to our people. More importantly, I believe you are capable of bringing us much needed security and peace." Eudora felt guilty, thinking of her promise to Quimat about instigating the most hideous and gruesome war in history. Were Oceanus to have heard her, he would not have such faith in her. She was leading the people to a slaughter that she not only expected, but planned on. *'Were there another way, I would gladly take it,'* Eudora reassured herself. *'But this is my only option...I must do this, for the people.'*

Eudora felt Ayasha's displeasure and frowned even more grimly. *'What would you have me do, Ayasha?'* Already, it was completely natural to speak with her Spirit.

*'Fight, Eudora. That is all any of us can ask of you. But there are means of fighting that do not spill innocent blood in such distressing quantities. I will be with you always, simply remember that.'* Nodding, Eudora turned to Oceanus.

"There are things we must speak of," the princess declared as lunch was served. Oceanus gave her a puzzled look, but Eudora shook her head, wordlessly instructing him to remain silent until after the meal. They ate without incident, which Eudora was quite thankful for.

After lunch was through, Eudora and the other Tamers retired once again to the beach. Oceanus gestured around as Arian, Tavon, Zasha, Kamali, Amana, Dinesh, Yuri, and three Tamers Eudora hadn't been formally introduced to sat in a loose circle.

"We will all be teaching you more today, but first, Tavon and the other three Tamers need to call your soul." Eudora's heart began to beat painfully in her chest, like a wild caged beast. She didn't want her soul called again, especially by Tavon, who looked so like a friendly uncle she once loved to sit and talk with in Cieala. Thinking of him in the position Dinesh had been in yesterday made her nauseous.

"Is there any other way to call my soul?" Eudora asked hesitantly, making Zene laugh. This time, though, Eudora was not inclined to join her in her amusement. She felt literally sick about having to be put in that position again. Oceanus sighed.

"It is either be called as a Legendary Tamer by the child king or be called individually by the last four Greater Elements." Eudora nodded and looked at each of the Tamers she did not know before turning to Oceanus. Her gaze rested on the jovial-looking Tavon for a moment before she spoke.

"Tavon is a Rock Tamer. What other Elements am I to be called for?" Oceanus gestured to the three strangers, and they stood.

"The last three Greater Elements are not to be taken lightly. It is incredible that we were able to even uncover one of these, let alone all three. Prophecy is the first, Tamed by Cassara." The first Tamer who had stood, with sweeping locks of forest green hair and eyes of palest gray, bowed to

the princess. “Rollin is the last known Tamer of Instinct.” The man Eudora had hesitated before looking upon had startling yellow-gold eyes and a wave of chestnut hair. He was stunning, yet the tilt of his lips and slyness of his eyes held a sense of wildness and danger. He nodded to Eudora as Oceanus gestured to the final Tamer, a young man with exceptionally old eyes and fair skin. His hair was a shock of silver, and his eyes matched that striking shade.

“And what is your name?” Eudora asked, strangely comforted by that wise, penetrating gaze. He smiled serenely and held out his hand. When Eudora took it, he kissed her palm.

“I am Warrick. Tamer of Time.” His voice was far stronger than the frame it belonged to, deep and soothing.

“I am very pleased to meet you.” Eudora breathed. Warrick’s lips on her skin had sent a wriggle of heat into Eudora’s chest. She didn’t mind it, although she was less than thrilled when he smiled in a way that told her he knew exactly what she was thinking. Making her decision, Eudora nodded and faced Oceanus.

“Because it must be done eventually, I would like for Aja to call my soul.” Tavon laughed, that chuckle that seemed inclined to shake mountains, Rollin gave an ‘awe-shucks’ look of disappointment, and Warrick gave Eudora calm, probing eyes. Cassara flipped her long hair, looking bored, as if she knew that was going to be Eudora’s choice, anyway. *‘Of course she did,’* Eudora thought wryly. *‘She is the Tamer of Prophecy, after all.’* She felt a giggle slide through her mind and knew that Ayasha had heard her thoughts. Laughing softly as well, Eudora bowed to the three new teachers she had just acquired.

“The pupil far surpasses the tutor on most occasions, *bella*,” Cassara murmured. Eudora was in awe at her voice. It was beautiful, flowing, with a touch of otherworldly mystery. The Prophecy Tamer gave her a small smile and then turned to Oceanus. “Call the child king, then, Oceanus, but be quick of it. The *niña* seems anxious to proceed with her education.” Oceanus nodded and smiled at the princess.

“I will be back shortly, Eudora. Acquaint yourself with the other Tamers, if you would, while you await my return.” Gladly, Eudora nodded and met each of the new Tamers’ gazes in turn. Rollin looked like he wanted to bite her playfully. Warrick appeared to be studying her, trying to find the

best and quickest way to get under her skin. Cassara looked bored, but smiled at Eudora when their eyes met. Tavon, whom Eudora was very glad she did not have to have her soul called by, as he was quickly obtaining an uncle-like position in her mind, came over to her and gave her a short hug.

“We are all very proud of you, little princess.” When Eudora sighed, Tavon laughed. “I mean Eudora. To have a queen who adapts so quickly to strange and potentially frightening situations will be a great asset. And a queen who desires so much to be a part of her people...well, such a ruler is a priceless gem. You will make us all even more proud in the coming years, I am sure.” Eudora’s stomach gave a lurch as the reality of what Tavon had just pointed out slammed into her. *Years...* This, the Passion Kingdom, being away from Cieala, this was her life now. It was permanent and unmoving, set in stone by choices other than her own. It made her want to cry. Ayasha sent a calming wind coursing through Eudora, and the princess’s tremulous thoughts immediately quieted.

“Thank you, Tavon,” Eudora replied with a soft smile. “I truly hope I can do as you say.”

“Well, I truly doubt it.” The far too familiar snarl assaulted Eudora’s ears, and the princess sighed as she turned to face Aja.

“We are all aware of the fact that you dislike me, child king. Do you have to make it obvious at every available opportunity? It makes you seem very childish. Are you simply jealous, or has your chauvinistic mind prevented you from seeing anything other than arrogant intolerance of me?” With Ayasha’s help, Eudora was able to see the vague shimmer of Catori, Aja’s Fire Spirit, when his anger flared into seething rage.

“You will not insult me, princess,” Aja growled, making her title into more of a mockery than anything. Eudora, just as furious, simply threw a scathing retort at him.

“There is no need, child king,” she replied waspishly, trying to put as much bite on the words as he had. Warrick put a hand on her arm, but even his and Ayasha’s combined calming energies could not temper her words. “Your actions do your name a greater injustice than any slur I could ever voice against you.” Ayasha grew in Eudora’s awareness, a towering presence ready to protect her Tamer. Catori mirrored the gesture, becoming more visible and imposing.

“Stop this at once,” Oceanus shouted in a commanding voice. Eudora

immediately backed down, and Aja took it as weakness on her part, not an inbred respect for elder males. Summoning Catori fully while Ayasha's presence dissipated, Aja snapped his fire whip in Eudora's direction. Ayasha howled a protest and became fully visible, rushing Aja in a wave of prickling heat. It blasted over him, knocking him off his feet and sending Catori back to being just a flickering impression behind her Tamer.

*'Do not touch her!'* Ayasha boomed, and Eudora felt that her Spirit's words, so full of power and wrath, had to be heard by everyone on the island. When Warrick asked what she had said, the princess was shocked.

"My Spirit commands that you do not touch me," Eudora told Aja calmly. Ayasha flowed gently back to Eudora's side, and the princess brushed her fingers through the airy feathers on her Spirit's neck.

*'Thank you.'* Eudora could find no other words to express her gratitude, no matter how endless it was. She realized that her cheek was bleeding and glared at Aja before Ayasha, finding the danger level to her satisfaction, faded back into an insubstantial shadow.

*'You are more than welcome, Eudora. Were he to hurt you more than that, he would not be standing right now.'* It was true—the child king was pulling himself to his feet with loathing etched into every feature of his normally handsome face.

"We will call your soul now, princess," Aja declared, voice dripping malice. "And we will see how strong you really are." Fear immediately leapt into Eudora's throat.

"Is the calling of a Legendary Tamer painful, Oceanus?" Eudora asked with a hint of desperation in her tone. The Water Tamer gave her a bleak look.

"It can be, *carina*," he said, and his tone conveyed sadness. "And it seems the child king plans to make this painful." Aja spat blood on the ground, and Eudora glared at him. Blood for blood seemed only fair to her.

"You're damn right I'm going to make this painful!" he nearly shouted at Oceanus. He then cursed fluently in the language of his people. Eudora only caught a few of the words, but figured out that they were highly derogatory insults directed at her. Oceanus nodded, and Eudora shot him a pleading look.

"Can you do anything?" she asked, and then silently directed the same question at Ayasha. The Spirit and the other Tamer both gave her

disheartening answers. Deciding that it was better to face Aja resolutely than beg for his mercy, Eudora turned and gave him her gaze unwaveringly. She tried to put into it all the disgust she felt for him, and he caught on nicely.

“Come here, fire rose.” Aja held out a hand, and Eudora fought not to run away. All her better instincts were for it, and that right there made her take Aja’s hand. If she was going to be a good queen, it would be nothing but beneficial for her to Tame all Elements, including Instinct. Rather than have Rollin, Warrick, Cassara, and Tavon call her, Aja was going to. It was easier and more logical. Trying to maintain grasp on these thoughts, Eudora gripped Aja’s hand tightly.

“You will never scare me, child king,” Eudora told him defiantly. “Not in this life or any other. Do your worst.” Aja’s face was unreadable, and he pulled Eudora to him with a gentleness the princess did not expect. When their lips touched, it was tender, a brush of summer air. This confused Eudora. Inch by metaphysical inch, her barriers fell until she was lost in the kiss. Aja’s hands were in her hair, his fingers twining in the silken strands. She tentatively tried to mimic the gesture, plunging her hands into his locks of ebony velvet. She stroked her fingers over his neck and down his shoulders. Ayasha, on her guard, moved through the two, a rush of warm sweetness. Sensing nothing she could worry further about, the Spirit faded back into her Tamer’s consciousness.

“I do not need your fear,” Aja whispered, breaking away from the kiss. “Seeing your pain will be enough.” With this, the child king shoved all of his energy into the princess before fastening his mouth again on hers to silence the scream that came to her lips. If the previous Elements had battled, they now raged. She felt like the sun, burning hot, a frozen lake, icily cold; a hurricane wind tore at her soul, while pain shrieked through her every limb. She was frozen in agony and felt as though her skin at any moment would come peeling away from muscle and bone, and then she would be nothing. Death would be relief, bliss. Never had she felt such pain.

When Eudora returned to her senses, she was on the ground and tears were streaking her face. Trembling all over, she hesitantly pulled herself to her feet. Were it not for Zene and Oceanus, she would have collapsed again. The two Tamers held her against them, letting the power of the waves flow through her to comfort her. Calming was for the Wind, however, and Ayasha came without being called, cradling her Tamer in a breath of warm,

consoling air.

*'What do you want me to do, Eudora?'* Ayasha asked worriedly. The princess, gasping, crying, sweating, and shaking, simply shook her head and stayed in the warmth and security she felt.

*'Stay with me,'* the princess whispered to the Spirit. She felt Ayasha's smile, and the wind became even warmer.

*'Always,'* the Spirit promised. It was a few moments before Eudora could even open her eyes, and by that time, the child king was long gone.

"You are what we have hoped for, Eudora," Amana said with an affectionate smile. She brushed a kiss over the princess's forehead and Eudora knew that there, more permanent than any crown, was the mark of a Legendary Tamer. A thin band of interweaving color, marking each Element the princess Tamed, encircled her brow like the most beautiful and distinguished coronet she could ever wear. It was an emblem, the symbol of what Eudora now possessed, the ability to protect her people. The marks of Rock, Prophecy, Instinct, and Time had appeared as well. At the small of her back, a swirling dance of silver marked Time. The small sphere of forest green between her eyebrows, beneath the Legendary Tamer mark, signified Prophecy. Down her right shoulder trickled the mark of Rock, a deep chestnut brown pattern the same color as Tavon's rich, jovial eyes. The mark for Instinct was around her left ankle and foot, like a flowing river of healthy moss. Eudora was a Legendary Tamer.

Catching her breath, Eudora searched for Ayasha's essence and found her Spirit practically humming with pride. The princess nearly blushed when the gleeful entity appeared beside her and rushed through her Tamer in a wave of blissful, joyful warmth. Eudora laughed, and Amana echoed her as they watched the frolicking Spirit with obvious pleasure.

*'Can you believe it, Eudora?'* Ayasha exclaimed happily, whirling around her Tamer. *'A Legendary Tamer! Think of all the things you can do for your people now! You will truly be able to lead them to peace, to security. I am so proud of you, Eudora!'* The princess let her fingers slide through her Spirit's warmth, smiling fondly.

*'Thank you, Ayasha, for your words and your strength. I will need more of both in the years to come, to be sure.'* Ayasha nuzzled up against her Tamer lovingly and then took to the sky again, not able to remain where she did not truly belong for great amounts of time. She was a creature of the sky,

and even though her Tamer was confined to walk the ground unless Taming the Wind, Ayasha could not force herself to subject to the land or sea for long, no matter how much she cared for Eudora.

*'You have both always, Eudora,'* Ayasha declared from the sky. *'Now, you must confer with the child king. He is the only one on the island who can truly assist in your teaching now. No matter how formidable the other Tamers are with their own Elements, you will far surpass all but a fellow Legendary Tamer in the weeks to come. Seek him out and cease this foolish power struggle before you both lose a valuable ally.'* Taking Ayasha's words for what they were, plain advice, Eudora nodded.

*'Of course, my friend,'* Eudora replied. *'I will seek out the child king, but after I have received tutoring and conversation from more pleasant sources.'* Ayasha seemed to sigh exasperatedly as she faded back to become merely a whisper in Eudora's consciousness. The princess approached Oceanus, who had been patiently waiting for her conversation with Ayasha to reach its conclusion.

"Are you ready to continue your training, Eudora? As I'm sure your Spirit has already informed you, the Tamers here can only take you so far. The prince is the one you will have to confront if you desire to tap into even a fraction of the power you now possess." Eudora nodded and gestured for everyone to sit again. Even though they were on friendlier terms than princess and subjects, she still had an air that commanded respect.

"I would like to hear how the Tamers came to be. What was the cause of the Dark War? How many Legendary Tamers are there? Is it a trait that is hereditary, or is something else factored in to decide who will become a Legendary Tamer?" By this time, all the other Tamers were laughing boisterously, so Eudora quickly fell silent, blushing scarlet. "Forgive me," she said quietly. She ducked her head as if she had done something wrong, but Amana placed a comforting hand on her arm.

"We are amused, Eudora, not condescending. Between your father's kingdom and our less than friendly prince, I'm sure your views of the rest of the population is less than flattering. Cassara is our resident storyteller, so she will tell you of how the Tamers came to be. After that, any other questions you have can be addressed." Content with this, Eudora focused on the Prophecy Tamer's astonishing voice as she began to weave a tale of magic, love, betrayal, and power.

“The legend begins more than four centuries ago, when the world of man was ruled by great beasts of terrible power who battled through the Elements for ultimate supremacy.” Her murmur inspired shivers, and Eudora was thoroughly captivated.

“In this time, the gods of old wielded magic as a part of them and completely ruled the Element which they Tamed. There was a god of Fire, Pyralis. He claimed himself ruler above the other gods and imbued his kingdom, Karaphel, with the power of flames. Thus was the first kingdom of man created, filled with the evil and lust for power of its father god. Following his example, the other greater Element gods and goddesses quickly claimed kingdoms of their own and granted the power over their own Elements to the humans they ruled. Only the goddess of Prophecy, Ziva, the god of Water, Misu, and the sister goddesses of Instinct and Time, who were named Tivona and Mandara, did not join in the struggle. They pleaded to the supreme deity, who was neither male or female and had control over all Elements, to stop the chaos that war between the Elements was creating. Because of their combating, the other gods and goddess were spilling enough negativity into the world to create a whole new Element. Evil was formed. The supreme deity’s rage thundered through the sky and plains and oceans, wracking the world with tremendous power. At once, all fighting ceased. The very world was poised to listen to what the supreme deity was prepared to speak.

“*‘My children,’ the supreme deity began. ‘This beautiful world, which I have given unto thee as my greatest gift, is wracked with war, stained red with blood of those who have fallen in the quest for power. No longer shall the gods have control over man to use as pawns in battle. The god shall retreat to myth and legend, no longer walking this world at the sides of mortals. Man now receives the last gift I shall give until they reach the higher plain. Through your blood, the powers you have been granted by the gods will continue through the coming generations. To balance the Evil which has now seeped into your world, I send you the Three. From these will spring the last great mark of the gods’ reign, men and women who can control all the Elements you have used so foolishly. In the gods’ names, indeed! I am wearied and sickened by the spilling of blood and battling of brothers. You will learn of great pain, injustice, and poverty, which are deserved for rejecting the peace which was given to you. Thus, the time of*

*man begins and the reign of the gods ends.'*

“The world was in turmoil after that. Although the supreme deity had hoped that withdrawing the gods would bring the humans closer together as a race, they were too separated by their Elements. Storms raged, Element battled Element, and the Spirits that were able to remain with the humans began choosing Tamers to bond with. With widespread war, disease, poverty, and despair ever looming, the humans battled feverishly against a changing world and their own kin.

“With time, as the remnants of gods and Elements began to disperse, children were born who had no Element to Tame or only a Lesser Element. This began a time of greater acceptance and a general easing into life as masters of their own destinies. Wars still erupted over territory, power, and other issues, but no war was nearly as great as the War of Elements had been and no time as trying as the century in its wake.

“The Three that the supreme deity spoke of were Legendary Tamers, and their descendants all could Tame every Element, save one. Evil, which had flourished during the War of Elements, had never been wielded by a human hand. One of the Legendary Tamers, who each lived incredibly long lives due to the power of the supreme deity that rested in their veins, partook of a quest in order to Tame Evil. He brought another war upon the Legendary Tamers, the Dark War. Still hungry for power, the rock kingdom, Gailenna, and the fire kingdom, Karaphel, united behind the Legendary Tamer who had gone mad under the influence of Evil. The fire and rock kingdom were drunk off his promise for ultimate power and intoxicated by the lust for blood which he promised to sate. The Legendary Tamer, whose name was Arawn, vowed to slay even the gods should they stand in his way. Arawn planned to dominate all the Tamers, especially the other Legendary Tamers, who now each had children of their own. The other male Legendary Tamer, Kyan, husband to a powerful Water Tamer, and his female counterpart, Elicora, who had married the king of the Wind Tamers, rallied their forces together, determined to face Arawn with all the strength they could muster.

“Thus began the Dark War, which destroyed the Wind Kingdom, Freylenne, the Light Kingdom, Inara, and the Water Kingdom, Naiya. Arawn met Elicora one night while battle blazed around them and whole peoples were mercilessly slaughtered by blade, bow, or Element. Elicora, it is

told, was weeping for her people while standing on the balcony of her palace. Her husband, though a kind and wise king, could not bear to have her hurt and thus imprisoned her in her chambers by means of a sacred, unbreakable vow. Because of this, Eliora was not able to flee when Arawn confronted her.

“Their meeting is still recounted in bards’ tales and songs, though only one was there to witness it. Arawn promised sanctuary to her people and herself, so long as she denounced the king and chose the Legendary Tamer as her husband. Sickened by the offer and the war being waged in his name, Eliora spat at her feet and vowed that she would never belong to him. She challenged him to a duel of wills and Elements, calling forth her numerous Spirits to assist her in battle. The king, sensing a disturbance, was distracted and tragically died, pierced through the heart by a flaming arrow.

“Eliora and Arawn battled fiercely, neither gaining any advantage over the other. All the Legendary Tamers were equally matched in strength and attributes, so the fight could have lasted until neither of them had strength to stand. However, Arawn had a dark upper hand over the wind queen. He once more offered his hand and safe passage, but, knowing the battle was a lost one, Eliora sent her Spirits to the final Legendary Tamer, Kyan, to assist him in the war. Eliora faced death with a calm that she was well known for and, before Arawn could secure his perfect victory, slashed him across the face with a sword. Enraged at her impudence, Arawn called the Spirit of Evil to his side and slew the gentle queen. He then set to looking for her child.

“While to Kyan were born two female twins, Eliora had been blessed with a male heir. All three were born with the mark of the Legendary Tamer encircling their brows, and Arawn wanted no challenge to his rule. The children were threats, and he intended to put an end to them. A servant with no Element to Tame, the same servant who had watched the death of the wind queen who was determined to save her people, protected the child by calling Kyan to him and running Arawn through with the queen’s own sword. By no means defeated, Arawn called all the forces of Evil to him and fled to a sanctuary deep within the dreaded mountains of Illac’Mur, where none to this day will venture near. With their leader gone, the fire and rock kingdoms were driven back by Kyan’s army.

“Mourning the loss of both the Wind king and queen, the kingdom

Freylenne dispersed, becoming a scattering of what are now ruins. The same happened to Inara and Naiya, both of which lost grievous numbers of people to the war. Now, there are no more Element kingdoms, save Gailenna, Karaphel, and the Passion Kingdom. All other kingdoms one would come across are trade cities or holy ruins. It is prophesized that, with a new joining of not three, but *four* Legendary Tamers, which has never occurred in any generation, the dreaded Illac'Mur will be conquered and Arawn finally defeated." Entranced until now, Eudora interrupted.

"But this happened so long ago. Surely Arawn doesn't still live?" Oceanus cast her a grim look.

"A Legendary Tamer's life can span centuries, Eudora, halted only by blade, sickness, or battle. In the case of an illness, however, there is only one disease which can touch one who Tames all Elements. It takes much for a Legendary Tamer to die." This shocking realization slammed into Eudora and, to her amazement, she began to cry. Amana pulled the princess into her calming embrace and whispered words in the language of the wind to ease the princess's mind.

"I'm forced to endure centuries of this?" Eudora gasped, stuttering slightly. "Centuries of being surrounded by people who see me only as a princess to avoid or be painfully cordial to? What god would force such torment upon me? Where is the justice in this cruel life I have been given?" Forced to incoherence by her violent sobbing, Eudora fell silent and wept.

"*This, too, will pass, my child,*" Eudora heard someone whisper close to her face. She didn't recognize the voice, but it didn't matter to her. Her life had become...chaos, pain, despair. She didn't want to live for centuries. She didn't want to be a Legendary Tamer. She wanted innocence-she wanted the ease of childhood.

*'You cannot have it back again, little one.'* Ayasha's words swept through Eudora, not unlike the first voice, though it was far more familiar, but the princess was beyond even the Wind Spirit's ability to calm. *'You have me, Eudora. Isn't that enough? You have your people and your friends...you have the promise of a future you can shape and mold with your own hands. And, for as long as you live, you have a precious gift. You can touch what only gods could once touch, little one. Take heart and be strong, for we will all need your strength in the coming years.'* Eudora let one long sigh tremble from her body, and then she was still.

*'What comes, Ayasha, that any would need my strength?'*

*'War, little one,' Ayasha replied sadly, coursing through her Tamer in a rush of sorrowful wind. 'War comes whether you offer hostility first or remain neutral. We cannot stop it. The air tells of a great army gathering to the east. And in the dreaded darkness of Illac'Mur, forces stir, wakened from a thousand years of tremulous sleep by the introduction of the second Legendary Tamer into this generation. This war will be such that, without strength such as yours, our world will be wracked and rent beyond repair. Weep not, little one. There will be time enough for tears later.'*

## **Chapter Six~ Reckless Abandon**

When Eudora had recovered, she found herself staring into the worried faces of Zene, Amana, Oceanus, and Warrick. The last offered her a hand and helped her stand when she caught his gaze.

“Ayasha tells me that the army to the east is rallying its strength,” the princess began in a cool, measured voice. “War is coming, and sooner than I expected it. It is possible that my father...” Eudora hesitated over the word and then continued, using her father’s name in place of the familial title. “It is possible that King Valin has already gleaned word of my resistance and thinks to crush any uprising before the problem is brought to his borders. That means there isn’t a lot of time to train the people as I wish. We need to have...” Eudora was cut off by laughter from all expect Cassara and Amana.

“The people are well trained, Eudora,” Oceanus declared. “It is one of the many reasons King Valin wanted control of the Passion Kingdom in the first place.” Eudora nodded.

“May I have control of the army?” The laughter immediately died.

“Prince Aja controls the army, Eudora. If you want any say in the process, you must first make amends with the child king.” Eudora nodded and eyed Rollin, Oceanus, and Warrick in turn.

“I will need commanders that I can trust with the battle and with my own life. After I speak with the child king, I would like to have a meeting with all of the Tamers.” Warrick cleared his throat politely.

“In matters of war, my liege, I am most ignorant. Might I swear my services to you in a different way?” Eudora arched one sculpted eyebrow.

“And what way would you offer your services, Tamer Warrick?” the princess asked, more a royal now than she had been all the time in the Passion Kingdom. Ayasha, uncomfortable with this newfound attitude,

molded herself into her Tamer's essence until she was a barely discernable wisp of warm air. Warrick bowed low, silver eyes flashing.

"It would give me great pleasure to serve as your personal attendant, my lady. While you think only of your people, I ponder on the fact that you will need more than strength of will to stand behind you. It would be a great benefit for you to have one or two Tamers placed as your bodyguards." Eudora was aghast at the very thought.

"I will not have the warriors of legend serving as hired muscle, Warrick. How you dishonor yourself and other Tamers, simply by the asking!" Oceanus smiled and placed a comforting hand on the princess's shoulder.

"He speaks soundly, Eudora. You must be protected, and one who Tames no Element in times such as these is only good as a shield of flesh. You would not want to sacrifice dear Majit or Pallaton because you fear dishonoring willing guards? It would, contrary to your belief, be a great honor to any Tamer who could hold such a place of esteem as at your side." Warrick nodded his agreement, so Eudora relented, as she was doing dismayingly often, to her own ignorance.

"Yes, that will be fine, then. Forgive me-I am still rather incompetent in more areas than I am proficient." Cassara joined in the tide of laughter that swept over the Tamers this time.

"It is settled then," she purred. "Warrick and Zene will take their rightful places at your side. You will find no more devoted guards than these." Zene looked stunned for a moment, and then pleased beyond belief.

"What a splendid honor," she Water Tamer declared with a grin. Eudora, though not agreeing with this task being an honor, nodded and smiled gratefully. Having Zene as a guardian would at least be entertaining.

"Then we will ask the queen for a proper ceremony tonight at dinner. The Passion Kingdom must know of the coming war, and I would like them also to be aware of the sacrifices the Tamers are willing to make on their behalf. Until then, I must learn as much as possible about being a Legendary Tamer. While I know it may take years,"-*even centuries*, the princess mentally added-"To master my Taming, I want to be as prepared as possible to fight in this war." A murmur of agreement swept through the gathered Tamers, and the training began again. Tavon came forward first, smiling jovially.

"Let us try Rock," Tavon declared, stepping towards the princess and

giving her a look of encouragement. “You must feel a connection with the very ground at your feet. Let it move up through you, solidifying in your mind as an unbreakable presence. You are a part of the planet, forged from it. Search through your mind and find the part of you that is borne from the very Rock.” It took Eudora a very long time to grasp Rock Taming, much longer than Wind or Water, which caused much amusement in the other Tamers. By the end of the session, all the princess could do was summon a dust storm, which she did only by inadvertently using her Wind Taming, as well.

“Rock Taming is hopeless!” the princess declared sourly. “It is as different from the Wind as...” Tavon laughed.

“As you are from the child king?” Embarrassed that the Rock Tamer knew what she had been thinking, the princess nodded. Tavon pondered this for a moment. “Differences are what make a people or relationship great, little one. But if you feel instead of think, if you use these differences instead of scorn them, then you will be able to triumph over that which eludes you.” Nodding, Eudora watched as Arian approached, moving with a kind of icy grace none of the other Tamers possessed. She was afraid of him, and, as his sovereign, that would not do.

“Ice is the last lesson to be taught today?” Eudora asked, keeping her voice calm and neutral as possible. Arian nodded, but made no verbal response, and Eudora instinctively knew that he was summoning Hielo. The Ice serpent hissed near Eudora’s ear, but she gave no obvious reaction. Rubbing himself around her neck like a living scarf, Hielo lazily made his way towards Arian.

“Ice is logic, princess-cold, uncaring logic. It is knowing that there is a part of yourself as cold as Ice, as cold as the vast expanse of a frozen ocean. In order to Tame the Ice, you must first Tame that nameless void of uncaring, glacial darkness inside your own soul.” His words made no sense to Eudora, and so she feared she may never Tame the Ice. Even having Hielo so close to her repulsed her. The princess then realized that it was because what Arian said was true. Being forced to accept the part of her own spirit that was alien, uncaring, was a frightening prospect to the princess. Instead of immediately relinquishing the daunting task, however, the princess sighed, nodded, and searched inside herself for what Arian had described.

“Is it something I must feel?” Eudora questioned, closing her eyes so that she could better focus. “Or something I must instinctively or logically recognize? For a tutor, you do not explain what needs to be explained.” The princess’ eyes shot open as Arian curled himself around her from behind, much like Hielo had. He let his breath slide along the Ice mark on the princess’s neck before speaking.

“Look at yourself as if you were baring your soul to a celestial mirror. Examine first your faults, then your qualities as objectively as possible. Shut parts of yourself down, emotions that cloud judgment like rage, hate, fear, lust, and love. Become impartial, dispassionate.” It was rather hard to do that with Arian letting his fingertips slide like gentle wisps of winter wind down her arms. When the Ice Tamer reached Eudora’s hands, he intertwined their fingers and let the dull chill of Ice flow into her.

“What are you doing?” Eudora questioned on a gasp. Ice was capable of bringing a frostiness that equaled heat in many aspects. It was difficult to differentiate between the two, and Eudora felt herself beginning to sink into the sensation.

“I am calling your Ice forward,” Arian explained, his voice strangely thick with things unspoken. Suddenly, it was as if a heavy veil had lifted from Eudora’s eyes. It was the strangest thing, to see everything in a perfectly logical, detached way. She realized that, though Arian had told her to let go of lust, he was aroused. Then again, he wasn’t the pupil. Lust, Eudora reasoned, was as natural as a mother’s urge to protect her children and no less vital to the survival of the creature which experiences it. The hindering of lust was unnatural, and in the light of pure logic, the Passion Kingdom seemed much more intelligent for the way it was handled than Cieala ever could be.

When Arian backed away, Eudora was able to divulge through her new mindset the way to call the Ice on her own. She indeed searched for the ‘celestial mirror’ that Arian had instructed her to and studied her many attributes the way a jeweler examines the many facets of a gem. She saw her flaws and her qualities, how to strengthen or repress each. She saw the benefits of living for centuries instead of the daunting threat of such a long period of isolation. And, finally, she saw, much to her surprise, the benefits of sexual expression in accordance with the way the Passion Kingdom was managed.

“May I attempt to Tame the Ice now?” Eudora asked, her voice calm and detached. Arian nodded, and she saw him as more a mirror than anything else. Only an Ice Tamer, who has seen the world through the eyes of cold, impartial logic could have eyes like that. Eudora searched within herself and found the seat of that dull cold. Summoning it forward, she spun her fingers around and called out of the air enough moisture to create a dagger of ice. Kneeling before Arian as the last of that vast frigidness drained away, Eudora offered the dagger to him.

“What is this, princess?” he asked, voice hesitant. Eudora was trembling now, a deep chill seeping into her bones. She hadn’t liked that feeling, the feeling of caring for nothing in the entire world. To live like that, without a thought of warmth, friendship, love, even anger, would be...unbearable.

“A gift for you, *maestro*.” She called him ‘teacher’ in the language of the Passion Kingdom. “Take it quickly or it will melt.” When humor had returned to her, Eudora knew that she was herself again. The only thing that had changed was the fact that now, without trying, she could sense a bottomless, numbing cold within her. Arian seemed stunned for a moment and then accepted the proffered dagger, which had begun to drip chilled liquid off its tip.

“*Muchas gracias, bella*,” Arian replied, even though his thanks seemed halted. The fact that he had called her ‘beautiful’ made the princess smirk. Eudora tipped her head in recognition as she stood fluidly. She now had attempted Taming four of the greater Elements, Water, Wind, Rock, and Ice, and decided that, with the proper amount of training, she could become very accomplished in each even with the small amount of time she had before the war began.

“We should contact the queen and consult with her before dinner commences. Warrick, I would like to speak with you alone.” The Tamers smiled or bowed as they left the beach, and Eudora called for Ayasha. The Wind Spirit seemed rather hesitant to approach her Tamer, but after Eudora teased and hugged her, Ayasha relaxed. Warrick sat on the beach beside Eudora, who was allowing the waves to lap gently at her toes.

“Did you need to discuss something with me, princess?” Eudora nodded and smiled, though she was looking at the water instead of the other Tamer.

“Arian uses my title to mock me, while Aja uses it as the most base of insults. Why do *you* insist on addressing me as royalty?” Warrick cleared his

throat and gazed over the calm blue expanse of the ocean.

“Would you like the truth, your majesty?” he questioned coolly. Eudora, distracted by the longing to be reconnected with both the Wind and the Water as she had earlier that day, had to ask him to repeat the question.

“Yes, of course,” she replied after the second asking. “A friendship is naught without honesty and trust, don’t you agree?” Warrick nodded and returned his eyes to the waves.

“To keep myself from feeling anything other than responsibility and admiration for you, I use your proper titles.” Smiling secretly, Eudora felt more at ease than she had in a long, long time.

“What else would you feel, Warrick?” Eudora asked, realizing that, for the first time in her life, she was flirting. She should have felt the need to reprimand herself, but after examining everything from the viewpoint of cold logic, some of the things before now considered taboo seemed as acceptable as the desire to eat and drink. Warrick laughed and shook his head.

“You tease me, princess, yet I harbor no ill will for it.” His stunning liquid moonlight eyes suddenly darkened with a very masculine intensity, and Eudora found her mouth dry when she recognized it. Aja wore that darkness every time his eyes fell upon the foreign princess. “I would feel the urge to drink in your spirit through our touching skin, to meld with body and soul by connected flesh and energies. You have stirred emotions in me I thought long dead before now. I am old beyond your imagining.” He smiled ruefully. “And yet the wisdom my years should have yielded is hidden from me. It would do you well, princess, to think of me only as protector and friend. I can offer you no more than that.” Eudora, entranced more by the movement of Warrick's lush mouth than the words he spoke, tried fruitlessly to catch his gaze.

“Why?” she asked, so softly that the Time Tamer may not have heard the single utterance. Instead of replying to her with words she would not hear anyway, Warrick clasped Eudora gently by the shoulders and met her eyes firmly with his own. Allowing the princess an ample amount of seconds that stretched lengthily, languorous fingers towards becoming minutes, Warrick simply sat, holding the princess immobile with his midnight mist stare.

It was Eudora who moved first, rushing towards the Time Tamer so

quickly that one might think she was collapsing into the utter abandon of unconsciousness. She lost herself within a different kind of abandon, however, when her lips crashed into Warrick's, and her arms securely imprisoned him. It was a willing capture, though, and Warrick fully lost himself to the eager princess's soft mouth and succulent tongue. It was impossible to quell the feelings rising and crashing between them, impossible to drench the flames in the cooling waves of logic or restraint. Eudora searched downward on Warrick's body, questing for the center of his heat in a way that was nearly frantic.

"Princess," Warrick was gasping, trembling, unable to keep one train of thought from colliding into the others that were beating against the inside of his skull. "Princess, no. We cannot do this. The prince..." Eudora refused to listen to him. She found his manhood and closed around it, spilling him, warm, heavy, thick, into her hands against his protests.

"The prince is cold," Eudora said in a pleading voice. "He hates me. You do not. I can see it in your face, hear it in your voice. Please, I want warmth, I want heat." The desire to tell the princess to call a Fire Tamer to her was lost to Warrick as her lips once again claimed his. "I will shelter you from the prince's wrath," she promised in a fiery whisper. After losing himself to another impassioned kiss, Warrick laid Eudora down on the soft, moist sand with the waves lapping against them.

"And I shall shelter you from the cold," the Time Tamer promised. The discovery of Eudora's body was a forbidden, delicious, bittersweet endeavor. He knew that, no matter what, the very least that Eudora could do was save him from execution by the prince's blade. After this, he would never again know the press of her lips, the swell of her hips, or the blissful heat of her beautiful body. For now, he would savor all of it and store it away in the long memory that was too riddled by pain and too scarce of burning pleasure such as this.

Eudora realized that the best, most splendid thing about the Passion Kingdom's garments was that they were easily removed. Even more marvelous was the fact that the Tamers wore no clothing whatsoever. It was absurdly easy to slip out of her gown and press the full length of her body against Warrick's. A low groan pulled itself from her throat as she felt him pressed into her abdomen, so fabulously hot and firm. Her hands had life separate of the entity they belonged to, caressing Warrick's back, legs, and

round, tight ass, occasionally digging nails into that smooth, unblemished flesh. It wasn't so much the fact that both of them knew what was forthcoming as it was simply being close enough to share the heat both of them were filled with. It seemed likely to spill over at any moment, securing them in a crystal tomb of solidified passion and desire.

Warrick drew himself up before continuing, trying to calm his breath and racing heart. Never had a woman affected him so. Were he a smarter or stronger man, he would realize the folly of having her once, tasting her, touching her, only once. He would crave it forever and would never be able to have it again. But knowing that, even for a moment, he could be the only one, and the surging triumph that came from being the first, cancelled out any doubts.

"You are mine," Warrick murmured, so softly that he doubted Eudora had even heard it. She hesitated for a moment before pulling him back down to her for another heated kiss. In order to simultaneously keep her with him for as long as possible and keep people from potentially blundering over them, Warrick stopped Time. Eudora felt how he did it and gasped at the pure strength of the Element. It encompassed all, within and out.

"I want to hear my name from your lips," Eudora told Warrick, wrapping one of her legs around his, as if afraid he would try to run from her. "Please."

"Eudora." He whispered it like a prayer, like a song, like a hymn of praise, or a mantra to keep the darkest demons at bay. Even the blackness of Illac'Mur did not scare him at the moment. In her eyes, in her arms, he was invincible. The kisses that followed were frantic, full of ardor and passionate fury. It seemed that the same lips from whence spilled the name, spoken as tender as that of an angel's, could not in any fathomable manner touch another's with such blind, careless, and frenzied abandon.

"Eudora, Eudora, Eudora..." It was as if the utterance of her name had demolished a wall built incredibly high and secure around the Time Tamer's emotions. He wanted her with every ounce of his being, could think of no sweeter, blissful pleasure offered in all the world than being inside her. Knowing that she was a virgin and extremely delicate, Warrick took his time arousing, moistening, and loosening the impatient princess. He stroked her folds of burning flesh with a calm, practiced hand, causing Eudora to moan and writhe beneath him. To watch her like this, to know that he was the

cause, was more of a gratification than Warrick ever could have imagined. Eudora whimpered and tried pulling him even closer towards her, wanting him inside her.

“Please, Warrick, please.” She panted, near tears because of everything she was feeling. There was so much heat, so many tight, wet, pulsing, sensations coursing through her that she was nearly blind to all else. Were Warrick not to have stopped Time and all the Passion Kingdom were able to see her display, she would not have cared. She wanted for nothing, save the feeling of Warrick pressed into the deepest reaches of her body.

The pupil was far more eager to please her tutor in this art than she had been all day in pursuit of the Taming, Warrick mused with his last shred of logical thought. That was swept away when Eudora arched her hips up, angled so that her most intimate parts pressed fully against his. Frustrated that, with Warrick pinning her arms, she could not guide him inside her, Eudora shivered and let her breath fall out in a moan that was unimaginably seductive to the Time Tamer.

“I can’t hurt you, *amor*,” Warrick declared in a pleading tone. His member was so full, pounding in time with each beat of his frantic heart that he was near insanity. However, he knew that his words were true. To hurt her even in smallest measure would be immeasurable pain to him.

“You won’t, you won’t.” Eudora gasped. A tear borne of too much intense emotion slid from the corner of Eudora’s eye, only to be swept away by the waves which had drenched her flaming locks and lapped against her burning body. Warrick, inflamed to the point of madness by that single tear, eased himself inside her with the utmost gentleness. Eudora didn’t want gentleness, no matter if it would hurt her or not. She wanted all of him in her, as hard and fast as possible.

“Stop, Eudora. I have no control for this.” Warrick was nearly at the point of begging. Eudora had been moving frantically against him, trying to increase the speed of his painfully slow pace.

“*Exactamente*,” Eudora declared breathlessly. Her mouth was parted slightly, while her molten eyes seemed to boil with passion. She showed him with that expression, almost overcome by her need for him, what she wanted, and he took her at her unspoken words.

Warrick pounded into Eudora in a desperate, wild, primal rhythm. Unable to contain the scream that ripped itself from her throat, Eudora dug

her nails into Warrick's shoulders and pumped her hips to match his maddening pace. Pain and pleasure blurred together. Everything was feeling. Thought, logic, even emotion were all lost to the heat, to the sound of flesh meeting flesh in a painful, blissful dance old as time. When orgasm burst over Eudora, she screamed again and heard Warrick echo her. His seed poured deep within her, causing a second explosion of heat even greater in intensity than the first. Eudora thought such things were not possible. It felt as though her very skin were going to liquefy and then she and Warrick would simply melt into each other, becoming one creature of pain, pleasure, and numbing ecstasy.

"By the gods..." Warrick whispered, his voice conveying horror. "What have I done?" He moved away quickly and doused himself with cool water while Eudora attempted sitting, far too soon, in her opinion, already feeling the shock of pain that accompanies losing one's virginity.

"Warrick..." Eudora attempted to touch him, to say something to calm him, but he jerked away from her.

"Into the water," he commanded harshly. "Clean yourself and dress. Then return to the palace and speak of this to no one." Fat, hot tears rolled down Eudora's cheeks. To be met with such hostility from the man to whom she had just given a great gift confused and hurt her beyond words.

"Warrick, please." Her voice was a broken requiem, a symphony of pain and turmoil. Warrick was deliberately scrubbing every square inch of flesh while kneeling in about two feet of water.

"Bathe, princess, and quickly. We have already made what may prove to be a fatal error." Unaware of what Warrick was telling her, the princess simply stood, gathering her clothing on the way, and fled. When she reached her room, Warrick sighed bitterly, hating himself, and allowed Time to flow forward once more. Storming towards him was the prince, who was radiating a wrath to rival that of the gods.

"Where is she?" Aja snarled as he splashed into the water and let his long, powerful fingers slide around Warrick's neck like a vice. The Time Tamer was calm, not fighting or trying to break free of the prince's death grip.

"I believe she returned to her room, your highness. Do you need anything else of me?" Aja roared his fury and slammed the Tamer face down into the water. Warrick, caught off guard, didn't even take a breath

before frigid liquid filled his mouth and throat.

*I will die here*, he thought wryly. *For loving and needing the very last woman I should have*. Darkness began to creep along the edges of Warrick's consciousness before he realized that the pressure of the prince's hold had released. Flinging his head upward, the Time Tamer took deep, gulping breaths of air while choking out the remnants of icy water that remained in his throat. Trying to clear his eyes of the salty drops, Warrick gave a cry of outrage as he saw Aja and Eudora, who was once again clothed, attacking each other.

"I will kill him if I please, bitch!" Aja bellowed as he snapped his fire whip at Eudora. The princess, overcome with rage of her own, summoned a shield of ice and then sent a powerful stream of water aimed at Aja's stomach.

"I claim responsibility for Warrick, his actions and protection!" Eudora screamed at the prince. "The only way you will kill him is through me." Aja flung a blade of rock, which the princess halted by a powerful blast of wind. Warrick knew that she was tiring at a frightening rate.

"I will gladly go through you to kill him, princess," Aja sneered, knowing as well as Warrick that she would soon yield to the other Legendary Tamer's attacks. Using his Taming, Warrick froze Aja and rushed to Eudora.

"You must leave, princess." Warrick panted, shivering from the icy water's embrace. Eudora looked wrathful, stricken, and terribly vulnerable. When the princess gave no response, Warrick shook her. "He will kill you!" Eudora looked at him once, and then her eyes rolled back and the strength went out of her limbs. She collapsed against Warrick and he, with the last reserve of his strength, carried her to the palace before unfreezing the livid prince.

"It seems my son has misplaced his rational thinking again," Wyanet muttered as she saw Warrick approaching. Placing a hand on the Time Tamer's shoulder when he reached her with his burden, she motioned for Majit and Quimat to claim Eudora from Warrick.

"Thank you, your highness," Warrick gasped, completely out of air and energy. He slumped into a chair, and Wyanet offered him strong wine to partially refresh him.

“What has happened that my son would attack his future bride with such vehemence?” Wyanet questioned as Eudora, carried between Quimat and Majit, disappeared through the door to the banquet hall.

“I...” Warrick didn’t know how to tell the queen what had transpired. Wyanet smiled knowingly and nodded.

“Perhaps you will allow me to deduce my own idea of the situation?” At Warrick’s approval, she began speaking again. “You and the princess had an interlude, which you conveniently stopped Time for. When my son came down to the beach, on my advice, to apologize for his over-hasty judgment of Eudora, he saw either the very beginning or the very end of whatever occurred. From there, being prone to quick, illogical actions as he is, Aja attempted to kill you for violating what is rightfully his. The princess, being young and ignorant in most things, tried valiantly to protect you by exhausting herself on her first day of being a Legendary Tamer. She used her Taming in excess and, in doing so, may have killed herself. For certain, she is now vulnerable to the only disease which could affect her. Do you realize the graveness of this situation, Warrick? If you could not have waited to offer a proper request to Prince Aja, at least you could have done it a bit more subtly. It is true that they are not yet married, but an engaged woman shares as much responsibility to her man, if not more, than a married woman.” Wyanet paused to sigh, and Warrick sat, dumbstruck.

“Forgive me, majesty,” he murmured, kneeling before her. “I know that an offense such as this is punishable by death.” Wyanet laughed, and the sound was far removed from the worry she had expressed in her words.

“I am sure the princess has already extended her protection over you. If Aja refuses to accept this, I will simply take you to my bed and thus secure my own protection over you. Have you any objections to this, Tamer Warrick?” Warrick shook his head and stood as Aja stormed into the room, rage still seared into every feature of his face, every tight line of his body. His fists were clenched when he approached Wyanet.

“My sword, mother. This *man* has committed a crime against me punishable by death.” Wyanet smiled sweetly at Aja.

“As he has well informed me, my child king. However, both the princess and myself have extended protection over him. If I am not misinformed, he will be guarding your bride to be throughout this coming war. I believe you should not be too hasty in your judgment of Tamer

Warrick. It does, as you know, take two to...how did that pretty young thing you were with this morning say it? Ah, yes, tango. If you punish Warrick, the people will expect the same punishment to be administered to Eudora. Killing her would, in turn, kill you. I daresay you are not so rash as to make such a mistake as this?" Wyanet continued to smile pleasantly while Aja looked like he wanted to set the entire planet aflame. His rage was fueled by the fact that his mother, craftily as always, had pointed out that Aja had committed the same crime he was holding his wife to be responsible for. "Of course, mother. You speak most soundly when my temper threatens to overtake the situation. Tamer Warrick, you will accompany me to my fiancée's chamber and will remain with her until she is well again. If she dies for lack of proper instruction, I will not be the only one to follow her." Warrick, in a daze, stood and, bowing once to Wyanet, followed Aja.

"You bound her to you, did you not?" Warrick was bold enough speak to Aja once the men had been silent for about a minute. Aja looked like he wanted to snarl and ignore the Tamer, but then he nodded. "I was a fool not to think that you would. Forgive me, your highness." They entered Eudora's room together, and Aja snapped at the guards who were accompanying the pale, immobile princess. They left immediately, and Warrick noticed, more to his shock than he could imagine, that Aja was truly worried. And it was not worry over his now uncertain fate, for he would surely follow her, were Eudora to surrender to this weakness. Aja worried for the wan beauty on the bed before him.

Without regard to Warrick, Aja slipped his hand under Eudora's inert one and rested his forehead against hers. It floored the Time Tamer, and he sat, dazed, in a chair near Eudora's bed. Warrick felt as if he had seriously misjudged the prince and hoped more than anything that Eudora lived to appreciate the same conclusion.

Aja remained by Eudora's bedside for the next day and a half. He growled when a servant came to offer him food or drink. He also refused to speak, though Warrick tried several times to offer conversation. Eudora didn't move, didn't so much as breathe out of rhythm the entire time. Her skin was pallid, and her hair seemed to have lost all its luster. Instead of the quiet strength she'd before seemed to radiate, frailty hung over the princess like an ashen cloak. Eudora's court members occasionally stopped in to see

if any new happening had presented itself, but the room stayed shrouded in the same miserable gloom hour after hour.

At long last, the princess's heavy lashes fluttered upward. Warrick and Aja both noticed that her eyes were now colorless orbs made heavy by weariness. They widened upon seeing both men in the same room, and Eudora attempted to sit up, presumably to prevent any foreseeable conflict. A wave of pain shocked her, though, and crossed her face in a terrible grimace. She fell back against her pillows, looking spent and wan.

"What's wrong with me?" Eudora asked, probing the room for Ayasha's essence. When her Spirit was nowhere to be found, Eudora truly panicked for the first time in her life. She assaulted the men with questions before they both yelled at her to be quiet and stop straining herself.

"Remain calm, princess." Warrick tried soothing her but was not stupid enough to touch her in front of Aja. "The danger is far from past." Eudora looked at Aja, who had stood and moved to the farthest corner of the room, away from her.

"What are you doing here?" she questioned brazenly. Aja's fists inadvertently clenched, but he answered anyway.

"Your ignorance nearly killed both of us. We are bound, you and I, so if one perishes, the other does, as well. From now on, you will not use Taming until you understand the nature of it. Is that clear?" Angered that he could think to order her about, Eudora glared at him.

"My ignorance? It is you who began that foolish duel in the first place!" Aja pushed himself off the wall in a flurry of rage, but calmed himself before he reached the princess.

"That is beyond the point," Aja resigned. "The Tamers left out a crucial lesson. Had you died, and myself, also, the damage done would have been unforgivable. We are the only known Legendary Tamers in existence who are still in control of our powers and bodies." Eudora relented to his reasoning, though she didn't like it.

"Were it not for my insistence, I'm sure the lesson would not have been neglected," Eudora admitted. "I take the responsibility. They could not have foreseen our duel. Therefore, the need to tell me that which you will now undoubtedly take as your own duty was not a prominent thing. Tell me, prince, why did the Taming drain me so? Also, why would you have died if I had preceded you?" Aja nodded and held out a hand to Eudora. After a

moment of hesitation, she took it and allowed the prince to help her out of her bed.

“I will show you what nearly happened to you. Clothe yourself, and we will go.” It took Eudora quite a few minutes to dress. Her muscles all felt as though they had been seriously strained, and it seemed like the princess had exhausted all of her reservoirs of inner strength, mental and physical. By the time she was clothed, Eudora needed to sit down in order to recuperate. Aja shook his head, lips tightening. Eudora assumed that he thought her weak and, determined to prove him wrong, stood almost as soon as she had seated herself.

“Lead on, child king,” she offered. Warrick had vacated the room moments before, and Eudora felt his absence like a hollow ache in her chest. She did not understand what had compelled her to reach out to him the way she did. Whatever the reason, she had angered the prince and in turn endangered all parties involved. As a princess, she resolved to be of better, more sound judgment in the future. As a woman, she couldn’t help but be pleased over the fact that Aja had most obviously been jealous. If they connected as she and Warrick had, the princess mused, the marriage would not be quite so terrible to endure as she’d first thought.

“Have you wondered why, though mentioned, my father has never made an appearance?” In complete honesty, Eudora had been far too distracted to worry about the king’s manners or eccentricities, and she voiced as much. Aja nodded and led Eudora down hallway after hallway. “Thiery was a great Legendary Tamer, the last of his generation. Kyan himself, the greatest Legendary Tamer of them all, was sire to Thiery’s great-great grandfather, Manelin, the last of Kyan’s three children. Never into any generation since the time of The Three have more than two Legendary Tamers been born. Also, never have two been bonded, even in the case of The Three. To prevent what happened to Thiery from happening to either of us, I bound us when I called your soul. This is the reason it was within my rights to kill Warrick.” Eudora, angered at his presumptuous attitude, retorted in kind.

“Then I presume it is within my rights to kill the throng of women you undoubtedly take to your bed?” To her surprise, Aja laughed at this.

“It is, indeed. However, because you have no knowledge of my people or the rules of being a Legendary Tamer, I did not fear any retaliation from you.” Simmering with fury, Eudora refused to look at the prince as he

continued speaking.

“A Legendary Tamer can be afflicted with one illness and one illness alone. No other person, Tamer or not, can contract this virus. If a Legendary Tamer becomes unable to control his or her powers, he or she will fall victim to this deadly curse. It is called the Eternal Darkness. It is a state of perpetual slumber that no healer can revert. Once the Tamer has succumbed to this affliction, it is nigh impossible to release him or her from it. Only one case ever met with a successful outcome-well, nearly successful.” When Aja paused, Eudora urged him to continue. She was quite the curious one. Aja smiled secretly as she spoke.

“What happened, Aja? And why are we in this deserted tower? It’s freezing in here!” Aja sighed and pushed open a heavy door.

“My father lies here. In the case I mentioned, Kyan was able to bring a fellow Legendary Tamer, his daughter, Iolani, back from the brink of death, only to be sucked into the Eternal Darkness himself. He could not maintain contact because they had not been joined as we have. In fact, any Tamer who tried to attempt such a healing without being joined to the Tamer being healed would suffer Kyan’s fate. He brought Iolani back for only a moment before both of them had the life sucked from them. Because of this, I have never tried to wake my father from the Eternal Darkness.”

Tears filled Eudora’s eyes as they fell upon a man who, she could tell by looking, had once been a great, respected, benevolent ruler. He looked like he had once been a kind and gentle man, and yet there was an unseen strength to him. Now, he was pale and sickly, hands folded atop a chest that scarcely seemed to move as he took slow, shallow breaths.

“Is this how I looked?” Eudora whispered as she nearly collapsed on the left side of the bed, near Aja’s father. “He looks like he’s had everything stolen from him, even the ability to dream, the ability to hope. What torture is this? How cruel are the gods to punish a messenger, a servant of their will with death by this most cursed affliction?” Stretching out one trembling hand to the clasped ones of the once proud and strong king, Eudora stroked his fingers and then closed her own around them. Tears slipped down her cheeks, aching orbs of sorrow for the man she saw before her. After flying with Ayasha, even dueling with Aja, she could not imagine being confined to the darkness within herself without the Elements, without other people, without herself. Thiery was a shell. He was empty of everything, including

every vestige of the man he was before.

“No, you did not look like this...” Aja finally answered. “I can look upon him now and feel only pity for a man I once loved and respected above all others. When you were lying still, unable to move or so much as open your eyes, I felt like I was dying. I tasted fear so bitter and acute that I thought I would be torn apart, piece by throbbing piece. I would have given anything to wake you as soon as it came upon you. I would have given my life to know if you had contracted the Eternal Darkness or if you’d merely exhausted yourself to the point of a temporary comatose state. The latter, of course, is very dangerous and makes a Legendary Tamer more vulnerable to the Eternal Darkness. However, there is still life. Where there is life, there is hope. Thiery has no hope. It has been stolen from him. Everything has.” Eudora stood, aware that Aja was offering her the contents of his soul as an apology. She took his hands, shaking her head violently.

“We can help him,” she declared fiercely. “We can bring him back. You said yourself that no Legendary Tamers had joined before. Kyan’s energy alone couldn’t bring back Iolani, but perhaps our bonded powers can save your father.” Aja looked, of all things, vulnerable. On the verge of tears, he cupped Eudora’s face in a way that was intensely protective and yet surprisingly gentle.

“Do you understand that I can’t lose you?” he questioned in a pain-riddled whisper. Eudora backed away, furiously brushing away her tears and rolling her eyes.

“Right. Of course. We wouldn’t want to risk killing the both of us. If I die, you follow. Forgive me for forgetting that vital piece of information.” Aja balled his hands into fists and gave a short cry of outrage. He then spun on his heel and stalked out of the room. Not caring what the child king did, Eudora returned to Thiery’s bedside and stroked the king’s hair away from his strong brow.

“Your son is angry with me,” Eudora admitted as she looked around for a brush. She found one on top of the dresser that stood opposite Thiery’s bed and began combing the king’s long hair as she spoke. “I fear that is always the case. Everything I do seems to annoy him.” Smiling, Eudora let her fingers trail over Thiery’s smooth cheeks, sculpted mouth, and finely chiseled chin. Were she to guess, judging by the color of his hair, which was a deep, deep brown just beginning to show gray, and what appeared to have

been a once ruddy and healthy complexion, Eudora would say that his eyes would have matched his son's. Either that, or a brown rich enough to make trees bark green with envy.

"A man of few words," Eudora commented with a smile as she continued tracing the lines and planes of this king's face and then resumed her brushing. "I like that." She talked to the king for more than an hour, admitting all of her plans for success and all her fears of failure. Shivering once more at the icy chill that seemed imbued in the very walls, Eudora tried to summon a fire in the fireplace on the far wall. The Element did not react to her command, however, which frightened the princess.

"I should have known better than to overexert myself on the first day of my Taming exercises," Eudora declared angrily, tucking the blankets more securely around Thiery's body and putting the brush away. "I have been a fool in so many things. When will I learn to stop making a mess of all I involve myself in?" Although the room was so very cold and Thiery didn't keep the best of company, Eudora hadn't felt so at peace in quite a while. Sighing, she laid down next to the inert king and let a few tears trickle over her cheeks.

"Did you love Wyanet very much, Thiery? What is love? Do you think I will ever be able to love Aja? Oh, I wish I could speak with you. I mean, really have a conversation with you. I want to make this work for my people, but how can I rule and stand by Aja's side when all my heart is against it? There are so many voices clamoring in my head, telling me which path to choose, which decision would produce the best outcome. What voice can I listen to? What if I make the wrong choice?" The door, which Aja had closed when he stomped out, swung open silently while Eudora continued speaking to Thiery.

"He won't answer, you know." Wyanet's voice was guarded, and it made Eudora jump. With a guilty expression, she slid off the bed and faced the queen.

"I'm sorry, your majesty. I..." Eudora's words died in her throat as she glimpsed the sadness that lined Wyanet's face.

"It's been nearly ten years now. We don't know what he could possibly be holding on for, but it gives me hope to sit and talk to him each day." Wyanet's eyes cleared of things unsaid as she turned them from Thiery to Eudora. "How are you feeling, sweet flower?" Eudora smiled haltingly.

“I am better in body, but I cannot use my Elements. Is that a side effect from the overuse?” Wyanet nodded as she sat near her husband and brushed his bangs away from his eyes.

“You combed his hair. I usually do that, too. Forgive me. Being here is always slightly distracting.” The queen cleared her throat and looked at Eudora while clasping Thiery’s hands tightly. “You will be able to use your Elements by the end of the day. However, I advise you to use your voice first and explain to your court everything that has happened. They are all very worried about you.” Completely ashamed, Eudora nodded. She went to leave but turned back to Wyanet as she stepped into the hallway.

“Aja and I will try to wake him, Wyanet. He doesn’t deserve to sleep the rest of his life away. It isn’t fair.” Wyanet laughed in a way that told Eudora the queen had no hope for Thiery’s recovery.

“Life never is, sweet flower.” Nodding, Eudora went to seek out her court.

“Quimat!” Eudora exclaimed as she came upon her most trusted court member. His soft violet eyes widened in shock when she pulled him to her for a quick, tight hug. They softened with amusement, however, and his lush mouth, barely brushing this side of feminine, turned up in a pleased smile. Eudora brushed the long bangs of his chin-length honey gold hair away from his beautiful eyes and smiled back. She was glad to feel the warmth of another person after the chill of Thiery’s solemn room.

“We have much to discuss,” Quimat observed, and Eudora nodded.

“Yes,” the princess agreed. “Perhaps I could speak with you alone, and then you could relay the information to the rest of the court with a few slight adjustments? I fear treachery, and the less King Valin knows of recent events, the better.” Quimat consented that it was a sound idea and followed Eudora into her room. She sighed after dropping wearily into a chair. Quimat cautiously took the seat across from her and looked at the princess probingly.

“Much has changed since we left Cieala. I can barely detect a trace of the girl I knew there.” Eudora smiled, for she knew Quimat meant it as a compliment rather than a criticism.

“There is much to tell, Quimat. And there is much more yet to occur, I fear. Forgive me for excluding you these past few days. I promise I will

attempt to keep you informed and included from now on.” Quimat laughed.

“I was beginning to wonder when I would earn a part in this epic you are embarking upon. The bards even now eagerly hold their pens poised. They scent a tale on the wind, one that will make for many a valiant song and intriguing telling. So, tell me, princess, how begins this legend?”

So, she told him.

Many hours, many heated pauses, many laughs, and a few tears passed before Eudora had finished her recounting of the past few day’s events. Quimat sat quietly through all of it, interrupting only once when Eudora told him of the battle between her and Aja.

“I should slay him where he stands!” Quimat fumed. “He, of all people, should have known the incredible risks of such a foolish challenge! By his jealousy, he nearly condemned us all!” Eudora calmed Quimat with explanations and pleas for understanding. Quimat was still furious but sat patiently through the rest of the story.

“And that is all there is to tell, for now. Will the bards be pleased?” The question was meant as a jest, but Eudora was truly worried. She hadn’t fully realized until then what an impact her actions were likely to have on her people, perhaps even the world. Quimat smiled consolingly and patted Eudora on the hand.

“I am sure they will be cursing you for how many years it will take for this tale to receive the justice it deserves. You always manage to shock and amaze, little princess. It makes for quite an eventful adventure by your side.” Eudora grinned and felt around for Ayasha, as she had been doing periodically for the past few hours. She was more thankful than words could describe when she felt her Spirit close by.

*‘Where have you been, little one?’* Ayasha questioned worriedly as she swept through Eudora in a breath of relieved air.

*‘Where have I been?’* Eudora retorted, too happy to see her Spirit to be angry. *‘I couldn’t feel you anywhere.’* Ayasha stirred, feeling troubled.

*‘I was so concerned for you, Eudora. You must promise never to use your Taming in excess like that again. It hurt you very badly.’* Realizing that she had been silent for nearly a minute, Eudora smiled at Quimat.

*‘Would you show yourself to Quimat, please? I’d love for you to meet him.’* Ayasha obliged her Tamer and materialized, to Quimat, seemingly out of thin air.

“This is my Wind Spirit, Ayasha,” Eudora told Quimat, awestruck as always by her Spirit’s wispy feathers and piercing ray-of-moonlight eyes. “She is the first Spirit I have gained the notice of, but hopefully not the last. If a Tamer is powerful enough, he or she acquires the lifelong bond and assistance from a Spirit such as Ayasha...” Eudora took another twenty minutes to explain how close Tamer and Spirit were and how grateful she was to have found Ayasha.

“She is...amazing, your majesty.” Quimat breathed, beyond impressed. Ayasha preened and ruffled her feathers, pleased.

*‘He seems nice, Eudora,’* the Spirit declared. Eudora laughed out loud before conveying the Spirit’s words to Quimat.

*‘You’re just saying that because he flattered you,’* Eudora exclaimed jokingly. Ayasha vanished from sight but stayed well within her Tamer’s ability to sense her presence.

*‘I do enjoy kind words,’* Ayasha admitted. *‘Now, be sure to stay safe, little one. I don’t want you to worry me like that again.’*

*‘So protective,’* Eudora teased, but she was grateful for her Spirit’s apprehension. Quimat sighed and stood, bowing for Eudora before he went to the door.

“I’ll go report to the rest of them, then. What can I leave in and what should I conveniently forget to mention?” Eudora detailed what the other court members could and couldn’t know. When Quimat nodded and left, Eudora immediately felt lonely. She scolded herself for the feeling. She’d never felt lonely in Cieala. However, she had to admit that life was much different now. Deciding that Taming lessons would only cause problems today, what with the duel problem of Warrick and her illness, Eudora resolved that she should resume her session with Wyanet. She still needed to know about the people, their way of life, customs, and everything else she would need to be a good queen.

“Were you coming to look for me, sweet flower?” Wyanet asked pleasantly as soon as Eudora opened her door, which Quimat, as was his habit, had closed and locked for her. Eudora had ceased to be shocked about Wyanet randomly popping up everywhere.

“Yes, Wyanet, as a matter of fact, I was. Can we possibly resume my tutoring on the people?” Wyanet smiled and simply stood there, radiating an amiable kind of patience. Eudora realized what she was waiting for and

leaned forward to brush her lips over the queen's. Wyanet beamed and gestured for Eudora to follow her as she began to walk away. The queen was wearing nothing save arm bangles from wrist to elbow. She had body glitter all over and looked like a midnight siren.

“Of course, sweet flower. Where did we leave off?”

They ended up back on the beach with a few of the natives walking with them. Eudora was no longer uncomfortable around them and listened avidly as they described their everyday lives to her. She learned about the superstitions of the people-there were very few to learn, but those there were, the natives took very seriously. For instance, they looked for signs of coming tribulations in the clouds, watched the patterns of the waves to determine what dangers would be faced at sea, and read predictions of coming events in shallow pools or by the way tossed rocks fell. The death of a bird was met with much religious disquiet, and they never ate meat for the noontime meal for fear of invoking the wrath of the animal god. Eudora was fascinated, and the lesson on superstitions turned to the rules of the Isle.

“We have few rules, sweet flower, and they are adhered to most strictly,” Wyanet began as they sat in the baker's hut for a meal of sweetbreads, fruits, and the roots of some deep violet plant that were slightly bitter and very filling. The baker told Eudora that, while the flowers of the plant were very poisonous, the leaves and roots were often used in healing procedures for stomach or head illnesses. If ground into a poultice and mixed with warm milk, the roots made for a very potent barrier against infection in deep cuts. It also healed the abrasions very quickly.

“What are the rules of your kingdom, Wyanet?” Eudora asked as she tasted a small, dark fruit with prickly skin. She pierced her lip while trying to bite into it, and the baker laughed before showing her how to peel it. The meat was very sweet, and thick juices ran down Eudora's throat, tickling her tongue pleasantly. The queen, who had been amused by Eudora's plight with the fruit, went into the lecture as if she had told it many times.

“Our kingdom is based upon the concepts of courtesy and discipline. From their youngest years, our children are taught that to take without asking is nearly as great an insult as one can offer another person. Although we must seem to you, who has never known a people to be so blatantly confident in their nudity and sexuality, to be very open and even...uncouth,

we treat each other with the utmost respect. For instance, if a woman were married and yet found herself irresistibly drawn to some lovely young man, she could ask permission to have intercourse with the other man from her husband.” Eudora began to interrupt, but Wyanet silenced her with a gesture.

“If said husband agrees,” Wyanet continued. “He states in writing that his wife is allowed intercourse with the young man, and *only* that young man. Permission granted does not encompass any but the specific person terms are decided on. Now, the husband can ask to be included, but it is not necessary. He expresses the same courtesy to his wife, and thus we have many a successful marriage. You see, we believe that it is preposterous to force a woman or a man to remain completely faithful to only one person for such a span of years that a marriage entails. It is a nice thought, but by allowing our kingdom the strictly regulated sexual freedom they enjoy, we have less chance of rape and a lower rate of failed marriages than any kingdom in the entire world. There are also rules for group intercourse-do you know the term for this?” Eudora shook her head, shocked and yet still interested.

“I was very sheltered in Cieala. The only way I learned anything about bedroom manners was to sneak around the palace. There were many who would have been very distressed to discover the things I knew.” Wyanet laughed.

“I find that very believable. Anyway, the term for group intercourse is an ‘orgy.’” Eudora carefully placed that in her memory. Wyanet smiled, amused at the princess’s eagerness to learn. “It takes much paperwork and energy to organize an orgy. For one thing, everyone must be aware of time, location, and materials to bring. For another, invitations are specially made and handgiven to those who are invited. To come to one uninvited is considered a great insult and is punishable by up to two days in The Room.”

“The...Room, your majesty?” Eudora interjected. Wyanet smiled.

“The room of punishment, *El Cuarto del Castiga*. We have ways of dealing with crimes that make one hesitant to commit them again.” Eudora was spellbound. Aside from execution, no other punishment was public. Eudora wanted to know what happened in The Room.

“And what punishments are administered?” Wyanet’s grin once again became the eager panther grin that Eudora was familiar with.

“Would you like to watch a punishment, sweet flower?” Eudora was hesitant but had more dedication to her kingdom than to refuse.

“Of course. I assume you punish criminals yourself.” Wyanet laughed, and the sound trilled out like an enthusiastic kitten, brushing over Eudora like furred fingertips. The queen thanked the baker as the women left.

“I do enjoy punishing boys and girls who have been naughty. However, if it is for a greater crime, Ismet and Kiet take care of the punishment. Pain and pleasure can reach the same desired aim, yet I rarely like to engage in the former.” They entered the palace together, and Eudora felt a thrill of unease at the prospect of seeing someone punished. It was necessary, however, and something she wanted to see, no matter how uncomfortable she was with that fact.

“How many punishments are normally administered every day?” Eudora asked, carefully observing the hallway they were moving through. She hadn’t been in this wing before. Vines covered the walls, and the princess had to touch one of them to see if they were real. They were, indeed, and Eudora smiled as Wyanet answered her. Everything was so alive here.

“Very few, actually. You see, because the punishments, when meted out, are so very...strict, and because our community is so very lenient, we have an exceptionally low crime rate. Ah, here we are.” Two guards bowed to Wyanet and opened the door to what Eudora assumed was The Room for them. Eudora heard moaning that was too far removed from pain to make her worried and not close enough to pleasure to make her squirm uncomfortably. She was somewhere in between and, therefore, could only follow Wyanet further into The Room.

“What are these used for, Wyanet?” Eudora asked, though she feared she already knew the answer. She had come upon the shiny silver table that held the frightening looking equipment. Wyanet tossed them a lazy glance and gestured to the man, Malon, who was receiving the last day’s worth of his punishment.

“They are used to teach lessons, sweet flower. This is Malon. He pressed a young girl quite forcefully and though he did not rape her, he made her uncomfortable enough so that she came to me. Rape is a week in the room and then public execution. The lesser form of this punishment is five days without execution. Malon here will never think of being forceful again, will he?” The queen rubbed her face against Malon’s cheek as he

wept. He had been released from his bonds so that he could eat and rest his sore muscles. Eudora looked upon the chains, posts, and leather straps with revulsion. She didn't know if she could bring herself to torture-for she felt this was torture-someone like this.

"No, my lady, no," Malon was whispering over and over, reaching out to Wyanet like she was his savior. "Never again. I have learned my lesson." Wyanet smiled grimly.

"Did you allow him release?" she asked the two men, whom Eudora assumed were Ismet and Kiet.

"Of course not, your highness," the taller one, Kiet, answered, as if it were a stupid question she was asking. Wyanet held up a hand, as if to tell him she knew he had done his job and that the question was simply for the benefit of Eudora. Wyanet knelt next to Malon.

"Those being punished are tied to these posts," She gestured. "Here with these." The queen picked up the leather straps and tossed them to Eudora, who caught them unflinchingly. "They are then, and I assume this is the word you would use, '*tortured*' for as many days as I deem necessary to make them repent for whatever sin they have committed. This means that they are stroked, caressed, fondled, sometimes cut or beaten, for all hours of the days except when they need to eat, drink, or rest. During this time, they are not allowed release, or orgasm. Believe me, sweet flower, after only a few hours of this, they are usually screaming for more than one reason." The queen kissed Malon on the forehead and stood.

"What is the longest you have ever punished someone?" Eudora asked, dropping the leather straps in distaste. Wyanet gave her that beaming, predatory grin.

"Two weeks. The condemned man had raped two of my court maidens, and it was far from fair. Much more punishment was deserved...even death seemed too good for him. He was an outsider, but believe that we have no mercy for ignorance. In fact, we are less tolerant of it than most. It keeps our kingdom fully and satisfactorily functional, however, so this policy will stay as it is until it ceases to work." She then turned to the other men. "One more hour, Ismet, and then I will be confident that our sweet Malon has learned his lesson." Malon began screaming protests as Ismet and Kiet picked him up bodily and secured him to the posts.

"Shall I watch or participate, Wyanet, to learn what must be done?"

Wyanet smirked, beyond pleased.

“Of course, sweet flower. I daresay Malon could do with a little female attention. Watch what I do and improvise however you would like. Ismet, Kiet, back away.” The men moved simultaneously, and Wyanet approached Malon, who was close to tears. Wyanet smacked him very lightly on the cheeks and took him by the jaw. “Pain brings the same end, Malon. Make this easier on yourself and do not make me hurt you.” Malon immediately stopped his struggle as Eudora approached. She had no idea what would please a man outside of intercourse, having just recently lost her virginity, and she didn’t think this was the best of ways to learn. However, logic dictated that the penis would be the reasonable place to start.

“May I, Wyanet?” Eudora asked. The queen gave Malon a swift kiss and grinned.

“As you wish, sweet flower. Now, remember, the aim is to bring the criminal to the edge, but deny release. As one with...limited experiences, I think you may have difficulty discerning the point at which you must stop. Listen to me, and I will teach you. Now, do as you like.” Eudora gave Malon a cool gaze as she studied his face. He was an attractive man, with eyes brown like autumn leaves under a clean, fast-flowing stream and finely-sculpted features. The princess found herself wondering why he would ever have to force himself upon someone.

Eudora slid down Malon’s body until she was on her knees. Gazing up at him, she tried to convey through her soft touches what she wanted. Shock rushed through her as a scattering of confusing images assaulted her mind. When she drew her hand back, the visions ceased. Stroking one hand down Malon’s leg, causing him to shiver, Eudora tried to figure out if these distorted impressions were coming from him. She saw herself from his point of view, and it was a pleasing view. She looked like a priestess, in his mind, presenting her body as an offering to some lusty god. Using this to her advantage, Eudora clasped her hands as she bowed her head and bent towards Malon’s dick. She blew gently along his shaft and actually grinned as she watched him grow hard.

“I think I am a rather quick study, don’t you, Malon?” Eudora purred. Her own voice shocked her. She sounded dark, sultry, painfully seductive. Malon whimpered as Eudora ran her long, sharp fingernails ever so gently down the length of him.

“If you are bold enough, sweet flower, you can use any part of your body to tempt and torture our delightful Malon.” The queen’s voice was more suggestive than Eudora’s could ever be. It was a mist of sexual energy that settled over the room, tightening Eudora’s body. If she had known that losing her virginity was going to be this much trouble, she wouldn’t have done it. It was like she was addicted. She wanted to do more, know more, be more. Bold, she could be.

Parting her mouth slightly, Eudora allowed her tongue to flick out over the tip of Malon’s penis. He moaned and shuddered, encouraging the princess. She gripped him around the base and squeezed, not quite gently. Malon buckled and, were it not for the leather straps and handcuffs, he might have collapsed. Even more emboldened, the princess slipped her mouth over the tip of him like a hot, velvet glove. She worked her tongue over the firm flesh, biting down lightly on the underside when she slowly drew her lips off. Malon cried out, and Eudora saw that Wyanet was behind him, biting, caressing, licking, and kissing her way down his back.

“You’re doing fabulously, sweet flower,” the queen murmured. Her eyes had the partially glazed look that Eudora had first seen of her when she was kissing her pets, Jarah, Islet, and Isadora. “Remember not to allow him climax. This is punishment, not a reward.” Eudora nodded and wondered if her eyes looked like the queen’s, touched with craving and reckless abandon.

Eudora stood and faced Malon calmly. He was rather taller than she was, so she had to raise herself up on her toes in order to place the most delicate of kisses on his lips. He shivered, and indescribable warmth lit in Eudora’s chest, spreading through her limbs languidly, like lazy fire. This caused the princess to shudder, mirroring Malon, and no one had even done anything to her.

“Wyanet...” Eudora said the queen’s name on a sigh, thinking something was seriously wrong. The queen peered over Malon’s shoulder while licking his neck. Her eyes were unsmiling when they met Eudora’s.

“Yes, sweet flower? Is there a problem?” Eudora, trembling, backed away from Malon as that center of heat spread to other, more dangerous parts of her body.

“I feel...” Eudora closed her eyes, trying to piece together exactly what she was feeling. “There’s...heat, Wyanet. What is wrong with me?” Wyanet

laughed, and that seductive sound trembling on the air turned the warmth in her body to a painful, powerful heat. Liquid flames licked at her skin from inside, and the princess continued to back away until she hit one of the men-Kiet she thought.

“Is she Taming Passion for the first time, my queen?” Ismet asked as Eudora jumped away from Kiet. Touching him had made the fires latch onto his...energy. She wanted to run her hands over the smooth expanse of his chest, to let her tongue explore the skin that faintly smelled of sweat and sweeter things. Pushing the image from her mind, Eudora focused on what Ismet had said.

“Passion? *Taming* Passion? This isn’t Taming, this is...” Squeezing her eyes shut tighter as more mental visions began to plague her, Eudora fell silent. She saw dark things, dangerous things. Biting, clawing-she couldn’t think of a strong enough word to describe that kind of intercourse. *Mating* didn’t seem to fit it, though the cool animal logic brought into her mind through Instinct told her that mating was as close as she was going to get. These visions became meaningless things, simple feelings of heat, pressure, pain, pleasure, confusion...Eudora was on the verge of screaming. Suddenly, everything was calmer, and she could think again. The princess looked down dumbly at Wyanet’s hand on her arm.

“Yes. You are Taming Passion,” the queen said, still smiling. This smile was dangerous, though, as if some perilous thing lurked just beneath the surface of her unfaltering gaze. “It is not Tamed as Wind is Tamed. Passion is a force unto itself, the very basest of Elements. It is purely impossible to truly Tame it. However, you can ride it. You can use it as a powerful ally. Simply give into it. I am holding it at bay for now, but Passion is a force to be reckoned with. Do you understand?”

Eudora was wide-eyed, fearful. “I *must* Tame it?” she whispered. At Wyanet’s nod, she asked, “Or what?” Wyanet patted the princess’s arm, and the Passion flared through her again.

“You do not wish to know that answer, sweet flower. Simply keep it...contented, and you will never have to find out. Now, I will show you, with our dear Malon’s assistance, how to Tame Passion. You do not always need another person to Tame it, but I do not feel you would be...comfortable Taming it alone, not yet.” Eudora nodded and followed Wyanet back to Malon.

“I would gladly help her Tame it, your majesty,” Kiet declared, earning a glare from Wyanet.

“Do not allow your tongue such free reign, Kiet, or you may find yourself in Malon’s place.” Kiet murmured an apology, but Eudora didn’t hear it. The Passion Element had flooded her mind again, causing her breathing to become quick and shallow, her pulse to leap in her throat.

“What must I do, Wyanet, to cease this piercing burn?” Eudora asked breathily, afraid to touch Malon.

“Do exactly what you do not want to,” Wyanet replied. “Touch him.” Malon looked positively fearful, and Eudora found herself wondering why. If everyone in the Passion Kingdom could Tame Passion, why would anyone look at another Passion Tamer with fear like that?

“Why does he fear me, Wyanet?” Eudora wished he didn’t. The fear was an added kick-it mixed with the scent of sweat and excitement in a way that was practically intoxicating. It nearly made Eudora swoon. It was an aroma that she wanted to bathe and bask in. At once, she knew that was the result of Instinct. Her senses had become more adept. She could smell Malon’s emotions as if she were surrounded by the most delectable delights. It was hard to choose which one she wanted to eat first. Wyanet answered her, but Eudora only understood part of what she was saying.

“All Elements you Tame strengthen the others. Therefore, as a Legendary Tamer, you are more formidable in your Elements than any except another Legendary Tamer is. You and Aja are now the most powerful Passion Tamers on the island. That kind of power tends to inspire fear.” Eudora nodded and did a simple thing: she stroked her hand down Malon’s chest. Both Malon and the princess shuddered as if her hand were playing over a much more delicate piece of flesh. It brought slight relief to the ache in her breast.

Leaning over, she pressed her lips to his nipple and let her tongue flicker over that hard, flexible piece of skin. Malon moaned, making Eudora’s heart stumble over itself. It was as if everything was wrapping around her in an ever-tightening blanket of overlapping sounds, smells, and feelings. She was being overwhelmed.

“Wyanet, I can’t do this!” Eudora exclaimed in a pleading voice. She was gasping, close to crying out in frustration. “What do I do?” The queen was once again a calming entity. Merely touching the princess made the

Passion recede a little, like a strong wind to force back a wave trying to beat the shore into submission. Eudora knew that wave was going to come back, however, and the next time it would be more painful, more urgent. By denying the Element, she was only making it stronger.

“Just give yourself over to the Passion, sweet flower. Because this is your first Taming, your control is very limited.” The queen sighed. “Ismet, take Malon away. His punishment is finished. The princess has no restraint for this.” Ismet did as told, and Wyanet turned Eudora to Kiet. “You can do whatever you would like with Kiet. As he offered, he will help you Tame it. Simply pour it into him, force his body to drink it down like wine. He will not fight you.” Eudora was uncomfortable with this. Of course, she had given her virginity to a man she had known for little more than a few hours, but... She sighed. Oh, it was hopeless. Had she any moral ground to begin with, it would have been rapidly eroding beneath her feet.

“Is this all right, Kiet?” Eudora asked as she approached him. She could already feel the Passion threatening to roar over her again. It was telling her that it had been gentle. But if she kept denying it, gentleness would no longer be an option. She felt that it had the mindless abandon of a typhoon. Joined with Instinct, she was afraid that she might eat Kiet instead of force that inhuman destructive force into him. At once, Eudora knew that she was misjudging the Passion exactly how she had misjudged the kingdom and the people. Passion could be gentle, could be tender, but only if she allowed it as much control as she desired to take. It was a compromise, and Eudora had never been very good at those.

“This is a great honor, princess,” Kiet finally responded as Eudora moved ever closer. The Passion was clinging to her like some ethereal perfume, bringing Instinct in a blinding rush. She wanted her teeth on Kiet, teeth or nails or skin, anything. She wanted to taste his anticipation, hold it on her tongue like the flavor of some delicious sweet. The imagery was so powerful that she shuddered, and she hadn’t even touched him yet.

Eudora stopped right in front of Kiet and looked him over from head to foot. Her eyes lingered over the chiseled muscles of his smooth, solid chest. His arms were nearly the breadth of the princess’s waist. She imagined having his hands, which could easily cover the span of her hips, splayed across that heated skin. His legs were long and well-muscled. Eudora let her gaze slide over his manhood, and it was as if she had already trailed her

fingertips over it. Kiet trembled, and Eudora fell gracefully to her knees. What scared her was that she executed the movement exactly as Wyanet once had.

“Don’t move, Kiet,” she whispered, pressing her cheek against his inner thigh. His dick hardened when she brushed her lips against it, and she shivered, imagining that long, firm thickness inside her. After one man, she was already craving that bodily connection again. It almost made her feel dirty, like a whore, but she pushed the thought aside as Kiet spoke.

“Why not, princess?” he asked, and there was a hitch in his breathing. Eudora did what she wanted and pressed her lips to Kiet’s thigh, letting her tongue slide out to dampen that sweet, sweet flesh. Kiet trembled.

“Because I might bite you if you bring my Instinct Taming any closer to the surface than it already is. I can taste your desire on my tongue. If fear or movement is added to that, I just might bite.” As if telling him not to had forced him to unconsciously do exactly what she had asked him not to, Kiet did two things: he moved away from her and allowed fear to sliver through him. The scent was like an exotic spice on her tongue, and it made her moan. She wanted that, even more than she wanted to feel her skin against the honeyed flesh before her.

“Kiet, stop moving and be calm,” Wyanet ordered. “She is not going to eat you.” It sounded funny, and under different circumstances it would have been, but it was just impossible for it to be funny when Eudora was terrified that she actually was going to try to take a bite out of Kiet-and not in the best of places, either. Eudora breathed deeply, trying to calm herself, but the Passion Element didn’t want calm. It wanted fire, rage, seduction and the pleasure that comes of it. It was like a pouting child, but this child was about to force her to hurt either Kiet or herself. Eudora couldn’t allow that.

“Kiet, please,” Eudora begged, “I need to channel this, or else I’m going to hurt someone in this room. I don’t want it to be you, but it will be if you don’t let me do what I have to.” Kiet hesitated and then nodded. He stopped backing away and just stood still. Eudora breathed a quick sigh of relief. The Passion Element didn’t want that, either. It forced itself back into her as a pulsing ache. If she hadn’t already been on her knees, she would be there now, anyway.

“Wyanet...” Eudora’s voice was breathy and strained. She looked up at Kiet, and she knew what he saw in her face wasn’t exactly comforting. The

queen laughed shakily and shrugged.

“You must Tame it, Eudora. It will not allow itself to be pushed back down many more times. Perhaps once or twice, and then you will be a slave to its will.” Eudora didn’t want that.

“Come to me, Kiet.” The voice that fell out of Eudora’s mouth like ebony velvet, sliding off her tongue like chocolate silk, was not her own. He came. It was as if argument was beyond his ability. He came and knelt in front of her, not touching, simply breathing, trembling, wanting, needing. Eudora moved into him and pressed her cheek to his. It was such a safe position, such a delicate touch, and yet suddenly the Passion was there, bursting over her like a begging, pleading, throbbing, pounding need. Eudora cried out against it.

“Ride it, Eudora,” Wyanet warned. “Ride it, or it will ride you.” Eudora nodded, breathless, and turned her face so that her lips brushed Kiet’s. The trembling liquid sensation that flooded her abdomen and lower was not something she recognized, not something she thought she could control. It scared her and empowered her all at once.

“Don’t fight me, Kiet, or I will hurt you. This is an offer you will never receive again, so take me up on it.” He nodded once, quickly. His eyes were a little too wide-too much of the whites were showing.

“Yes, my princess.” His words were like a dark prayer to some sexy goddess of love and death, the kind of deity who would love a man, or woman, to death. Eudora didn’t want to be that, but she had no choice. Under the Passion Element’s thrall, she was all that and more.

Eudora did what she had been wanting to and pressed her body against Kiet’s, forcing every available inch of flesh to touch. The heat from either side was overwhelming in itself, but added on top of that the smell of desire, of excitement, of fear...it was enough to drive Eudora to utter madness. The princess groaned, and Kiet echoed her, moving slightly so that his cock, which was painfully hard, slid between her legs. She reached down and grabbed him around the base, squeezing to the point of hurting him. His eyes glazed with things other than discomfort, though, and she knew that there was a thin line between pain and pleasure for this beautiful man.

The Passion Element, satisfied that it was finally going to be indulged, coursed through Eudora in a wave of heat that was no longer painful, no longer desperate. It was just hot, oh, so hot. Grabbing his hair and claiming

his lips, Eudora forced that heat into Kiet, using her tongue, teeth, and hands, which were roaming all over his body. They traveled down, down his back and ended cupping his lovely ass. Molding her body more firmly against his, Eudora dug her nails into that sensitive flesh and pushed him towards her. That hardness so near and yet not within her made her moan and shudder. She didn't want to have sex with Kiet, but she didn't know exactly how much the Passion Element was going to demand.

"All our people are safe to have intercourse with, sweet flower," Wyanet said as if she were reading the princess's mind. "However, if you would like to guard against other things than illness, I suggest you use this." She tossed the princess a thin piece of white stretchy material, and Eudora looked dumbly at it. Kiet, breathless with need and desire, took it from her.

"Allow me, my lady," he declared, slipping it over his dick. Eudora was about to argue that she didn't want to have sex with him, but before that could happen, Kiet laid her back and thrust himself between her legs.

Eudora's body had healed from the damage having her virginity taken had inflicted. She was now able to experience, without pain, the full pleasure of sex. Flexing her hips up to meet Kiet's thrust, Eudora stopped wondering what her mother would think and focused on the mind-numbing bliss pounding through her. The leather coverings that Kiet wore around his chest rubbed against Eudora's breasts as they moved, chafing against her hardened nipples. It sent a jerk of heat into her abdomen with every thrust and made her cry out, mindless with passion. Almost without her own knowledge, Eudora set her teeth into Kiet's neck, making him shudder and falter in his sure, strong strokes. One benefit from living in the Passion Kingdom was that the inhabitants were trained to be amazing lovers. Kiet was able to do something with his cock that allowed him, even when he was drawing out, to rub against the most sensitive parts of Eudora's groin.

Eudora cried out as orgasm crashed into her. She writhed underneath him, lower body twitching and jerking uncontrollably. Kiet, more trained than she to ride a climax, held her in place to keep her from hurting herself or him while she thrashed about. When she recovered enough sense, she realized that Kiet was still hard and ready inside her. She was amazed that he hadn't come when she did.

When she could breathe normally, Eudora searched cautiously for the Passion Element, expecting it to surge up within her again. When it

remained calm for a few minutes, the princess allowed all the tension to ease out of her body. She was then able to come to terms with the fact that she was lying beneath a man, who was far from exhausted and still enveloped in the wet velvet sheath of her body, whom she had met only an hour ago, perhaps less. The very thought mortified her.

“Kiet,” Eudora began in a very small voice. “May I please get up?” She noticed with more horror that she had bitten him hard enough to draw blood, and not just a little. It trailed thickly from the nice, clean imprint of her teeth in a slow, steady, crimson river. He grinned at her and hoisted himself up, apparently unaware of the fact that he was erect in a way that *had* to be painful.

“That was wonderful, princess,” he declared, gingerly touching his neck wound. He didn’t wince, simply shuddered as if experiencing the pleasure anew. Kiet cast an appreciative look Wyanet’s way and smiled widely at her. “I would gladly assist you in Taming the Passion Element if you ever have need of it again.” Eudora nodded.

“I’m hoping that I won’t need your help again, Kiet. However, thank you.” She didn’t know what else to say. What *could* she say? Kiet chuckled as Wyanet helped the princess to her feet.

“I’m half a mind to ask you to finish what you started, your highness, but I will go to my lover now. He thanks you for warming me up in advance, I’m sure.” Eudora didn’t know what to say to that, either, so she waved dumbly as Kiet left.

## **Chapter Seven~ The Right Thing**

Eudora was aching from head to foot as she turned to Wyanet. The princess felt dirty, and at the same time, energized. She was doing a smashing job, in her sarcastic opinion, of becoming at home in the Passion Kingdom. Within days, she had given her body to two different men, neither being the one she was betrothed to marry. Things could hardly get more confusing.

“You must rest, sweet flower. After intercourse and Taming the Passion Element, your body needs to recuperate. Be sure to eat something before sleeping, though. If you go too long between meals, it becomes more difficult to control your Taming. Your body and mind must be kept healthy if you are going to be a successful Tamer.” Eudora sighed and nodded, relishing the idea of retiring to her room. A thought suddenly occurred to her that she could barely stomach, though.

“Do you mean I must have evening meal in the palace with the others?” the princess asked worriedly. Wyanet gave her a small, comforting smile.

“Yes, but we do not have any events planned for tonight that would make you uncomfortable. You can eat in relative peace.” That was an overstatement, in Eudora’s opinion. She could not be in any kind of peace sitting so near Aja after having intercourse with first Warrick and now Kiet. The thought that he felt cheated out of what was rightfully his, however, brought a feeling of fierce triumph into Eudora’s heart. She could prove to the prince that she was beyond such things as dominance and ownership. Wyanet’s smirk widened.

“What?” Eudora asked, suddenly suspicious. Wyanet laughed.

“Remember that Tamers can hear another Tamer’s thoughts quite well, sweet flower. I agree with you about ownership, but you might find your views towards ‘dominance’ slightly...how should I say?” She pondered for

a moment, then finished with a grin. “Skewed.” Eudora didn’t know what the queen was implying, didn’t *want* to know.

“I shall see you at dinner, Wyanet,” Eudora declared, trying to maintain as much dignity as possible as she left the room. Wyanet’s laughter followed her out.

“So, you sleep with Tamers and servants, yet you deny your husband to be everything, save your hatred?” Eudora hadn’t even noticed Aja was in her room until he started talking, or better said, *ranting*. Eudora sighed and turned to face him. He was leaning against her wall, cloaked in shadows. Floored, as always when she saw him, by the beauty and quiet strength he radiated, Eudora was silent for a few moments before answering.

“If my husband to be had taken it upon himself to educate me in the Taming, I would never have....” She paused, searching for a word other than ‘molested.’ “Seduced Kiet. And if said fiancé could find it within himself to be a little less prejudiced and unfair towards me, I would not have sought comfort from another man.” There. She thought that explained her feelings rather well. Ayasha, who had returned after the Taming of the Passion Element, agreed with her Tamer. Aja, however, thought she was being an idiotic child.

“I can’t believe you dare impugn me, of all people! As if I had anything to do with your lax morals!” Eudora didn’t have the strength to be angry or argue with Aja. If she hadn’t just forced herself upon Kiet, if she hadn’t been ill for the past few days, or if she simply knew what she was doing, she would have yelled, ranted, and raved. Her temper was well-equipped to match his own. Instead, she sat on her bed and gave Aja a blank stare.

“You mean, according to my kingdom’s code of honor, my morals are lax. But, in the Passion Kingdom, if you have permission, you can be intimate with nearly anyone, isn’t that correct?” Aja fumed again, and Eudora thought he was simply angry about the fact that she was facing him so calmly.

“You didn’t *have* my permission!” he shouted. “You didn’t have my permission to Tame Passion with Kiet, and you certainly didn’t have my permission to give that damn Time Tamer what belonged to me!” Eudora tilted her head to the side, causing that molten fire hair to spill over her shoulder and down her arm.

“My virginity, you mean. You thought that belonged to you?” Aja balled his hands into fists, tension singing through his body. Eudora was quite fascinated by how his skin tightened over his work-hardened muscles and how the vein on his forehead was suddenly jumping. He was very angry.

“*Thought?! Of course* it belonged to me. You are my wife to be...” Eudora interrupted him, still speaking in that dull monotone. She felt empty, but not drained. Wondering if it was a side effect of Taming Passion, Eudora resolved that she would discuss it with Wyanet later.

“What if I thought, as your wife to be, that I needed to become more experienced before coming to you?” Aja laughed, and the sound was an annoyed bark of harsh sound.

“You didn’t think that.” Eudora shrugged.

“No, I didn’t. But *you* didn’t even think to ask me of my thoughts or feelings or anything. You simply assumed that I was either going to throw a tantrum and demand to return to Cieala or behave like some meek little dog that has been kicked one too many times. If we are to be married, Aja, you must understand that it is going to be a true partnership. We are equals; from our horrible tempers to our dedication to the people we have been put in the position to protect. I will demand respect from my husband, and until you can assume that distinguished role, I have nothing more to say to you.” She stood and opened the door, gesturing for him to leave, as he gaped at her.

“You...you’re...” Eudora was glad that it was finally not she in a position of unease and speechlessness. She’d had more of that in the past few days than she ever wanted to experience again in her lifetime.

“I am going to be here for quite some time, child king, whether you like it or not. I suggest that you get used to me and learn to accept the responsibilities that your status has gifted you with. Ruling the people as a good king should be your first goal. Lead by example, Aja, starting with your marriage.” Since he was still staring at her as if she were Lazarus back from the dead, Eudora left her own room and went to Quimat’s in order to bathe.

Dinner that night was, as promised, an uneventful affair. Eudora left the banquet hall feeling rather relieved and slept the night through with no problems. The next morning, she was up early without any rude wake-up

call and ventured down to the beach, where she hoped the Tamers would already be.

Oceanus and Amana stood at the water's edge. Wondering why neither of them had called their Spirits to show her when the others had, Eudora walked briskly towards them. She was going to ask if they would call their Spirits for her.

When Eudora reached the edge of the waves, she smiled down lovingly at the lapping water and slid her toes into it. The chill was quick and immediate, but Eudora didn't mind. Just having the feel of the waves on her skin was something she welcomed gratefully. The princess looked up, mouth open to speak, and froze. In the water was a small boy, not even two years old, by her guess.

"Oceanus, the boy!" she exclaimed, splashing into the water. The Tamer held her back, however, and simply smiled.

"Calm yourself, Eudora. He is learning how to swim." Eudora was deeply confused and still feared for the boy's safety.

"It isn't safe!" she declared. "Where are his parents?" Oceanus and Amana both laughed.

"We are his parents, Eudora," Amana told the princess. "This is Cael, our firstborn son. He has quite an affinity to the water." The Wind Tamer went to her son and knelt in the waves next to him. He splashed water at her, and Amana smiled warmly at him. Grabbing his little fists, Amana played with her son while Oceanus and Eudora spoke.

"One of our goals as parents is to nurture independence in our children at the very youngest age possible. We are always here, but we want him to do as much on his own as he is capable of. It is the way most of the children on the Isle live. It is also the way we introduce our children to the Taming. I am hoping that Cael will be a Water Tamer like myself, but Amana suspects that Wind will be his Element." Oceanus' beaming smile was not lost on Eudora, and she found herself smiling back. Just because something was different didn't make it bad or wrong. She was finding many examples of that in the Passion Kingdom. So she and Oceanus watched Cael and Amana frolic in the cool water as the bowl of the morning sky filled itself with colors to its liking.

When the Wind Tamer came out of the water holding her son, she was smiling in such a way that Eudora wished for a child of her own. The

thought was silly and completely unexpected, but she savored it for a moment before she let it slip to the back of her mind.

“Your highness,” Oceanus declared as he turned to greet the child king. Eudora froze. She hadn’t seen Aja since their argument the previous night.

“I did not think your majesty would be present today,” Amana added, holding Cael easily in her right arm. Eudora broke her paralysis and turned in time to see Aja nod at Amana. The prince’s gaze, however, was all for the princess. As always when he was near, the princess felt a tightening in her chest, a tingling rush when she observed his quiet strength and nearly painful beauty. But beneath all of this was a center of dull, aching cold. What would the argument be today? What would she say to him to make him leave...again?

“Hello, child king.” He smiled softly at her, and Eudora met the expression with a gaze of molten steel.

“Eudora,” he replied with none of the mocking or malice that usually dripped from his voice. He then turned back to the Wind and Water Tamers.

“I came here to apologize, to the princess as well as to you.” Those ice-coated emerald eyes met Eudora’s, and his smile was once again gentle. She didn’t trust it. The last time he had been this cordial was right before calling her as a Legendary Tamer. The thought made her trust him infinitely less. Aja’s smile became one of self-deprecation, and Eudora figured he was most likely reading her thoughts.

“I have been callous and stubborn, Eudora. I ask for your forgiveness and, to prove myself to you, I have a request.” Eudora was uncomfortable, but she nodded anyway.

“Ask it.” Her voice gave away none of the conflicted emotions she was feeling. Part of her wanted to scream and curse and hurt him any way she could, but the other part wanted to hold him as close to her as she could and forgive everything. Aja sighed.

“As of now, our marriage contract is void. I have no more hold over you than one Element over the other. I ask, however, that you give me time to prove that I can be the husband you expect and deserve. For if you leave now, you deny the Passion Kingdom their rightful queen.” The fact that Aja himself was telling her that he thought she was supposed to rule, that it was practically her *destiny* to rule, made the princess glow with pride. This was what she had wanted, simply to be accepted. However, she was still wary.

“I will grant your request on two conditions.” Aja grinned.

“Name them.” Eudora found herself smiling back.

“I want you to continue where your mother left off in my education of your people, and I would like to appoint Oceanus, Cassara, and Rollin as commanders of the Passion Kingdom’s army.” Aja, Amana, and Oceanus all looked completely taken aback, but the prince nodded.

“Fine. It will be done.” Eudora breathed a sigh of relief as Aja fell to his knees before the Wind and Water Tamers. He looked deeply ashamed and repentant. “The crime I committed against you, my most trusted and respected teachers, is nearly unforgivable and certainly inexcusable. Tell me what I must do to make things right between us.” Oceanus and Amana laughed, and the Water Tamer brought Aja to his feet.

“The fact that you are enough of a man to ask forgiveness for that which you know to be wrong would make your father very proud. As for repayment, I believe we can ask for nothing short of your firstborn child.” Aja laughed with the Wind and Water Tamer as Eudora pondered how very much she wanted to touch the child king. It wasn’t anything overtly sexual, even, just the desire to hold and be held. She wanted her skin on his, in any way possible. The thought brought heat to her face, so she turned away as other Tamers made their way to the beach. It was almost time for another lesson.

“We ask only that you be friendlier to Eudora,” Amana told Aja seriously as she handed Cael over to the child king. “It would do her much good to have you as companion instead of adversary.” Aja nodded and gladly accepted Cael, whom, it seemed, he was very familiar with.

As Aja moved by Eudora with Cael in his left arm, he gently brushed his fingertips along the back of her hand. She gave him her eyes and found the world in his. She didn’t know if it was being offered to her or if she was being taunted by it, though. He was so confusing, and she wasn’t in the mood to keep guessing about him.

“Shall we begin the lesson?” Eudora asked as the gathered Tamers stopped moving and formed a semi-circle around her. Oceanus smiled at her as Aja sat by the water and played with Cael, intending to watch.

“Today, we shall try to Tame Fire, Light, and Darkness.” Kamali and Zasha came forward first, instructing the princess how to summon fire as if it were imbued in her blood, coursing always through her veins. Her anger at

King Valin allowed her to grasp control rather quickly over the flames, once again impressing her varied tutors. When Eudora was able to melt down metal in a fire-proof bowl and forge a stunning rose of the material, Kamali and Zasha declared the lesson over. Eudora gave Zasha the rose as Dinesh came forward.

“Light Taming focuses on the concept of things present, yet unseen, tangible, yet unfelt.” Eudora was nearly as inept at Light Taming as she had been at Rock. This, however, was more difficult for her because Dinesh kept snapping at her. She just couldn’t grasp the concept.

“Eudora, please!” Dinesh nearly shouted as she tried and failed, perhaps the third time, to light a lantern. “Where do you think the moon goes when her reign is ended? And where does the sun sleep when the moon presides over the sky? They do not simply vanish! You *must* understand this if you ever hope to Tame the Light.” When Eudora was able to light the lantern and keep it lit, Dinesh agitatedly declared the lesson finished. Yuri stepped closer to the princess. Darkness would be the last lesson.

Already irritated because of her failure with Light, Eudora had an even more difficult time Taming Darkness. She could not for the life of her fathom how to shield herself in shadows and exclaimed as much, causing Yuri to sigh and roll her eyes.

“How am I to steal the very light from the sky, Yuri? It is quite impossible!” Eudora declared angrily. The Darkness Tamer shook her head.

“Do not aim to destroy, Eudora. That is reserved only for Evil. Allow the shadows to cloak the light, but do not allow them to devour it. Bend them to your will. The Darkness is simply misunderstood. Tame it by Taming that misconception.” This simply made Eudora more confused, so Yuri sighed and told her they were done for the day after the princess was able to summon a flimsy barrier of shadow against the light.

“Might I steal your pupil, *maestros*?” Aja asked Oceanus and Amana as the Wind Tamer stepped forward to claim her son, who was falling asleep against the child king’s chest. Oceanus nodded, smiling benevolently, as was characteristic of him. Aja took Eudora’s hand and led her away from the beach. The princess smiled and waved to the Tamers on her way, and Amana spoke when the young royals were out of hearing distance.

“Three days, Oceanus,” the Wind Tamer declared, beaming at her sleepy son. “Give him three days, and if he has not won her trust by then, we

will lend our assistance.” Oceanus laughed, Zene echoed him, and the Tamers watched as Eudora and Aja made their way to the village.

“So, child king,” Eudora began as she followed Aja through the community. He stopped occasionally to greet his subjects and accepts gifts from them. After Eudora spoke, he turned to her with a pondering look on his handsome face.

“I feel the same as you, Eudora, about the way my companions address me. Please, call me Aja.” Eudora nodded.

“All right...Aja.” The word sounded so out of place on her lips that she sighed. “It simply does not sound right,” she complained. He laughed and shrugged.

“Do not address me, then.” Eudora made a sound of exasperation as she continued to follow him towards the palace.

“I am used to calling you *something* every time I speak to or about you!” she exclaimed. Aja simply laughed again and went to play with a small group of children.

“Yes, and I am sure that *something* is never anything very flattering.” Eudora blushed and watched him kick a ball that the young boys were playing with. It was amazing to her how very much she wanted to touch him, roll in the scent of his skin, bury herself in his breath and gaze. It made her feel uneasy.

Watching them play and laugh, Eudora found herself becoming steadily more uncomfortable. *This* Aja, the wise king who was devoted to his subjects, was not the Aja he had let her come to know, nor did she know how to deal with him. Deciding that it had to be a ploy designed to gain her trust, Eudora met his icy emerald eyes, shining with mirth, as he approached with her stony silver ones.

“How I long to know what you are feeling,” he declared in a soft voice, stopping a few feet in front of her. Eudora crossed her arms beneath her breasts, a pose meant to ward off what she was feeling for him. In the dress she was wearing, another of Passion Kingdom design, the gesture lifted and flaunted her breasts more than she was comfortable with. It didn’t bother her overmuch, though, until she saw the way Aja’s eyes moved downward to sweep appreciatively over the soft swell of flesh.

“You are a Tamer, as I am.” Eudora spoke mostly to draw Aja’s

attention away from her breasts. “Simply venture into my thoughts if you wish to know the contents.” Aja shook his head, a sad smile gracing his lips. Eudora turned her eyes away so Aja couldn’t see how they softened. When she was sure she was in control of herself, Eudora turned back to hear Aja speak.

“I can hear your thoughts, but it is like a dance without music. I cannot tell if you are angry, sad, or if you feel anything that I feel when I look at you.” Eudora gave him a gaze full of anger, for it was the only thing she thought was safe enough to direct at him. He laughed. “But if you felt how I feel, there would not be such animosity in those beautiful eyes.”

“And what do you feel, child king?” Aja began to walk again, and Eudora could do nothing but follow him. If he was able to gain enough of her trust, she knew she would follow him to the ends of the world. The thought terrified her.

“I feel the urge...no, the *need* to touch you. It is like I will die if I do not taste your lips, feel the press of your skin on mine. I’ve never felt anything like it. This need is very different from the need to eat or drink, but the act is just as vital. I cannot be near you and not want to do something to become closer to you, even if it is as simple as holding your hand. I cannot think about you without wanting to lose myself in the sweet warmth and scent of your hair, the desire to explore every lush, delectable curve of your body.” Aja cleared his throat, a flush darkening his cheeks as if he had said more than he meant to. Eudora was shocked to find that he was voicing her thoughts.

“Perhaps it was binding me to you that created this need,” Eudora said carefully, neither agreeing nor denying that she felt the same. Aja shrugged.

“Whatever the cause, the result is that I can barely stay sane if I go long without touching you. Therefore, I am going to ask that you allow me to do so every once in a while.” Eudora hesitated.

“An act as simple as touching my hand is sufficient?” she questioned suspiciously. Aja nodded.

“For now, I would deeply appreciate that.” Eudora sighed.

“All right, then. Do what you feel is necessary, but know that I will be sure to tell you if I do not approve.” Aja laughed as they stopped before a woman offering fruit that looked perfectly ripe. She gave one to each of the royals, who thanked her graciously.

Eudora bit into the givable flesh of the fruit as if it were the most blissful thing she'd ever experienced. She loved the fruit of the Passion Kingdom as she'd never loved any kind of food. It burst over the tongue in a sweet, tangy, warm wave of incredible flavor. Closing her eyes, she allowed the juices to caress her mouth as pleasantly as the tongue of a lover. Perhaps it was the effect of the Passion Kingdom that made her think of the heavenly fruit and sex in such close context, but, whatever the cause, the result was simply luscious. Aja laughed.

"What I wouldn't give to feel what you're feeling right now," he declared softly. They were walking again. Eudora turned curious eyes to him, bringing one hand up to wipe the corner of her mouth. Aja's gaze was dark, and she blushed to see it.

"Why do you want to feel what I'm feeling?" Aja tossed his whole, uneaten fruit from hand to hand as he answered.

"Everything I think of as being natural, constant, you see as a perpetual wonder. Something as simple as a fruit can give you the kind of joy most people seldom experience in their whole lives. Why is this so?" Eudora didn't know how to answer. So many years, she had been told to temper her joy, hide her emotions, until she barely felt anything. To be given the ability, the *gift* to express how she really felt, was wondrous to her, and she stated as much.

"King Valin always told me that to be a good queen, I must be as unmoving as stone. That meant that any emotion I felt was to be kept within. A stone cannot feel, cannot love, or express joy, happiness, anger, hatred, anything. It was forbidden." They reached the palace as Eudora hesitated. "I suppose that is why I act the way I do now. The Passion Kingdom has given me a great gift, the freedom to be who I am, to openly express what I feel. I've never had that before." Aja nodded and smiled.

"Well, I have something to show you, the only thing that makes me feel that absolute wonder you always seem to be constantly shining with." He took her hand again, and she let him, relieved to be able to touch him in even so small a way. They went all the way around to the back of the palace, and what Eudora saw momentarily stopped her breath.

The expanse of flawless beauty before her seemed wrong, somehow, as if creatures of flesh and bone were unworthy of such magnificence. There were flowers, trees, and lush, tall grasses over every square inch of ground

as far as the eye could see. The only place that obviously held the touch of man was in what appeared to be the very center, a temple of most glorious design.

Although all that diversity should have seemed like a jumbled mosaic, it flawlessly blended from one melding of color and beauty to another. Eudora felt that she would cry at the splendor. It was amazing, pure, perfect. She wanted to go running through it, basking in that unearthly glory. What she did instead was follow Aja silently to the temple.

“This is the place of worship for the Passion Kingdom,” Aja declared as they entered the building. There were a few inhabitants offering fruit or flowers to alters, fires, or statues of gods. Eudora recognized Pyralis, god of fire, Misu, god of water, and Zephyra, goddess of wind. The others were unfamiliar to her, but the princess was sure at least one of them was a deity of passion.

“It’s stunning.” Eudora breathed. There were no doors, only stained glass windows positioned all around the circular main chamber. These windows depicted scenes of ancient battles, times of worship, celebrations, and sorrows. Eudora felt as though she couldn’t possibly hold all the awe that she felt for this place, but seeing the visuals etched lovingly by such skillful hands added more emotion to the ever-growing whirlwind within her.

“Come. There is one more thing I want to show you.” Aja led Eudora to the only door in the temple and placed his hand against it. The mark of the Legendary Tamer flared to life on his forehead, and the door swung open. Aja took Eudora’s hand and pulled her inside.

When the door closed silently, Aja and Eudora were enveloped in warm, sweetly-smelling darkness. Eudora felt the child king smile.

“Why don’t you see if you have become any more adept at Light Taming?” he teased, and it held no mocking, which brought no anger leaping to Eudora’s throat. She tried summoning any light from any place, but she was still having trouble with the concept of things unseen yet always present. Aja laughed, and it was good-natured, understanding.

“I, too, had trouble Taming Light, at first,” he admitted before a globe of golden light appeared before them. It led the pair to the end of the long hallway.

The chamber, like the main chamber, was circular. In it were poised

twelve statues, standing always as silent sentries over a crystal alter. Looking at the male in the middle of the semi-circle, Eudora decided that he was a Legendary Tamer.

He had a crown that held all the interwoven colors that the Legendary Tamer mark did. In one hand, he held a great gem. It looked to be a mystic fire topaz and flashed with all the colors that shone so brightly in his coronet. In his other hand, he sported a short imperial dagger. He had a very kingly look about him.

To the Legendary Tamer's right was a woman heavy with child, much shorter than her male counterpart. She stood only to his shoulder. In one of her outstretched hands was a bouquet of wildflowers and in the other, a tree branch. Judging by the foliage on her dress, which was a Passion Kingdom creation, and in her hair plus her lack of weapons, Eudora pegged her as a Tamer of the Lesser Elements.

Standing beside her was a tall man with flaming hair and a blade of fire in his left hand. In the other rested a great ruby, the size of Eudora's combined fists. His eyes were molten ebony, his long mane of hair deepest scarlet. He was a Fire Tamer, beautiful in a very dangerous way.

Next to the Fire Tamer stood a Water Tamer, smiling in a way reminiscent of Oceanus. She held a spiked trident in one hand and the biggest sapphire Eudora had ever seen in the other. Her hair and eyes were ocean waves, her demeanor, even as a statue, calm and reassuring.

Eudora turned her eyes to the man who stood beside her. He was holding a sleek, thin saber in one hand and a smooth, perfect, giant pearl in the other. The peace in his gaze and wispy form told Eudora that he was a Wind Tamer.

Beside the Wind Tamer was a woman who seemed one with the shadows. Her eyes were steely gray, her waist-length hair midnight black. She was holding a ball of obsidian in one hand and a long spiked whip in the other. This woman, Eudora knew, was a Darkness Tamer.

To the right of the Legendary Tamer, on the opposite side of the semi-circle, was a Rock Tamer. Her eyes held the same jovial humor that Tavon's often shone with. Slung through her belt, which was the only thing she wore, rested a hammer with a blade on one end. In her uplifted right hand was a golden amber gem that Eudora had never seen the likes of before.

Next to the Rock Tamer was a man who held an opal in one hand and a

great staff in the other with a diamond set in its crown. His eyes, like healthy leaves, and the depth of knowledge they expressed made Eudora think that he was a Prophecy Tamer.

To his right was a woman who held a stunning emerald in her clawed hands. Her eyes were slightly slanted, sly, and the color of the gem she held in her hands. One more look at those wicked looking claws, and Eudora found herself thinking that was all the weapon the Instinct Tamer needed.

Beside the Instinct Tamer stood a man who had curved blue daggers at his sides, held in place by the straps that adorned his otherwise naked thighs, and an icy blue gem in his hands. Eudora looked in his eyes, that perfect cornflower blue, and knew by that cool, passionless gaze that he was an Ice Tamer.

By process of elimination, Eudora knew that the last Tamer was a Time Tamer. Just by looking at her eyes and hair, so like Warrick's, however, Eudora would have known easily. She held a great crystal in one hand and a long staff with a blade in its hilt in the other.

The last thing that Eudora turned her eyes on was the alter, so painfully and shockingly beautiful in a room full of beauty. It shouldn't have had such impact, surround by its glorious, exquisite guards, but it took Eudora's breath away, anyway.

Kneeling before the alter without knowing why, Eudora gently placed her hands on it. She closed her eyes and sat there, full of the warmth, the scent, and the serenity that seemed imbued in the very walls of the room. She opened herself to it, and it responded, much to her surprise. She heard words whispered in her mind, calming, comforting, and encouraging words. It told her to do what was right. That was all anyone could expect from another-for them to do the right thing. It was so easy, too. Just do the right thing. What was right for her? To love, to live, and to give herself to her kingdom. That was right, and that was what she had to do.

Eudora came back to herself with a gasp, as if she had been holding her breath the entire time she'd been kneeling. Aja's worried face came into view, and she allowed him to help her to her feet. That calming presence, so like her mother's voice, scent, and hands, filled Eudora and brought a peaceful smile to her face, a tranquil security to her soul. It was wonderful and beautiful and right.

"What happened?" Aja asked. His voice held concern. Eudora let her

eyes travel over the guards, so silent, so true, once more. The gems all seemed to flash when her gaze went to them, but the princess didn't comment on it. She felt that she finally understood something that had been a long time coming.

"I had a question answered, a question I didn't even know I needed to ask," Eudora replied, giving Aja a calm, easy smile. "I know now." Aja nodded and took her hand again.

"I had an experience of the same sort the first time I came in here. I won't ask you what you heard, because I never told anyone the words it spoke to me." His eyes were in a faraway place, and Eudora felt like she knew the way there. "We should be getting back. It will be lunchtime soon." Eudora nodded and felt her throat tightening. She was supposed to do what was right. Concerning the child king, what was the right thing to do?

"Aja..." His name fell so softly from her lips, so quiet and tender, that he almost didn't hear it. He did, though, and that was all that mattered. Before either of them really knew what was happening, she was in his arms, his mouth on hers, his very essence threatening to overwhelm her until they felt as one consciousness, thought as one mind.

Eudora broke away from the kiss feeling close to delirious and gave Aja a weak smile. She pulled away from him but allowed him to keep her hand.

"I'm sorry," he said with a look that told Eudora he wasn't at all. She laughed and gave him a light, quick kiss.

"No you aren't," she replied. "But you shouldn't be, at least not for that." She lightly touched her fingertips to his cheek, frowning. "Tell me this isn't just an act, Aja, please. Tell me you aren't going to hurt me again." Aja pressed her hand against his face and closed his eyes.

"Never. I'll never hurt you again." Eudora nodded. For some unknown, unexplainable, completely irrational reason, she believed him.

"What did it tell you, Aja?" He smiled and kissed the tips of her fingers.

"It told me to love. The world can be healed by love, the soul can grow, the seeds of the future sown with promise and care. Simply love, and the world will be right." He smiled. "What did it tell you?" Eudora smiled back at him.

"It told me to do what is right. That was all anyone could expect of another person. Do what is right. To love, to live, and to give myself to my kingdom is what is right for me." Aja nodded, that faraway look once again

entering his beautiful iced-emerald eyes.

“We should return to the palace. Then we must discuss some things, starting with the army and King Valin’s plans.” Aja took both of Eudora’s hands and met her gaze firmly.

“And tonight, we will do what is right for both of us. I will come to you, if you want me to, and I will give you what you deserve from me.” Eudora nodded.

“I will tell you my decision after we discuss the coming war.” Aja smiled, and that was enough. They left the temple and retired to the palace for lunch.

## **Chapter Eight~ Wind and Rain**

After lunch, Eudora once again cornered Quimat. He was walking with Keeran but, as she was his sister, Eudora trusted the court maiden.

“I have much to discuss with both of you,” she murmured before leading them to an isolated wing of the palace. They followed without question, as loyal subjects are prone to do, and waited in silence when the princess came to a halt and did not speak for almost a full minute.

“My marriage to Prince Aja will take place within a fortnight,” she finally told them. She then went on to discuss the coming war, the Tamers, and her part in everything. She also told them everything that had happened over the past few days and about all of her Taming abilities.

“I want all of my court members called as Tamers at once.” Eudora smiled. “I will call your soul myself, Quimat,” she told him. “For once, I want to be the one not on the receiving end of such discomfort.” Quimat looked suspicious but nodded anyway.

“As my lady commands, so I shall obey.” Eudora sighed.

“And you really must stop addressing me so formally. I am going to need your help and friendship more in the coming months and years than I ever thought I would. Say it, Quimat. Say my name with no formalities attached.” Quimat looked like he was struggling with actual physical distress, but he then echoed his sovereign’s sigh.

“Eudora.” The princess nodded and turned to Keeran.

“Say it, Keeran.” Quimat’s sister made a face.

“Eudora.” Her voice was softer and less determined than Eudora’s had been, but the princess beamed, all the same.

“Wonderful. Now, to the beach. We are going to call your souls, so gather up my court and meet me there.” Quimat nodded as Eudora rushed off, presumably to inform the other Tamers of what she had planned.

Quimat and Keeran looked at each other and grinned.

“Her mother was absolutely right, Quimat,” Keeran declared. Her face then darkened with sadness. “I only wish she were alive to hear it.” Quimat tilted his head to one side, as if listening to voices only he could hear.

“She doesn’t hear it, sister, but she knows.”

“They are all here, Oceanus. Shall we begin?” The Water Tamer smiled at Eudora and nodded before stepping up to Minjonet, who looked as though she were pouting. She had been the only one to argue about having her soul called. Eudora had been shocked to see all of her court members dressed in the Passion Kingdom fashion and laughed to discover that three of them, Jason, Sagira, and Neviah, had to be pulled away from partners in order to answer their princess’s summons. Eudora was pleased and relieved to find that these people whom she loved and trusted had the promise of a potentially happy life in store for them.

“We will indeed begin, Eudora,” Oceanus declared. A Tamer was standing before each of the ten court members. Seeing as there were only two Legendary Tamers, it was probably going to take a rather long time to call each court member for each individual Element. But Eudora refused to call anyone except Quimat and Keeran, so that was the process she would use.

“Don’t be afraid,” Eudora said, smiling at Quimat’s violet-eyed sister. Having never called anyone else’s soul before, Eudora found herself worried that she wouldn’t know what to do. With Oceanus’ instructions and Ayasha’s help, however, the princess was able to catch on quite easily. Keeran was not a Tamer of any Element, but Oceanus reassured the disappointed court member that she would probably be a formidable Lesser Tamer.

Eudora next approached Quimat who looked positively terrified after seeing his sister’s soul call. The princess smiled to calm him and placed her hands against his bare shoulders. He was wearing a long vest that covered nothing and whirled around him when he walked like a veil of morning mist. Eudora thought that the Passion Kingdom was perfect for him, that he fit there, and tried to tell him that with her eyes and gentle fingertips on his skin. So far, none of her court had been recognized as a Tamer, but there was plenty of opportunity left.

Eudora leaned into Quimat and had to raise herself on her tiptoes in order to touch her mouth to his. It was a gentle kiss, a soft press of lips, anxiety trembling just beyond the warmth of Quimat's mouth. Moving her hands downward, Eudora gradually eased Quimat's mouth open with her tongue. When she found him in her questing hands, the kiss became as it was supposed to: a melding of essences, as if she were trying to eat Quimat's soul from his lips.

Warmth flashed through Eudora and passed into Quimat like a languid river of heat. Eudora knew this meant that he was a Tamer, for she hadn't felt anything like that when calling Keeran. By the sound of the sudden commotion farther down the beach, someone else was found to be a Tamer, also.

Eudora's eyes drifted open lazily and met Quimat's. He was no longer afraid. Her Instinct Taming recognized lust and pushed into her subconscious enough to move her face against Quimat's neck. She rubbed against that delicate flesh with her cheek before she realized what she was doing and backed away.

"Eudora, Dinah is an Instinct Tamer," Rollin declared, his tone telling her that he was pleased beyond words. To his knowledge, he had been the last pure Tamer of Instinct in existence. This had to be a treat for him. He had a protégé now, and a female one, at that.

"And Quimat is a Wind Tamer," the princess exclaimed delightedly. His Wind Mark, as Amana's, was all over his body but shone most vibrantly on his right leg. The gentle, flowing gold accented the perfect shade of his honey blond hair and, added to the stunning lavender of his eyes, made him seem gentle, kind, powerful and radiant. He exuded the kind of peace that the Wind was well known for.

Over the course of the next hour, they discovered only two other Tamers of Greater Elements within Eudora's court. Majit, Eudora was pleased to discover, was a Light Tamer, and Janson was a Rock Tamer. Wind, Rock, Instinct, and Light. They were good Elements to have. Eudora was beaming at her court and hugged each of them in turn after they had all had their souls call numerous times.

"Will we train with the other Tamers now, Eudora?" Quimat asked, causing Majit to gasp. Eudora smiled and nodded.

"Yes, and Quimat has just made a point I was intending to discuss with

you all. None of you are to address me with any kind of formality from this point on.” She beamed at Amana. “I was taught the value of friendship and intend to honor it. You are my friends, not my servants. Therefore, you will address me as Eudora from now on.” Majit was the only one who looked truly uncomfortable with this. Sagira and Pallaton actually looked relieved in their own ways. Still smiling, Eudora quickly hugged Quimat, who was now used to these displays, and then made her way over to Aja.

The effect they had on each other was as obvious on the prince’s face as on Eudora’s own. Determined now to express instead of hide it, Eudora let it show in the new heat her eyes burned with and her hand reaching out for his that she wanted and needed him with her, close to her. Aja didn’t object, wasn’t surprised. This was natural to them, and Eudora really did think that it was because of their binding. They were closer now than either of them had ever thought possible, and it simply seemed ludicrous not to touch.

Lacing their fingers together, Eudora let that soft, content smile wash over the gathered Tamers and court members, her friends. When her gaze fell on Oceanus and Amana, she laughed quietly.

“Oceanus, Amana, I thank you for not interfering in even the smallest way today. Aja did quite well convincing me that there was another side to him that he failed to present to me. I am sure most or all of you assumed that I would be gone from the Passion Kingdom already with Prince Aja having lifted the marriage contract.” The only one who nodded, surprisingly, was Dinesh. Noticing for the first time that Warrick wasn’t present, Eudora let a frown slide across her face before she continued.

“Well, I am either more stubborn or devoted than you thought, Dinesh. I have decided to stay in the Passion Kingdom and take my rightful place at Aja’s side.” Eudora’s court members applauded, but the Tamers stood silently, each of them smiling, nodding, or looking at her ponderingly. Cassara looked, of course, bored by the whole spectacle. Eudora knew that this was because the Prophecy Tamer had already known the princess’s choice. Laughing again, Eudora shook her head.

“The wedding will take place within a fortnight,” she declared. “And I would like all of you to be included in it. Until then, we must continue our training, including the instruction of the new Tamers within my court. Quimat, Pallaton, I would like you to take your places as Prince Aja’s personal sentries.” Zene laughed, and Oceanus joined her. Eudora didn’t

know what was funny until she saw Aja's face. Mouth agape and eyes wide, he looked as though she had seriously insulted his masculinity. Patting his arm, she grinned.

"Do not worry, child king. I don't imply that you cannot take care of yourself, but, in times such as these, I would like to establish as much trust between my people and your own as is possible. Also, I admit that I do fear for your safety. I trust Quimat and Pallaton more than I trust most anyone else in the world." The incredulous look didn't leave Aja's face, but he nodded anyway.

A wave of something Eudora couldn't recognize passed through her, confusing her for a moment. She swayed, but it was gone almost as soon as it came. Aja looked concerned.

"Is something wrong?" he asked, tightening his grip on her hand. She gave him a comforting smile and shook her head.

"No, I'm fine. Just one of those things. It's nothing, really."

Two days passed without incident. Eudora found herself becoming more relaxed and at home every hour. She attended every meal and met with the Tamers at the beach, now joined by the four new additions from her own court, in order to train. Each day, Eudora felt, perhaps once or twice an hour, and then by the third day every few minutes, a very peculiar sensation. When she took the matter to the queen a few hours before dinner on the third day, Wyanet laughed.

"I would say any number of things that would be expected, sweet flower, but what happens with you is never expected. Have you had your monthly cycle yet or is it still forthcoming?" Eudora, not as uncomfortable with the query, as she would have been a week ago, told the queen that the day she and her court arrived was the last day of her menstrual cycle. Wyanet nodded, pondering.

"One of my Lesser Elements happens to be childbirth, but I am not advanced enough to tell if you are pregnant." Eudora paled at the thought. She hadn't considered that.

"Is that possibly the cause?" she asked. Wyanet nodded and smiled.

"It could be." As if considering another idea that was even less pleasant to her, Wyanet frowned. "When was the last time you Tamed Passion?" Eudora shrugged.

“Not since I Tamed it with Kiet.” It was the queen’s turn to pale.

“You mean you haven’t Tamed it in nearly four days?” The look on Wyanet’s face was enough to make Eudora uneasy, but the queen’s tone was enough to make the princess tremble with fear.

“What does that mean, Wyanet? It hasn’t resurfaced. I thought I only had to Tame it when it called upon me!” Wyanet placed her hands against her temples and groaned.

“Nothing goes as it should with you, sweet flower, *nothing*. What has Oceanus been doing down at the beach, teaching you embroidery?” The queen shook her head and regained her easygoing demeanor as if she were hitting a switch to change her expression. It was quick and flawless, but Eudora knew better. Wyanet was worried.

“You must be taught how to Tame Passion on your own but, as of now, I am beyond surprised that you didn’t molest everyone in the hall at lunch today. You must Tame the Passion, now, willingly, or within the hour...” The queen shuddered, a break in her perfect façade.

“Or what, Wyanet?” Eudora asked in a whisper. Wyanet touched Eudora lightly on the arm, and lust flared through the princess. The Passion Taming had been awakened by the slightest brush of skin.

“You haven’t touched anyone today, have you?” Eudora, voice breathy, answered on a trembling sigh.

“No. We were training, and I do not need to have physical contact to call the Elements anymore.” Eudora nodded.

“I am shocked my son did not deduce what was going on. He once tried to hold out against the Passion, you know.” Eudora looked frightened.

“What happened?” Wyanet smirked, but not like it was funny.

“The force of his Passion Taming called two women to him and three men. Aja was fourteen. He had never had intimate relations with more than one person at a time before that. It was most certainly an educating experience for him.” Eudora looked horrified.

“So, I could seduce anyone in the near vicinity?” Wyanet shook her head.

“Not exactly. It is almost as if Aja became their master. They were slaves to his will while he was Taming Passion. You understand, I hope, how dangerous this could be?” Eudora nodded. “I believe it is one reason your father wanted control of the kingdom. King Valin loves power, and the

power of Taming Passion is...formidable." Wyanet sighed.

"Well, we must do something about this. I do not want you summoning Aja to you. The force of your combined Taming would have the entire kingdom falling over each other, driven mad by lust. No, you need someone who will completely negate the Taming. One of your court members who was found to have no Element to call at all would be preferable. They haven't been on the Isle long enough to develop any form of Passion Taming. Who would you prefer I summon to you?" Eudora was focusing on the queen's mouth while she spoke, and Wyanet laughed as Eudora leaned towards her, as if to kiss her.

"I am a Passion Tamer, sweet flower. Perhaps I am not so fearsome as you or my son, but I would not be able to maintain control over my own Taming in order to help you Tame yours." She pondered for a moment while Eudora wrapped her own arms around her trembling body.

"Call someone, Wyanet, and do it quickly." Her voice was pinched, high, and breathy. She didn't like feeling like this. If she could just ride this out, Eudora swore that she would be more careful about the Taming from that moment on.

"I believe the only person I can think of is dear Keeran, sweet flower. She would be perfect." Eudora nodded, casting her haunted eyes downward.

"Call her." The princess' voice was hoarse. Wyanet nodded, and Mora, the slight-framed Wind Tamer, was suddenly there. She nodded a few times, but if either of them spoke, Eudora couldn't hear. Mora left as silently as she had appeared, and Wyanet and Eudora waited.

"My princess...I mean, Eudora," Keeran exclaimed upon entering Wyanet's room a few moments later, unaccompanied. For Eudora, it felt as though it had been an eternity, and she looked puzzled as Keeran approached. The other woman looked wary.

"Your princess needs your assistance, dear Keeran," Wyanet purred, placing one hand on either of Keeran's shoulders. Even though Eudora was arguing against formalities, Keeran bowed before the princess.

"I am yours, my liege, however you need me," Keeran declared. Wyanet chuckled and ran her fingers in several lines of heat down the court maiden's back, causing her to gasp. Wyanet was preparing Keeran without the other woman's knowledge. Eudora couldn't worry about that, though. The scent of subtle lust and Wyanet's own exotic perfume were clouding

Eudora's mind. She felt faint, but she now also felt the Passion Element surging through her, as if warning her. This time, if she did not give into it immediately, it would consume her.

"Come to me, Keeran." The same words Eudora had spoken to Kiet spilled from the princess's lips before she could halt them. It made her uncomfortable. She wondered how much she was going to have to do to her court maiden. Keeran licked her suddenly dry lips and stood.

"Always, my princess," she whispered. When Keeran was less than a breath away, Eudora used the last of her logical mind to cast her eyes over the maiden's shoulder to meet Wyanet's burning gaze.

"I will not be able to control it, Wyanet, you know that. I would rather you were not here to become involved. If possible, could you barricade the door and refuse entry should anyone be called by my Taming?" Wyanet nodded and backed out, keeping her gaze fixed to Eudora's face, staring like a man dying of thirst stares at a tall glass of water.

"As you wish, sweet flower. Let it be known that sometime soon, I will come to you, as well." Eudora nodded and breathed a line of heat along Keeran's shoulder, making her tremble slightly.

"That time is not now. Leave, Wyanet, and we will discuss this later if my rational mind survives." The queen nodded once more and then fled the room, barricading the door from the outside and, as promised, standing sentry outside in the hallway.

"What is this, Eudora?" Keeran asked. Her voice was tight and breathless, as if she had just run a fair distance. Eudora hadn't even touched her, merely let the Passion slide out and caress the other woman.

"This is Passion, Keeran, and I must Tame it." The Element surged through Eudora, stronger now, as if refusing to be contained any longer. "Soon, you will have a form of it, as well. For now, you are the only person we could think of to use to Tame it safely." Pressing her forehead against Keeran's damp cheek, Eudora sighed. The Passion screamed through her, and there was no more room for words in her mind.

Taking Keeran's high ponytail in her hand, Eudora used it as a handle to guide the other woman's mouth to her own. Her lips were so different from Warrick's or Aja's or Kiet's, so soft and yielding instead of hard and demanding. The exploration was silky and sweet. Keeran's tongue was a tentative prisoner at first and then became a force to rival Eudora's own.

They tore at each other, and in the first rush, both of their garments were lying on the floor around their feet.

Feeling that it would be wrong to take Keeran on Wyanet's bed, Eudora led the other woman to one of the chairs in the corner and pushed her down. The princess straddled Keeran's legs and took the other woman's breasts in her hands. She kneaded them and then took one hardened nipple into her mouth while still cupping the other. Keeran's whole body shuddered, and a low moan pulled itself from her parted lips.

Eudora felt as though she were melting from the inside, a blissful, throbbing warmth pouring through her abdomen. She claimed Keeran's lips again, and the other woman timidly raised her hands to brush them over Eudora's breasts. The princess shivered and paused momentarily in the ravishing of Keeran's mouth.

"Hold on, Keeran." Keeping her fingers on Keeran's arm, Eudora moved to a table within her reach. There was a slender metal bar on it. Eudora didn't delude herself into thinking it was for something even remotely respectable. Sending a jet of flame over it, Eudora made it bacteria-free. She then cooled it with an icy caress.

Moving back to Keeran, Eudora was glad that the door was barred. She wanted more; more emotion, more heat, more passion. That, sadly, could only be accomplished with more people. That, the princess didn't want.

Knowing that Keeran wasn't a virgin, Eudora didn't worry that she was going to hurt the other woman. Sliding the chilled bar into Keeran's hot, moist opening, Eudora met her gaze and flicked her tongue over the other woman's nipple.

"Scream for me, Keeran." Her whisper was as hot and heavy and dripping wet as Keeran felt. That voice pulled on something inside the other woman, and when Eudora began moving the rod in and out of her, Keeran did scream.

Eudora worked her fingers over the sensitive flesh closer to Keeran's navel as she continued to thrust the metal bar inside the squirming, moaning woman. When the orgasm crashed into her, Keeran raked her nails down Eudora's shoulders and arms. The pain was a different kind of aphrodisiac, a blissful torment all on its own, and had the princess shuddering along with Keeran.

When Keeran's spasms subsided, Eudora rested her head in between the

court maiden's legs, against her right thigh. The Passion Element was not sated, not in the slightest. As its Tamer, it wanted more, more, more. Knowing that Wyanet would hold true to her word, Eudora threw the idea of calling someone else from her mind. Instead, she let her tongue slide out and caress Keeran's thigh, causing the panting woman to struggle beneath her.

"Not yet, my liege, please." Ignoring her, Eudora went to her knees and spread Keeran's legs as wide as they would go, which wasn't far because of the arms of the chair. Lifting one of Keeran's legs, Eudora slid it behind the armrest. The arms of the chair were intricate swirls of silver. With Keeran's legs spread, Eudora could easily hold her in place by putting pressure on her knees. Doing so, the princess steadied herself on the chair arms and leaned into Keeran. Eudora moved her tongue over the top of Keeran's thigh, keeping her cool silver eyes on the inflamed violet ones of her court maiden. Keeran struggled to move, but Eudora had her hands on the other woman's knees. She wasn't going anywhere.

When Eudora was bent between Keeran's thighs like a great tiger drinking at a stream, movement caught her attention. Although Wyanet had sealed the main door, the servant's hallway was still accessible. The servant who moved towards the women like he was possessed was tall and beautiful, as all the people of the Passion Kingdom were prone to be. He wasn't a Tamer, at least not of any Greater Element, for which Eudora was incredibly glad.

"Come." She held out her hands to him, and he came as Keeran had come, as if he had no say in the matter. Their lips met hungrily while Eudora reached down to cup the center of Keeran's throbbing heat in her hand. The other woman moaned and writhed as Eudora kneaded that oh so sensitive flesh, digging her fingers and nails into the delicate folds of moist, burning skin.

When Keeran was nearing her second climax, Eudora practically fell to her knees, and the servant moved as though she were telling him what to do aloud. There were no words, though, just the pounding of hearts, gasping of breath, and occasional sigh, whimper, or moan.

Eudora buried her face in Keeran's groin while the servant entered the princess from behind, thrusting between her legs in a way that had her quivering and crying out into the aching, dripping heat she was ravishing with her mouth. The servant had put on one of the stretchy white devices

Kiet had used, and Eudora found herself irritated with it. Although he was touching her skin to skin nearly everywhere else, she wanted more-the Passion needed more.

Keeran rode her orgasm on a shriek, bucking beneath Eudora. The princess separated herself from the servant in order to change position. She pushed him back, and he fell willingly, not even catching himself. Eudora straddled him, and he guided his shaft into her.

She rode him as hard and fast as possible, taking as much of him into her as was possible. He wasn't as well trained as Kiet, but his fingers digging into her breasts, his groans, and eyes empty of everything except need sent Eudora to the golden edge of that shining abyss.

When orgasm hit, Eudora continued to grind herself into the servant, and then the Passion surged over both of them. The servant came as well, screaming as he drew his nails down Eudora's waist. She set her teeth into his shoulder but didn't draw blood as she had with Kiet.

They continued this until neither of them could move and Eudora collapsed on top of him. They were both gasping for air, and twitching spasms coursed through the princess's limbs. The servant looked confused, almost as if he didn't know why he was there, but wasn't really in the position to protest. Eudora shook her head and stood shakily. Only Wyanet, who had come back into the room after feeling the Passion recede, was able to catch the princess when she fell.

"I hope a lesson was learned today, sweet flower," Wyanet murmured into Eudora's hair. Although exhausted, Eudora was dismayed to find that the Passion stirred within her at hearing the queen's voice. It seemed as though she would never be able to sate it.

"Yes," Eudora answered, her voice thick. "I have learned that the Passion does not care for pride, for its Tamer, or who its Tamer can possibly hurt. It cares about pleasure, about crossing lines and blurring things supposed to be opposites. It is all about confusion and blind, primal need." Her mouth set into a grim line, Eudora surveyed the servant who had yet to stand and her court maiden, head lolling to one side and wearing a look of deep contentment.

"The Passion is a curse." Wyanet nodded.

"As all things of power; a blessing and a curse both," The queen agreed. Eudora shook her head.

“There is nothing about the Passion that is a blessing,” the princess retorted, anger beginning to stir in her gut. It flooded through her, and her Fire Taming awakened, stretching through her like a cat forged of flame. It was lazy and lethargic, though, and so the princess did not set fire to anything in the near vicinity. She was glad for it. Wyanet sighed and led the princess out of the room after Eudora clumsily clothed herself. She silently directed two other servants to tend to Keeran and the man.

“With time, I hope your thoughts will change. Until then, you must continue to train and continue to Tame the Passion, in a small way, at least twice a day.” As Eudora started to protest, Wyanet held up a hand for silence. “I am not saying have intercourse every hour, Eudora. I am saying that if you keep it sated by doing small things, intercourse will not be your only option.” Eudora quirked an eyebrow but was too irritated and exhausted to argue further. She did notice, though, that her strength and energy were slowly returning to her. Asking Wyanet if this was a side effect of the Taming, Eudora was surprised to hear Wyanet laugh.

“You are a woman, Eudora. You will learn in time that your stamina is much more than either you or your male partners will expect.” Eudora smirked, understanding what the queen was saying.

“Do you mean that women can have more orgasms without becoming spent?” she asked. Once, at Cieala, she had overheard her mother discussing such things with one of her court maidens. They had laughed about their husbands’ inabilities to keep up. Wyanet laughed again, that spine-tingling, shiver-inspiring laugh.

“*Exactamente*, sweet flower, *exactamente*.”

Aja looked vexed when he practically accosted Eudora and Wyanet moments later. The queen left Eudora to placate her husband-to-be, sweeping out of the room with one of her pets. Eudora remembered her as Jarah and fought a blush as her eyes swept down the other woman’s lovely backside. She could not use the Passion as an excuse, for it had been well Tamed, for her attention. Refusing to ponder the confusing and slightly frightening alternative, Eudora gave Aja a wide smile.

“Why were you locked in my mother’s room?” Aja asked. His tone contained worry and irritation. Eudora surprised herself by feeling guilty for the latter. She assumed that he was irritated because everyone else kept

getting things from her that he was entitled to.

“You did not tell me everything I needed to know about the Passion Taming,” Eudora told him with no accusation in her tone. She was very matter-of-fact. “I had not Tamed it since Kiet helped me.” Aja paled, as Wyanet had paled.

“You did not Tame it for three days?” he asked in a horrified whisper. Eudora shook her head, and they began to walk, instinctively clasping hands as they did.

“Wyanet called Keeran to me so that the Taming would not become overwhelming and spread to others. My own Taming was enough, however, and called a servant to us.” She paused and let out a shaky breath.

“I know that you feel everyone else is getting what you deserve from me, Aja.” She held up her hand as he started to argue. “It is the truth. Tonight, come to me. No Taming, no tricks. Just us.” She smiled at him until he smiled back and gratefully kissed him when he leaned towards her.

“It seems absurd that just recently we were ready to kill each other, fire rose,” he commented, making her laugh.

“I am sure it is only temporary,” she teased. “By the end of the week, you’ll have done something else to enrage me, or I’ll do something to convince you that I don’t belong here.” She shrugged. “But that is what a relationship is about. We tolerate, correct, or fight over character flaws that we and our partner possess.” They entered the gardens behind the palace, and the sight stole the princess’s ability to speak.

“And through this, we grow,” Aja added. He knelt next to a healthy shoot, which stood very near a group of stunning, strong trees. The prince smiled. “We grow as this plant will grow. With warmth and sunlight, but also with wind and rain. We need our trials, don’t you agree?” Eudora nodded and placed her hand against the sweet-smelling bark.

“We will have plenty of them, Aja,” she told him seriously. “Not only in our relationship, but in our rule.” Resting her cheek against the tree trunk, she sighed.

“King Valin will attack, Aja. He will attack in full force, sparing none who think to stand in his way. He wants the power of the Passion Kingdom. He wants it no matter what it costs to get it.” Aja laid his hands on Eudora’s shoulders and squeezed gently.

“We will protect our people,” he declared. Eudora thought it arrogant of

him, but she had suffered the same thoughts. She wanted to protect them but knew she couldn't. Many would die, no matter what she did, no matter what the prince did. Turning to meet Aja's eyes, Eudora was amazed to find tears in her own.

"You cannot save them all," she told him softly. His gaze was firm and full of something Eudora didn't understand, so she assumed it was a male thing.

"I can't," he agreed. "We *will*." Eudora sighed to hear the defiance in his voice. War, no matter how small, would always claim victims-and this would be no small war.

"We will discuss it some other time," Eudora said quietly, looking once again at the garden. She would hate to see it destroyed. Wind and rain, trials to overcome....

Somehow, Eudora didn't think she'd stand to the test.

## Chapter Nine~ Words of the Spirits

“Dinner will begin shortly,” Eudora said softly after she and Aja stood, cloaked in companionable silence, for many minutes. He nodded and started off without her, but then turned and held out his hand when she began to follow. Smiling, she took it gratefully and looked down at herself.

“But I must bathe first.” She made a face. “I will not lie and say I did not enjoy it, any of it, yet I am nothing but honest when I say that I tire of the smell of too many hands and mouths on my body.” Aja gave her fingers a gentle squeeze.

“In time, we will organize a list of all those you can Tame Passion on. Without variety, it becomes discontent and will react as though you hadn’t been Taming it at all.” He sighed, and Eudora flinched. “I agree. The Passion is among the most difficult of Elements to possess.” A spark of something indefinable lit in Eudora’s chest.

“Do you have a Passion Spirit?” she asked quietly. Aja smiled.

“I only lack a Spirit for Wind.” At hearing her Element, Ayasha swept through the two of them. Eudora laughed brightly and listened as the Spirit spoke seriously.

*‘You have gained the notice of two other Spirits, little one. Call and they will come, but do not call out of desire. Call out of need.’* Eudora frowned.

*‘I do not want a repeat of the situation with Arian, Ayasha,’* she declared. The Spirit laughed and faded into her Tamer’s consciousness.

*‘Have you learned nothing, little one?’* Without waiting for Eudora’s answer, Ayasha became simply a wisp of warm air in the princess’ mind. Still frowning, Eudora turned to Aja.

“So, do you?” Aja nodded and raised his hand.

“Yes. My Spirit is very jealous, however. If I did not constantly flatter her, she would not like you touching me.” Giving her a smile that emanated

patience, Aja called his Passion Spirit forth.

*'I come, master,'* she whispered through his mind. Her voice was the most seductive he had ever heard. *'What is it you desire of me?'* Aja smirked and ran his hand through the shadowy form of his Passion Spirit. She was a tiger woman, with a tail, claws, and perky orange and black striped ears.

"This is Tessa. I call her Vixen." Tessa purred and rubbed against Aja like the phantom cat she was. Only this cat had imposing breasts and a sly smile that Eudora didn't like. The princess nodded stiffly.

"I am most pleased to meet you, Tessa." The Passion Spirit's laugh trickled through Aja's mind as she caressed his arm.

*'Oh, master, this one does not like me.'* The Spirit licked her way up Aja's neck and cheek, keeping her dark amber kitty cat eyes on Eudora the whole time. She was taller than the woman of flesh and more muscular. She looked like everything Wyanet's dangerous, provocative smile contained on most occasions.

"What does she say?" Eudora asked. Her tense shoulders and faint frown made Aja want to send Tessa back. What he did, however, was gesture Eudora over.

"She says she is pleased to meet you, also, and finds your eyes to be very beautiful. She says they look like silver melting in the moonlight." Eudora made her way cautiously over to Aja's Spirit, who was pouting now.

*'As if I would say that to her.'* The Spirit snarled, sending sparks of anger through her Tamer's mind.

"Well, I am more impressed with her eyes," Eudora replied, smiling now. "She is stunning." Tessa flipped her long hair over her shoulder and gave a soft snort of contempt.

*'She finds my breasts impressive,'* Tessa declared mockingly. Her ears twitched, and her tail swished back and forth excitedly. *'Do you think she is jealous?'* Aja laughed.

*'Not a chance. This one knows where she stands.'* He gave Tessa a very serious look. *'She stands beside me, Tessa. This is to be the new queen of the Passion Kingdom.'* Tessa hissed loudly and vanished from sight, making Aja sigh. Eudora looked confused.

"Did I do something wrong?" she asked softly, looking very hurt.

"Simply existing is not wrong, fire rose. I told you, Tessa is a very

jealous Spirit.” Eudora nodded, still hurt.

“So, I will have a Passion Spirit?” Aja smiled in a comforting way and took her hand again.

“Yes. Yours will most likely be male, as a Passion Tamer’s Spirit tends to embody the gender its Tamer prefers.” Aja laughed. “But do not be perturbed if your Spirit is female. Sometimes it happens that, while the Tamer is more attracted to a certain gender, the opposite gender of Spirit is attracted to the Tamer. My first Spirit was Catori, and most of the others I have by my side are female, as well. I have only three males. My Spirits of Water, Ice, and Darkness are all male.” Eudora suddenly stopping walking.

“Aja, I must go to the Temple.” She squeezed his hand when he began turning down the path that led back to the garden.

“Alone. This is something I must do by myself.” Nodding, he gave her a gentle kiss on the nose.

“I will not be offended, and nor will any of the others, if you miss the meal.” His eyes held a knowing gleam, his smile a gentle patience. Who was this Aja, Eudora wondered, who had such kind eyes and warm, protective strength? Why hadn’t she seen him before?

Releasing Aja’s hand, Eudora fought not to run to the Spirit Temple. After all this time, telling others she *knew*, she was ashamed to admit she knew nothing. Ayasha the Wind Spirit had handed her Tamer the key to her destiny, and yet she had ignored the wise words.

‘*Call out of need.*’ Ayasha’s voice once again swept through Eudora’s mind, making her tremble with excitement. When she reached the garden path that led to the temple, the princess couldn’t help herself. She broke into a run and did not stop until she reached the door that only a Legendary Tamer could open.

Wondering how Aja had done it, Eudora pressed her palm flat against the door and simply stood. Nothing happened. Perturbed, she frowned and pressed harder. Perhaps there was a lever to push, a button to press. When nothing more happened, Eudora pushed with her mind.

‘*Open!*’ she exclaimed through her thoughts. ‘*I am a Legendary Tamer and....*’ She trailed off. She was about to say that she demanded passage. She could not. Everything was a request and then the response to that request. ‘*I ask that you allow me passage, please.*’ The door swung open, and Eudora beamed. After thanking it, she stepped into the cold hallway and

allowed the door to close behind her.

Needing no light this time, Eudora eagerly made her way to the central chamber where the twelve Tamers stood as sentries over the crystal alter.

“Great Spirits,” Eudora exclaimed, falling to her knees in front of the alter. “I have need of you. War approaches on swift wings. In order to save as many as I can, I must wield every weapon available to me.” The princess smiled. “And I beg the guidance of necessary friends. Without them, I will not succeed in this quest.” Touching the alter, Eudora was surprised to find tears glistening on her lashes and trailing down her cheeks.

“These people are all to me, Great Spirits. I will give anything to protect them-my life, if need be. Help me to do what is right...I need guidance and strength to do what is right for me and for my people. I need my friends.” Silence reigned for longer than Eudora could measure. Then, something happened to still her heart. Each of the Tamer statues shimmered with their own colors, reflecting the jewel its Tamer held. Eudora stayed on her knees, afraid to move.

The Legendary Tamer moved, smiling benevolently at Eudora. Her mouth fell open as he offered her the jewel in his hand. The mystic fire topaz gleamed in the torchlight, and Eudora shook her head.

“I need my Spirits, Great Tamer.” He nodded and continued holding the gem out to her. She hesitated, then touched it. Light exploded around her, dazzling her into painless blindness. After blinking a few times, the princess gazed around the room. The statues had regained their previous stances and motionlessness, but the Legendary Tamer now stood without his gem. In its place was a bird frozen in a timeless pose with its wide, multi-colored wings spread and its serene, pure white face lifted towards the ceiling. It was the *Tahirah*, the bird of peace.

One thought flooded Eudora’s mind: that beautiful bird, the most rare and exquisite in the entire world, was trapped in stone because she had taken the Legendary Tamer’s gem. Tears streamed from her eyes, and she collapsed upon the alter, crying in earnest.

When the princess felt a gentle touch on her shoulder, she gasped and looked up, wiping at her damp cheeks. Surprise and shock swamped her, and she sat in numb silence as her eyes fell upon eleven very different looking entities.

Ayasha was among them, and Eudora stood, going to her Wind Spirit

with something akin to fear and closer to wonder making her heart pound.

*'What is this, my friend?'* the princess asked Ayasha. A great blue dog with a lolling tongue and sharp white teeth gave a growling laugh. He was the perfect color of the sky on a winter day.

*'We can all hear you, snowflake,'* he told her. His voice brushed over her like fur chilled in a winter breeze. Suddenly, she understood everything.

"You're my Spirits," she exclaimed in amazement. Joy surged through her, more powerful than anything she had ever felt in the grip of Passion. Pure, unhindered elation made tears flow from her eyes again as she hugged the Ice Spirit to her. She took a long time to allow them to introduce themselves to her and found herself deliriously happy with them all.

Beside the Ice Spirit, who was called Miyagi, was a Water Spirit. Her name was Asahi, and she took the form of large penguin, standing as tall as her Tamer. She was the color of early morning ocean waves, with a white head and flippers. Her belly was a deep cobalt blue, and her back shimmered faintly teal.

There was also Naoko, a female Light Spirit in the shape of a small golden elephant. She was shorter than Asahi, and they seemed to amuse each other with simple glances. Every Spirit was laughing to itself or with others at one point or another, and Eudora felt aching joy at each purring, growling, or hissing giggle.

The hiss came from Eudora's Rock Spirit, a deep brown male lizard-looking creature with four legs. His name was Treyen, and he stood on his back legs to give his Tamer a warm hug when he introduced himself to her.

Eudora's Fire Spirit was a cat hardly bigger than a kitten who liked to roll around as nothing more than a ball of flame. She had bright orange-yellow eyes and three tails instead of just one, each tipped with a different color flame. The longest tail, sporting a white tip, sat in between the others, one with a blue tip and the other with orange. Both of these tails were shorter than the first. Her body was deep crimson with a streak of white down her chest. She liked sitting on Eudora's shoulder, which made her Tamer laugh. Her name was Jana.

The Time Spirit who had come to Eudora was a great winged silver horse, taller even than Ayasha. Eudora could tell that her Wind Spirit looked up to the Time Spirit, for he was old and wise and powerful. He gave the princess calm, gentle, ancient eyes and tipped his head to acknowledge her.

He told her that his name was Eternity and that he was honored to be friend to such a lovely, brave, and wise Tamer.

Eudora's Instinct Spirit was the only one to truly take her breath away. While all of them amazed her in more ways than she could express and though she loved none of them more than the others, her Instinct Spirit was in the form of the animal she adored above others. She was a huge, stunning wolf. Her name was Bronwyn, and her bright gray eyes cut through to Eudora's soul. Out of all of them, she solidified the connection that bound them the quickest with her.

Green as the gem in the center of Cassara's forehead, Eudora's Prophecy Spirit took the form of a great buck. His mighty antlers crowned him as surely as Eudora's Legendary Tamer mark crowned her. His name was Kaoru.

Sneaking in and out of the shadows, Eudora's Darkness Spirit silently crept up behind the Tamer, scaring her when he coiled himself around her ankles. His phantom fur brushed against her bare legs, and she laughed. It tickled. The Darkness Spirit was in the form of a fox smaller than Miyagi, her Ice Spirit, and much larger than Jana, the Fire Spirit. He called himself Loki and laughed as he trotted away.

The last of Eudora's Spirit's was her Passion Spirit. She was the only one out of Eudora's Spirits who took a form even remotely close to human. In fact, she looked very much like Tessa, Aja's Passion Spirit. Eudora's, however, sported the features of a leopard and not a tiger. Her name was Calla, and her arms bore golden fur spotted with black, the same as her kitty ears and tail. It looked like she was wearing elbow-length polka-dot gloves with sharp claws on the ends of each long, slim finger. Calla grinned at Eudora with sharp teeth and rubbed against the Tamer, purring. She was the only one who wasn't one specific color, as well, and looked more like her Tamer than any of the others.

Ayasha tipped her head at Eudora, smiling.

*'The Legendary Tamer who guards this Spirit Temple has given you two gifts, little one.'* All of the Spirits called their Tamer by some sort of endearing name. Ayasha's was the only one that didn't relate in some way back to the Element she represented.

*'I know of only one, the most treasured gift I will ever receive,'* Eudora commented, smiling fondly at her Spirits. They all laughed, and Jana,

purring, snuggled against her Tamer's neck. She seemed the youngest, but Eudora was sure the feisty Fire Spirit was much older than she thought.

*'The Legendary Tamer did not give us to you, moonbeam,'* Naoko, Eudora's Light Spirit, told the Tamer. *'You needed us, and we came. Though you have not insulted us, remember that we are not items to be given or received at leisure.'* Eudora nodded quickly, upset at her own ignorance.

*'Of course, Naoko. Forgive me.'* The Spirits laughed again as Eudora turned back to Ayasha. At one point or another, she was always in physical or mental contact with one or all of her Spirits. It made her feel warm and safe, like family.

*'What gifts did the Legendary Tamer give me?'* she asked. Ayasha gestured with one sweeping wing to a mirror that stood in the corner of the room.

*'Come and see,'* the Wind Spirit offered. Eudora moved to examine herself in the mirror and was pleased to see that all of her Element marks had vanished, save her crown that marked her as a Legendary Tamer. He had given her a measure of control that she had not previously possessed. Only with this control could the princess hide the marks. Looking closer, Eudora found that the mystic fire topaz had become imbedded in her forehead, in the very center of her Legendary Mark. It glowed softly and with power, speaking for itself what its holder did not believe. Whether she believed it or not, Eudora had a power no other did. If she could discover what that power was, the universe would be at her fingertips.

Deciding that a power such as this was better left unrealized, Eudora turned back to her Spirits. This was all she needed; her Taming and her friends. She gave them a beaming smile, and bowed to the statue of the Legendary Tamer.

"Thank you," she told him aloud. "For your gifts." She gave another sad glance to the *Tahirah*, the bird perched on the statue's left hand, and turned towards the exit.

*'I have accomplished what I came here to do,'* Eudora declared, gazing lovingly at each of her Spirits. *'Shall we leave?'* Jana hopped down from her Tamer's shoulder and padded in front of her as they left the Spirit's Chamber. By the time they reached the door that only a Legendary Tamer could access, all of Eudora's Spirits had faded and become faint whispers in

the Tamer's consciousness.

Anxious to speak to anyone about the amazing occurrence she had just been a part of, Eudora darted into the main chamber of the temple. She was shocked to find that the sun had set and night stars had claimed the sky. By the position of the moon, Eudora would say that it was past the middle of the night and close to morning. She had been in the Spirit's Chambers for hours.

"I was almost worried." Aja's voice was thick from sleep, his smile quick and relaxed. "You were in there for a very long time. The door wouldn't open for me." Eudora felt guilty.

"I am sorry to have worried you unnecessarily, Aja," she exclaimed earnestly. He shrugged and stood. He had been sleeping on one of the pews in front of Pyralis' statue. The god of Fire glowered down wrathfully, and Eudora found herself shivering. That was one statue she didn't want coming to life. Stretching, Aja observed her.

"You have your marks hidden." Puzzlement swept through his eyes. "And what is...." He trailed off on a gasp, discovering the mystic fire topaz on her brow. "It's true!" Anxiety entered his gaze. "The prophecy has begun." His tone was so sad that Eudora reached out to clasp his hand. He was scaring her.

"What prophecy? What's happened?" Aja shook his head and brushed Eudora's hair out of her face, giving her a small smile.

"What were you doing in there for so long, fire rose?" he asked without another mention to the prophecy or the topaz. Eudora was worried, but she summoned all of her Spirits, anyway.

"Finding my friends," she told him with a small smile. Calla draped herself over her Tamer's shoulders, and Aja raised his eyebrows at the princess.

"Your Passion Spirit is a woman." Eudora fought not to blush as she nodded.

"Indeed. Her name is Calla." She spent a few moments introducing all of her Spirits to Aja, and he listened attentively, sometimes interrupting her to complement one of them.

"You have done what no other Tamer has ever been capable of. What is it that you have done differently than every Tamer come before you?" Eudora smiled and ran her hand through Ayasha's wispy feathers.

“I listened and I spoke of need, not desire. I needed my friends. I did not desire weapons or power. I just wanted my friends because they are the right thing for me. They are a part of me that I feel wrong without.” Aja nodded, and Ayasha sighed through Eudora.

*‘Tell the prince that he is a very slow learner. In the days he has known you, he has come no closer to gaining the notice of a Wind Spirit. Both of you must open yourselves fully to your goal if it is success you seek. If not, simply give King Valin the Passion Kingdom. At least then, only few will die.’* Eudora nodded and conveyed her Spirit’s scolding to Aja. He sighed and agreed that Wind was still the Element he least understood. Jana playfully swatted at the child king’s foot when he moved back, making him smile.

“You’ve never seen Catori’s true form, have you?” he suddenly exclaimed. Eudora shrugged.

“I thought that the whip was her true form.” Aja laughed.

“No, though it is rare for a Spirit to be able to change shape in order to aid its Tamer. Catori, come to me.” Aja’s Fire Spirit appeared next to him, and Eudora gasped. The lioness was orange and white, her huge molten eyes the color of blood set aflame. Aja’s eyes were even with her shoulder. Jana, never missing an opportunity to play, ran in circles around the lioness’s feet. The fact that Catori was many times the size of little Jana made Eudora think it wasn’t the wisest thing her Spirit could do.

“Jana, come here,” Eudora ordered, softening her tone and not allowing fear to enter it. She simply didn’t want her little Fire Spirit injured. Jana giggled and leapt up to take her place on Eudora’s shoulder. The princess stroked her shadow fur and smiled.

Bowing her head, Eudora eyed Catori warily. The last time she had been summoned, Aja had used her to nearly kill the princess.

“You are magnificent, Catori, in any form you take. My little Fire Spirit could learn much from you.” Jana pouted, and Eudora found herself thinking that perhaps she was not wrong to assume that the Spirit was young, at least as far as Spirits go. Catori nodded back, and Aja spoke for her.

“She apologizes for meeting you as a weapon. With you as queen of the Passion Kingdom, she is not your enemy, but your friend.” Eudora gave a silent sigh of relief, and Jana looked up at her Tamer, as if to ask for

permission to play.

“Do you think perhaps Catori would enjoy mentoring Jana?” The great lioness gave a snort of disdain, but Eudora continued. “I know she must be very wise and strong. Jana looks up to her.” Jana spoke excitedly in Eudora’s mind.

*‘She is so very big, fire heart.’* Fire heart was a nickname Eudora rather liked, though couldn’t figure out why. Jana used it as often as she could. *‘And so beautiful! I have never seen another of our kind to rival her prowess.’* Eudora laughed and patted her Fire Spirit on the head. Aja grinned.

“The Spirits can hear each other speak, even though Tamers can only hear their own. Catori tells you that your hands are full with this one, and she would be honored to mentor her.” Jana gave a squeal of delight and hopped down from her Tamer’s shoulder. She sat beside Catori when the lioness sat. When Catori stood, so did Jana. She gave a sigh of irritation, and Eudora and Aja laughed.

“Thank you, Catori.” Catori nodded to Eudora as Miyagi came up beside his Tamer and licked her cheek. He was almost as tall as Catori.

*‘Does he have an Ice Spirit, snowflake?’* Eudora nodded and asked Aja if he would summon his other Spirits. He did, and the commotion from either side made both Tamers laugh again. It was rare that Spirits got to interact with one another like this.

Aja had a female panther as his Light Spirit named Taka, who seemed more interested in bothering the Darkness Spirit, a male wolf smaller than Bronwyn named Elsev, than introducing herself to Eudora’s Light Spirit, Naoko. The child king’s other two male Spirits were his Spirit of Ice, a bear almost as big as Catori named Artan, and his Spirit of Water, in the form of what Eudora guessed to be a hippopotamus. His name was Balan.

The rest of Aja’s Spirits were female. Lanai, in the form of a tall, proud-looking coyote, was the Spirit of Instinct. Aja’s Time Spirit, Cosmos, was a great eagle with calm gray eyes and a preference to perch on her Tamer’s forearm. An owl with stunning green eyes and the tendency to stay away from the others, Ryl was the Prophecy Spirit. Tessa, Aja’s Passion Spirit, stood close to her Tamer, eyeing him protectively and casting Eudora bored or spiteful glances alternatively.

After all introductions were made and Eudora began yawning, they both

let their Spirits leave to do whatever Spirits do when away from their Tamers.

Aja took Eudora's hand and led her out of the Spirit Temple, smiling softly. They gazed at the stars and touched blossoms of the flowers, closed in sleep, before speaking.

"I'm...sorry." Aja spoke first, and his words brought Eudora's eyebrows as well as suspicions up.

"For what?" The child king sighed and took his hand away. Eudora immediately felt the loss and cursed whatever had done this to them. She felt weak without him and she hated the feeling.

"You must understand how confusing this is to me," he began, sitting down on a smooth rock. Eudora desperately wanted sleep, but she wanted to comfort him more. So, she sat next to him and folded her hands on her thighs.

"What is confusing?" she asked, fighting to keep her hands in her lap and not stroke his midnight velvet hair. He smiled apologetically.

"This, you, everything. I didn't want to be married-I fought against it with all my strength. And now..." He hesitated and then stood, gesturing for Eudora to remain sitting when she tried following him to his feet.

"I don't know if what I feel for you is real, Eudora. I bound us in anger, before I had any chance to know who you were, how you thought, what you felt. I know that the need to touch each other is a result of the binding, so I have been wondering if...other things are occurring simply because I joined our spirits." Eudora felt cold, numb, not in the least bit tired anymore. She was stupid to believe he wouldn't hurt her again. That was all he was capable of, it seemed.

"Go on," the princess offered. Her voice was lightly touched with the heat of anger. Everything she had done, everything she had sacrificed, and he was going to run away. Again. Aja looked despondent and searched for words before speaking again. Eudora was simply stunned.

"You must understand that my whole life has been preparing to rule the Passion Kingdom. I am just past my twentieth year, the year that a prince of the Isle gets to live his own life until he must take a bride, which is on the eve of his coronation. I did not think I would be forced to wed until my mother had passed the throne, which she was in no hurry to do." He sighed. "I was awful to you for more than one reason. I wanted you to return to

Cieala, even after you had revealed yourself to be nothing like I expected. It is true that I believe that the throne of the Passion Kingdom is your rightful place. I just..." Eudora nodded, understanding.

"You just do not believe that you should be forced into a marriage that would put me there simply because you want to have your independence? You think you are the victim because my father wanted your army and your mother wanted protection for your people?" Like that, it sounded selfish. Eudora believed it was. Aja was being very, very selfish. The princess seethed with rage but spoke very calmly.

"Tell me what you would have me do, child king. I cannot remove the bond that you yourself placed upon us, and I cannot leave my people, for they are my people now. If you would like to spread your wings, do it away from me. It disgusts me that you would think to leave your people on the verge of war without their king simply because you feel your bride to be imposing on your freedom." She stood and began walking away.

"I refuse to let you be the one to leave this time, Aja. Ever since I've been here, all you've done is walk away. Until you can come to me, I do not wish to speak with you." She left him there with the moon sinking slowly into the folds of the night sky. She didn't turn back around to see him cry or show him her own tears.

Eudora was awakened nearly two hours later. It had been earlier in the night than she'd thought, and she was glad that she would be able to salvage at least a few hours of sleep. The noise that disrupted her slumber was faint and nearly inaudible, but it brought the princess far enough from her dreams to lay tensed on her bed, eyes open.

"Did I alarm you?" The voice was soft, unthreatening, but Eudora's pulse jumped at the violence contained beneath the wavering surface of the words.

"No." The princess breathed. "I simply wasn't expecting company." When his hands slid underneath the blanket Eudora had tossed across her frame haphazardly hours ago, the princess shivered. His hands were freezing. He ran them over her bare legs as she spoke.

"Aja, what is wrong?" Eudora asked quietly, turning to face him. There were tears not yet dry on his face, and she touched them, drawing them away from his chilled flesh. Even though the days on the Isle of Passion

were warm, the nights were cold as death. He let a trembling breath slip from his lips as he turned his face to rest his cheek in the palm of Eudora's hand.

"You are right," he admitted, his voice hardly a breath louder than a whisper. "And I am a fool." Eudora sat up and tucked her knees to her chest, trying not to touch the child king. She didn't want to keep handing him opportunities to hurt her.

"Why are you a fool?" she asked, listing off reasons in her mind why she thought so. Aja laughed mirthlessly.

"Reasons of my own, as well as the ones in your thoughts. You were right that I was being selfish, Eudora. I know that I have much more to prove to you than to anyone else. Would you mind if I spent the night with you?" As she began to protest, Aja gave her a sweet, close-mouthed kiss.

"I promise, I will make no advances on you, fire rose. If you hadn't noticed, however, it is cold, and I find myself longing for a little security, not freedom. As my mother once said: a gilded cage is still a cage unless you love the one who holds the key." With this, Aja snuggled up to Eudora and the princess experienced a vision, like she had when she was punishing Malon. This one did not come from Aja, however-it came from the past. Eudora saw Wyanet and King Valin arguing in her chambers.

*'A gilded cage is a cage nonetheless, Valin, and she can see the sky. You must let Eudora fly free sometime! If you are going to wed her to my son, at least let her have a year of freedom first.'* King Valin scoffed at her.

*'She sees nothing, Wyanet. She sees neither the cage nor the sky. Now, do we have an agreement or not?'* He held out a pen and paper, and Wyanet signed, seething with well-disguised hatred. She did this for her people and wept inwardly for the princess. At least she would be taught of the people, her people, however. The ruthless king had at least promised that much...

*King Valin left later that day, eager to inform the princess of her impending journey. She would be solidifying a formidable power for him.*

*'You're right, Valin.'* Wyanet spoke his name, but she was the only one in the room. *'She doesn't see the cage or the sky. For now.'*

Eudora pulled herself from the vision as forcefully as possible, bringing with the pain the unwavering knowledge that Valin had betrayed her and

thought nothing of it, simply to gain power. He was a heartless bastard and had sacrificed her not for any high ideals or because he wanted his people safe, but for power. There were tears on Eudora's face, however, as she thought about how she loved him, then and even still.

Aja sat up on his elbow and brushed the tears away. She didn't want him to see her cry and so tried to turn her face from him. He held her cheek and stroked his fingers soothingly over the damp flesh. The sympathy in his eyes was unbearable.

"Taming Prophecy has never brought me anything but pain, fire rose, the same as you. King Valin is undeserving of your love and could never hope to be worthy of your tears. Please, don't cry for him." Eudora shook her head, anger flaring through her.

"You think me stupid because I let him hurt me even though he doesn't care, even though I can never hurt him with the weapon he wields against me: love. He does not love me, and so I cannot wound him-this I know." More tears seeped out from in between her lashes, no matter how she tried to hold them in.

"I am a fool," she admitted in a cracking voice. "But nothing you can do or say will convince me that to love him is wrong. It would be wrong to allow him to do this again, knowing what I do now, but it is not wrong to love." Sobs began wracking her frame. "It is never wrong to love, no matter if they hurt you or not." Unable to form any more coherent sentences, Eudora let herself be held by Aja. He sat them both up in order to rock her back and forth, stroking her hair and whispering things to comfort her.

"You misinterpret my every word, fire rose," he murmured against her neck before pressing his lips to the same skin. "I did not say you were a fool. I said he does not deserve you. I hold him accountable, not you. You have the most forgiving nature I have ever encountered. I hate him for hurting you, and yet you give him your unconditional love. You are smart in not allowing him to hurt you anymore. Love without trust is love nonetheless, but without the benefits a strong, true, unwavering love has. I am sorry eternally that you cannot have that with him." Eudora pushed him away.

"It seems I cannot have that with anyone," she muttered, brushing at her tears angrily. More replaced them, and she resigned to letting them slide down her face.

“When things were finally close to working,” she continued thickly. “You had to be your thick-headed self again and ruin everything. You hurt me as I knew you would and hoped desperately would not.” Aja went as still as stone, all sense of life leaving his body.

“Yet you still love me,” he whispered. Eudora didn’t see tears rush to his eyes and down his cheeks. “I truly am the fool. I did not even realize your love until I threw it away.” He moved from the bed and crossed the room. When he reached the door, he turned back to Eudora.

“I have things to think on. Rest, and we will go to the beach in order to continue training in the morning.”

When he left, Eudora collapsed on her bed and cried as she never had in her life. The wracking sobs sucked all energy from her, leaving her a trembling, gasping mass of tremulous emotion and unimaginable pain. After admitting aloud he knew she loved him, he’d still walked away. How could he be more cruel? Head pounding, chest burning, and mind reeling with that single thought, Eudora lost herself to dreamless, restless sleep.

“You hurt her.” The accusation in the tone was enough to peel skin from bone if one was not wary. Aja sighed as he sat at the foot of his father’s bed.

“I seem to do it often.” Wyanet took her son’s hand and gave it a comforting squeeze. She then turned back to Thiery’s still form and sighed.

“It is not a trait you inherited from him, my son. I was always the one gifted for pain. Thiery would cut off his own hand before he gave me cause to frown.” She sighed and laid a gentle kiss on the old king’s forehead.

“And yet I always found some way to give him injury, usually a wound of the heart. I did not do this willingly, understand, but he was such an easy person to hurt. His love made this so.” She smiled wistfully. “Not that I did not love him, for I did, with all my heart. He was simply more fragile of spirit than I.” She shrugged, and Aja patted her shoulder.

“That is nothing to feel shame for, mother. I remember Thiery as being weaker than you in the area of being wounded by his love.” He leaned closer to her. “But he was overall stronger, you know. To stay with you even though you hurt him so, no matter how unintentionally, should prove just how strong.” He went quiet as Wyanet touched Thiery’s face affectionately, almost so softly that it made Aja think she was asking his forgiveness for past sins.

“Eudora is like this, my son. She will love you no matter what, but a time will come where she will feel her self-preservation more strongly than that love. You cannot keep hurting her and expect her to keep her faith, trust, and hopes with you. Eventually, like Thiery, she will reach her point of breaking. Let us hope it does not do to her what it has done to your father.” Her tears were quiet, but Aja knew the pain she was feeling. Wyant blamed herself for Thiery finally succumbing to the Eternal Darkness. The child king stood and made for the door.

Aja left the room, left his mother to the silence of his father’s tomb. He refused to let that happen to Eudora, but how to prevent it? He simply had to stop hurting her, but how to do that? Aja’s Light Spirit, Taka, appeared before her Tamer. The golden female panther sat right in his path and glared at him before answering his silent query.

*‘Love,’* she declared as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. *‘You are stubborn, and foolish. This, joined with your gift for pain, makes you a difficult man to love. The world can be healed by love, the soul can grow, the seeds of the future sown with promise and care. Simply love and the world will be right. The great Spirits spoke those words to you, and you, in your arrogance, in your idiocy, ignored them. What would you do to make this right for her, Aja?’*

Aja frowned. His Light Spirit was usually a rambunctious hellion, always bent on terrorizing Elsev, the Darkness Spirit in wolf form. She now stood patiently, looking wise and firm.

*‘When did you become so inclined to voice your thoughts, Taka?’* Aja asked disapprovingly. It was a jest, though, and Taka knew that. She glared at him instead of acknowledging it.

*‘When I realized you were going to single handedly bring ruin to the only woman in the world capable of understanding and loving you. Not to mention that, without her, the Passion Kingdom will fall. It is the first and only defense against the evil that is even now taking wing. Would you let the world be thrust into chaos simply because you are too thickheaded to learn to love the woman you are meant for?’*

Aja patted his Light Spirit on the head as he walked past her without answering. She snarled loudly and pounced on his back. It was the first time he had felt her become close to solid, though his other Spirits had done it on occasion.

*'You will listen to my words, whelp!'* Taka growled. Aja was taken aback. She had never expressed her anger openly towards him before. He had not even been aware that she was capable of becoming angry.

*'Taka, I am going to make this right,'* Aja declared. He had rolled over so that now his Light Spirit's paws were resting on his shoulder. Her claws, no matter how insubstantial they were supposed to be, dug into his flesh.

*'How, by doing as you have always done? It will not work, Aja. She has been betrayed too many times to allow you to get close to her now without proving yourself to her. You need guidance in this, or else you will destroy everything.'* She roared her anger when he tried raising himself off the ground and drew blood on his shoulders.

*'Let me up, Taka,'* Aja commanded in a voice that was even, but radiated anger. Taka let a threatening snarl rumble through her stomach and up through her mouth. She was more furious than Aja had ever seen her.

*'Not until you listen to me, whelp.'* Aja became irritated with the demeaning title. *'Then don't act like a child!'* Taka snapped in response to his thoughts.

*'How am I acting like a child?'* Aja demanded to know in outrage. Taka let a low laugh find its way from in between her bared fangs.

*'Easier to answer, whelp, is how are you not? The only thing you are doing worthy of your position as the man she loves is deciding that something must be done about the way you treat her.'* When Aja became insulted by this, Taka pressed her claws deeper into his skin, commanding his attention. *'Go to Amana. Ayasha told us of Eudora's love for this woman. If anyone can help, it is she.'* The Spirit paused to growl again. *'And sleep in your own bed. Nothing you have done has granted you access to hers.'* With this, the Light Spirit vanished. Groaning as he touched his shoulder wounds, which were dripping blood, Aja stood.

Almost instantly, another Spirit materialized. It was Catori, in her form as lioness.

*'She is right, you know,'* Catori said softly as she took her place walking by his side. *'You must do something, or the darkness of Illac'Mur will swallow us whole. I am not concerned with affairs of the heart-you know this. Taka is playing matchmaker and ignoring the greater danger. If Eudora leaves, your people will fall. This cannot happen. If it does, you welcome an age of evil without even a fight.'* Aja glowered.

*'Can I not have a moment's peace? I understand that I have done wrong. Is that not enough?'* Catori frowned sympathetically.

*'No, my cub, it is not. Only with the combined strength of the rightful king and queen of the Passion Kingdom can this disaster be evaded. You know you are the rightful king. Let her take the place she was destined for.'* Aja shook his head.

*'It isn't that easy, Catori. She doesn't care about what she rules, the power she possesses.'* Catori gave him an expression he had seen her use countless times before. It always made him feel ages younger than she.

*'Oh? And what does the fire rose care about? What fills her heart? What does she hold closer than anything she has?'* Aja thought for a moment, then sighed.

*'The ones she loves. Eudora would do anything for those she protects, because through that protection, she loves them.'* Catori nodded.

*'I am glad you understand that, at least. This queen will do anything for those she protects, those she loves.'* She gave him that expression again, the one he hated. *'You would do well to become one of those people, my cub. Who knows when you will need her protection?'* Aja scoffed.

*'Why would I need the protection of a woman, Catori?'* The lioness snarled in outrage at this, and Aja backed away from her instinctively.

*'In this matter, you are being very foolish, young one.'* Catori snarled. *'You would do well not to offend the women in your life, especially the ones who could kill you in an instant.'* The threat was obvious, but empty. Catori could never harm her Tamer.

*'You're right, Catori, you're right.'* The child king sighed. *'I always make a mess of things...I'll go to Amana, make it right. Is that fine, my friend?'* Catori blew out a heated breath and nodded.

*'That will be fine, Aja. But remember what Taka and I have told you. This will be the world's undoing if it is not corrected.'* Aja rolled his eyes as his Spirit departed. Of course a problem with the fire rose would be the end of life as it was known. When were things not of a manner such as this when concerning her? Irritated with all things, Aja stormed to his room, slammed the door, and went to bed.

## Chapter Ten~ The Storm Breaks

The next few weeks went by in a blur for Eudora. She continued to Tame Passion in small ways every day, sometimes with the assistance of her court or Wyanet and her pets. The princess still wanted the queen to teach her how to Tame it on her own, but Wyanet gave her a half-smile and told Eudora that her Passion had the most voracious appetite of any she had ever encountered. To learn to Tame it successfully without anyone else would not only be a difficult task, it would be nothing short of a miracle.

While Taming Passion came as easily as breathing, Elements like Rock, Darkness, and Light were near impossible, even with the aid of Eudora's Element Spirits.

*'Here, Eudora, just feel through me...'* Loki, the Darkness Spirit, offered as he appeared and touched his muzzle to his Tamer's hand. Eudora, frustrated, simply nodded her agreement as the wispy, midnight black fox spoke in her mind.

*'The Darkness is misunderstood, my shadow gem,'* Loki murmured, focusing his Tamer's energy on the Darkness all around her. *'Light and Darkness need each other to thrive. Without one, the other withers and dies. Each is needed to perfect a balance. Feel that balance within you and call the Darkness to you.'*

Eudora's Light Spirit, Naoko, materialized as well. *'For this to truly work, she must see both,'* Naoko said softly when Loki glowered at her. The fox nodded, his darting eyes returning to his Tamer's face. Naoko, the shining little elephant, touched her trunk to Eudora's free hand.

*'Do not think about the Light or the Darkness, moonbeam,'* Naoko whispered. *'Think about the balance. Without one, there is no other. Without right, there is no wrong. Touch that part of you, that center of balance. Touch that piece that feeds the balance and is fed by it. Only then can you master either the Darkness or the Light.'*

Eudora tried desperately to focus on what her Spirits were telling her. Searching for that calm center of herself was something she could barely fathom, however, and the efforts of the Spirits were wasted. Oceanus sighed as he approached, and Naoko and Loki vanished, after words of thanks from

their Tamer.

“You will learn in time, Eudora,” he offered in consolation. Eudora gave him a half-hearted smile.

“I fear I am not giving this my full attention,” the princess admitted. “I will try harder.” Oceanus laughed and touched the back of his hand to Eudora’s cheek, a sign of respect between friends.

“We will add an hour of meditation, then. If you can find your center, it will be easier for you to control your Taming.”

Neither Aja nor Warrick ever attended the training sessions anymore, which wounded Eudora’s heart. The prince, after the discussion he and Eudora had had a few weeks ago, had come to one session, looked once at Eudora, and left. From that moment, he was scarcely seen around the palace and never in close proximity with the princess. It hurt her so....

“That will be fine, Oceanus.” Eudora sighed. Her training had seemed pointless as of late. She wanted to see the army, see for herself that it really was seasoned and battle-ready, but without Aja’s permission, it was like asking a brick wall to bend for her. She couldn’t go near the army without Aja’s authorization and couldn’t corner the prince long enough for him to grant it.

“Go to bed, Eudora,” Amana told the princess with a small smile. This had been the last training session for the day, and the sun had set hours ago. She kissed the princess on her cheek before ushering her away, telling her that she was exhausted and needed the rest. Eudora made her way to the palace as Amana took Oceanus’ hand.

“I worry about this, my husband,” she admitted softly after bidding the other Tamers goodnight.

“Oh?” Oceanus replied, giving his wife’s hand a gentle squeeze and leading her back to their home. “What worries you?” Cael was asleep in his bed, and Amana smiled down at him, stroking his forehead with her free hand before responding.

“Eudora,” Amana told Oceanus. “She accelerates as we expected her to in her Taming. Already she is close to being a Master of Wind, Water, and Fire. Even Prophecy and Instinct seem to come naturally to her. It is obvious that she is the most talented Passion Tamer the kingdom has ever produced. But I feel the strength of her spirit waning.... This is all Prince Aja’s fault, you know?” Her eyebrows knitted together in a frown as another voice

commented on her words.

“Is it now?” Aja sounded furious, but weary, as well. “It seems more than one share your view, Amana, and I have come to correct it.” Amana fell to her knees, afraid for the first time of the child king’s tone and expression. He looked downright vengeful.

“Forgive me, my liege,” Amana exclaimed. “I should keep my tongue curbed about such things.” Aja stood and gave Amana a smile that was gentle, but only because he forced it to be so. He was terribly angry. Kneeling in front of the trembling Wind Tamer, Aja took her by the shoulders and helped her stand.

“Nonsense, Amana,” the child king said softly. “You never need curb your tongue, at least not around me. I am your friend and, even if I do not appreciate what you say, I will appreciate your wisdom and advice when you tell me how I can correct the mistakes I have made repeatedly.”

Oceanus, who had been nearly vibrating with his effort to contain the power of his Water Taming, which was more than ready to spring to Amana’s defense, let that simmering protective wrath drain away.

“In this, my friend, we would be more than willing to assist,” Oceanus declared, gesturing for Aja to sit, which he did. Amana, still looking wary, took a seat opposite him and folded her hands on her lap.

“Where to begin?” the Wind Tamer began jokingly before launching into a lecture that was close to an hour long. She finished by telling Aja that he had been a fool in matters that concerned the Ciealan princess and imparted upon him a vital piece of advice.

“Eudora is an infant in the matters of love, my prince. You are a child of the Passion Kingdom—you know how much a successful relationship depends on physical as well as emotional harmony.” She gave him a look that was very motherly, scolding. “And I don’t mean sex on this, Aja. However, I believe that in order to gain back even a measure of her trust, you are going to need to put yourself completely at her mercy until she lets you back through the rather impenetrable boundaries she has now constructed around herself.” Oceanus gave Aja a very firm look.

“Completely at her mercy means doing exactly what she wants, Aja, even if that is abstaining from *any* intercourse until she trusts you.” Aja’s mouth fell open.

“A-any? You can’t possibly mean.... How will I Tame my Passion?”

His indignity made Oceanus and Amana laugh.

“I know your mother is an exceptionally skilled teacher, my child king,” Amana said teasingly. “Therefore, I know you are incredibly practiced at Taming Passion on your own.” A flush painted Aja’s cheeks, causing the Wind and Water Tamers to laugh again.

“This is going to take some time and patience, Aja,” Oceanus warned. “You must give yourself over utterly and entirely to Eudora. Only with your complete trust in her will she come any closer to trusting you again.”

Aja left Oceanus and Amana’s home in order to search for Eudora. Knowing instinctively where she would be, the child king headed to the garden sanctuary of his people.

“You aren’t welcome near me.” Eudora spoke without turning around as Aja came up silently behind her. Ayasha, glaring wrathfully, materialized facing the prince. She was letting him know that she could and would attack were he to come a step closer. Halting, Aja sighed.

“And for just reasons, fire rose,” Aja confessed. “I simply wish to speak with you.” Eudora, who had been sitting in the middle of a patch of Everbloom Wind Lilies, stood and whirled to face the child king. Ayasha’s rage paled in comparison to the explosive fury emanating from the scowling royal.

“Speak with me? Speak with me! You have barely *looked* at me in the past weeks. What have you come to tell me, child king? That you are sorry? That you beg my forgiveness?” She cursed him in a tongue not her own nor the Passion Kingdom’s, so Aja couldn’t understand her. Against his better judgments, he found himself so attracted to her at that moment that it stole the breath from his lungs. Her cheeks were flushed, her chest heaving as she gulped air, unable to breathe deeply enough to calm her wrath. Her eyes flashed like molten silver. The dress she was wearing was one Aja had never seen before, a pale silver creation that brought unnatural, flattering light to her eyes and complimented her luscious figure.

“Listen to me, fire rose, please.” Aja spoke in a calm voice to combat her wrath. Eudora balled her hands into fists and glowered at him.

“No!” she shouted with enough anger to shake a mountain. “I am through listening to you! I will not abandon my people, Aja, no matter how much you want me to leave! They *are* my people, and I refuse to leave

them, for you or anyone else! You will have to kill me before I even think about taking a breath that is not taken in their benefit!” Glaring, panting, and looking more attractive than Aja had ever thought she could, Eudora found tears in her eyes.

“I can’t believe that you could live among them your whole life and still care more for yourself than your people. How could you think to deny them a monarch who would give anything to protect them, to provide for them? How *could* you?”

Aja, anger at her accusations making him as irrational as she was being, took a threatening step forward. He was blocked immediately by four of Eudora’s Spirits. Two of them even solidified and pushed him back.

“Call them off, Eudora.” Aja growled. “We must discuss this and have it done with.” Eudora made gestures, and her Spirits, Miyagi, Ayasha, Eternity, and Naoko, all backed away.

“There is nothing to discuss, Aja. If you do not want the throne, abdicate and I will rule the Passion Kingdom alone.” Aja sputtered for a response, his rage leaving him as incredulity took over.

“You can’t do that!” he declared in a shocked voice. Eudora looked like a vengeful goddess. Her wrath prickled across his skin like a wind blown over a blazing inferno.

“I shall do whatever it takes to prevent this war or, if it must come about, fight with all my strength to protect the people who depend on me. I can only utilize my full arsenal as queen of the Passion Kingdom. I do not need a king by my side to succeed, Aja, especially one as spineless and heartless as you.” Fury sweeping instantaneously back through him, the child king glared at Eudora.

“You will watch your words, princess, or I shall have your tongue cut out for your crimes.” Eudora summoned all of her Spirits, and they crowded around her like dutiful sentries.

“You shall try and, in so doing, you shall die. Besides, my prince, of what crimes do I stand accused? Is it a crime to want security for my people? For I am guilty as charged if such is so. I stand with them, for them, to fight back the shadow of evil that is even now stretching fingers across our land. I am also guilty of being foolish in love, as I’m sure you would consider this a crime. So, tell me, Aja, what other crimes could you possibly call against me?”

Aja searched frantically for words, but in the end simply sighed and shook his head. His anger left him, this time for good. “What is wrong with us, Eudora, that we fight like thunder and lightning? I sought you out to beg forgiveness, and all that came of it was another argument to tear us further apart. Would you at least listen to my words before deducing the best way to strike at me?” Allowing her Spirits to slip back into their insubstantial forms, Eudora nodded and sat back down amidst the Everbloom Wind Lilies.

“Speak, then, child king. But do not expect my forgiveness as soon as the words leave your lips. You yourself expressed anger over the way I view my father, how I still love him, even though he will never again have my trust. He is of my blood-you are not. Do not expect the same treatment.” Aja sat near her but didn’t touch her. He was being as careful as possible.

“Does that mean you no longer love me?” he asked softly. Eudora stiffened, her lips pressed into a tight, colorless line. She didn’t respond, and Aja sighed.

“It is not my place to ask that question. I am sorry.” Looking out across the garden, Aja sat silently beside Eudora for a few minutes. She finally broke the silence.

“Are you going to speak or not?” she questioned in an exasperated tone. He smiled sadly.

“Of course. You know, when I was younger, my father and I used to walk through these gardens. We would sit right where you and I sit now and talk of many things. He was supposed to be training me to be king, but what he was training me for was simply life. He told me a great many things that have been invaluable to me.” Eudora, ever the curious one and desperate to know about the silent, still king who rested in his half-life, forgot her anger and took Aja’s bait.

“What things?” she asked quietly. Aja smiled again, and this time it was more poignant and reminiscent than sad.

“Any old things,” he answered. “Thiery often spoke of my mother and how to treat those we love. He said that my mother hurt him often and yet never meant to. It was a gift of hers, the ability to cause pain without intention.” Eudora frowned.

“Not a gift. That is certainly a curse,” the princess protested. Aja nodded.

“I think so, too. I always asked my father why he would tolerate her when she hurt him so. He would simply smile and tell me that he loved her more than he ever had loved anyone, more than he ever could love anyone. Love, he said, can make a man weak and strong at the same time. It can also give reason to madness and tolerance to the intolerable. That is way he suffered through what my mother did. He loved her, more than he loved himself, more than he loved most others in the world.” The prince’s smile this time was more prideful than anything.

“But not more than his people. Wyanet and Thiery both loved their people above all else.” Eudora interrupted, some of her anger returning.

“At least someone did.” Aja didn’t respond to the insult. He simply continued speaking of his family, the Passion Kingdom, friends he had made and lost over the years. He spoke of his Taming, how he hated the thought of having to rule the Passion Kingdom and relinquish the dream he had held above all others; to travel all nations and seek out every untouched corner of the world. When he discovered he was a Legendary Tamer, his hopes soared, for with such a long life, he could certainly see all he wanted. Then, King Valin approached Wyanet with his proposal. Against his will and wishes, Aja was shackled into a marriage with a woman he doubted he would even be able to stand, let alone love.

“I hated my mother for many days after she told me you would be coming to take your place as my bride. I had grown up around the most true and beautiful of any love I had ever seen: the love between Wyanet, Thiery, and their people. To think that I would be forced to wed a woman not my choice and never have a chance to feel that love broke my heart. The only reason I agreed was because Cassara came to me and told me she had had a vision about me. If you hadn’t already guessed, the only limitation of Prophecy is that the Tamer can see nothing about his or her future. When Cassara told me that to wed you would allow me to realize my greatest goal, I stayed.” Eudora turned to look at him while the stars came out, one by one, to gleam in the sky.

“What is your greatest goal, Aja?” Eudora asked. Aja smiled at her, and this one was altogether different from any smile she had ever seen of him. It was gentle and benevolent and filled with something the princess could only guess at.

“My greatest goal is to love and be loved in return the way my mother

and father loved each other and their people. Cassara told me that I would find love like that without saying the words exactly and gave me enough incentive to stay.” He frowned. “And yet, I have done everything in my power, it seems, to keep my goal from being unrealized. Why do you think this is so?” Eudora shrugged.

“Perhaps it is not what you really want...” She ventured forth a guess. Aja laughed for a long time. When he quieted, there was heat to his eyes that Eudora recognized so well. She hated him for it, hated herself for it, because she felt herself permanently, irrevocably drawn to him, in love with him. She hated that he could look at her, turn her way, enter her thoughts, and make her want to hold him and forgive everything. After hearing him speak for so long, she understood part of why he had acted the way he had, which made her even more angry.

“Eudora, I have never been so sure about anything. This is something I have aspired to achieve since I was old enough to think logically about it. I think it is less that my goal has changed and more that I have encountered something beyond my wildest imaginings.” His eyes were orbs of frosty emerald, misting over like dewdrops touching sweet summer grass. He put his head in his hands, and Eudora was silent as he wept.

“I must leave, child king,” she finally said when she was sure her voice would not betray her heart. She was shaking inside, burning with the urge to take him in her arms and make everything all right for him. He didn’t say anything for the longest time, so Eudora sat and counted the stars, praying for strength and guidance.

“I love you.” His words were so soft, like a breath over silk, but Eudora heard them and froze. Not knowing what to do, Eudora stared down at the Everbloom Wind Lilies as her thoughts raced. Surely he was joking....

“I love you, Eudora,” the child king said in a stronger, louder voice as he lifted his gaze and directed it towards her.

“No, you don’t,” the princess whispered in denial. She didn’t know why she would argue, it seemed that that was all she could do with him. She was so tired of it, though, so tired of hurting him and being hurt by him. Aja’s mask of confidence, which was wavering anyway, crumbled and left him looking inconsolably heartbroken. Tears streaked his cheeks, and his whole body shook with the effort of containing too much emotion.

“I do,” he protested. Eudora shook her head. She had to fight this, had to

fight the urge to cry along with him and let the tears wash away everything that had happened between them, every cruel word, every blow to each of their hearts.

“You don’t, Aja. How can you? Because of me, you’ve had to give up your dream. I’m different from everything you’ve ever wanted...I’m...” Tears threatening to overtake her as well, Eudora fell silent before her resolve shattered. Aja took both of her hands in his, squeezing hard enough to hurt in order to make her look at him.

“You’re the most stubborn woman in the world,” he finished. She looked at him incredulously. “You’re presumptuous, foul-tempered, and obstinate. You are by far the most willful and independent woman I’ve ever beheld.” He laid a gentle kiss on the side of either of her eyes and laughed.

“You’re the woman I love, the woman I’ll always love more than myself, more than I’ll ever love anyone.” He gave her a special smile, one she hoped would never be directed at any woman other than her. “But not more than my people. That is why I fear it to be my solemn duty to marry you straight away and provide a strong heir to carry on in our places, after we win this war and bring our people peace.” Pressing another kiss to her forehead, Aja breathed deeply and gave her a look that was breathtaking. He wasn’t lying—he wasn’t doing this to hurt her. She needed to accept the fact that it was not her mission in life to fight him every step of the way. She needed to accept that he loved her as much as she loved him.

“You’re more stubborn than I am,” Eudora finally declared, causing Aja to laugh joyously. “And I could never match you in arrogance.” He nodded and claimed her lips tenderly, kissing her as if she were oxygen and he a man dying of suffocation.

“You’re the most beautiful creature in the world, you know that?” Eudora blushed, and they both laughed. “I hope our son has your amazing hair, your spirit, your laugh.” Eudora laughed again, as if to encourage his words.

“We will have a daughter, my prince,” she countered, mostly joking, but instinctively knowing she spoke true. Aja gave her a somber look and shook his head.

“Well, that won’t do, my love. I’ll have to behead you.” Eudora hit him on the shoulder, gasping at his words.

“You shouldn’t say such things, Aja. That’s horrible even to think!”

They laughed again, and Aja pounced on Eudora, tickling her sides until she could barely breathe, let alone think clearly. The prince moved to her side and laid down next to her so their heads were right next to each other and their feet pointed different directions. Panting softly, Eudora watched the stars as Aja played with her hair.

“I would love a daughter, Eudora,” the prince admitted. “I always wanted a daughter, a strong, proud daughter who would rule with her head and her heart. At least, I wanted my first child to be a daughter. Boys can be terribly difficult to reign in, you know.” Eudora sighed, smiled, and nodded.

“Oh, I know. How many children do you want?” Aja chuckled, and that masculine warmth slid across Eudora’s skin, bringing with it a rush of desire. She wanted him now more than she ever had.

“I was thinking twelve.” Eudora bit her lip to keep from laughing. In a serious voice, she replied.

“Why stop at twelve? Twenty sounds better.” They both laughed. “As long as you’re willing to deliver half of them.” They collapsed into giggles again, and Aja rose fluidly from his back. Crouching on his hands and knees at Eudora’s head, he let his lips hover over hers. Their laughter stopped, and heat blossomed around them. Eudora lifted her head in order to touch her lips to his, and with this, they were lost.

Aja kept the kiss sweet, gentle, and languid, not moving his hands from the ground or doing anything else to ignite the flame that simmered just beneath the surface. Pulling gently on Eudora’s bottom lip, he guided her without words in the delicate art of arousal and foreplay.

Because each sexual episode the princess had experienced before this was the result of the Passion Taming, she didn’t know how much pleasure could be gained from simply kissing, touching, breathing. When Aja finally cupped his hands over Eudora’s breasts, kneading the supple mounds with expert skill, she was aching for his flesh.

Aja moved from his position behind Eudora, coming to her side, never letting her go without his touch. He ran his mouth over her jaw and down her neck, caressing the skin and making her tremble.

“Aja...” The prince covered her mouth with his hand and spoke as Eudora drew one of his fingers between his lips and sucked on it, holding his gaze with her own.

“Don’t speak, my love. I will teach you everything you need to know.”

Eudora watched him as he kissed his way down her stomach, exposed because of her dress, which was fashioned in the Passion Kingdom's design. When he eased it up and brought her into a sitting position in order to slip it over her head, the prince smiled. "Wouldn't want to have to destroy a dress that so flatters that gorgeous body," he declared.

The prince, of course, wasn't wearing anything except for a chain of silver around his navel. His arousal was obvious, and Eudora found herself irrationally frightened. He was larger even than Kiet had been.

"You're bigger than anyone I've had, Aja. This won't hurt, will it?" After looking stunned for a moment, the prince laughed. Kissing her lips softly, Aja reached down to stroke his fingers in between the princess's spread legs. She arched up to him instinctively and gasped.

"You will feel nothing but pleasure, fire rose," Aja promised before moving down to where his hand had just been, leaving a trail of hot, wet kisses along the way. When his tongue massaged that most delicate flesh, Eudora writhed beneath him. He was very talented, a master of his art, and she was soon gasping for breath, on the brink of embracing oblivion.

"Aja, Aja, please...." The princess panted. "Please, stop. I can bear no more." Aja chuckled and moved to cover her body completely with his. His member pressed, hard and firm, against her inner thigh, and she nearly cried out in her need to have him inside her. This was not the Passion Element. She simply wanted him more than she could ever understand.

"I love you, Eudora," Aja whispered before he guided himself into her. Even though he was not her first or even her second, it was still difficult, still a fight to get all of him into that tight, moist opening. He didn't fight against her body, simply allowed her time to adjust to how thick and full he felt inside of her. Waves of pleasure so close to agony it was frightening slammed into Eudora as she grasped at her only remaining thread of logical thought.

"I love you." Her words were close enough to inaudible that she doubted he heard her, but it didn't matter, not then. Aja eased out of her slowly, as if still afraid he would hurt her, but Eudora grabbed his chin with one hand, digging the nails of her other into his hip.

"I am not made of glass, my prince-you will not break me." Her words were so strained with need that she was amazed Aja could find enough resolve in himself to move back inside her in a way that was excruciatingly

slow.

“I thought to torture you a bit,” he declared, breathless as she. Eudora, surprising Aja, flipped them over and was either skilled or lucky enough to keep him inside her when his back hit the ground.

“Let me help,” she murmured before she began to ride him. Eudora moved purely by instinct, allowing her mind to fade into a blissful vortex empty of all except feelings of pleasure and heat. Aja grabbed her breasts and molded his fingers over them, squeezing so that it almost hurt. Eudora’s Instinct Taming liked it, and she groaned as her hips moved faster, slamming their bodies together.

Bending over him, Eudora slowed her pace and licked Aja’s nipple. The next time they did this, she was going to take time to touch, tease, and lick every inch of him. For now, biting down on that flesh and hearing him cry out was enough to bring her back to the edge.

Raising herself back up, Eudora continued to grind herself against Aja, panting and moaning. His hands on her hips were vice-like, and she knew that if she didn’t bruise, it would be the grace of the Spirits.

When Aja arched his back up and blinding heat rushed through Eudora, she knew that they had both hit their peaks. Amidst the sheen of sweat, primal sounds, and the exquisite feel of his flesh on hers, Eudora lost herself to more than one climax.

After she had collapsed on him and their breathing had slowed enough to take the fear of hyperventilation out of her, Eudora laughed and kissed Aja’s neck.

“That was nice,” the princess said with a breathy sigh. Aja made a face as he stroked her cheek.

“That was the wrong thing to say, my love.” Eudora laughed again and rolled off him, stretching like a sinewy cat. She propped her head up with one arm and let the other rest on her navel. Her eyes were burning hot enough to melt metal.

“You were fabulous, my child king, as I’m sure you well know. Now that we have that out of the way, what shall we do?” Aja moved closer in order to kiss her softly. The sweet taste of his mouth was intoxicating and Eudora lost herself in the simple pleasure of his lips for a good time before he pulled away and responded.

“We shall marry, tomorrow.” He looked at the sky, which was pulling

itself from its sleepy slumber into the hazy colors of morning.

“You mean today,” Eudora corrected, laughing again and noticing how tired she was. “The night has come and gone while we argued and made love.” Aja pressed one more delicate kiss to Eudora’s mouth and then stood, taking her hands to help her up, as well.

“Yes, today. We need some rest, and then we’ll go to my mother. She has a surprise for you.”

Eudora enjoyed the deepest, most relaxing sleep of her life nestled in Aja’s warm arms in his bed. They slept well into the afternoon, waking once to make love and then slipping back into their dreamless slumber. By the time the sun had reached the highest point in the sky, Eudora’s eyes were drifting open and a slow, easy smile was curving her lips.

“Rise and shine, child king,” she declared, kissing him quickly before leaving the warmth and security of the bed. The only reason she could was because she had the promise of more nights and mornings like that to come.

“You need a bath,” Aja commented, watching her as she walked across the room. Her hips swayed provocatively, and he found himself appreciating the training simply living in the Passion Kingdom offered. Eudora, if she desired to, could be the most seductive of sirens. The princess gave Aja a look over her shoulder, an appraising, raised-eyebrow look that managed to be critical and flirtatious all at once.

“You need one more,” she retorted lightly. He rolled off the bed and moved to stand next to her as she touched the tap near the huge in-ground tub. Her Water mark exploded with light, and the water rushed joyfully from the tap. Aja frowned.

“My Taming never responds that way,” he said, puzzled. “It’s like obliging you is the most thrilling task the Taming can undertake. Even something as simple as filling a tub makes the Element act like...well, look.” Eudora smiled as she watched the water frolic about as it filled the tub. It splashed over and around itself like a bunch of children made of waves, playing delightedly with their brothers and sisters.

“Perhaps it is because I see no task as simple,” Eudora offered. She touched her hand to the water, barely breaking the surface, as she released her Taming from the faucet. The water began to steam as Eudora looked at Aja.

“I see it as a blessing, all of it. Even heating the water is amazing to me. You grew up with the Taming, Aja—you think of it as natural. I never knew it was real, so I think of it as magical. Perhaps this is the reason.” Although she had brought her dress back from the garden sanctuary, she had had no reason to put it back on the night before. Therefore, she immediately slid into the water, luxuriating in the warmth. Aja shook his head and then joined her. The bath was more than big enough for the two of them.

“We should all see it as magic, as a blessing,” Aja commented as he pressed himself to Eudora’s side. They were facing each other, and they smiled with their faces merely inches apart.

“One thing is a blessing,” Eudora declared, stroking her hand down his cheek. Water droplets followed and caressed his skin after her fingers had passed. He smiled to see her using her Taming so easily.

“What is that?” he asked, kissing her before he allowed her to answer. She blew a breath across her hand, and the water drops floated away as if they weighed no more than air.

“That we are together, that we have any trust between us, let alone enough to begin and maintain a marriage.” Aja frowned in a way that told Eudora he was thinking, pondering her words.

“You’re right,” he agreed. “It takes a strong person to trust someone after they’ve been hurt that many times. You’re strong like Thiery was strong.” Eudora nodded and snuggled closer to him.

“And weak like he was, too. Isn’t that right? Wyanet hurt him the same way you hurt me.” Aja kissed the crown of her head, still frowning.

“That’s right. And I’m sorry.... You’re just so fragile, the both of you, and Wyanet and I are so good at bringing pain.” Eudora sighed.

“Is that why she partakes in the punishment?” the princess asked before sitting up to wash her hair. Aja took the soap, fragranced with fruits and flowers from the garden sanctuary, and washed her back before responding.

“Yes, I think that has something to do with it,” he admitted. “But Wyanet feels strongly responsible for her people. Any threat or insult against them she takes as a personal offense. Therefore, she also does it out of a deep sense of duty. She doesn’t like anyone to hurt her people.” Eudora nodded again.

“That makes sense. I would do it for that reason, as well.” Aja smiled as Eudora rinsed her hair and then doused a rag with the perfumed soap in

order to wash the child king. It was a very relaxing task, punctuated occasionally by a kiss or caress.

“I know you would, fire rose. I think Wy Janet knew, as well. That may be why she took you to Malon’s punishment.” Eudora shivered at the memory. Her Passion Taming had first awakened at the punishment.

“A rather unpleasant experience,” Eudora confessed. “But there were parts of it that made me feel...strange.” Aja stood and, when Eudora followed him, wrapped the princess in a big, fluffy towel.

“It was your Instinct Taming, I think. Mine reacts to pain, sweat, fear, and blood like that, too. It always helps me Tame Passion more fully if I allow my Instinct to...join in, so to speak.” Eudora allowed Aja to dry her. When he took his time to dry her breasts, she smirked at him and hit him lightly on the head.

“How do you do that?” the princess questioned as she drained the tub and stepped out. Aja, still dripping, didn’t follow her. He didn’t want to get the carpet wet. Eudora mimicked him and wrapped a towel around his waist, paying special attention to his groin. Instead of protesting, he gave her a hot look.

“Continue this and we will need another bath,” he warned her. She smiled, then laughed and finished drying him off.

“So, how do you Tame them simultaneously?” Eudora asked when the prince was dry. He followed her to his closet and watched with an amused expression as she picked out a long, see-through emerald cloak, silver sandals, and a silver arm bracer. Aja dressed and shrugged before answering.

“You simply drop the barriers,” he told her. “The Instinct awakens as the Passion is being fed, but it doesn’t respond like the other Element. Instinct is the soul of patience. Instinct guides a wolf to wait before it pounces, allows any predator the determination to stealthily track prey. Passion is all consuming, engulfing, and acts like a child who wants a sweet. Passion does not know how to wait, it does not have patience. Therefore, it can consume you while Instinct waits calmly nearby. To indulge both of them is to tread the line between pain and pleasure, to seek rapture in a realm of forbidden fruit. Most are not brave enough to blur the line, let alone crush it into oblivion.” Eudora had been listening in rapt silence the entire time. Nodding her approval at Aja’s clothing, she finally spoke.

“And you have crushed this line?” she questioned in a calm voice. Aja’s had been empty of emotion while he spoke, and she echoed his tone. He gave her a look she couldn’t place and didn’t try to.

“I don’t believe the line ever existed for me,” he stated plainly. “I was born into my Taming as much as my title. Instinct, Passion, and Fire came almost as soon as I attempted to Tame them. I had Lanai, my Spirit of Instinct, Catori, my Spirit of Fire, and Tessa, my Spirit of Passion before I reached my fifteenth year.” As if speaking her name was summons enough, Tessa appeared beside Aja.

*‘Master.’* She purred through his mind, molding herself against his back and stroking her claws hands down his chest. Tessa was the only Spirit who addressed him thus. There was more sexual connotation to the title than anything, however, and Aja knew she didn’t really see him as the one in control.

*‘Hello, Tessa,’* Aja exclaimed brightly, watching as Eudora’s eyes smoldered. She was still naked, which wasn’t unusual in the Passion Kingdom. Tessa hardly paid the princess any mind as she kissed Aja’s neck.

*‘What are you doing today, my prince?’* Tessa asked. *‘You haven’t asked me to Tame Passion with you in a very long time.’* Taming Passion with one’s Spirit was a truly phenomenal event. Some Tamers who became strong enough to gain a Passion Spirit even shunned other people in favor of spending time solely with their Spirit.

*‘I am to marry this day, Tessa. As a matter of fact, we are going to see my mother right now. She has Eudora’s wedding dress.’* Snarling her anger, Tessa vanished.

“She didn’t look happy,” Eudora exclaimed, allowing a pleased smirk to curve her lips. Aja laughed.

“Such an evil look, fire rose. You can’t possibly be jealous of Tessa.” Eudora shrugged.

“I know how I feel when I look at Calla, so, yes, I am a bit jealous.” She sighed. “Even though it is illogical. I know that we can hardly be expected to be monogamous. I doubt you even know the meaning of the word.” Aja grinned.

“Oh, I know the meaning. And I find it absurd. You’re right—we won’t be monogamous.” He drew her to him and held her tightly. “But you will learn in time, fire rose. We share our bodies with those who are our friends

or as a means to successfully Tame our Passion. However, you will find no more devoted partner, no more dedicated lover than one of Passion Kingdom birth. We share our bodies, yes, but our hearts are for one and one alone.”

Eudora nodded and smiled. She had known exactly what to look forward to when she decided that she truly wanted to marry Aja. She wasn't just expecting it-she was greeting it with open arms. This was what she was meant for.

“I know and understand,” Eudora told Aja, who smiled with relief. “Now, what am I going to wear?” Seeing as the princess had no clothes in Aja's room, the prince gave her a silver chain to wrap around her waist and decorated her chest with silver body glitter. Her hair was hanging down to brush her hips and moved like it was part of the outfit, no matter how little the outfit consisted of.

“You're ready,” the child king declared. Gulping silently, Eudora padded barefoot out of the room, following Aja. They made their way down winding hallways and twisting corridors, heading towards Wyanet's room. When they discovered she was in the banquet hall for lunch, they headed that way.

“You know, even though everyone has seen everything I have, I still feel more naked now than I ever have in my life,” Eudora whispered to Aja as they passed the fifth servant in a row to give her an appreciative nod. They passed Islet, one of Wyanet's pets, and she handed the princess an envelope before commenting on how lovely she was to look upon. As Islet swept away wearing even less than Eudora, meaning she only had silver body glitter on, the princess blushed furiously. Aja simply laughed.

“She is right, you know?” he commented as Eudora traced the gold lettering that formed her name on the front of the envelope. Ignoring Aja's compliment, she held it out to him.

“What is this?” the princess asked. Aja gave her a small smile.

“The best way to Tame Passion,” he declared. “It is an invitation to an orgy.” Eudora paled.

“Can I refuse it?” she asked in a small voice. Just recently having come into her Passion Taming, the princess wasn't really ready to have intercourse with more than one person at a time. She then thought about the episode with Keeran and had to expand that number to two. Aja entered the

banquet hall before she did and took the envelope from Wyanet's outstretched hand before giving the queen a gentle kiss on the cheek.

"We will discuss it later," he told her quietly before seating himself beside Wyanet, at her right hand. Eudora took a chair to the queen's left and sat patiently, waiting for Aja to speak.

"You have come to get the present, I assume, my child king?" Wyanet purred as she took a bite of her lunch, which consisted of three different kinds of fruit, a pale yellow root, and an array of nuts and berries. Edible flowers decorated the plate, and she allowed one to dissolve on her tongue before greeting Eudora with a soft kiss on the lips.

"Yes, mother," Aja replied. "Where is it?" The queen finished her fruit and stood, gesturing to a few servants who stood ever ready beside the table to take her plate away.

"Follow me," the queen declared as she walked away. Today she was wearing one long, see-through red cloth, the deep crimson designed to match her eyes. It wrapped around her body from her right wrist to her left ankle, held in place with bracelets and ruby-studded pins. Bangles adorned her free arm and ankle, jangling quietly as she moved.

"Here we are," the queen said softly as she opened the door to the room she had taken Eudora to the first day the princess had been on the island. The bed was gone, and the whole room had become what looked to be a seamstress's headquarters. Fabric was scattered everywhere, and three looms were set up beside each other. Where the bed once was stood a mannequin clothed in the most beautiful dress Eudora had ever seen.

The silver was near translucent, shimmering with all the colors that were seen in the mark that permanently decorated Eudora's brow. Fashioned as all Passion Kingdom dresses, it nevertheless was more stunning than anything the Ciealan princess had ever seen. It would be form-fitting when on the princess and, she was sure, would be the most beautiful thing she would ever wear.

Eudora moved closer to give it a more thorough inspection. It was a dress more suited for a goddess than a normal woman, be she queen or peasant. Attached to the wrists of the long sleeves was sheer fabric that was secured at the back of the dress by a tasteful, painfully intricate crystal fastener. When the princess opened her arms, the fabric would look like gossamer wings.

The bodice of the gown was solid and sparkled as if moonlight had been poured over it. Obviously, the breast area was filmy and see-through, but elegantly so. At about the area of the navel, the gown's material spilt into two layers. To either side, it was the same as the parts of the bodice that was pure, glittering silver. That fabric would cover the outsides of her hips and thighs.

At where Eudora guessed her belly button would be, the fabric bunched, held in place by another crystal fastener. In the middle of the spilt was a layer identical to the material fitted over the breast area. It was gauzy and see-through, which would expose her groin and legs.

Beside the mannequin on a footstool was a long silver veil and a bouquet of Everbloom Wind Lilies held together by white lace and silver ribbon. Backless slippers decorated with crystal sat patiently at the foot of the gown, awaiting use.

"Oh, Wyanet..." Eudora breathed with tears in her eyes. "It is simply exquisite." She turned to give the queen a tight, heartfelt hug. "How can I ever thank you?" Wyanet laughed before she pulled away.

"Marry my son before he has a chance to muck things up again," the queen exclaimed teasingly. Eudora laughed with her and cast a gleeful look Aja's way.

"You know, Wyanet, he hasn't even asked me properly yet. Surely you taught your son better than this?" Wyanet lifted her eyebrow in a scolding way at Aja, and he threw his hands up, smirking.

"Between the two of you, I can do nothing right!" he declared. He waved at them and chuckled. "Fine. The wedding will wait for a few hours. Sunset, then?" Wyanet gave him a slight inclination of her head as Eudora gave her gorgeous wedding dress one more longing look. She then followed Aja out, wondering what she could do to properly thank the seamstresses who must have toiled for so long over the heavenly garment. After donning silver sandals to match Aja's and throwing a shimmering, gauzy cloak over her shoulders, Eudora followed the prince out of the palace.

"Aja, where are we going?" Eudora finally asked after they had trekked away from the village for about an hour. Her feet hurt, and sweat was just dripping from her body. If he was searching for the perfect place for a nice romantic proposal, he was going to have to supply a bath, as well.

“You’ll see,” was all Aja had to say. They walked for maybe another twenty minutes and by that time, the princess was near collapsing.

“Aja, we either have to stop or you are going to be carrying me back.” The prince laughed and took Eudora’s hands in his.

“It isn’t far now, love,” he told her consolingly. “Surely you went for walks when you lived in Cieala? By the way you’re panting and sweating, one would think you’d just fought a war by yourself, not simply gone on a leisurely hike.” Grinning, Aja turned and led her to a green, tree-ringed oasis. Eudora huffed in outrage.

“Leisurely?! You call this leisurely?! I’ve never walked such a distance in my entire life! And, added to that, it is hotter than the face of the sun in this jungle! To think, I actually thought....” Her ranting trailed off when Eudora finally looked around and truly grasped the place of beauty she and the prince were standing in.

The oasis was stunning and looked untouched by man. Birds flitted about, all different kinds, even some Eudora couldn’t place. The princess’s jaw fell when her eyes fell upon a *Tahirah*. Aja smiled and held out his hand. The *Tahirah* came to him and perched on his wrist, whistling softly at the prince.

“This is Zandra. I met her when I was only five years old, wandering through the jungle alone. Though the island isn’t terribly big, it is very easy to get lost in the trees. Zandra found me and led me back to the palace. From that point on, I came to visit her whenever I could. I wanted you to meet her.” Zandra ruffled her wings and whistled at Eudora.

The bird’s voice was even more beautiful than her multi-colored gossamer wings. Her feathers were soft to the touch, an enchanting mix of velvety smoothness and firm, silky muscle. Eudora knew that, even though it appeared fragile, the *Tahirah* could fly faster and farther than any other bird in existence. Though it was the strongest and most resilient of all birds, it was still the most rare.

Catching Zandra’s gaze, Eudora felt the pull of those ancient, compelling eyes. Like her wings, Zandra’s eyes were of many colors, changing, it seemed, on a whim. The princess felt a voice in her mind and, full of fear and wonder, could do nothing except listen as the *Tahirah* spoke to her.

*‘The sleeper awaits the day of waking, which will come with a crash*

*of lightning and thunder. The world will split from shaking, quaking beneath the gaze of the midnight moon, and the sleeper will awaken. Deep primordial blackness that rests beyond the light will awaken with a shriek and scream throughout the night. Unless the evening flower, marked by Kyan's power, can rise to arms and fight. The fate of peace stands trembling, clasped in hands of stone. Arise, dark flower, to do what is right. Protect the children of peace, or fault of death is yours and yours alone.'*

Eudora snapped back to herself in a way that was almost painful. Breath surged back into her lungs, bringing a gasp from her throat. Zandra sat on Aja's wrist, still perched as though she were simply a pretty decoration. Aja looked worried, but in a way that said he knew why the princess was ashen and shivering. Eudora was no longer hot. A deep chill had settled into her very bones.

"Zandra told you the prophecy, then?" Eudora couldn't do anything but nod as Aja stroked his free hand over the *Tahirah's* beautiful plumes. "The shock will fade in a moment. Out of all the creatures in our world, to hold a mind connection with a *Tahirah* is always the most traumatic. They are pure in a way we cannot imagine being. It stuns our soul, no matter how brief the connection is." Gradually, feeling returned to her frozen limbs.

"Why did she tell me...that?" the princess finally asked. "Why did I need to know that?" Aja gave the princess a sympathetic look.

"Isn't it obvious, fire rose?" the prince replied. "You hold Kyan's mystic fire topaz. He himself placed it in the hands of Thiery's ancestor, to pass it down to his descendants. None have ever laid claim to its power, and yet you now wear it, and signs of its influence. You've gained the ability to hide your marks. None except Master Tamers have that skill. My mother calls you sweet flower, I call you fire rose. Neither is coincidental. My Spirits are all in a clamor about the darkness of Illac'Mur spilled across the land. Don't you see? Arawn is the sleeper, and he's about ready to awaken." Tears slipped down Eudora's cheeks, and she wiped them hastily away.

"It isn't fair," she finally declared. Zandra tipped her head to the side, as if perplexed that the princess would respond this way. Aja frowned.

"What isn't fair?" he asked. Eudora sat down on a rock near the pond in the middle of the oasis and wrapped her arms around herself.

"I thought we came out here so you could properly propose, then we'd go back to the village and have a beautiful wedding with all of our people

present to oversee the union.” More tears fell deftly from the princess’s eyes.

“But we came here so she could tell me that if we fail, everything is my fault! Arawn is awakening, and Kyan has marked me, an ignorant princess just coming into her Taming, as the evening flower, the only one who can overcome the evil. Instead of happiness, there is once again pain. Instead of the most joyful day of my life, the sun sets while I am privy to the most heartbreaking prophecy I have ever heard. Is there anything you do that is not to hurt me, Aja?”

The prince knelt in front of Eudora after instructing Zandra to sit on a tree branch close to them. When he took her hands, she did not pull away.

“I did not come here to hurt you, Eudora.” The princess rolled her eyes and made a sound of disbelief.

“And the sun does not set in the west,” she retorted waspishly. Aja gave her a scolding look but tempered it with a smile of compassionate understanding.

“Zandra did not come because I willed her to. She came because she sensed the presence of the evening flower. That prophecy was meant for you and you alone. As the holder, Zandra could do no more than what she knew instinctively had to be done.” Eudora threw her hands in the air.

“As if I needed her to tell me that I must battle Arawn! I already had a pretty clear concept, Aja, of what will happen should we lose this war!” Aja stroked his thumbs over Eudora’s knuckled and sighed.

“Zandra couldn’t have known that, fire rose. It was imbued in her very soul that she must give that prophecy to the evening flower, or all would be lost. The fact that you already planned to fight Arawn to your last breath makes no never mind. It was her task, and she completed it successfully.” Eudora nodded, and when she looked again at the *Tahirah*, she felt more than heard a secret kind of music coming from the beautiful bird.

“She really is amazing, though,” the princess said wistfully. Tipping her head to one side, Eudora tried to hear or feel the music more clearly, but it simply wouldn’t come once it was noticed.

“Yes,” Aja agreed, pulling Eudora to her feet. “And she is not alone. You are amazing, as well, my little fire rose.” Eudora smiled through her pain. She was good at it. She had lived smiling through the pain of her mother’s death and did the same now, though it hurt no less and no more.

“Well, are you going to propose to me, or are we going to be late for our own wedding?” Gesturing to the setting sun, Eudora forced a laugh. Aja, his eyes showing how much she didn’t fool him, brushed a soft kiss over the princess’s forehead.

“I can find no words to explain to you how I feel. I was a fool to try to blame anything on the binding. I was meant to love you, and you were meant to love me. The simplicity of it all is in itself inexplicable. Take this as a symbol of my devotion.” The prince paused in order to slip a ring onto the finger it was always meant for. Eudora almost was able to forget her pain at the beauty of it.

The silver band held a ruby, the most flawless, perfect example of the blood stone Eudora had ever beheld. Around the ruby, spaced evenly apart, were three small diamonds. Eudora knew it to be the symbol of eternity. The ruby for a passionate, everlasting love, and the three diamonds to hold it in place. They symbolized faith, hope, and trust.

“It is...stunning, Aja,” Eudora told him. He smiled.

“That isn’t all of it.” He pulled out a dainty silver necklace holding a heart-shaped locket. “Take this as a symbol of my hope. My hope for us, for our people. Wear it near your heart to represent the necessity of hope. It is life.” Eudora fingered the locket as Aja fastened the clasp behind her hair.

“Thank you, Aja,” Eudora said softly. She didn’t know what else to say. The ring itself was amazing-the locket was simply incredible.

“And take this...” the prince said while holding out a package wrapped in delicate looking silver silk. Eudora gave him a questioning glance and took it, waiting for him to explain before unwrapping it.

“It is a symbol of my love, a love which is surpassed only by my love for my people and for peace. A love to make me weak and strong, reasonable and irrational, yours for all time. It is a song of life, of the beautiful tragedy we all walk through day after day. My life is yours, my heart your own. Forever, we are one. By the purity of this gift, I give myself wholly to you.”

Eudora let the silk fall away from the heavy globe. It was a crystal, stunning in its blinding, pure brightness.

“Aja...” Eudora was nearly speechless. “Why does it glow so? I’ve never seen a jewel shine quite so brightly.” The crystal was about the size of the princess’s closed fist and was shining like an angel’s laughter solidified.

Aja smiled and closed his hands over it. The glow wiggled in between the spaces of his fingers gleefully, making itself known even when it was supposed to be contained.

“As long as our love stays strong and pure, it will shine this way. As Kyan gave you his mystic fire topaz, I give you the gem that is my heart’s joy. This will protect you in your time of need and shine always to show my love. Keep it close and remember me forever. In this, and all things, you hold my heart.”

Eyes filling with tears, Eudora threw her arms around Aja’s neck. It was over. The time of hurting, of pain, of striking at each other any way possible was forever gone, banished by the light of which the crystal represented. Love. He truly loved her.

The prince laughed as Eudora tried fruitlessly to give him her endless thanks. Her words were incoherent, and he simply smiled, stroking her hair.

“Does that mean your answer is yes?” he asked before giving her a soft kiss. She returned his smile and nodded.

“My answer has always been yes.”

## Chapter Eleven~ Awakening

“With the blessings of the good spirits upon you, I pronounce you husband and wife. Live long and rule well.” A cheer went up from the gathered villagers as Eudora and Aja sealed their union with a tender kiss. Wyanet, dressed in ceremonial robes, stood before her son and the former Ciealan princess and smiled. Spreading her arms before her, she presented the new king and queen of the Passion Kingdom with obvious pride.

“May the gods of fortune and well-being smile upon you always, my son and daughter.” Wyanet’s smile was just for Eudora as she embraced the two of them. “Now, go celebrate your wedding night by conceiving a strong heir for us.” A blush swept across Eudora’s face, but she laughed along with Aja as he took her hand and led her at a run through the crowd of beaming, cheering villagers.

“I thought my mother would never finish that ceremony,” Aja whispered against Eudora’s neck before kissing the same skin, which was moist with warm water. They were in the *Lujuria* because Eudora had asked Aja if they could spend at least part of their wedding night there. It was a forbidden craving she had been unable to indulge ever since the first day on the Isle.

“I think she hurried it along, my king. You were ready to throw me down and ravish me right there on the marriage alter, if I remember correctly.” Aja laughed, pressing his naked skin against that of his wife’s. Wife. The word felt beautiful, perfect in his mind.

“I could hardly wait another minute,” he admitted. Dropping to his knees, Aja shivered as the water flowing from the walls swirled around him playfully. For a Water Tamer, this room was the perfect erotic dream. Even for one who could not Tame any Element, the room was still an exotic

pleasure.

“Then why are you kneeling on the floor? Your wife is up here.” The queen said playfully. Aja cast her a provocative look that tightened her body and sped her pulse.

“My wife has little imagination if she believes my attention would not be better served down here.” Eudora bit her lip, a smile that perfectly mixed innocence and sex spreading across her face.

Aja brushed the first delicate kiss to Eudora’s thigh while calling his Water Taming to him. He focused part of his attention on asking the Water to caress and massage Eudora’s legs while he reached around to dig his fingers into the tight, firm flesh of her ass. She made a sound in her throat and arched towards him as he kissed along her navel and pelvic bone.

Using his tongue just as effectively as any other part of his body, Aja made Eudora cry out, pant, and whimper. He brought her so close to release and yet kept her expertly poised on the brink for so long that she felt she would go insane. When the queen was shaking with need, she fell to her knees. Aja caught her before she hit the hard stone, and she dove for his mouth.

Eudora didn’t care where she was, who could see or hear. The only thing she was concerned with was devouring Aja’s lips and fighting the urge to set teeth and nails into him. Aja came up for breath and dug his own nails into Eudora’s hips, making her moan.

“Tame your Instinct, Eudora. I am not easily damaged.” Afraid that she would hurt him but more afraid to deny the aching, pounding hunger inside her, Eudora nodded.

She bit his neck first, gently. It was a place she loved to have her mouth on. It felt like life, like holding life on her tongue. She had control over it. With one twitch of her jaw, she could steal the life she held so tenderly. It was painful and erotic.

The queen moved down to Aja’s chest, licking water off him as she went. She covered his nipple with her mouth and bit down there, drawing sweet, metallic-tasting blood. He groaned and fisted his hands in her hair, pulling hard enough to hurt. She liked it and didn’t protest.

The next area Eudora encountered, she couldn’t bite if she wanted further use of it. She could, however, take it into her mouth and luxuriate in the texture and taste, which she did. Aja threw his head back as Eudora

reached his base and then drew back off quickly. It was almost past difficult to keep him fully in her mouth at once. She used her hands, tongue, and teeth to tease, torment, and arouse him. Though not as practiced as the prince, Eudora was becoming more skilled at holding one on the edge of orgasm.

When Aja was looking at her with wild eyes, Eudora knew she had to have him in her or the pleasure would not reach its full apex. Sitting astride him, she reached between their bodies and guided him in. He set his nails into her thighs, causing her to jerk and tremble above him. He moved beneath her, and that was all the invitation she needed to rock her hips against his, riding him in order to push him in as deep as he could go.

Aja moved his hands from Eudora's thighs to her hips, squeezing the supple flesh as hard as he could each time she slammed into him. From there, his hands traveled upward to not so gently cup her breasts. He kneaded the flesh with his big hands, pulling her nipples taunt as she moaned and ground into him faster and harder.

When orgasm crashed into the two of them, they both released their Passion Taming and let it feed until it was content. Panting, dripping sweat and water, Eudora leaned down and pressed a kiss to her husband's mouth.

"Are you so easily spent, my love? What good did twenty years of training do you if you cannot even keep pace with your new wife?" When Aja rolled her over, nuzzling her neck and whispering provocative threats in her ear, Eudora laughed happily. It was going to be a long night.

Eudora awoke and stretched like a sinewy panther, smiling sleepily. From the *Lujuria*, she and Aja had gone to the garden of Everbloom Wind Lilies and then to his room, where they finally fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. Wrapped in his arms, Eudora felt more at peace and at home than she ever had.

"Finally awake, I see," Aja declared as he stood. He had been sitting in a chair that faced the bed, obviously watching his wife while she slept. Eudora directed her drowsy smile his way and stretched again.

"You did your job well, husband," the queen admitted on a giggle. "I fear I could sleep the rest of the day away." Aja made his way to the bed and snuggled against Eudora's side. He had brought a plate of fruit with him and offered his wife a sweet slice of pineapple. She took it from him slowly,

spending more time than was needed on the task of licking the juices off his fingertips. Aja lowered his face to Eudora's and took her breath away with a deep, lengthy kiss. When they broke apart, the queen smiled impishly at her husband and rolled off the bed.

"I need a bath," she declared before making her way to the tub. Aja watched her while eating another piece of fruit. The skin was a soft shade of pink and easily broken. The meat was tough to chew and deep crimson in color. Aja thought Eudora's kisses tasted better.

"What will we do today, my fire rose?" Aja asked, catching juices that were spilling out of his mouth with his tongue. Eudora, laughing, jumped back on the bed in lieu of taking a bath and licked the sides of Aja's mouth for him. He laughed with her, and it was a few minutes before she answered him.

"We will take a day for you to show me all the secrets of the Isle." The queen let her hands travel downward as she bit a piece of fruit in half and held it in her parted mouth for Aja. The prince leaned forward and bit into it as well, sending sugary juice exploding into both of their mouths. It was a delicious kiss, and Eudora smiled into it.

"Why are we going to do that?" Aja asked when they separated for breath. Eudora nuzzled her face against Aja's neck, blowing warm, sweet-smelling air across the flesh.

"Because you need to show me all the places I will have to make love to you. And then we can come up with some new places." Aja chuckled, a very masculine chuckle, and gave Eudora a short, tight hug.

"My, aren't we frisky this morning?" Eudora giggled and stood, flipping her hair as she did. She then made a face.

"From now on, we finish in my room. I have no clothes in here!" she complained. Aja laughed.

"The less clothing you are wearing, fire rose, the better, in my mind." Eudora smirked at him and touched the tap, allowing the Water to pour forth joyously. She motioned Aja over.

"Here," she told him, placing his hand on hers. "Feel what I feel. Feel the Water through me. You have taught me how to Tame-now I shall teach you how to feel." Aja, as he had been trained to, allowed his thoughts to slip away as his essence touched that of the Taming.

Euphoria coursed through him. Eudora was a conduit for the elation, it

seemed, and the Element responded to that. It was part amazement, part devotion, and part...something else. Whatever made Eudora the person she was also made her able to Tame in such an unusual way.

When Eudora broke contact, Aja felt the absence of her pure joy like a hollow ache. Bringing her up into his arms, he just sent waves of love pouring through her. It didn't seem enough. For him, it could never be enough.

"You amaze me," he whispered. "You're so beautiful to me." Eudora smiled and settled comfortably into the warm embrace.

*'You move my heart....'* A breath of warm air swept through the two of them, and they both gasped.

*'Finally,'* a child-like, wispy voice exclaimed in Aja's mind. *'You finally learned. And now, you have me.'* Eudora's face was shining with joy as a grin spread across her lips. Aja's Wind Spirit had materialized before them.

She was something different from the other Spirits Eudora had seen. She seemed almost to be made of sheer fabric woven into a vaguely female form. She moved like the wind she was and seemed to dance while she floated around the pair.

"Lela," Aja said in a soft voice. His eyes filled with tears as he embraced his Wind Spirit. Ayasha appeared beside the other Spirit and giggled in Eudora's mind.

*'My, but this king of yours takes a long time to learn, little one.'* Eudora laughed with Ayasha and conveyed her Spirit's words to the child king, who laughed, as well.

"Thank you, Ayasha, for your guidance. Although it took me a time to realize the wisdom of your words, I am grateful to you nonetheless." Eudora's Wind Spirit chuckled and swept around her Tamer before disappearing. Lela embraced Aja once more and vanished, also. Eudora looked amazed by the whole thing.

"Perhaps we will win this war after all, my king," the queen said in a soft voice before kissing Aja on the cheek. The king smiled and hugged Eudora around the waist.

"I never had any reason to believe we wouldn't," he responded. Eudora smiled, and there was a moment of perfect peace between the two of them.

"I must bathe, and then we are going to do something else, something

besides delighting in the secrets of the Isle. This is far more important.” Aja arched an eyebrow as Eudora warmed the water for them. There were few things she found more pleasing than sharing a bath with him.

“What do you plan on doing, Eudora?” he asked before joining her in the tub. She gave him a serious look and squeezed his hands.

“We’re going to wake your father, Aja.” When the child king began to protest, Eudora silenced him with a look. “We must, my king. I know we possess the power between us to bring him back from the Eternal Darkness.” Aja stroked one hand tenderly down Eudora’s cheek.

“Do you understand that I can’t lose you?” he whispered. Eudora froze. He had said the exact same thing the first time Eudora had mentioned attempting to wake Thiery.

“Because you love me, Aja?” Eudora replied, her voice as whisper-soft as his had been. “You can’t lose me because you love me, not because you would follow me were I to die?” Aja drew Eudora closer to him and embraced her as tightly as he could.

“Yes,” he murmured. “Because I love you. Always, that has been the reason. Because I love you, not because I would lose my soul without you. Because I love you, I will resign to never again hear his laughter, never again speak with him, never again see the love between him and my mother. Because I love you....” Eudora touched his tears and kissed him, a delicate, gentle kiss.

“That is why we must do this, Aja,” she told him softly. “Because of love. Can you love me and let him lie without his soul? If you can, then I cannot love you.” Aja nodded and touched the crystal that now hung around Eudora’s neck on a silver chain. It was shining brilliantly.

“As you wish, my love. We will wake my father.”

Aja and Eudora finished their bath quickly. Somberly, Aja dressed in a black, flowing robe of sheerest material. It looked like a nighttime shadow, even against his dark skin. Eudora borrow a robe of forest green. She also used one of his anklets and a band of silver that could be adjusted to fit her upper arm. Aja donned a crystal cirlet and took Eudora’s hand as they left the room. Wyanet passed them in the hall, and Eudora took the former queen’s hand without speaking. Wyanet followed wordlessly.

“Mother,” Aja began as they entered Thiery’s silent chamber. Wyanet

looked fearful and pale.

“Yes, my son?” she replied in a soft, faintly trembling voice. Even if she did not know exactly what they were doing, the crimson-eyed woman had a good idea. Eudora smiled and took Wyanet into a tender embrace, kissing her mother-in-law gently on the lips before backing away. Aja stepped forward next and hugged his mother tightly.

“We are going to wake Father.” Wyanet collapsed heavily on a chair near Thiery’s bed and drew a shaking breath.

“Can I say nothing to convince you otherwise, my children?” Eudora and Aja clasped hands, the new queen smiling peacefully and the king facing his mother with a look of patience, benevolence, and fierce determination.

“Do not fear, Wyanet,” Eudora said comfortingly. “Thiery will laugh and smile once more. It is unfair for him to spend his days this way, imprisoned in this emptiness. We will wake him.” Wyanet nodded as Aja and Eudora turned simultaneously to the prone figure on the bed. Eudora’s heart reached out to him, out to the once proud and strong, yet caring and gentle warrior king. She loved him without ever having heard his voice, without even knowing what color his eyes were. She loved him through loving Aja and Wyanet. Using that love as the drive behind everything she was doing, Eudora stepped forward with Aja at her side.

Aja opened himself as he did when Taming, not allowing the fear he felt imbued in every single bone, muscle, and nerve ending to distract him from what he was doing. He couldn’t lose Eudora to this, so he poured everything he had into their desire, the goal they were both risking everything to achieve.

Eudora was calm as she and Aja placed their hands on the places they had earlier decided would be best to use. The queen placed hers on Thiery’s forehead, and her husband placed his over his father’s heart. Eudora was well aware that Aja was terrified of losing her, of losing both of them, but felt deep in her soul that they would triumph, no matter how close to defeat they would come.

Aja felt a jerk in his chest, like something was trying, gently at first, to rip out his heart. Darkness swept around the edges of his vision, and he looked to Eudora, to see if she was suffering the same discomfort. If she was, she was doing a valiant job of disguising her pain, for it had now

become pain. Aja refrained from gasping out as searing heat stole through his lungs and heart.

Eudora was in agony. There was icy cold spreading through her limbs, starting at her heart and pulsing outward with each frantic beat of the laboring organ. She was beginning to see pinpricks of light before her eyes and looked to Aja when he looked at her. She knew he had to be in the same anguish, but he hid it well. The only thing she saw in those frosted grass green eyes was concern for her.

Aja was beginning to feel a numbing cold in the palms of his hands. While it was at first a relief from the heat, it soon became unbearable torment. When he detected a hitch in Thiery's breathing, Aja poured forth even more of his soul into the task which was causing such excruciating pain.

Heat exploded into Eudora's palms. She winced as the cold attempted and failed to battle back the blistering, internal flames. As the inferno swept up through her arms, Eudora noticed Thiery's chest rise and fall in a stronger, steadier rhythm than before. The queen's hopes soared even as she was blinded by pain.

Wyanet stood watching her son and new daughter-in-law. The torment they were feeling was obvious in the set of their shoulders and the singing tension portrayed by the tightening of their muscles. The old queen knew to interrupt now would be death to all of them, so she watched helplessly as the three people she loved the most battled with everything they had.

Thiery could feel. Not much, but enough to know that he had come back from the dead. There were soft hands on him and the scent of lavender and vanilla. He felt the presence of his son and wished he could weep in his joy.

Eudora and Aja fell away from Thiery at the same moment. Wyanet was rooted to the ground in shock and could not move to assist either of them as Thiery drew a deep breath and opened his radiant, emerald green eyes. The new king and queen collapsed to the floor, panting, sweating, crying, but alive. Thiery looked at Wyanet, and tears flooded his eyes. With a cry, the old queen's paralysis broke, and she threw herself upon her husband.

While Thiery and Wyanet shared a reunion punctuated by kisses, tears, and exclamations of joy, Aja and Eudora held each other and wept. Aja brushed tears away from Eudora's face and kissed her tenderly, trying to reassure himself that she was truly all right. When he was certain she was

alive and as well as could be expected, they joined Wyanet and Thiery on the bed.

After more hugging, kissing, and tearful murmured words, Thiery gently pushed everyone away and moved to stand. He had not risen from the bed in nearly ten years. With the help of Wyanet, he was able to get up. Eudora had brought a cane, and the old queen offered it to Thiery as he supported himself on the chair Wyanet had placed by his bed in order to watch over him years ago. When Thiery stood, although shakily, before the bed, Eudora almost burst into tears again. He was going to be all right.

“Wyanet,” Thiery began. His voice was one of the most beautiful things Eudora had ever heard. “What happened?” Wyanet stood and offered her hands to Aja and Eudora. They accepted them and took their places on either side of Wyanet. After giving their fingers affectionate squeezes, Wyanet gave Thiery a brilliant smile. Eudora liked that smile. Although she had become accustomed to and even begun to enjoy Wyanet’s preying panther smiles, this one was much, much better. This smile was radiating love.

“This is the new queen of the Passion Kingdom, my darling,” Wyanet declared. Eudora moved forward and swept into a bow before the old king.

“My name is Eudora, my lord,” the new queen began. “And I am more thankful than even the Spirits know to see your eyes open and to hear your voice. It has been my only wish for many weeks.” Thiery knelt before Eudora and touched her chin, lifting her face tenderly.

“You are very beautiful, Eudora. However, the beauty of your body cannot compare to the exquisite spirit which resides within you. Its container does not do it justice, as the most craftily and strikingly made cage does not do justice to the *Tahirah* it keeps locked inside. You shall never kneel to anyone again, spirit bird. I should be on my knees before you, thanking you for the priceless gift which you have bestowed upon me. You have given me my life, returned me from the dead. It is the most precious gift in the world.” He glanced at Wyanet. “The most precious gift, save love.” Eudora blushed and kissed the tips of Thiery’s fingers before helping him rise.

“It is not a gift I gave alone, Thiery,” she said softly before bringing Aja to her. “Your son gave me strength to pull your spirit forth. Without him, I would never have been able to brave the purgatory your soul was trapped

inside.” Thiery’s gaze went misty as he looked upon his grown son.

“So many years, my boy,” Thiery whispered before embracing Aja tightly. “So many years I have lost with you. I am sorry.” Tears had not even begun to dry on Aja’s cheeks before more rushed down to join them.

“Don’t be sorry, father,” Aja replied, hugging him back. “We have many more years ahead of us that we can share.” Thiery clasped Aja’s shoulder and smiled at him as they stood only an arm’s length apart. Eudora was breathless at the sight. Aja’s eyes were grass beneath the spring frost, Thiery’s were the same color of the gem Instinct Tamers prized. Their smiles were identical, the strength returning to Thiery’s broad shoulders perfectly matching his son’s. It was more than obvious that they were father and child. They were beautiful, and Eudora loved them more than she could have imagined ever loving anyone.

Wyanet took Eudora’s hand and squeezed. When the new queen turned to the old, Wyanet took the younger woman’s face in her hands. She gently kissed Eudora’s eyelids, her cheeks, and her lips. She then hugged her tightly.

“I can never repay you, my queen. I only wish you could know the extent of my gratitude. You have returned my heart to me, the love of my life. My eternal loyalty and devotion is yours.” Eudora smiled and returned the gesture Wyanet had used.

“I can never repay *you*, Wyanet. The gratitude you feel for me is as boundless as mine for you. You have given me a heart, led me to the love of my life. As friends, loyalty and devotion comes from both of us. Mine, eternally, are yours as well.” They embraced once more and turned to the men. Thiery was looking around, presumably for a more suitable outfit. The one he was in was quite worn.

“We are near the same size, father,” Aja declared. “You can wear some of my clothing until the seamstresses can assemble a new wardrobe for you.” Thiery nodded and gestured Eudora over. He embraced her, and Eudora smiled, delighting in his scent and life energy. She could feel him now and was beyond thankful for the feeling.

“My son will make you a good husband, and I am assured you will be a wonderful wife to him. I wish you all the blessings of the spirits in the union. Forgive me for not being present at the ceremony.” Eudora raised herself up on tiptoe to brush a kiss over Thiery’s lips before smiling again.

“You were there, Thiery. You were there in all of us.” Thiery returned her smile as they left the room and closed the door forever.

The banquet hall erupted with applause as the king and queen presented Thiery and Wy Janet, who took their places beside Aja and Eudora at the head of the table. Thiery was bombarded with questions, which he answered politely while smiling and touching the hands of villagers and servants who came near simply to reassure themselves that their once dead king had been resurrected.

“We will hold a grand feast,” Aja declared after Eudora called for silence. “It will last for three days, and every man, woman, and child will attend. We will eat, drink, and be merry in the fact that my father has returned to the land of the living.” Another cheer went up around the gathered banqueters as laughter and discussion swept back through the room.

The servants of music began a gay tune, and Lirit, the Music Tamer, joined his angelic voice with the notes. He sang the story of Kyan, which praised the Legendary Tamer as the bravest of men. Where the song was supposed to end, a new verse had been added about the valiant king Thiery, descendent of Kyan, who had walked through the land of the dead and been returned to the living through the courage and strength of the Passion Kingdom’s new queen and king.

Eudora and Aja toasted to Lirit appreciatively before sipping on the sweet wine that was the prize of the Isle. Thiery, bedecked in one of Aja’s flowing cloaks, emerald to match his eyes, smiled and laughed boisterously as children presented plays in his honor. They were darling, and Eudora found herself longing for a child of her own. Placing her hand on her stomach, the queen wondered if that desire would soon be realized.

“My queen,” Islet began, sweeping into a bow next to Eudora’s chair. Eudora touched the woman’s soft, slender shoulder, giving her permission to rise.

“Yes, Islet? What can I do for you?” Islet smiled and nodded respectfully to Aja.

“We were expecting a reply, my queen. You received an invitation, and the date is tonight. You, as well, my king, have not given a reply as of yet.” Fear leapt into Eudora’s throat. It was strange that she felt more discomfort

now than when risking her life to bring Thiery back from the Eternal Darkness. Aja smiled warmly at Islet.

“Forgive us, Islet. We have had other issues on our minds.” He gave Eudora a meaningful look. “My wife and I would be honored to attend.” Eudora fought not to gulp and instead gave Islet a tight, close-mouthed smile.

“As my husband says, we would be honored,” Eudora added, her tone not betraying her thoughts. Islet beamed and bowed once more before returning to her place beside Wyanet. Jarah and Isadora were there as well, and Islet gave them slight nods before reclaiming her seat.

“It will be fine, Eudora,” Aja promised in a soft voice before giving her a soft kiss on the cheek. Eudora was still uncomfortable.

“It will be strange, Aja. What if I become too unnerved, too embarrassed? I will make us both look like fools.” Aja gave Eudora a reassuring smile and stroked her hair consolingly.

“I have taught you well in the ways of the Passion Kingdom, my love. You will make both of us proud. But, rest assured, if you become too uneasy, I will not force you to stay.” Eudora was slightly relieved by this.

“Thank you, Aja,” she murmured.

It was many hours before the joyful villagers left the banquet hall. They were returning to their homes to rest for the next three days. There would be wine, the most deliciously prepared meals, music, dancing, and festivity from sunrise to sunset. There would be great bonfires around which would gather bards and storytellers and people eager to hear their tales. Because of the continually tepid weather, swimming would be a way to enjoy the days or evenings, and exploring on the coral reefs sounded enticing to Eudora. People would feast, drink, dance, and enjoy the company of dear friends and family members. Eudora was looking forward to it.

What she was not looking forward to, however, was following Aja to Wyanet’s chambers of entertainment. Although the former Ciealan princess was much more at ease around the Kingdom’s people and lifestyle, she was still not completely at ease with her body or sexual appetite. The episode with Keeran and the palace servant still made Eudora wary of her Passion Taming, which she was keeping relatively sated between Aja and her court members.

“It is time, my fire rose,” Aja declared as he lifted his silver coronet from his dresser. The jewels flashed in the evening light, and Eudora smiled to see him dressed the way he had when she had first come to the island. She knew now that he dressed certain ways for particular events, such as an orgy. The jeweled circlet was only worn to sexual encounters that included more than one person.

“I am still nervous, Aja,” Eudora admitted on a sigh. Aja smiled and gave her hand a comforting squeeze as he draped a silver robe over her shoulders. He added a circlet to match his own around her forehead and then gave her a gentle kiss on the lips.

“It will be fine, wife,” he told her in a consoling tone.

Eudora did her best to control her frantic breathing and rapid heart rate as she and Aja entered what Wyanet had teasingly called her ‘playroom’ earlier in the day. The walls were black as jet, pure obsidian. It made for a very dark enclosure but managed not to feel cloying. In fact, the room and the two it conjoined felt very open, even inviting. Inviting, that was, until one saw what the rooms contained.

If the *Lujuria* had been built to fulfill a wet dream, this place was designed to be the erotic highlight of one’s life. There was everything from black candles burning to produce hot wax to pour over one’s skin to a chair in one corner designed for the most experimental of lovers. Fabric slithered across the walls, silver to offset the black décor. The flowing drapes showcased a magnificent bed, too big for one or even two people to sleep comfortably in. Eudora’s heart threatened to rupture her breast as what began as uncomfortable steadily progressed to nightmarish.

“Come, wife,” Aja murmured against Eudora’s ear, pushing her forward as Islet and Isadora accepted invitations from the gathered people. Eudora moved to the foot of the bed and stood still as a statue, waiting for Wyanet to speak.

The old queen was dressed in one piece of sheer black fabric. Silver bangles adorned her wrists and ankles, and she smiled the panther smile Eudora was so familiar with. Islet, Jarah, and Isadora curled around Wyanet’s feet, naked save tassels that matched their eyes and bracelets to match their mistress’s around their wrists.

“Welcome, my guests,” Wyanet purred. “Tonight, we delight in the joys

of flesh and friendship.” She nodded to Eudora as Thiery wrapped his arms around his wife’s waist and kissed her neck.

“I will not break protocol,” the old king said. “For tonight, I will leave. Soon, we shall have another gathering to celebrate the bountiful fruits of the Passion Kingdom.” Wyanet kissed him, long and luxurious. With a nod to Eudora and Aja, Thiery left the room.

“He walks with more strength now,” Eudora commented. “One barely even notices the cane.” Aja sighed and placed his hands on his wife’s hips. When he squeezed down, Eudora gasped at the heat in his fingertips. She knew the time for talking trivialities had been past, long past, when she entered that room.

“Wyanet,” Eudora breathed. “May we begin?” The queen grinned dangerously.

“So anxious, sweet flower.” The words rolled off Wyanet’s tongue like spiced wine. She padded over to the new queen, moving gracefully like the elegant jungle cat Eudora assumed her soul must envision itself as.

“And just a moment ago, you were regretting coming.” She brushed the air in front of Eudora’s face with both hands and then slid her fingers over the trembling woman’s shoulders. With Aja’s help, Wyanet had effortlessly awakened Eudora’s Passion. Aja dug his nails into the flesh of Eudora’s waist, and she nearly swooned. Her Passion and Instinct Taming came spiraling to the surface together, pouring over her like entwined plumes of flame.

“Oh, Wyanet,” Eudora murmured before taking one of the former queen’s hands and kissing her fingertips. “How could I ever regret,” she paused to kiss the other woman’s palm. “coming?” Wyanet shivered.

“You are truly mastering your Passion, sweet flower. I believe we will enjoy this evening very much.” Besides Islet, Jarah, and Isadora, Quimat and Pallaton stood waiting. Quimat, who had been helping Eudora Tame her Passion occasionally, kissed her deeply when Wyanet moved away. Eudora found her robe cast aside, and Aja’s joined it on the floor. Pallaton approached Quimat and kissed his way along the other man’s shoulder blade and up his neck. Reaching around from behind her, Aja took Eudora’s breasts in his hands and squeezed, rolling her nipples between his fingertips. Eudora moaned softly and gripped Quimat’s hardening shaft with both hands. Her Passion Taming was threatening to claim her mind entirely.

Glancing over to Wyanet, Eudora saw that the other woman was thoroughly enjoying the company of her pets.

“All of you,” Eudora said on a gasp as she focused her attention back on the men. Her Instinct Taming gently persuaded her to squeeze Quimat’s cock to the point of pain. “All of you in me.” She turned her face to meet Aja’s and captured his mouth in a kiss rough enough to bruise before speaking again.

“Can we do that?” Aja’s eyes were glazed with lust, and he was a moment replying.

“We can certainly try,” he finally said.

The king led his wife to a bed, of sorts. It stood perhaps three feet high and was very simple in design. Black, like most of the room’s furnishings, it had no bedposts, no headboard, no pillows or decorations of any sort. It was obviously not made for sleeping.

“You two are not as well trained as I am, so I will lay here.” Aja gestured to the bed. “Can we figure it out from there?” The sarcasm in his tone did nothing to diffuse the essence of sex that rode their air like black velvet lightning. Eudora smiled seductively at Aja.

“So, that means I am to be on top, husband?” she purred while stroking him. Aja chuckled.

“A position you much prefer, wife,” he declared before kissing her. “But you are only half right. You will be on top of me, but you will be beneath our lovely Pallaton.” Eudora’s heart skipped a beat, but then the Passion overwhelmed her again. Her entire body was suddenly hot, heavy, dripping, pulsing, wet. She’d agree to anything that night and, besides, she’d been the one to suggest it.

Aja slid onto the bed and gestured Eudora over. She mounted him while her Passion surged through her, tightening every muscle, coaxing every nerve to life so that her very skin throbbed with desire. Desire to be taken, to be possessed, to be had in every way as roughly and recklessly as possible. Eudora wanted to drink Aja in, to meld their very flesh, but he held her completely still as she whimpered against him.

“Lay down,” he instructed. Eudora immediately obliged him, hoping he’d oblige *her* if she did what he said. She bit his neck and reveled in the feel of flesh between her teeth as Pallaton took her hips in his big, strong hands. He entered her slowly, gently, taking his time to allow her body to

adjust to the new position. Eudora was completely overwhelmed by the intense sensations brought on by having two men inside her at once.

She still wanted more.

Lifting her head from Aja's chest, Eudora begged wordlessly for Quimat to come to her. As Pallaton drew out slowly and Aja arched upward, Quimat thrust himself between Eudora's lips. He drew out slowly, as well, and all three men sat still for a moment. When Eudora was close to screaming from the pressure, they men found a rhythm between them. Eudora screamed for another reason.

There was nothing, then. Nothing but the sound of flesh on flesh on flesh. Nothing but spikes of pleasure, waves of it, and a glorious pressure building and building in every muscle, limb, and nerve ending.

Eudora could do nothing. She was more aroused than she imagined possible by being trapped between Pallaton's powerful legs and Aja's broad chest. She couldn't close her mouth. It was all she could do to swallow and gasp for breath at random intervals. While Quimat pounded himself into her, Eudora's main task was keeping her teeth out of the way. She was more concerned, however, with the exquisite pleasure/pain happening behind her and between her legs.

Because Pallaton and Quimat had developed forms of Passion Taming, they fed on Eudora and Aja's, fed on and fed them. Therefore, when they all reached release, it exploded around, through, and between them in a rush of pleasure unlike any Eudora had ever experienced. Hot liquid poured into her mouth, down her legs, and deep within her. Eudora screamed around Quimat as her body spasmed again and again.

Pallaton convulsed against her, flexing his fingers into her hips. Aja bit down on her collar bone, drawing blood and bruising her. Quimat drew away before Eudora lost control completely. Her jaw ached, and her voice rasped when she cried out once more. While Eudora's muscles twitched and Pallaton kissed her spine, the silver-eyed woman kissed her husband deeply.

"This is one invitation I will joyfully accept again, my love." Aja chuckled and licked Eudora's bottom lip. She was quickly recovering from her exhaustion, and her body tightened around him in response to his playful nipping.

"Do not think about next time, my wife, when we aren't even done with this night." As Eudora, Pallaton, and Aja separated themselves and stood,

the new queen watched Wyanet and her pets.

Wyanet had Jarah securely in place on the frightening looking chair. Her legs were spread wide and clamped down, her arms fastened with straps of leather. While Islet thrust a slender metal rod between Wyanet's legs from behind, Wyanet made love to Jarah with her mouth.

Isadora was on the floor with Islet kneeling over her. The smaller woman had her face buried in the soft, damp curls that sheltered Islet's pussy. Islet moved her hips in time with Wyanet's, who groaned while working her tongue and teeth over Jarah's clit. The golden haired woman cried out as she orgasmed. Islet took this as a sign to thrust her tool at a faster pace into Wyanet. By her expression and the now frantic pace of her hips, Eudora knew Islet was close to climax, as well.

While Jarah panted in the chair and the other women worked each other towards release, Eudora knelt beside Isadora and slid three of her fingers into the other woman's silken channel. Isadora was close, dripping hot, with no manipulation, but Eudora's fingers massaging her, matching the pace of the others, brought her within a minute.

Wyanet, the one most capable of handling orgasm, moved over to Eudora and kissed the other woman passionately. When she broke away, the old queen drew Eudora's fingers to her mouth and sucked them clean of Isadora's juices.

"The bed, sweet flower, has need of us." Eudora gasped as Wyanet skimmed her fingers over the fire-haired woman's moist groin.

"All of us?" Eudora responded in a whisper. Wyanet chuckled and helped Eudora stand.

"It could be better no other way," the old queen declared.

Aja, Pallaton, and Quimat were already on the bed, fondling and caressing each other, when the women joined them. Aja drew Eudora to him and kissed her as if he'd eat her soul from her lips. Wyanet strapped the device around her waist that she'd used in the *Lujuria* and grabbed Eudora by the hips before thrusting the shaft into the younger woman. Eudora fell over, landing in a crouched position, as Wyanet flexed her hips expertly, riding the fire-haired woman roughly and forcefully.

Pallaton knelt behind Wyanet and slid his fingers into her as Islet crouched on her hands and knees before him, taking his dick in her mouth and working on it with all the skill one of the Passion Kingdom was taught

to possess. Quimat rode her from behind as Isadora laid back, allowing Jarah's tongue full access to the wealth of lilac hair between her spread legs. Aja fondled Eudora's breasts with one hand and manipulated Jarah's clit with the other.

Eudora lifted her face and took Aja's cock into her mouth. Aja focused totally on Jarah as Eudora slid her lips, teeth, and tongue over him in a pace to match Wyanet's. When Eudora came, she brought herself back to her knees and relieved Wyanet of the device.

Aja left Jarah and Isadora to pleasure each other simultaneously with their mouths as he turned to his wife. When Eudora attached the device to her waist and slammed into Wyanet, Aja mimicked her and thrust into his wife from behind. Pallaton orgasmed in Islet's mouth, and Quimat echoed the other man's primal screams as he forced himself into Islet more roughly, riding her through his own climax.

Wyanet grunted and drew her nails down Eudora's back, making the other woman shriek and spasm around Aja, whose hot seed exploded into her as he writhed against her ass. Jarah and Isadora cried out as they brought each other to climax. Wyanet gave Eudora a gentle kiss.

"So, sweet flower," she began as Eudora licked sweat off the crimson-eyed woman's neck.

"You do not regret," she paused and flicked a fingertip over Eudora's clit, causing a tremor to wrack her frame. "coming?" she finished in a whisper as she licked Eudora's breasts. Eudora chuckled and kissed Wyanet deeply, sucking on her tongue as she knew the older woman enjoyed.

"As I said," she started breathlessly, "I could never regret coming."

Many hours later, the group minus Quimat and Islet, who'd retired to their own rooms, were asleep on the huge bed, limbs tossed haphazardly across one another. It was too big for one or two to sleep comfortably, but six slept just fine.

Morning crept across the land, and Thiery entered the room. He leaned against the wall and watched the people he loved most, Wyanet, Aja, and Eudora, sleep cuddled next to each other.

Eudora moaned and tossed about in her sleep, as if caught in the grip of a fearsome nightmare. She gasped and jolted awake, shooting up and looking around frantically. When her eyes fell upon Thiery, she smiled and

slid off the bed. Padding over to him, she gave him a soft kiss on the lips and motioned him out.

“Good morning, my handsome father-in-law,” she declared out loud when they’d left the room and its deeply sleeping occupants. Thiery smiled and brushed Eudora’s tangled mass of fiery hair from her face.

“Good morning, my beautiful daughter-in-law,” he replied. Eudora looked distant, and Thiery frowned, touching her cheek. “What ails you, child? Are you well?” Eudora smiled, giving the expression a half-hearted effort.

“I dream of horrible things, Thiery. Blood, pain, war...I see Aja...” She trailed off and shook her head, forcing a smile. “But dreams are just dreams, aren’t they?” Thiery returned her smile and took her hand, leading her towards the back of the palace. She assumed they were heading towards the gardens.

“You Tame Prophecy, Eudora,” Thiery started gently. “It is well true that these things will come to pass.” They stopped in front of the Fire Orchids, and Eudora was reminded of the flames in her dream. Flames that were viciously devouring the wall of trees that sheltered the village. Flames from Ciealan arrows.

“They must come to pass, Thiery?” The old king shook his head, and they walked onward, towards the Night Jasmine.

“No, little one. Destiny is like an orb with many intersecting, overlapping threads. One may choose which actions to take-this is free will. Destiny comes into play when the consequences to these choices are revealed, for they must happen according to the choice made. This dream of yours is one of the consequences. I assume you are worried?”

Eudora nodded. They now stood in the patch of Diamond Tears. They were the flower of the Time Tamers. Pure, glistening white in color, they only opened when a full moon was at its zenith. When they closed, they looked like giant teardrops hanging from their silver stalks. When open, the petals were thick and lush, shining with actual miniscule diamonds.

“War spills into the Passion Kingdom. There is fire, and our people are being slaughtered. I am powerless to protect them as I see them brutally slaughtered. And then I see Aja...” Tears slipped from her cheeks as she touched the crystal around her neck, glowing brilliantly.

“My crystal is no longer shining, and he looks at me with...disgust,

hatred, utter loathing. And then my father is there...and he has my mother's sword. He looks at me, and in that instant, I see the burning hatred in both of their eyes, like mirror images. They both feel I have betrayed them. Valin and Aja fight, and Aja...dies." Sitting on a bench near the Everbloom Wind Lilies, Eudora touched one of her favorite flowers.

"What does it mean, Thiery? Will I lose him? Will he die by my own father's hand? Will he die thinking I have betrayed him?" Thiery sat beside Eudora and took her hands in his. He brushed the pads of his thumbs over her knuckles, smiling in a way meant to comfort and console.

"We may see the future, but to tell what it will bring with absolute assurance is folly. Not only our choices, but the choices of others pave the road of Fate. This is but one of thousands of outcomes. Do not worry, dear one. My son loves you more than life. He knows you could not betray him." Thiery pulled Eudora into a quick, tight embrace, and they watched the sun rise fully into the sky. Eudora smiled.

"I should go change. And bathe. I must definitely bathe." Thiery laughed.

## Chapter Twelve~ Exploration

Eudora waited in the garden for Majit later that day, after bathing and changing. She had promised to have lunch with him and decided that they would picnic in the Everbloom Wind Lily patch.

“Majit!” Eudora exclaimed as she caught sight of him approaching her. He smiled broadly as she pulled him into a tight embrace and kissed him softly on the mouth. Majit was still rather uncomfortable with the Passion Kingdom’s greetings and protocols but did not pull away from Eudora when she pressed her lips to his.

“Hello, little majesty,” he declared. Eudora laughed. She knew he used her title not to mock or anger her, but because he felt comfortable addressing her no other way.

“How have you been, my dear friend?” Eudora asked as they sat and each took a piece of fruit. Majit peeled his expertly. Eudora had trouble, so the older man smiled gently and peeled hers, as well.

“I have been adjusting quite well, your highness, and am flattered by your concern for me. I am very thankful to have been one of those to accompany you here, to your new destiny.” Eudora smiled and gazed at the Palace.

“This has been my destiny all along, Majit. And yours, as well, for yours has always been inexplicably entwined with my own.” That comment led to a session of reminiscing. They talked and laughed about things past and the way Eudora had acted as a child.

“I swear, you were around me more than your own father, child. Given the choice between us, you would always run to me.” Majit’s eyes shadowed with sadness. “I am sorry for what he has done, little princess, truly, I am.” Eudora kissed the back of Majit’s hand as she savored a bite of fresh pineapple.

“There is nothing to be sorry for, Majit. He made his choices, not you. I know my father. He is stubborn and he is greedy. Any lust felt in the Passion Kingdom pales in comparison to that man’s lust for power. He would not have listened to you were you to attempt to reason with him. Let past be past, Majit. That is where he belongs.” Majit nodded, smiling to himself. Eudora had grown recently into a beautiful, intelligent woman well on her way to being confident and wise beyond her years.

“How fares your husband, my lady?” Majit asked. Eudora grinned and touched her crystal absent-mindedly.

“He is my husband, Majit. For now, that makes him agreeable and rather pleasant to be around. Give it a few more weeks, though. He will be back to his old prickly self before too long.” They both laughed at this and spent another hour speaking of the Taming, at which Majit was excelling. He demonstrated how to form a ball of Light in the palm of his hand and spoke of his desire to have a Spirit of his very own. As if that had been the invitation needed, Eudora’s Spirits materialized around her.

Naoko, her Light Spirit, trumpeted and pranced around Majit. He beamed at her and stroked her golden trunk and ivory tusks. Miyagi sat beside Eudora and pressed his muzzle to her cheek. She returned the playful kiss and stroked his nose as Ayasha rubbed her magnificent head against her Tamer’s shoulder. Loki and Bronwyn frolicked about, laughing as they nipped mischievously at each other. Jana snuggled against Eudora’s hip and slept, purring contentedly. Calla caressed Eudora’s hair and kissed her Tamer’s neck gently before sitting beside her. Eternity and Kaoru sat with Asahi, who was admiring the Raindrop Harps, beautiful blue flowers that made music when the wind blew just the right way. They were the flower of the Water Tamers.

“These are my Spirits,” Eudora declared before introducing them all to Majit. He was quite impressed with them and said as much. Eudora laughed and conveyed her Spirits’ thanks. They all enjoyed Majit’s company but soon disappeared to reunite with their Elements. Eudora explained the circumstances surrounding her rather unusual acquisition of her Spirits, and Majit shook his head, admitting that nothing ever went as planned with the queen.

“I am sure your husband would like to spend part of this day with you, majesty,” Majit finally said as he glanced at the sun, which had begun to fall

past its highest peak in the sky. Eudora smiled and nodded as they both stood.

“That he will, Majit. After waking his father, I can’t seem to find time to be alone with him.” Eudora hugged Majit tightly. “But I am more than willing to part from my dear husband if it means he has even one more minute with his father. It is good that at least one parent cares so for his child.” Majit smiled sadly and brushed Eudora’s hair from her cheek.

“Your father will see the mistake of his ways, little one. All he has to do is but look at you, at what you have accomplished, and he will be able to see past what he was trained to see. But know, small majesty, that as a strong, intelligent individual with deep-seated motives which compel you to act, you are more an enemy to him than another who shares his lust for power. You must get him to see past you as a queen and upon you as simply his daughter.” Eudora smiled and nodded before embracing Majit tightly once more.

“You have always been like a father to me, Majit. Thank you for everything you are.” Majit laughed self-consciously and lowered his gaze. Eudora tipped his face up so their eyes could meet and kissed him softly.

“Thank you,” she repeated. Majit took both her hands and kissed her palms gently. They began walking towards the palace as Majit spoke.

“You are more than welcome, your highness.” Eudora stopped and forced Majit to as well by pulling on his hand, which she had clasped tightly in hers.

“It is Eudora, Majit. Please, enough of this silly title business. Call me Eudora. As my friend and the man I look upon as father, you could do me no greater honor. It is not the title which defines a man or woman’s worth. Knowing that even one can speak my name with love and respect means more than any identity I could claim, be it peasant or goddess.” Majit beamed at Eudora and kissed her forehead, a sign of wisdom in the Passion Kingdom, because he was older than she and kissing the charka, or energy center, that controlled knowledge.

“Then it would be my highest honor, Eudora, to address you by your name. I only hope I can express how much love and respect I feel for you simply by the saying.” Eudora grinned and they walked to the palace.

“You already have, Majit.”

“I was beginning to worry, wife,” Aja said on a smile as Eudora entered Thiery’s study. Wyanet had told her where the men would be after the new queen had bathed and dressed. Eudora greeted them both with a gentle kiss.

“There is no need to worry, husband,” she replied while hugging Thiery tightly. It still amazed her every time she looked upon him and found those lustrous emerald eyes wide and alert, gazing in her direction. Aja smiled at the two of them before turning his attention once more to the logbooks of the army. It detailed supplies and costs needed to keep it functioning efficiently. Eudora looked over Aja’s shoulder and tapped him on the back. He gave her a slightly irritated look.

“I have just lost my count, wife. Did you come in here simply to distract me?” Eudora grinned.

“No. I came in here to ask you to take me to see the soldiers. I want to be completely assured that we have a force capable of defeating Cieala’s army should it come to war.” Aja and Thiery exchanged looks, very masculine looks, Eudora thought, before nodding.

“As you wish, Eudora,” Aja declared as he led her out. Thiery followed, still using his cane but walking more confidently.

“The warriors are trained in their Arts with more discipline and brutality than any force I’ve ever known,” Thiery began as he led Eudora around the training arena. There were men and women fighting hand to hand, with weapons, or with their Taming. Fire and Water seemed to be the predominant Elements, but Eudora saw Amana working with two men, and a servant Eudora recognized to be Mora. The Wind Master was lecturing the novices in a firm voice on how to use their Taming to lift them up and attack with a blast of air. Tavon was instructing a young woman in Rock Taming, and she was able to knock him off his feet with a well placed eruption of sand and gravel. Tavon laughed jovially as he stood, and Eudora turned back to Thiery.

“How many Tamers are on the island, Thiery? I want to meet the ones trained specifically for battle so that I may brief them on the war tactics of Cieala. I also want to gather together the generals who have no Taming abilities. I will be replacing some of them with Tamers. Others will become scouts. I am sure that your generals are intelligent and able to gather information quickly and efficiently. Inform them that I am not demeaning them by turning them into spies. I simply want Tamers as generals.” She

leaned into the old king.

“Valin will be using more than steel, Thiery. I am sure that he will call Karaphel and Gailenna to him should he bring war on our heads. We have two Rock Tamers, and our Fire Tamers pale in comparison to those of Karaphel. The kingdoms are ruthless and will crush us for the promise of power. Even three Legendary Tamers will not stand to this test.” Thiery nodded.

“Your idea is a sound one, little lily.” Thiery smiled. Eudora’s happy expression faltered as Thiery spoke her second nickname from him. It had a flower theme, same as Aja’s, same as Wyanet’s. Same as the prophecy. ‘Evening flower.’ Though she’d avoided thinking about it, the words the *Tahirah* had given her still loomed in her mind, an ominous presence intent on making themselves known by feeding her fears and worries. Eudora forced a bright smile and gave one more glance to the training field.

“I am satisfied, gentlemen, that the army is indeed battle ready,” the queen said before nodding and spinning around.

As she walked back towards the palace, Warrick, Tamer of Time, stepped forward from the pillar he was hiding behind. He had been watching Eudora, Thiery, and Aja, wondering when an ideal moment would approach him. He knew the moment was now upon him.

Taking a deep breath, Warrick strode briskly forward, towards Eudora and the men who followed her, laughing silently and shaking their heads. Warrick knew he had been a coward. He didn’t even want to speak with Eudora now but steeled his nerves as he came upon the fire-haired woman.

“My queen,” The Time Tamer fell to his knees in front of Eudora as she walked by. She looked shocked, amazed that he had spoken to her.

“Yes, Warrick,” she replied with a wary smile. “Rise, please. And don’t address me like that. Even if you have been less than pleasant, you are still my friend, and it is still Eudora.” Warrick stood and couldn’t help but laugh as Eudora waved Thiery and Aja on. Her husband gave a nod to the Time Tamer before following his father into the palace.

“You’ve changed in so many ways, my dear,” Warrick exclaimed. “And yet, you still remain the same. Eudora, then. You cannot imagine how sorry I am. Can you ever forgive me?” Warrick was expecting angry words, utter silence, or the calm order for his head to be chopped off. Instead, Eudora smiled and kissed his cheek gently.

“Had you spoken to me sooner, you would already know there is nothing to forgive, my friend.” Warrick took Eudora’s hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss to her middle finger.

“You are an angel, sweet child,” he said softly. Eudora embraced him warmly and gave him another beaming smile.

“Warrick, before my husband left, I was about to ask him who I could Tame Passion with today. Even after our little party last night, the Element is still hovering just beneath the surface, ready to rise up and swallow me should I deny it for too long.” She cast him a sly glance. “Would you like to accompany and then assist me while I seek out my husband to ask his permission?” Warrick was floored at her blatant offer.

“Why...Eudora, wouldn’t you rather we sit down and talk, perhaps return to the training field so I can explain its intricacies to you?” Eudora sighed and trailed her fingertips down Warrick’s chest.

“You do realize that I need to Tame my Passion daily, don’t you, Warrick? We can talk later.” The Time Tamer nodded quickly and then proceeded to follow Eudora to the room she now shared with Aja.

“Good morning again, wife,” Aja declared before kissing Eudora’s cheek. He gave a nod to Warrick. “Time Tamer.” The king offered Eudora a deeper kiss, but she declined before gesturing to Warrick.

“May I have permission, dear husband, to Tame my Passion on this lovely Time Tamer?” Aja arched his eyebrows, as if to question how her Taming could become discontent so soon. His own would follow shortly, though, so Eudora knew he didn’t doubt her word so much as her choice of partners.

“Why, of course,” he responded in a velvety voice. “Would you like my assistance?” Eudora smirked.

“Perhaps later, my love,” she said as she pushed him gently out the door. He kissed her passionately before closing it behind him. Eudora heard him laughing as she locked the door and turned back to Warrick.

Eudora opened herself to the Passion, and it burst over her like a rush of warm water loosed from a floodgate. Warrick had to catch his breath.

“That is impressive,” the Time Tamer commented. Eudora grinned and knew that her dangerous smirk was beginning to resemble Wyanel’s. However, the slyness in her eyes and the tension in her hands, which looked as though they were harboring some secret desire to tear into delicate flesh,

foretold violence. Wyanet wore sex like a second skin, and Eudora wore ferocity. The danger of it made the women very different.

“I will gladly show you impressive, Warrick.” His name spilled over Eudora’s tongue like candy as she let her sheer silk slip fall to the floor. Staring him down, the queen stepped away from the pooled material while removing the crown she wore from her hair.

“What would you like, my lady? I will be your slave,” Warrick asked, beginning to sound breathless. Eudora grinned wickedly and continued to glide forward ever so slowly. He watched her move with lust spilling into him. She danced with every step, and sex just seemed to cling to her skin.

“Well, Warrick,” she purred. “What a novel idea.” Removing four pieces of firm, yet givable leather from her dresser drawer, Eudora gestured to the bed.

“Bed. Now.” Warrick immediately obliged, sinking onto the mattress and making his way to the headboard. The bed was a four poster, and the leather pieces were just long enough to secure someone to them. Of course, this was not by accident.

Eudora made quick work of tying Warrick to the bed. He looked at her as though he’d agree to anything she requested. He’d never imagined he’d have her again. Now, with her husband’s permission, they could take as long as they needed and devote attention entirely to each other.

“You are more confident,” Warrick said, working not to swallow his voice while he tried to swallow his pulse. “More forceful. May I call you ‘mistress’?” Eudora grinned, a quick, dangerous flash of teeth.

“I would enjoy that,” she replied. Kissing down Warrick’s chest and stomach, Eudora let both of their anticipation grow and grow, swelling up inside of them like a hand of muscled silk spilling into a velvet glove. Eudora fed on it as she worked her way over Warrick’s flesh, kissing along his navel and licking the soft skin of his thighs. Giving oral sex, to a man or a woman, was one of the most pleasurable tasks for Eudora, and she let that enjoyment spill out from her delicate touches and wet tongue as she worked.

Warrick was hard when she finally slipped her mouth over the tip of him. Her body, which was already tightening, became dripping wet at the feel of that delicious muscle trapped between her lips. The act was nearly as arousing for her as it was for her partner.

It was easier to take all of Warrick into her mouth than Aja, but no less

luscious. While he bucked and writhed beneath her, Eudora worked her mouth over him so quickly that she barely allowed herself time to breathe or swallow. She gripped his base and squeezed as she swirled her tongue up his shaft and then to the head of him, letting her fingers follow the trail of wet saliva up his dick, which caused Warrick to cry out.

He looked down his body to meet her eyes. His own were wild. Eudora used her hands on him the way she'd used her mouth; quick, nearly painful strokes. Her saliva served as a lubricant and allowed her hands to glide smoothly up and down his shaft. Warrick convulsed, close to release.

"Mistress..." he exclaimed on a gasp as a tremor ran through him, from his fingertips to his toes. "Please, mistress!" Eudora was half-crazed, as was Warrick. His begging only pushed her mind further into the realm her Passion controlled.

She straddled his waist and guided him in. She was hot and tight, but that was what took her to the edge. She didn't wait for that channel of wet silk to loosen before slamming herself down on him. While Eudora forced Warrick deep in her body, she dug her nails into his arms, bruising and drawing blood.

Warrick screamed for her, which rocked her into an even higher state of arousal. Eudora knew her body well and angled herself to where Warrick hit that spot inside of her each time she thrust her hips forward. She moaned and grabbed her own breasts as she rode him, needing more than she was getting. She dug her nails into that supple flesh and ground her hips faster and harder against Warrick.

With a cry, release exploded over her. Eudora realized Warrick was still hard and thick inside of her, which made her Passion Taming very happy. While her body recovered, Eudora unfastened Warrick's hands and feet.

Eudora pressed the front of her body against the ebony headboard and groaned as Warrick molded himself to her back.

"Yes, please, yes," she whispered frantically as he shoved himself inside of her. Eudora gripped the headboard as Warrick rode her body, knowing she wanted it as rough as she could get it.

Eudora thrust her ass against Warrick to meet his body and whimpered as he reached his hand around to massage her clit while he slammed into her. When her body spasmed around him, Warrick fought not to come as well. He wanted one more task of his mistress before his Passion would be

sated.

While Eudora was panting against the headboard, sweat beading on her shoulders and trickling down her back, Warrick opened the closet and brought out a whip. It was studded, and Eudora's pulse picked up when she looked at that shiny metal.

"And what is this for, my pet?" Eudora asked breathily before realizing she'd called Warrick the same thing Wyanet called Jarah, Islet, and Isadora. The thought didn't stick with her long because she was too busy watching Warrick hold up one of the straps of leather and gesture her over.

"Come here, mistress," he said. Eudora stood on legs that shook only a little and moved slowly over to Warrick. He sat the whip reverently down on the table that was positioned in the right corner of the room. It was surrounded by five chairs and stood about as tall as Eudora's hips. After sweeping the chairs out of his way, Warrick turned Eudora around, using more force than was necessary.

"You aren't a very submissive pet," Eudora said with laughter and sex both soaking her tone. Warrick didn't respond as he tied her hands behind her back.

"We of the Passion Kingdom have many talents," was his only reply. He tied her hands tightly, and she felt him pressed, hard and firm, against her ass.

"Well," she began seductively. "Are you going to use those talents on me or not?" He didn't answer, and she felt him move away. She was about to turn around when she felt the whip cut into the skin on her back. At first she was shocked. Then the pain swept over her, like a flood of warm blood spilling over her, caressing down her body. She knew this was her Instinct Taming. That part of her loved the pain that was cutting into her skin.

"Bend over," Warrick ordered in a strong voice. Eudora was still trying to come to terms with how blissful the pain felt spilling down her skin, and so she didn't immediately act. Warrick snapped the whip again, and the silver studs smacked against her flesh with more force, this time drawing blood.

"Did you not hear me, mistress?" he growled before grabbing her wealth of fiery hair. He twisted his hands into the strands, and a strangled sigh escaped Eudora's lips. The pain was glorious.

Eudora let her upper body spill onto the table while she spread her legs

as far as they'd go without compromising her balance. Having her ass up in the air seemed like a position that would be undignified, but it felt incredibly satisfying to her. She was hot, dripping, pulsing, pounding with the need to have Warrick in her again. The Passion, after having been teased and aroused with two sexual acts yet not allowed release surged over her and nearly brought her with the force of its urgency.

“Warrick, my pet,” Eudora said on a trembling gasp. “Please....” The Time Tamer didn't snap the whip this time. He let it slash across Eudora's back with all the strength he possessed in his arms to intensify the blows. Eudora screamed as bright red blood blossomed over her skin. It felt as though her delicate flesh was being flayed to ribbons beneath the whip's merciless teeth.

She loved it.

Warrick knelt behind Eudora and took his time to lick blood from her ass all the way up to her neck. It was warm and dripping, spilling across her pale skin like damp silk. Falling to the floor, each drop was like forgotten strains of an ageless song of agony and bliss. Eudora shivered as pleasure and pain battled within her, each fighting to claim dominion.

The Time Tamer discarded the whip and thrust into Eudora, shoving himself into her as deep as he could go. The pressure of having her hands behind her, the feeling of being utterly under his control as he held her hips in his big hands, and the blood that pulsed from her wounds with each frantic beat of her heart made Eudora moan and arch her back, pressing her breasts into the cold, hard table.

While the blood dripped in between her legs and onto the floor, Eudora panted, gasped, and screamed for Warrick as he rode her, pushing himself deeper and deeper until Eudora thought he would come out the other side of her body. She struggled beneath him, wanting to claw, bite, anything to relieve the pressure screaming through her limbs.

Warrick drew his nails down her waist, causing more blood to explode onto her skin. Eudora's struggling aroused him even further, and he felt that, as long as she was underneath him, writhing, screaming, bleeding, that he would never be done.

Warrick moved away only long enough to untie Eudora's hands and shove her down to the ground. Both the fall and the rough carpet against her cuts made Eudora cry out. Warrick didn't give her time to object as he once

again entered and thrust into her. Eudora tried to keep pace with his hips, but she was overwhelmed by the pain, the pleasure, the Passion.

Warrick pounded Eudora into the floor, and the orgasm came over her unexpectedly, dragging a scream from her throat and causing her to rake her nails down his back. Warrick continued to ride her through his own climax, and that glorious heat spread through her. Both Tamers finally allowed their Passion to feed fully.

Eudora loved the feeling of having her body trapped beneath Warrick's. He ran his hands over her breasts and down to cup her ass, sliding him into her again, which made her gasp. A tremor passed through her, and he spasmed against her again as she jerked and writhed on the floor.

"Oh, Warrick," Eudora murmured as feeling tried to return to her numb legs. "I'd love to do this all day." She raised her head up so she could kiss his neck. "But I have work to attend to." She gave him a wicked smirk. "Join me for a bath?" He nodded.

"You start it up," he agreed. "While I regain my strength." Eudora's own strength was returning slowly, even though the Passion was sated. She decided she wanted to utilize the training of the Passion Kingdom to its fullest and smiled at Warrick. He would have to rest for a few moments before she could have her way with him again.

The warm water did its job soothing the marks of the whip. It wasn't long before Warrick was aroused and erect again, so they made love as water swirled around them. Going from standing, to leaning against the tub's edge, to the floor, they made a game of bringing each other as close to release as possible and letting off at the last instant.

While water dripped off her hardened nipples and warm droplets slid down her bare skin, Warrick held her hips and thrust himself between her legs. The cuts on her back were not healed, but didn't cause her very much pain as she rocked back against him and groaned. They were never going to finish their bath.

It was back on the bed, rolling between the now damp sheets, that Eudora finally decided to bring Warrick to his final climax. After working him with her mouth for a few minutes, she laid back and spread her legs for him, wrapping them around his waist when he shoved himself into her. She cried out for him, calling his name and thrusting her hips up to meet him as he slammed into her. His whole body tensed before release exploded over

him.

Eudora hadn't reached orgasm, so she let her hand travel downward in order to work her own fingers over that hot, dripping flesh while Warrick watched. She closed her eyes and whimpered, taking her time so Warrick could enjoy the show. When she finally brought herself, her back arched and she writhed, spasming until that pressure left her body.

Warrick snuggled up against Eudora's waist, letting his hand trail across the soft, moist skin to touch her hip. She turned to kiss him softly on the mouth and then stretched languorously before smiling at him.

"Can we risk the bath again without getting...." She paused to laugh. "Distracted?" Warrick nuzzled his cheek into Eudora's neck.

"Lay with me for a few minutes more, mistress. I won't interrupt the bath." Eudora stroked her fingertips down Warrick's back as Calla materialized beside her Tamer.

*'When will you call upon me, my love, to Tame the Element which calls me its own?'* Calla purred as she took Eudora's hand and licked her fingers with the tongue Eudora so enjoyed. It was rough and yet strangely soft all at once. Eudora brought her Spirit closer in order to give her a gentle kiss.

*'Come to me tonight, Calla, and we will indulge the Passion.'* Calla grinned in a satisfied way and retracted her claws in order to brush the phantom pads on her hand over the curve of Eudora's breasts and waist.

*'Indulgence, my love, is what the Passion adores above all.'* Eudora nodded as Calla vanished.

"The bath, then?" Warrick offered as he stood and held his hand to Eudora. She took it, and they soaked in the bath for another hour before Eudora got dried off and dressed. It didn't take her long to prepare for the remainder of the day.

Aja raised his eyebrows in an appraising way as Eudora met him in the banquet hall for dinner. He took her hand and led her to her seat beside him, and she smiled brightly at everyone as she sat between her husband and her father-in-law.

"I take it you enjoyed your afternoon," Thiery said on a chuckle. Eudora didn't blush; she simply batted her eyelashes at Thiery and gave him a coy smile.

"Would you like to help me enjoy my evening, my lord?" she offered in

a purring voice. Aja squeezed her hand under the table in a way meant to scold. Eudora simply laughed and raised a toast to the Passion Kingdom, wishing wealth and health to its subjects for all its reigns.

After dinner was finished, Eudora led Aja out of the banquet hall with just her eyes. She let the dangerous things running around in her mind make their way down to her hips, which swayed seductively as she moved, her hands, whose fingers curled invitingly towards Aja when she turned back to him, and her eyes, burning with a hunger all her own.

"I'd like your father to join us," Eudora whispered in a soft, oh-so-sexy voice before pressing a wet kiss to Aja's neck as she stopped him in a dark, deserted hallway. Aja grinned down at her and nibbled along her jaw line.

"It is too soon for the Passion to need a feeding again, fire rose, even for you," Aja declared when he backed away. Eudora smirked and pressed her body against his. Her hair was dry, for her bath had been hours ago, but it was still spiced with the delightful scents in the liquid she had used to wash it. Aja closed his eyes and breathed in that flowery aroma, leaning his full weight against her so that she was trapped against the wall.

"I do not know if my father is up to such a task yet, my love," Aja murmured as he stroked one hand down her cheek. "I do not even know if I am." Eudora giggled as her eyes met Thiery's over Aja's shoulder.

"I think I am well up to the task, my son," Thiery claimed as he took Eudora's hand and kissed the tips of her fingers. "And even if I am not, I would be delighted to make a valiant attempt." Eudora gave a full-throated laugh as Wyanet wrapped herself around Thiery's waist. She pressed a kiss to his bare shoulder and smiled at Eudora, that predatory smile that made the new queen's heart skip a beat.

"If my husband is to join you, then I would be thrilled for an invitation, as well," Wyanet purred. Eudora gently pushed Aja away and moved around Thiery's body, brushing against him as much as she could. Because she and Wyanet were so small and Thiery so large, it was like two children playing hide and seek around a great, ancient oak. When Eudora rounded Thiery's right shoulder, she reached down and ran her hand from Wyanet's knee up to her mouth. The new queen then kissed her deeply.

"Any invitation that includes Thiery includes you, Wyanet," Eudora declared. Wyanet grinned, and all three of them turned heated eyes to Aja.

"Will you be joining us, my son?" Thiery asked as he led Wyanet away

by the hand. Aja smiled, ready to reply, but then worry entered his icy green gaze.

“Eudora?” Her name had barely left Aja’s lips before his wife collapsed against him. All sense of playfulness vanishing, Wyanet knelt beside Eudora as Aja lowered her gently to the floor.

“Back,” Wyanet ordered, taking the new queen’s pulse and checking her temperature. Aja moved away, his eyes burning with panic.

“What’s wrong, mother?” Wyanet shushed him and closed her eyes, placing her hands first above Eudora’s head, then her chest, and then her stomach. Aja saw wispy vibrations passing between the skin of either woman, like heat rising off a fire. Aja knew that his mother was using her Taming on Eudora, Taming of a Lesser Element, to discern the cause of her collapse. Wyanet was very skilled at *Humani Corporis*, or the Taming of the body’s balance.

Wyanet frowned. She then repeated the same movements as frustration furrowed her brow.

“Perhaps I am not using the correct form of Taming...” the old queen murmured before placing her hands on Eudora’s abdomen. When she backed away this time, the magma-eyed woman smiled and patted Aja on the shoulder.

“Tell your wife to eat more often and sleep much. She is fine, except for the child now growing in her womb.” After allowing shock to settle through him for a moment, Aja gave a whoop of elation and jumped to his feet in order to embrace his father. Wyanet beamed and stood as well, bringing Aja into her arms for a warm hug.

“Shall I call for a servant to take her to your room?” Wyanet asked, but Aja shook his head.

“I will take her there. How far along do you believe her to be?” Wyanet shrugged.

“Not very far. I would not even guess her to be a month with child. Now you must understand, Aja, that while her spirit is unbreakable, her body is not nearly so strong. With all the stress her father has brought on her, trying to manage a kingdom, worrying about you, and Taming the Passion, the poor thing had reached her limit. Send Mora to watch over her while she sleeps.” Aja nodded and scooped his fragile wife up tenderly. He gave his mother a soft kiss and his father a glance filled with love.

“She won’t need to Tame her Passion during the pregnancy. But I am sure that after our son is born, the offer extended tonight will still stand.” Thiery nodded and laughed boisterously. He was much too happy about the impending birth to be disappointed about the cancelled evening.

Eudora awoke curled against Aja. Her stomach felt queasy, and she had a thundering headache. When she turned to look at her husband, Eudora smiled to find him sleeping peacefully. After brushing a soft kiss onto his cheek, the queen stood and stretched. She didn’t remember how she’d gotten to the room she and Aja shared. The last thing she recalled was Wyanet and Thiery, standing in the hallway and planning what promised to be an interesting night. She didn’t remember why they had foregone it in order to sleep. Eudora hadn’t even known she was tired when she...oh, that was right. She had collapsed.

Frowning her confusion, Eudora gently shook Aja awake. He sat up with a start, worry clouding his eyes. Eudora could see those icy emerald orbs even in the darkness and smiled at his concern.

“All is well, husband,” she whispered comfortingly. “I was merely puzzled. Why did I collapse?” Chasing the sleep from his gaze, Aja took Eudora’s hands and gave her a very warm look.

“You collapsed because the Gods have given us a very precious gift, one that drains you of energy while you carry it.” Eudora drew a quick breath as she began to form conclusions from Aja’s words.

“You mean...” She trailed off as Aja pressed kisses to each of her palms. She was trembling, with tears sparkling on her dark lashes.

“We’re going to have a child, my love,” Aja murmured before taking his wife into his embrace. “A strong, healthy baby to love and nurture and lead in the ways of our kingdom. You are pregnant.” Eudora was still for a moment, and then her quivering form was overtaken by tears. Aja was alarmed.

“My wife, my wife, *mi corazón querido*, why do you weep? I thought this was happy news.” Aja rocked her as she sobbed and then backed away as she wiped at her face.

“Silly, silly,” she was saying. “I don’t know why I’m crying. This is happy news, wonderful news! I could not be more joyous were you to say anything else in the whole world. And yet my heart fills with sadness.” She

suddenly clasped Aja's hands tightly. "What if he attacks, Aja? What if Valin decides now is the time to bring war on the Passion Kingdom? Then our child will face war and death without first tasting the breath of a free world." Aja took Eudora back into his warm embrace as she wept.

Staying as still and silent as the guardian trees who stood as sentries for the Passion Kingdom, Aja let security and peace flow from himself to his wife. When she had fallen into a deep sleep, Aja first kissed her on the forehead, then kissed the crystal around her neck.

"Our child will be safe, fire rose, my love," Aja whispered a promise while laying his hands lovingly over his wife's stomach. "I swear it on my eternal soul. Our child will be safe." Aja left Eudora to sleep as he went to his study to go over his preparations again for the coming war.

## **Chapter Thirteen~ Dreams and Nightmares**

Months passed in the Passion Kingdom. Peaceful months. Happy months. Eudora mastered her Taming completely and began to show the signs of what caused great joy throughout the Kingdom.

Eudora was pregnant, pregnant with what the inhabitants of the Isle hoped would be a strong and wise heir to lead the Passion Kingdom's children.

Aja and Eudora spent nearly every day with Wyanet and Thiery. Seeing the old king gain his strength back and walking without the use of his cane made Eudora's heart soar with joy. In the months of peace and happiness, Eudora forgot about Cieala, forgot about the prophecy, and focused on being wife to her true love and queen to a people she cherished above all else.

As she neared term, Eudora was glad to find her Passion Taming, as predicted, had receded completely in the face of the impending birth. While she granted Aja permission to Tame on whomever he so chose, Eudora spent her hours in the Everbloom Wind Lilies patch, resting her hands on the pleasant, hard swell of her belly and speaking to her baby. Wyanet had proclaimed the child to be extremely healthy and said the birth should go smoothly. Eudora hadn't been worried, anyway.

While the sun was being swallowed up by the ocean, Aja watched his wife speak to their child, the child who would rest within her for only a week or two more. He had never seen anything more beautiful or awe-inspiring than his lovely wife carrying their first heir.

Aja had told Eudora all through her pregnancy that he wanted a boy, but he secretly wished for a girl. A smart little girl, with her mother's hair and father's eyes. Certainly, her mother's spirit and heart. As he mused over all the things he hoped his daughter would be, Eudora stood with a bit of difficulty and turned to smile at her husband. His pride in her was

tremendous, not only because she had truly become the queen of the Passion Kingdom, but because she was truly a Master Tamer. Even her Legendary Tamer mark was now hidden.

“How long have you been watching me?” she asked before giving him a soft kiss. Her voice was more melodious than he remembered it being before, more gentle and tender. She had done well through the pregnancy and looked healthy, even though the first three months had been terrible for her. With Wyanet’s coaching, the last six had been less painful. Aja sank to his knees and laid gentle kisses on his wife’s belly before responding.

“Not very long,” he responded as he stood. “How is our son doing?” Eudora grinned at him and took his hand as they walked slowly towards the palace. This banter was expected and calming to her. It had gone on ever since she discovered she was pregnant.

“Our daughter is anxious to greet the world,” Eudora answered with a teasing lilt to her voice. She then laughed and placed her free hand on her stomach. “She kicks even now, when I thought she’d be sleeping.” Aja stopped walking and went to his knees again, laying his cheek against Eudora’s belly. She smiled lovingly and stroked his hair as he closed his eyes and listened for the heartbeat of their baby. It was something he enjoyed doing often.

“I am anxious for him to be here,” Aja admitted, kissing Eudora’s stomach again before rising. Eudora caressed Aja’s cheek, still beaming at him. He loved looking at her like this. She was radiant.

“I’m sure she can’t wait to meet her father,” the queen told her king in a soft voice. It echoed with the love that stars have for their ivory companion of the skies. Aja smiled the secret smile he only gave to her and only rarely.

“Come,” he said as they began to walk again. “Let’s get our son to bed.” Eudora laughed and shook her head.

“The time is drawing near,” she said in a confident voice. “I doubt our daughter will be able to sleep through the excitement.” The child did sleep, though, cradled between the warm bodies of its mother and father.

Eudora woke hours later with pain cramping her abdomen. After the initial wave of fear swept through her, an instinctive calm took over. She was a woman, a soon to be mother, and this was her job. She would not fail her child by panicking.

“Aja,” Eudora said softly as another contraction rippled through her. She shook her husband lightly, and he came awake with a start. He was immediately alarmed.

“What? What is it? Is the baby all right?” Eudora tried to transfer some of her calmness to her husband. It had no effect on the apprehensive king.

“She’s fine, Aja,” Eudora said soothingly, trying to see his face in the darkness. It wasn’t even nearing morning yet.

“She’s simply impatient,” Eudora continued in a smooth, relaxing tone. “The birth will take place sooner than expected.” Aja was torn between elation, excitement, and terror.

“Why? Is something wrong? We must get my mother!” He jumped off the bed, barking at Mora the Wind Taming servant to watch Eudora as he sprinted out of the room. Mora entered carrying a pail full of hot water and several cool rags. As pain once again shot through Eudora’s mid-section, the servant smiled serenely and placed one of the cloths on the queen’s forehead.

“Breathe,” Mora said in a voice calm as a summer breeze. “Stand and walk until the baby is ready to be born. You’re doing fine, your highness. Just listen to my voice and breathe....”

Eudora lost herself to the sound of Mora speaking, the blood-red of Wyanet’s eyes, the startling pain, the enormous pressure, the sick look of worry etched into Aja’s very skin, the gentle touch of Thierry’s hand on her brow. It was many hours before the labor was complete, and by then, the sun had breathed its welcome breath of morning across the land.

“We have a daughter, my love.” Aja spoke with tears in his words and on his cheeks. Eudora touched them wearily and managed a weak smile.

“How is she?” Eudora, sliding easily into the role of protective mother, wanted to see her daughter and know for herself that she was really healthy. Aja squeezed his wife’s hands and pressed warm kisses to her knuckles.

“She’s perfect, my love, absolutely perfect. My mother is cleaning and wrapping her. She’ll be with you again in a moment.” Eudora smiled contentedly and gazed out the window at the flaming sunrise.

“She came to us with the moonlight,” Eudora whispered. “Therefore, that shall be her namesake. Miakoda, falling moonlight.” Aja nodded and stood as Wyanet came towards him with the sleeping princess in her arms.

“A beautiful name for a beautiful child. Miakoda it is, then. My beautiful daughter.” He took her from Wyanet and laid soft kisses over her

closed eyes. They were the color of the moonlight she was named for. Aja touched Miakoda's tuft of silken ebony hair and smiled as more tears glistened in his eyes. She was perfect.

Aja handed Miakoda to Eudora, whose eyes misted over with love and amazement. The small princess awoke with a startled cry as she was moved from one parent to the other, but quieted as soon as Eudora held her daughter to her breast. The infant suckled for a short time and then fell back into sleep.

Eudora gazed down on her daughter with more love than she ever knew she could feel sweeping through her. Aja kissed his wife's damp hair and then took Miakoda gently from her arms. Placing her in the crib beside their bed, Aja touched his daughter's soft back and then stroked her tiny fingers. Miakoda stirred, but felt her father's presence and was content. So, as Eudora bathed and then fell exhaustedly into the newly cleaned bed she and Aja shared, the infant Miakoda slept, wrapped, safe and warm in the love of her parents.

For three days, the people of the Passion Kingdom feasted and danced. As before, when the festivities had celebrated Thiery's awakening, there was music, dancing, bonfires, laughter, and gaiety while they rejoiced in having a new princess. Eudora ate, slept, celebrated and regained her strength. Because it was her first pregnancy and had been such an easy birth, three days was enough time for her to recuperate fully. Her Taming helped the process, and soon she was feeling completely restored.

On the third day of the celebration, Eudora was hit by a shock of power. She immediately recognized Prophecy. Allowing the Taming to sweep through her as it never had before, Eudora's knees buckled, and she hit the ground near Miakoda's crib. The infant gave a troubled cry as her mother was held, helpless, in the thrall of the most dangerous Element.

Aja entered the room to see Eudora on the floor and rushed to her side, panicked. She stared up at him, eyes glazed, as vision slammed into her. When breath rushed back into her body and she returned to the plain of the living, the queen's eyes filled with burning tears. Her entire body shook with the force of the visions.

"War, Aja." She gasped. "War is..." A crash that roared like thunder through the village interrupted her, and she squeezed her eyes shut, allowing the tears to slip down her cheeks.

“War is here,” she whispered. Aja surged to his feet and looked out the window, which Miakoda’s crib sat beside. The baby was wailing in earnest, afraid of the sounds which had woken her. Screams rent the air. Flames crackled hungrily. Men shouted angrily as they made their way through the village, butchering the unprepared inhabitants.

“Stay here,” Aja said in a growl as Eudora moved to follow him out the door. Eudora was angered.

“These are my people, Aja. I must go with you to fight.” Aja pushed her back towards Miakoda.

“This is our daughter. Your true battle is here. Swear to me on her life, on our love, that you will stay here and protect her. Leave Valin and his army to me.” Eudora looked from Aja’s firm eyes to Miakoda’s crib. Finally, she nodded and pulled Aja close to her. After kissing him deeply, she shoved him out the door, knowing that if he didn’t leave now, she wouldn’t be able to honor her word.

“I swear it to you, Aja. Now go show Cieala the strength of the Passion Kingdom’s heart.” He took the sword Eudora handed him and sprinted down the hallway. The sword was his grandfather’s. It held great symbolism for their people. When Aja fought with it, he fought with the strength of his ancestors.

Eudora closed and locked the door. Leaning against it for a moment, she let her head clear and her emotions calm to a simmer in place of a storm. She then moved to her daughter’s crib and lifted the tiny babe into her arms.

Eudora smiled through the tears on her cheeks and sang her daughter a lullaby of mountains, of winds that carry the spirits home, of wolves and deer running free and wild, of a mother’s love for her only child. She sang of love and laughter, of fairies and gods above. She sang as her army rose up like the wind of death and began forcing Valin’s army back. She sang as blackness erupted from the mountains of Illac’Mur.

This, indeed, was her true battle. It had, however, nothing to do with the small child in her arms. It had everything to do with the sleeper, and everything to do with the evening flower. She now knew why she was who she had been prophesized to become, and she was not afraid.

Hugging Miakoda tighter to her breast, Eudora watched as the shadow from Illac’Mur spilled over the ocean and slithered closer to her kingdom, closer to her people, her love, her daughter. The sleeper brought with him

demons, demons longing to feast on the blood of the living. The war had awakened him. Eudora knew this, and she also knew that she was not meant to return him to his sleep.

She was destined to kill him.

Miakoda fell back into a fitful sleep as Eudora sang. She created new songs, songs to tell her daughter of her fear for Aja, her pride in the people of the Passion Kingdom, and her determination to destroy the sleeper. She was the evening flower, and this was what she was meant for.

When he entered her room, Eudora was not afraid.

“It has been far too long, Eliora,” Arawn whispered as he moved closer to her. “This situation seems familiar, does it not?” Eudora clutched Miakoda to her, repulsed by the evil that clung to Arawn.

“My name is Eudora,” the queen declared bravely, facing Arawn with her shoulders set regally and head held high. “You murdered Eliora centuries ago.” Confusion swept over Arawn’s face momentarily, but then he smirked at her. He really was beautiful, with his long dark hair, shining like black ice, and eyes deep and dark as twin new moons. He held a blade of obsidian and brandished it at her.

“Did I now?” he asked in a growling voice. “Well, then, it seems the gods have gifted me with another beauty. You look like her, you know. Has your husband also trapped you here? Has he killed you trying to save your precious soul?” Eudora saw movement behind Arawn but held his attention with her eyes.

“He would do no such thing,” the queen replied. “He would not subject me to such magic as the unbreakable vow after having heard the story of Eliora. While love forgives mistakes, wise men learn from them.” Her eyes flickered to the flash of silver behind Arawn.

“Apparently,” the queen continued. “You are not very wise.” Arawn did not understand until the sword blade pierced his flesh, entering beside his spine and bursting out beneath his ribcage. While Arawn roared his rage, Mora used the Wind to slip from his grasp and Eudora fled the room.

Gasping, panting, Eudora flung herself out the palace doors and made her way to the beach. Valin’s army had not stood a chance against the Passion Kingdom’s. Training, diligence, and the commands of intelligent, strategic Tamers had the Passion Kingdom’s at victory’s doorstep.

Ignoring the battle raging around her, Eudora made her way to Oceanus

and Amana's home. She burst through the door and slammed it shut quickly, hoping no one had seen her. Smiling down at Cael, who was asleep in his bed, Eudora placed Miakoda near the sleeping toddler before kissing them both.

"Be safe, little ones," Eudora murmured, using her lesser Taming of *Humani Corporis* to coax both the children's bodies to a deep sleep before darting out of the hut and grabbing a discarded spear. Although she had promised not fight, rushing headlong into a fracas weaponless seemed to be inviting death.

The Passion Kingdom looked identical to the way it had during Eudora's vision. The guardian trees were burning, and blood was everywhere. Then, to Eudora's horror, she saw Aja and Valin. They were locked in battle. Valin held her mother's sword, and Aja wielded his grandfather's.

As if she were trapped in a nightmare, Eudora watched as both men turned simultaneously towards her. After shock registered on his face, Aja let rage consume his beautiful features. Valin saw her as a threat, the enemy, and for a moment, they stood like mirrors to each other. Betrayal was in both of their eyes. The crystal around Eudora's neck dimmed, then shattered. Weeping, Eudora began running towards the men. She couldn't let Aja die.

The battle between Valin and Aja had resumed. Both men fought with all their strength, neither giving an inch either way. Steel clanged on steel as Eudora ran to them. She threw her spear like a javelin, using her Wind Taming to make the throw more accurate and powerful, and impaled a Ciealan warrior through his head. He had been about to kill Aja with an arrow. The Wind Mark exploded to life on her leg as she ran.

The queen fought through soldiers with her Taming, trying valiantly to reach her husband. Daggers of ice slashed through men, awakening the Ice Mark on her neck in a flash of white-blue. Fire consumed flesh from within, and the Fire Mark came flaring to life around Eudora's breasts. Rock effectively imprisoned even the strongest of fighters as the Rock Mark tumbled down the queen's right shoulder. Water served as an unbreakable shield, glowing as brilliantly as the Water Mark dancing on her wrists. Though she was a Master, Eudora felt herself weakening dangerously.

"Aja!" Eudora shrieked as she ran. Valin was a master swordsman and,

as of now, was just toying with the Passion king, who was not nearly so skilled. As Valin's sword came down, as it had in Eudora's vision, she screamed and poured all of her strength into her Taming, attempting to send a formless wave of energy towards the dueling men to halt their blades. She felt her power cut off, however, and her anguished cries were silenced by the strong, gloved hand that slipped around her throat and squeezed. Turning her face before Valin's blow struck, Eudora's silver moonlight eyes met the midnight ones of Arawn.

Tears slipped silently over the queen's cheeks. She knew now that without the strength of their king and with Arawn's forces joined to Cieala, Gailenna, and Karaphel's, the children of the Passion Kingdom were doomed to death.

"Please..." She gasped. Arawn was choking her and grinning while she suffocated. "Withdraw your army. Leave the Passion Kingdom be. They are no threat to you. The Legendary Tamers are dead with me." Arawn chuckled and released his hold on the queen's neck.

"Oh, my queen, you speak such brave words." He knelt beside the collapsed Tamer, who was coughing and clutching her throat. When Arawn slapped her, the shock of the blow sent her reeling over. He stood and towered over her.

"All who live are threat to my reign." The Tamer of Evil snarled. "And you lie about the Legendary Tamers. Even now, three live and three are candidates for the power." Joy swept through Eudora as she realized the three had to be Thiery, Aja, and herself. Her husband was still alive. Confusion quickly followed. Candidates? Weren't the Legendary Tamers *born* as such?

A tremor suddenly passed through Arawn's body. His lips curled into a frightful sneer. He jerked Eudora up by her hair and gestured towards the palace.

"Even now!" he snapped angrily. "Even now the old wretch calls the soul of the fourth." Spittle from Arawn's lips landed on Eudora's face, but she was too busy thinking to notice. There were now four Legendary Tamers. Who could possibly be the fourth?

"We don't have much time," Thiery declared as he took the hand of the woman beside him. He turned to a man cloaked in shadows and nodded to

him. "Use your Illusion Taming and cover us, quickly," the old king ordered. He did as his sovereign commanded and a light silver veil fell over Thiery and the woman at his right side. He gave her a small smile and squeezed her fingers.

"We will triumph, father," she said in a voice soft as the wind.

Arawn dragged Eudora through the battling soldiers, paying no heed to men calling out piteously as they bled to death or held stumps of severed limbs. Eudora watched numbly with tears falling continuously from her swollen eyes as she stumbled over bodies, weapons, and nameless pieces of men who were, in death, not recognizable as friend or foe. She had not seen her father or Aja since Arawn had seized her.

A rush of warm energy lit through the queen, starting at her heart and working its way out from her chest. She felt her Taming return. Glancing around cautiously, she tried to pinpoint the location of the person or people assisting her. Only another Legendary Tamer could return power stolen from one of their kin. When she saw no one, Eudora decided the time had come for action, and she used her free hand to snatch the dagger she had fastened around her upper thigh.

Thiery smiled at Eudora as he watched his brave, and not to mention highly intelligent, daughter-in-law slash her dagger across Arawn's face. He wondered if she was even aware of how her actions were damaging the Tamer of Evil. Elicora had done the exact same thing centuries ago. Arawn wore the scar on his right cheek still and now had another to accompany it on his left. Nodding in the queen's direction, Thiery turned to the newest Legendary Tamer.

"You have not had training in any Element but your first," he began calmly as he brushed the hair out of his daughter's face. His daughter, whom he had not known until Wyanel told him yesterday he even had. Her mother had been Thiery's second love after Wyanel and had died while birthing the girl. Even though it had saddened him, seeing his daughter made Thiery feel that the power of the Passion Kingdom could truly prevail. She nodded.

"I know, father. The Wind is the only voice I can hear." Thiery gave her a comforting hug. Even though the Illusion Taming had shielded them from all including each other, Thiery could still feel his daughter.

"Then listen to her voice," he said softly. "Use the Wind to free your

queen, as it was meant to be.” Thiery’s daughter, princess of the Passion Kingdom, nodded again and asked the Wind to mold itself to her desire. She and the Wind worked perfectly together, so perfectly that she had gained a Wind Spirit as soon as she had been called as a Legendary Tamer. Calling Terryn to her, she sent the Spirit to her queen, who was engaged in a duel with the Evil Tamer.

Arawn roared his fury as he hit Eudora, closed-fist, across the face. Because she had moved and blocked at the same time, the blow didn’t knock her unconscious, but did have her world spinning. Therefore, when Arawn slipped both massive hands around her throat and squeezed so hard Eudora thought her spine would snap, she could do nothing to stop him. Blood dripped from Arawn’s chin, and that made Eudora smile. She had wounded him and denied him perfect victory, as Eliora had once done. The symbolism did not slip past her.

“She defeated you,” Eudora rasped. “The bards sing Eliora’s name even today. You are looked upon as nothing more than an animal who refuses to be put down.” Darkness crept over the edges of the queen’s vision as Arawn followed Eudora to her knees.

“Eliora lost everything.” Arawn snarled. “As you do now. I stole from her kingdom, people, love, and life. She had *nothing* when I killed her.” Eudora’s eyes closed, and her hands went limp.

“You...disgust me,” she whispered. “You’ll die...before this night ends.” The queen lost consciousness before a blast of wind powerful enough to snap bones crashed into Arawn. He fell back with a howl as that same wind cradled the oblivious queen and swept her back to the Tamer who had saved her life.

Thiery breathed air into his daughter-in-law’s mouth for a moment before she came awake with a choked gasp. When her eyes fell upon Thiery’s daughter, upon the Legendary Tamer Mark that swept around her noble brow, Eudora couldn’t help laughing with pleasure. The Illusion Taming had vanished after its hour of life had been extinguished, and Eudora could see full well who the fourth Legendary Tamer was. Hugging the younger woman to her, Eudora was happy in the midst of chaos simply to be near one she knew as kin.

“Mora!” she exclaimed. “How did you come to be a Legendary Tamer?” The Wind Tamer smiled self-consciously, but her expression immediately

darkened as she looked upon Arawn, who was standing.

“Now is not the time, my queen,” Mora declared as she went to her feet. Thiery and Eudora rose as well, the queen a bit shakily. The Ice Mark on her neck was tainted with a sick purple bruise.

“Where is Aja?” Thiery asked. Agony stole Eudora’s ability to speak, and she gave Thiery a look that passed beyond pained. He nodded.

“His death was for the good of the Passion Kingdom, then, as it should be,” the old king declared, but Eudora shook her head.

“He is not dead,” she objected. “At least, not so far as I know. The Evil Arawn spoke to me of four Legendary Tamers still living. I now know that the fourth was Mora. You, me, and Aja are the other three. He lives still. It is just...” Thiery swept a consoling hand against Eudora’s cheek.

“Your vision? He believes you have betrayed him.” Eudora nodded, not trusting herself to speak. Thiery sighed.

“We must convince him otherwise. Without his power joined to ours, we are truly lost.” Thiery led Mora and Eudora around the outer edges of the village, trying to stay as far away from the wrathful Arawn as possible. When he came upon Valin and Aja, Thiery gently took the swords away from both men. Aja had been holding Valin’s blows off with his Wind Taming, aided by his Spirit, Lela. He had found an opportunity and then, not through skill but through blind luck, had wounded the Ciealan king in the side. From then, it had been Valin blocking Aja’s attacks, but the Passion king had used his Taming to exhaustion and so had not been able to strike a killing blow.

“Stand down, my son,” Thiery said softly as he looked upon Valin. Thiery’s face became infinitely sad. “I am sorry to meet the father of my beautiful new daughter-in-law under situations such as these.” He sighed and helped Valin to his feet. Valin looked warily at the old king and gave a snort of disdain.

“You’re weak,” he growled. “Why would you greet me as a friend on a battlefield where our soldiers are spilling their lifeblood, fighting our war for power?” Thiery shrugged.

“It is your war, Valin, not mine. I never wanted any of Cieala’s power. You gave up even your daughter to secure the power of the Passion Kingdom for yourself. It is a pity. We could have been allies, with the strength of both kingdoms shared between us. But, like all the kingdoms to

the east, you are selfish and simple-minded. Cieala has brought ruin to itself through its greed.”

Thiery took Eudora’s hand and gave it a squeeze. The gesture said, ‘Be strong.’

“Arawn is retreating to Illac’Mur,” Eudora murmured as the shadow of Arawn’s Evil slipped back across the sea. “We must follow him and destroy him once and for all.” Thiery nodded and turned back to face the dueling soldiers. Without Arawn’s army to lend them strength, the armies of Cieala, Karaphel, and Gailenna were rapidly losing ground against the small but skilled militia of the Passion Kingdom. Valin spat on the ground.

“Let him run. He’s got his tail between his legs, just like I knew he would.” Confusion suddenly clouded Valin’s face. “Wait...he was fighting...you? He was fighting with me? Why was I allied with The Sleeper?” As Valin came slowly out of his trance, he sat down heavily. The blood from the wound Aja had inflicted had stained his battle mail, so the silver looked rusted. Eudora knelt beside her father.

“Who was telling you about the happenings here, Valin?” she asked in a soft voice. “Who was betraying me to you?” Valin didn’t need to answer, because Warrick approached the gathered royals with a look of loathing on his face.

“Your court maiden fled with her true master,” he snarled. He was painted with blood and sweat, and Eudora found herself thinking wryly of how he had once told her he had no place in battle. He looked more a warrior than most she’d seen.

“Which?” Eudora asked as she stood and faced Warrick. The Time Tamer gestured to Illac’Mur hopelessly, as if angered he hadn’t been able to do anything about it.

“The little one, the one who looked small and delicate as a flower.” Eudora nodded. Wy Janet had spoken her concerns of that maiden from the beginning.

“Minjonet,” Eudora mused. “The only of my court not handpicked for this mission by me.” The Passion queen turned back to her father and gazed down upon him with pity.

“Aren’t you going to kill me?” he suddenly asked, looking up to catch the molten silver eyes of his only child. Eudora felt her heart break at those words and shook her head slowly.

“No, I’m not going to kill you.” She gave meaningful looks to the others standing around her. “Nor is any other member of the Passion Kingdom.” Taking Thiery’s hand, she looked to Oceanus, who had just approached and nodded to her. Smiling to her friend, Eudora gestured to Valin.

“Protect my father, please, Oceanus? It would mean a great deal to me.” Oceanus smiled his benevolent smile and took position as a sentry for the Ciealan king. Eudora was suddenly panicked.

“Oceanus, where is Amana?” the queen exclaimed. “She was a general. Where is her battalion?” Oceanus calmed Eudora with his sea deep eyes.

“My wife is fine, Eudora. She is now returning to our home to look after our son.” Eudora nodded, glad that Amana would be there to look after Miakoda, as well.

“Wonderful.” She then turned to Thiery. “We must leave.” He nodded and held out another hand to Aja.

“Come, my son. It is time to finish this.” Aja looked spitefully at Eudora and backed away.

“I will not fight beside her,” he spat out angrily. Eudora thought Valin’s words had broken her heart, but she couldn’t even define what Aja’s did to her soul. Tear gathered in her eyes, and she called Ayasha to her, quickly asking the Wind Spirit to take her to Illac’Mur. Ayasha obliged, and the queen swept away on the Wind with Mora following her quickly, supported by her spirit, Terryn.

“You must come, Aja,” Thiery declared in a rough voice. Then, in a gentler tone, he said, “She did not betray you, my son. The little lily had reason for what she did.” Aja stood in stubborn silence as Thiery called his Wind Spirit, Dialys. The old king left Aja, who glared at Oceanus as the Water Tamer touched his sovereign on the arm.

“Go and see Amana, then,” Oceanus said on a sigh. “There is no battle left, simply cleaning of the mess made by Karaphel, Gailenna, and Cieala. Even now, your mother signs the peace treaty between the kingdoms, naming you and Eudora as the rulers of Cieala and allies to the Rock and Fire Kingdoms.” Giving the king a gentle push, Oceanus smiled. “Talk to Amana.” Aja nodded and set off towards the house Oceanus and Amana shared.

When he reached the humble dwelling, Aja heard Amana singing softly, crooning to Cael about his bravery and strength. Apparently, he had slept

through the entire battle.

“Amana,” Aja began as he entered her home. He stopped, however, when he saw Miakoda curled on the bed beside Cael. “What is she doing here?” he asked as he swooped his infant daughter up into his arms. Amana gave him a puzzled look as she warmed goat’s milk for the baby and wrapped a blanket around her son.

“Didn’t Eudora tell you? Oh, but of course she was busy battling Arawn.... The Evil Tamer confronted the queen in her chambers, forcing her to flee with Miakoda. She came here, knowing the princess would be safe, and then left in order to finish this war once and for all.” Aja sat down heavily as Miakoda stirred and looked up at her father with her mother’s eyes.

“How do you know this?” he demanded to know. Amana gave him another strange look.

“The entire kingdom is singing Eudora’s praises, speaking of how we have a queen as wise and strong and brave as Eudora herself. Wiser, stronger, braver, even because she wounded Arawn and escaped, saving our precious princess as she did. Cassara was the one who eventually told me all that occurred. What did you hear?” Aja was already on his feet, though, and had no time to respond as he handed Miakoda to Amana.

“Protect my daughter, please, my friend. This war has not ended yet and will not end until Arawn is dead.” Amana nodded.

“I will protect her as my own,” Amana said with a soft kind of smile. “As dearly as I love my Cael, so I shall love your Miakoda. They are the same to me.” Aja was confused by this, but simply thanked the Wind Tamer and darted out of her home.

“Lela!” Aja called as he ran. When his Wind Spirit did not come to him, Aja frowned and shouted her name again. She appeared before him with her arms crossed, frowning sternly. At least, Aja thought that featureless face was turned into a frown. He couldn’t honestly tell.

‘*You’ve done it again!*’ she accused. Her anger stung the back of Aja’s head.

‘*What did I do?*’ he retorted. Lela made a sound of disgust and spread her arms in an ‘isn’t it obvious’ kind of way.

‘*You hurt the queen. How could you think she betrayed you?*’ Aja glowered.

*'Lela, 'we have no time for this' is even an understatement!'* the king shouted in his head. *'We have to go now!'* Lela crossed her arms again and stamped her foot, looking like a pouting child.

*'Not until you apologize to her!'* the Wind Spirit declared. Aja roared his fury aloud.

*'I can't very well do that if she's dead!!'* he yelled angrily at his Spirit. Lela hesitated, as if searching for the logic of his words, then nodded her agreement.

*'Then let us hurry,'* the little Wind Spirit declared before sweeping Aja up into her airy embrace. They sped to Illac'Mur, Aja urging his Spirit to fly faster and faster until the peaks of the dreaded mountains were right in front of them. Aja searched for Eudora's essence, her aura, which he had found he could sense within a reasonable distance.

*'Take us down here,'* Aja ordered as he felt Eudora's presence. It was vague, not near the rocky ridge they landed on, but far beneath it. If the king wasn't mistaken, Arawn had taken the battle into the bowels of Illac'Mur.

Lela vanished after Aja thanked her for their speedy arrival. The king was hoping beyond hope that he wasn't too late.

It took the king almost a full turn of the clock's hand to locate his wife. He had to run through tunnels, which was dangerous, search uncounted caverns, and fight his way through inky darkness before he heard voices bouncing off the walls not three yards in front of him.

"Mora!" Eudora screamed. The panic in her voice sent Aja dashing through the cave mouth, blinded by fear for his wife. He knew that if Mora was in danger, Eudora was going to try and protect her. It was in her nature, now more so than ever because she had become a mother

"Eudora!" Aja shouted as he barreled into her, sending them both sprawling over the jagged rocks of the cave floor. A shock of power ripped across Aja's back, and he cried out in pain as the skin blistered and burst, sending a flood of warm blood down his back. This Taming was unlike any he'd ever experienced. It was powerful in a way he couldn't even fathom, yet on its basest level, it was pure Evil. Something had to be sacrificed to wield that sort of power, and Aja knew Arawn had given his very soul for it.

"Oh, Aja..." Eudora murmured as she helped the king to his feet. He gave her a weak smile as they turned to Arawn together. Thiery was wounded gravely, unconscious on the cave floor. Mora, whom Eudora had

pushed out of the way at great jeopardy to herself, stood uninjured. Arawn smirked at all of them.

“With your deaths, my reign is secured,” the Evil Tamer declared. Eudora supported her husband and gave Arawn a disgusted look.

“As long as the free breathe, you will never rule this world. As long as hearts beat true, you will never rule.”

Arawn declined response to this and instead attacked. Eudora shoved Aja out of the way as the Evil Tamer came at them and summoned a shield of Rock. It was easier to Tame with the Element most readily available.

Arawn blasted through the barrier with ease and brought a sword down, intending to bury the blade in Eudora’s skull. She blocked with her own sword, the sword Aja realized Valin had wielded in the battle, and pushed off the cave wall with her foot. The queen’s momentum forced Arawn back, and when he was off balance, Eudora slashed at him. The queen was by no means a sword master, and therefore the wound she inflicted was sloppy and shallow. It gave her pleasure to see Arawn’s blood, however, and Mora took the opportunity of his distraction to blast the Evil Tamer in the back with a strong surge of Wind.

“This isn’t working, Eudora!” Mora exclaimed despairingly as Arawn simply laughed. Eudora grunted as she threw her whole body weight into him, shoving him back into the opposite cave wall.

“What a delightful position, my queen,” Arawn murmured. Eudora brought her knee up between his legs and smirked when he doubled over in pain.

“Oh, I quite agree,” she replied. Arawn pulled her legs out from beneath her and brought his sword down. It was blocked inches from Eudora’s heart by a shield of invisible Wind. Mora wasn’t very strong in her Taming yet, so Eudora knew she had to act quickly to get out from beneath the sword’s tip.

Eudora didn’t have to worry, however, because Aja chose that moment to slam his body into Arawn’s. Both men tumbled away from Eudora, who grabbed Arawn’s fallen sword and launched it like a javelin towards the Evil Tamer. It barely missed Aja’s head, and his angry gaze snapped up to meet hers.

“Will you watch where you’re aiming?!” he shouted. Eudora winced as Arawn smashed his fist into the king’s jaw. Aja went down like a sack of rice. When Arawn picked up his sword, Mora and Eudora rushed him as

one. His hand to hand fighting was superior to any of theirs, so he easily fended off the two women's blows.

"You're right, Mora," Eudora declared as she ducked beneath Arawn's slashing blade. "This isn't working! What do we do?" Mora stumbled back as Arawn swiped his sword at her. She was thinking frantically but couldn't draw any solid conclusions, nor did any brilliant plot form to relive them of their plight. Eudora was thinking, as well, but all she could see was the faces of her Spirits, and the only thing she could hear was the voices of her friends. Suddenly, her thoughts were clear. As if someone had flicked a switch inside her mind, Eudora understood what her Spirits of Light and Darkness meant by balance. Everything had to have an opposite. Everything. Which meant....

"Mora, what is the opposite of Evil?" The question so confused the other Legendary Tamer that she left herself open to Arawn's attack. His blade plunged into Mora's shoulder, and she shrieked in agony. Eudora couldn't go to her sister-in-law, no matter how much it hurt her to turn away when Arawn readied himself for the killing blow. She instead went to Aja and helped him stand.

"Everything has an opposite," Eudora continued, mostly to herself. If she didn't talk the theory through, she was going to lose her faith in its chance for success. "Everything can be cancelled by its opposite. So, if we use the opposite of Evil, if we fight with the direct counterpart to Arawn's Element...." Arawn turned to Eudora, as if distracted by her rambling.

"Would you rather I kill your little sister before or after you discover it is useless to fight me?" the Evil Tamer growled. Mora, panting on the ground at his feet, looked at Eudora fearfully. *'What will happen?'* her eyes seemed to say. *'Is there any way we can defeat him?'*

Eudora held Aja close to her and smiled softly at him. Her eyes misted with tears as she thought of all the people she loved, especially her newborn daughter, Aja's newly discovered sister, and Aja himself, her beautiful husband.

"I love you," the queen whispered softly against Aja's hair. "I'll always love you." Aja was nearing unconsciousness, but he smiled back.

"I love you," jhe echoed her words, then leaned against her neck and spoke so softly Eudora could barely even hear him. "What is the opposite of Evil, fire rose? Arise, dark flower. Protect the children of peace. The

opposite of...the opposite of Evil is....” Aja sagged against his wife, losing grip on reality as blood flowed from his horrifying back wound. Arawn approached at an easy pace, perhaps thinking on the way he would kill Eudora.

“The opposite of Evil,” Eudora finished. “Is Love.” Eudora felt the love of her people, the love of her friends, her husband, her daughter, her family. When Kyan’s mystic topaz exploded with light on her brow, Eudora placed Aja gently on the ground and moved towards Arawn.

The Evil Tamer grimaced at the brilliance emitting from the jewel in the middle of Eudora’s Legendary Mark but continued to walk the short distance across the cavern to her. With each step, Eudora was hearing voices blossoming within her, sending knowledge blooming into her mind. She was the evening flower, and her true power was finally emerging, like the center of a lily opening to sunlight. When she and Arawn met, everything from Eliora to Miakoda, from Kyan to Cael was within her, and she knew how to win.

Arawn and Eudora collided in a clash of flesh and blade. Eudora had inherited prowess in the art of sword fighting from Kyan and all his ancestors who had wielded the blade and was now Arawn’s superior. The Evil Tamer’s face contorted with shock as Eudora easily sliced through his blows and struck him with precision and strength. Blow by blow, Eudora forced the Evil Tamer back the way he came, across the cave. She moved like liquid, like lightning, like quicksilver. The queen was her blade, and as each of Arawn’s thrusts grew sloppier, each block grew weaker, the queen’s arm grew stronger and truer.

The Evil Tamer’s blade was knocked from his hand, and Eudora put the tip of her sword to his throat against the far wall of the cavern. Mora had made her way to the injured Aja and was attempting to use Fire to mend his wound. Thiery was still unconscious, but Eudora was focused only on the man before her. The man who had killed Aja’s ancestor, her ancestor, and led thousands upon thousands of innocents to their deaths.

“What do you have to say, Arawn?” Eudora asked softly. “Can you say anything at all?” Arawn laughed.

“I have nothing to say to a foolish child,” he replied. Eudora frowned at his words but screamed when she felt phantom claws ripping into her back. Arawn continued to chuckle as Eudora was torn away from him, locked in

the wicked embrace of one of the Evil Tamer's Spirits. Arawn picked up his discarded sword and grinned at the queen.

"What do you have to say, Eudora?" Arawn taunted. "I thought you were going to smite me, bring me down with the opposite of my Evil." He snickered and balanced his blade between his fingertips. "You should have seen this coming, my love," he continued as the Evil Spirit sank its claws so far into the queen's back that the tips pierced the skin of her chest. She screamed in agony but glared up defiantly at Arawn.

"I have nothing to say..." she rasped. "To a foolish child...Because you are a child, Arawn, even after all these centuries. You think you should be able to take what you want, that you should have no retribution for what you do." Tears streaked Eudora's face, tracing clean lines through the blood, sweat, and grime covering her cheeks. "Let them be. Please. Let them live." Arawn laughed loudly and shook his head.

"You disgust me." He snarled before slamming his fist into Eudora's jaw. The blow rocked her, and she let out a pained cry. "I'm going to do you one favor, though. Instead of promising not to kill them, I'm going to kill you first. That way, you won't have to live to hear their screams, to know that you failed them." Eudora let her head fall to rest on her chest and smiled at the cave floor.

"I could never fail them," she whispered as Arawn drew back his sword, preparing to pierce her heart. "I love them." The blade entered precisely for a killing blow, and Eudora shrieked. It felt like fire was consuming her very skin. As the world began to fall away from her, light exploded from the queen's entire body. Arawn, who still had a grip on the sword lodged in Eudora's heart, looked fearful as the queen felt her spirit begin to slip away.

"What magic is this?" the Evil Tamer shouted. His Spirit screamed in agony as the light consumed it, spinning it in a maelstrom of fading particles around the two Tamers. The light began to creep up the sword's handle, and Arawn gave a panicked roar as he tried desperately to release the blade. Eudora lost herself as Arawn's skin peeled away, first from his arms, then his chest, then the rest of his body. He continued to scream for a long time after. Mora and Aja clasped their hands over their ears, trying to block out the horrible sounds. When Arawn was finally silent, the light faded and left only the queen on the ground with blood pooling around her.

Mora rushed to her sister-in-law with Aja close behind. They cradled the

barely lucid queen between their bodies, and Mora wept to see Eudora's eyes glazed with pain and death, which was creeping ever nearer.

"Don't, Aja," the queen said in a weak voice when Aja began to heal her. "My death will pull you in, as Iolani's did Kyan." Aja's face was covered in tears.

"I will die with you anyway, fire rose. That is how it must be." Eudora shook her head and smiled.

"I'm sorry..." she murmured before a fit of coughing hit her. When the tremors subsided, Eudora smiled at Aja. "Elora knew how to create and unmake the bond. I used her knowledge and unmade ours before Arawn's blade touched my flesh. You will live on, my love." Aja couldn't keep the sobs from his lips as Thiery approached his three children.

"As always," the old king began gruffly. "The little lily speaks such nonsense. Between our three life forces, this task will most certainly be less than suicidal." Eudora continued to smile but could not bring herself to laugh at Thiery's joke. The old king nodded, and Mora placed her hands over Eudora's brow. Thiery's took their place above her heart, and Aja clasped his wife's hands.

"I will see you on the other side, Eudora," Aja whispered before kissing her lips gently. "No matter which side it is, we will be together." Eudora's eyes drifted closed, sending two more teardrops spilling down the sides of her face.

"Always," queen whispered.

## **Epilogue~ Twenty Years Later**

“With the blessings of the good spirits upon you, I pronounce you husband and wife. Live long and rule well.” Eudora completed the marriage ceremony between her daughter, Miakoda, and Amana and Oceanus’s son, Cael, with a beaming smile. This wedding ritual was rather different than Eudora and Aja’s had been. There were people present of Ciealan heritage as well as Passion Kingdom inhabitants. Mixed in between at rare intervals were members of Cieala. The two joined kingdoms, along with several of the smaller lands between, were ruled over by the new queen and king of the Passion Kingdom, and were called the Kingdoms of Benecia. They were the Alliance of Peace, and only Karaphel and Gailenna remained outside its rule.

Eudora let a sad gaze slide over her father’s tomb, which the ceremony had taken place in front of. He had been buried on Passion Kingdom soil, just as he had asked to be years ago, after adopting the Isle as his home. Valin died of a terrible illness two years previous, but had lived long enough to make up a lifetime of neglect to his daughter and granddaughter, whom he had loved dearly.

Aja took his wife’s hand and gave her a soft smile, as if to tell her he knew what she was feeling. What she was thinking-well, he always knew that. But, that day, they were both proud and sad all at once. Their daughter, Miakoda, was a fine princess with molten silver eyes and hair black as the highest peaks of Illac’Mur. She was destined to rule well because of how she had been raised and how she loved her people. There was still sadness, though.

In the years since Arawn’s defeat, a constant shadow had blanketed the land. Minjonet, who had been serving her master, the Tamer of Evil, had not been found or, more importantly, destroyed after the war. Eudora knew the

traitor was waiting patiently for her moment to strike.

Ruling all the different kingdoms had been difficult, and the adjustment had been drawn out and painful for everyone. Eudora and Aja had lead as the heads of the Council, made up of two members, one man and one woman, from each kingdom, and trade routes had painstakingly been designed. Small military forces had been stationed in each kingdom and now, twenty years later, there was finally a semblance of peace. Eudora had decided it was time for Miakoda to begin her rule.

As the newlywed king and queen of the Passion Kingdom graciously thanked guests for attending, Aja and Eudora slipped away to travel through the gardens behind the palace. They had not been touched during the war, although the temple had been destroyed. Nothing within its walls had survived.

“What shall we do, my love, now that we are free of the trials of ruling kingdoms?” Eudora asked as she took her husband’s hand. She felt a twinge run through her chest, but it was not uncommon. After all these years, Arawn still was able to haunt her through the scars he had left, both internally and externally. Aja smiled and calmed her pain with a look of love.

“I think it’s time we made my second dream come true.” Eudora beamed at him as she touched an Everbloom Wind Lily gently.

“And what dream is it that you speak of?” she asked him as he brought her tenderly into his embrace. He held her for a moment and then looked up to the sky. Clouds were beginning to form in that sheet of curved cerulean.

“I want to see the world.” He looked back to her and squeezed her hands. “But now I want you to see it with me.” Eudora leaned her head against Aja’s shoulder and laughed happily. Although darkness would never be banished completely, couldn’t without sacrificing the light, as well, Eudora felt that she had found a place of light and peace that she could keep forever.

“I would like that,” Eudora admitted before giving Aja a gentle kiss. “Let’s see the world.”

Eudora and Aja left that night to do just that. They left to see a world which now was ruled under the tentative veil of peace by Miakoda and Cael. As their Spirits followed them to the boat that would take them across the sea to the lands of the east, Aja and Eudora bid farewell to the land they

knew as home and the first chapter of their life. It was time for Miakoda and Cael to write their story now. Eudora sent a calming wind through the Passion Kingdom, to remind her daughter and family of her love, and set the bow towards Cieala.

# THE END

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Alyx C. LaCroix is a lover of literature, cats, and music. She enjoys a quiet but fulfilling life tucked away in the backwoods of a sleepy town she has known all her life. Alyx's current focus is the continuation of The Taming Trilogy. She is diligently working on Taming Moonlight, the second book in the series, and Forever Tamed, the stunning conclusion. Look for more about Alyx on her publisher's website or at [www.freewebs.com/alyxlacroix](http://www.freewebs.com/alyxlacroix)



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