

Chapter 1

Monday, New Year's Day, Somewhere off the coast of St. John

Soft laughter echoed off the glistening walls of the cavern. The only light illuminating the small space was reflecting off the sand at the bottom of the pool in the center of the cavern. The entrance to the small cavern was only a few yards away and the cavern was one of several that honeycombed this part of the island. Two shimmering luminescent forms sat on the rocks, barely discernable in the ethereal lighting. They were human in form, but more ghostly than corporeal. The taller of the two beings lifted a large pebble and threw it vigorously into the water causing a series of ripples on the calm surface. The sound of the splash abruptly stopped the laughter and was followed by a stern but respectful reproach.

"My Princess." The voice was low and the words couched in concern. "We must return to our homeland. It is no longer safe for you to be here. The threats against the realm are very real, and Varian is not a man that can be deceived for long. One of his men is sure to be close behind us. I believe we should find the nearest emergency craft and return home. There is one near here and we could be on our way tonight."

"You worry too much, Janai. Varian has always been under my father's command. I cannot believe that he is plotting against him or me. He is like my second father. I'm sure there must be some misunderstanding. The communication implicating him must have been interfered with somehow."

"Princess Alana, please, would it not be a wise move to treat the information as true? What harm could come of your returning home ahead of schedule?"

"What? And not complete my study of these people as my father wishes?" *Besides, I am having a great deal of fun on this exploration and I am not about to be scared off by an obvious miscommunication. And I have other, more personal plans to accomplish.* "I am not finished learning about, let alone understanding, their behaviors. Father said I had much to learn from them, especially from the ones we will visit next." She stood and moved toward Janai and softly placed her hand on the taller person's arm. "Besides, Janai, that is what you are here for. You are my protector, and the most complete warrior in our realm."

"Yes, my Princess, I am that. But if this communication is true, I cannot be certain that I will be able to protect you from all the forces Varian has at his command."

Alana's voice softened and came out as a mere whisper. "Janai, please, don't call me 'princess'. We have been together far too long for that formality. And, the one thing I have learned to appreciate about these people is how they respect one another as equals." She gently squeezed the taller woman's arm. "I promise that after we visit the country called America, we will depart for home. And, if this suspected threat of yours becomes more tangible, we can seek one of the emergency crafts there. After all, our people have placed them everywhere on this planet." A hint of steel underlied her cajoling tone.

Janai realized she had pushed the issue as far as she dared. Bowing her head in concession, she replied, "Yes, my — Alana."

"Come, let us swim with our friends in the sea once again and then resume the more earthly shapes of our hosts." Alana stood, and her form pulsed a deep, muted, bluish purple before it shape-changed into a translucent nebulous silhouette and slipped into the pool.

"I hope you're right, my Princess." Janai sighed, and then quickly followed, becoming a translucent, deep blue-green amorphous shape.

The two pulsing figures flowed easily through the water, slipped around the coral reef at the entrance, then sped away toward the open sea.

At the back of the cavern, a black form speckled with red and gray emerged from the wall. "Ah, Janai," Kerris spoke aloud. "I was hoping that warning message had been intercepted. My job will be a bit more difficult with you on the alert. I will have to change my plans. I wonder how the High Council and the Emperor will react to the loss of the Princess at the hands of humans."

Intrigued at the thought of creating a reason for war, the dark form shimmered. "This may be an even better plan than a transport disaster on the way home. The High Council would never agree to an investigation on this planet and jeopardize discovery of our people." The form pulsed into a deep red and gray cloud, then flowed easily into the water in pursuit of Alana and Janai. It would not do for him to lose track of them now.

Dean and Katie checked all their belts and buckles, made sure the respirators were functioning properly, and double-checked their air supplies then headed to the dive platform at the aft of the charter boat. They were with ten other vacationers on the chartered dive, and were making the last dive of their short, four-day vacation. The trip was a Christmas present from Dean. Katie was glad to be able to spend some time away from the cold winter days of Virginia; the warm temperatures of the Caribbean islands were like a siren's call she would always eagerly answer.

After Dean rescued her from the trap Natasha had set for her under Niagara Falls, she thought she would never be able to get the cold out of her body. The dampness from the wind swept blasts of the falling water and the cold of the winter season seemed buried in her bones even days after the ordeal was over. But now, after four days in the Caribbean sun and the heat of their lovemaking, she was a new woman. Warm blood coursed through her blood vessels and she felt human again.

Katie turned her attention to the dive platform on which she stood and surveyed the horizon, smiling at the sight. Off to the south was the island of St. Croix, with St. Thomas to their west and St. John right behind them. Katie had talked Dean into a day trip over to St. John to dive at the Eagle Shoals site. It was one of the most remote dive sites in the area, and one of the most beautiful. There were many small, curious caves and coral arches, along with a wide variety of coral outcroppings. The healthy smattering of colorful tropical fish everywhere added to the beauty of the underwater scenes.

"Penny for your thoughts," Dean said as they waited their turn to enter the water.

"Mmm, just enjoying the day," Katie replied with a sigh. "Have I told you how much I love this present?"

"Yeah, about a hundred times now." Dean chuckled as she squatted down on the platform. She dipped her mask into the water, then looked out across the expanse of sea to the island before them as she spilled out the seawater. "It is beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yeah." Katie sighed again. "But it's back to the real world tomorrow morning."

"Well, you know, with your little bank roll, you could probably retire now and live here permanently," Dean said as she rose to stand next to her lover.

Katie nodded, realizing the truth in Dean's words. "Yes, I could. But then it would become an everyday experience and, well, I'd risk losing the appreciation of it. I'd rather just come to the islands often and be awed each time. Besides, I don't think you're ready to retire yet."

Nodding confirmation of the accuracy of that assessment, Dean smiled at her partner. "Well, are you ready to get awed by some underwater scenery?"

"Yeah." Katie smiled. "Let's do it."

They put their regulators in their mouths, slipped on their masks, and held them to their faces as they stepped off the platform into the sparkling turquoise sea.

All the divers on the trip were experienced and had their cave certifications in addition to their open water certifications. The caves of St. John weren't like those Dean and Katie had encountered in the Bahamas, but could be just as dangerous if a diver's attention wandered. The other ten divers were steadily making their way toward the cave openings, but Dean and Katie had opted to dive the reefs and view the coral, having had their fill of underwater caverns on Grand Bahama Island.

Katie spotted a school of yellow and blue angel fish and tugged on Dean's flipper to get her attention, then waited until Dean stopped kicking and turned. Katie pointed toward the school, tilted her head in their direction, and waved for Dean to follow.

They eagerly pursued the fast moving angelfish as they darted in and out of coral outcroppings, then finally split into two separate schools to pass around an unusually large stand of fan coral. Katie stopped before the stand and watched as Dean followed the school off to the right side before she gracefully changed direction and glided behind the largest of the fans. As Dean peeked around the coral, Katie raised her camera and snapped a shot of her lover's face as it appeared framed in fans. She then swam around to the left to join Dean.

Hovering in the water, Katie looked at the colorful bounty of the underwater world before her. As difficult as it was to smile with a regulator in her mouth, Katie did her best and gave Dean a thumbs up sign.

Dean nodded, affirming her own delight at the sight before them. She pointed to a group of dolphins that glided lazily towards them. The two divers remained suspended in the water, watching the dolphins put on an exhibition of speed and grace. The aquatic mammals swam around the pair, as if enticing them to join their pod.

Now it was Dean's turn to smile; she tugged on Katie's arm and then swam off with one of the playful creatures that had nudged her from behind. As Dean swam through the water, the dolphin seemed to be appraising her, nodding and clicking as they imitated one another's moves. After the dolphin won hands down in the "graceful" category, it made a series of clicks that Dean swore was laughter as it departed to catch up with its friends.

Returning to Katie's side, Dean checked her dive watch and motioned that it was time to head back. The dive had passed too quickly, and they reluctantly changed direction back toward the dive boat. As they swam towards the boat, Katie tapped Dean's arm. She pointed toward a flash of a blue-green...something...as it moved along the seabed.

Neither had seen anything like it in their diving experience, and they were both bewildered at its appearance. It was a luminous, partially transparent cloud that could move faster than their dolphin friend, similar in appearance to a large, flat jellyfish that oozed into different shapes as it ebbed with the current. As they watched, the apparition split into two parts, one was a blueish-purple and the other a greenish-blue, before rejoining again.

Katie lifted her camera to take a picture of the strange objects, but every time she was ready to click the photo, the objects would dart out of site, and all she captured was a colorful blur. Whatever the entities were, they seemed to be moving along with them — stopping as they stopped and moving as they moved. After checking her dive computer, Katie cocked her head, questioning whether they had time to go check it out.

Dean estimated the remaining time on their air tanks, then nodded in the affirmative. As they changed direction and kicked toward the specimens, Dean realized there were two separate objects that suddenly picked up speed and darted toward a huge coral outcropping and slipped out of view.

Caught by surprise by the evasive action, Dean and Katie looked at each other, and then increased their kick rate in an effort to catch up. When they arrived on the other side of the coral stand, the two objects were nowhere to be seen. They scanned the bed of coral, looking for a cave or recess that the elusive entities might have slipped into, but found no feasible hiding place. Turning toward the open sea, they saw only a wide expanse of sand and coral, and schools of tropical fish.

Dean shrugged her shoulders and motioned towards the boat. Katie nodded and turned to follow, but her eye caught a glimmer on the sandy bottom near the base of a huge bulk of brain coral. She kicked down toward the glinting spot and found two small balls that looked like luminescent black pearls. She cautiously picked one up and examined it. *A pearl in these waters? Now how would it get here?* she thought as she picked up the second one.

By that time, Dean was by her side, looking at the objects in Katie's hands. She took one from Katie and studied it, rolling it in her fingers. It was perfectly round, seemingly solid, and was surprisingly heavy for its size. It had a hint of blue-green luminescence to it. Both objects seemed to be the same size and weight, but the one Katie was holding had a hint of blue that was so deep it was almost violet.

Katie made a questioning gesture by shrugging her shoulders. Dean imitated the motion, then unscrewed the top of the cylinder that held their room key. She dropped the ball into the small container and held it out for Katie to drop hers inside. After securing the lid, the two women headed back to the boat.

They surfaced near the rear platform, then swam to the ladder and waited their turn to climb up. The other divers chatted excitedly about the caves and politely asked the two women what they had seen. Katie recounted all the types of coral and tropical fish they saw, and told about their playful dolphin companion.

"Then on the way back, we saw something really weird." She saw Dean's subtle shake of the head. "It was a...a...barracuda...just staring at us. It, um, stared for a couple of seconds like it was planning to come at us, then darted off behind the coral."

"Ooo, I hate those things. They look so vicious," a freckled faced redheaded exclaimed.

"Yeah, they look at you like they're appraising you for your worthiness to be their next meal," her boyfriend added.

Another man from the group spoke up. "Barracuda aren't weird or evil; they're just misunderstood."

Everyone laughed and began telling tales of run-ins with barracuda and other denizens of the deep. As the boat headed back to the harbor, Katie sat quietly by Dean and wondered why her lover did not want her to say anything about their encounter with the strange objects.

Back at the resort, Katie took their masks, fins, and snorkels out of the dive bag and headed to the bathroom to rinse off the salt water. She opened the small key container and looked at the two luminescent balls. "Might as well clean these off, too," she mumbled as she turned the container over to drop the balls into her hand. She washed everything off and set the equipment on the patio to dry. After placing the two balls on a washcloth, she took them into the kitchen where Dean was making two mugs of tea.

"Hey, love," Dean drawled as Katie entered with the washcloth in hand. "Whatcha got there?"

"Oh, those little balls we picked up on the dive. I was rinsing everything off and decided to clean them up, too." She held them up for Dean's inspection. "Any idea as to what they are?"

“Nah. Looks like decorative glass beads to me.” She picked one up and rolled it in her fingers. “Prettier, though. One’s a little bluer than the other.” She held it up to the light for further examination. “Hmm, if you hold it up to the light, you can see through it. They’re actually very pretty.”

“Yeah, I noticed that opacity when I rinsed them off. They’ll look pretty neat in the new marble displays Dirk and Bill got me for Christmas. I’ve been wondering what I would mount on them and now I know.”

Katie had been a champion marble shooter in her youth, having won a few American Marble tournaments, and was having fun teaching Dean how to finesse a shot. It made for fun competition, and Dean’s skill level was improving rapidly. Due to her lifelong interest, Katie had quite a collection of marbles. From rubies to black eyes, hot dogs to crystals, pearls, swirls and cats’ eyes, to tiger eyes, and even a few of the new collectibles by various artists. Some of the marbles in her collection were true antiques and quite valuable, while others were more modern game marbles. The ones she was collecting in earnest were the new artistic ones.

Dean nodded. “Good idea. Add them to your little collection.” She pictured Katie’s marble collection that was currently occupying most of the bookshelves in their den. *Who am I kidding? Her collection is anything but little!* When she moved Katie’s possessions over to their new house, she just about gave herself a hernia when she lifted the first crate of the tiny toys. Realizing there were nine more crates of marbles, she opted to use the dolly for the rest. “Do you have any clue as to how many of those little orbs you have?” Dean asked with a snicker as she held up the ball.

“Hmm, well, let’s see,” Katie thought for just a moment then added, “counting these two there should be around 27,987 of them.” She walked over to Dean and gave her a hug.

“And do you have a clue how much those little gems weigh?”

“Not off hand,” Katie answered with a smile. “But, I bet you know, right?”

“Damn right, I do. They weigh at least a ton! Or at least that’s how they felt when I moved them to the house.”

“Ok, I promise these will be the last two I add to my collection,” Katie said and as she turned away she whispered, “for a while anyway.”

“I heard that!” Dean said with a grin.

“Busted!” Katie replied with a matching grin followed by a wink.

The teakettle whistled, so Dean tossed the orb back to Katie and resumed preparing the mugs of tea. Katie made the catch easily and gently wrapped it in the washcloth to be packed in her suitcase for the trip home the next day.

Dean finished preparing the drinks, handed Katie a mug, and leaned back against the counter as she picked hers up and took a careful sip.

“Why did you stop me from telling the other divers about those weird, cloudy things we saw?” Katie asked as she waited for the hot tea to cool.

Dean shrugged. “Couldn’t explain it, so I didn’t want to talk about it.”

“Maybe someone else saw it, too. It came from the direction of the caves.”

“If someone had, they would have said something,” Dean replied.

“Or, maybe they were waiting for someone else to mention it first,” Katie suggested.

“Yeah, that could be. Anyway, it wasn’t worth mentioning.”

Katie thought about that for a while, considering what possible reactions might have been provoked by telling the others about the encounter. She decided that Dean was probably right and thought about the objects again. They certainly were unusual and unexplainable. “You’re probably right.”

Dean lifted an eyebrow. “Probably?”

Katie looked up into the twinkling sapphire eyes, shook her head and grinned, then gave Dean a light backhanded slap to the abdomen. "You are so bad!"

"That's why you love me." Dean winked, earning a dazzling smile from her lover. She put down her mug and encircled Katie in loving arms. She lowered her head to eagerly waiting lips that parted ever so slightly as they met in a soft kiss.

A quiet moan escaped from Katie as their kiss ended. "Mmm, I think there's more than one reason why I love you," Katie whispered as she gazed up at Dean.

"Really? You'll have to enumerate them for me sometime." Dean enjoyed the feel of Katie in her arms. "Are you all packed for the trip home?"

"Mmmhmm. Why? You have something in mind?" Katie asked knowingly.

"I thought maybe we could compare our reasons." The words hung in the air as they began a physical exploration and made their way to the bed, opting out of the island's nightlife for their final evening.

The next morning, Katie and Dean arrived at the airport well in advance of their scheduled departure time. Katie always made sure she was on time or early for everything. Dean was no slacker in that department, either. Adherence to rigid time schedules was a must for all military operations and with Dean's nearly seventeen years of military service, she could almost function without a watch. Being on time was as ingrained as her love of her country.

After checking in, they walked to the small coffee shop, where they bumped into two of their companions from the previous day's dive. They chatted amiably about their diving experiences and the quality of that dive in particular.

"So, where are you two from?" the young red-headed woman asked. "My name's Angie and this is my boyfriend Eddie."

"The Washington DC area," Katie said. "How about you?"

"Hey, that's cool; we're neighbors," Angie chimed in. "I just started teaching in Falls Church this year," she looked at her boyfriend, "and Eddie here is a guidance counselor there." She pulled out a packet of photos and flipped to the last one. On the back, she wrote Dean and Katie's names and "Washington, DC".

"Are those from yesterday's dive?" Katie inquired. "I still have my film in the camera."

"Yeah, you want to take a look? I had them done at the hotel when we got in. I'm hoping to paint some of the sunsets in watercolor."

"Wow, you really have a good eye," Katie commented as she sifted through the photos. She pointed at one of a spectacular sunset framed in palm trees and sea oats. "This one is super!"

"That's my favorite, too. I think I'll start with that one for my painting."

Katie sifted through the packet some more and stopped at an underwater shot of one of the caverns. There was a blue-green blur in the opening that looked very familiar to her. She passed the pictures to Dean with that one on top. "Angie has some nice shots of the cavern opening," she said as Dean noticed the blur, too.

"Umhm, sure does," Dean said as she flipped through the rest of the stack and handed them back to Katie with a subtle motion to warn Katie not to bring up the subject.

Katie handed back the packet. "So, you're on your Christmas break," she surmised, vaguely remembering the skiing vacations her family had gone on at Christmas time. She quickly considered that if her parents had decided to go to the islands instead of the ski slopes that fateful year, maybe they would still be alive. She shook her head to clear the sad memory of their deaths, then she looked up to see Eddie peering at her.

“Yep! Except it’s politically correct to say winter break. Can’t be offending anyone, now can we?” Eddie said, then nodded in approval at the slight change in Katie’s expression.

Smiling at the attempted levity, Katie looked at Angie who was staring at Dean, who in turn was trying to ignore the attention.

“You know, you have really great features. I’d love to do a portrait of you. Would you be interested in sitting for me?” Angie was moving her hands as though sizing up Dean for a portrait. “The strength in your jaw is awesome...and your eyes...wow!”

Feeling sorry for her lover, Katie asked the question that really wasn’t a question, “So, Angie, what do you teach?”

“I teach art.” Angie launched into a long explanation of her philosophy of art education and its benefits for children. “Kids are — or can be — so very creative. Art is just one terrific way to turn on those creative juices and get the kids really involved in something special.”

Keeping eye contact with Angie, Katie smiled as she felt Dean’s warm hand on her leg under the table followed by a grateful squeeze on her thigh. That made her smile even brighter as she continued to try to engage Angie in conversation and keep her artistic eye from roaming Dean’s body. Their discussion ended abruptly as their flight was called.

“Hey, that’s our flight,” Dean said as she stood. Katie noted the tone was a bit too bright for her normally stoic partner and had to shake her head and smile. “We’d better be going.” Her quick rise from the table almost yanked Katie up with her as she hastily moved to leave.

Eddie also perked up. “Yeah, that’s the plane we’re on, too.”

Dean almost moaned out loud, hoping that the young couple was not sitting anywhere near them. As they boarded with the first class ticket holders, she was relieved to see that Angie and Eddie were still waiting to board with the coach passengers. The young couple waived at them as they walked onto the tarmac.

“What’s the matter, hon?” Katie asked with a twinkle in her eye. “Angie got you flustered?”

“Hey. If she had been staring at you the way she was at me, you’d be relieved to be boarding right now, too.”

Katie snickered quietly as they took their seats and buckled up for the flight.

“By the way, thanks for diverting her attention.”

“No problem, love. I could feel the edginess just oozing from your pores.” They sat in silence, holding hands as they waited for the rest of the passengers to board the flight. When Angie and Eddie smiled and nodded at them on their way to coach, Dean let out a small sigh of gratitude with her smile.

During the flight, Eddie asked, “Hey, Angie, you got that thing you picked up off the ocean floor?”

“Uh huh. Looks like a kid’s marble to me.” She dug it out of her bag. “Here, take a look for yourself.” She handed him the small ball. “Looks pretty cool, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. I like the red-gray-black marbled coloring. Maybe some kid tossed it overboard from one of the cruise ships.”

“Hey, maybe it is made from marble; it’s pretty heavy to be just glass.” Angie took the orb back from Eddie and tossed it up and down before putting it back in her bag.

“What drew your attention to it?” Eddie asked.

“I’m not sure. I was taking another picture of that pretty coral outcropping by that cave entrance and thought I saw another one of those colorful jellyfish like things that blurred by earlier, but when I looked down, all I saw was the marble. Anyway, I just

thought it was pretty. I think I'll give it to my nephew. He collects all sorts of stuff, and I know he has a marble collection. It might even be worth something."

Contemplating the idea that their find might be valuable, the two slipped off into consideration of that possibility.

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