

“We keep meeting like this.”

The man’s voice tickled her ears. His closeness triggered Kenna’s dormant senses to full alert. Her eyes were open, but she only saw a vast white vacuum of space. A pressure squeezed inside her ears whenever she swallowed, as if she were swimming underwater. Her heartbeat and anxious nerves hummed beneath her skin, yet there was no skin. There was nothing physical about her, just a conscious mind.

Oh man. Is this another weird dream?

“It’s been a while since we last saw one another,” he said. “I imagine Isoldesse is pleased with me.”

Isoldesse? Ulissa’s sister. Okay, seriously, what the hell is going on?

“You don’t remember me? You ran straight into me out by the forest.”

“Ben?”

“You do remember,” he said.

An image of Ben formed in her mind. The chunky dark blond layers of his hair and that boyish cowlick above his eyes—above his *orange* eyes.

Ben is one of them.

“Ben, where am I?”

“I’m not exactly sure, but come here. Come sit on the bed with me.”

A bed? How is he able to see our surroundings and I can’t?

“Ben, why am I here?”

“You are a gift from my goddess. She often sends me gifts while I sleep in the form of adventures, memories, and occasionally intimate encounters.”

Dreams. He’s talking about his dreams.

“I especially look forward to the pleasurable moments, like now... with you.”

“Hold on, cowboy. Let’s figure this out first.”

“What’s to figure out? She’s obviously pleased with me for the discovery I made regarding the rebels.” He hummed an erotic groan that sounded way too close. “But I don’t want to talk about Sendarian politics or the Athru right now. Please, come sit.”

“Ben, please don’t come any closer. I need you to tell me about these *Sendarian* people first.”

He ignored her attempts to talk, and instead he prayed, “Blessed be Isoldesse—you saved Sendara and you saved me. My life is your life and I honor your glory with every breath of every day. I’m humbled by your gifts that you bestow upon me, and I’m more than pleased with the young woman you’ve sent to me while I sleep. She will do well to alleviate my heartache and stress.”

Heartache? Alleviate his stress? What the...

“Uh, excuse me! I am not here to *alleviate* anything for anyone!” Whatever this place was, she needed to wake up, and fast. “Ben, please, stop! I can’t see anything. I can’t see you—or me!”

“Ah, but I can see you. Now, come here and let me hold you. Let me—”

“Oh my God! Just stop! Stop talking!”

I need to wake up. How do I wake up? Come on, come on, think!

“Ben, you do realize I’m a real person and not some imaginary person your mind... or goddess, whatever... thought up?”

Wait? Why is he calling Isoldesse a goddess?

Two hands caressed her invisible shoulders and she jerked, or at least in her mind she shook herself free from his grasp.

“Ben! Seriously, don’t you have someone you can talk to? A friend... with benefits, maybe? I don’t know, just not me and not here! There’s got to be someone in the real world you can do this with. A real companion. Someone special to you. I don’t know, anything but this.”

She waited. When he didn’t respond or make another advance, she called, “Ben? Are you still out there?” There was nothing but a somber chill that swept through her conscious mind. An aching for something lost.

Shit! Where did he go? I need answers and—and why the hell do I suddenly feel like crying?

An overwhelming sense of abandonment and loneliness flooded her thoughts. She wanted to focus on figuring out where she was, but a thick layer of heartache enveloped her entire being, yearning for something... or someone.

What the hell is wrong with me?

Seconds from a ghostly cryfest, Kenna felt the familiar warmth of the arcstone energy float through her mind. She immediately tried to call out to her bonded companion, “Ulissa! Is that you? Can you hear me? Are you okay?”

But the only response Kenna received was a heated energy that countered the onslaught of sorrow like white blood cells devouring bacteria.

After the last of the sorrow had seeped from her existence, she returned her attention to the vast, empty white space. *Now to figure out where the hell I am.* But the mystery was short lived. The pressure of the arcstone’s energy inflated against the boundaries of her subconscious.

“Okay, okay! That’s enough!” The heat of the energy grew hotter and fiercer. “Stop! Please, *stop!*”

From the corners of her vision, a reddish-yellow glow crept inward, consuming the vast white space. When the pain grew to be too much, she screamed.

The abrupt silence and soft fabrics surrounding her told her she was awake. Or at least she hoped she was awake. She pried her weary eyes open and saw white again, but not vacuum-space white. Something was physically blocking her view. A white object with a chalky scent.

Her arm muscles felt heavy, as though she’d slept for too long, as she reached up to her face. Whatever was covering her face, it was smooth and had some flexibility to it. Her fingers continued up into her hair, where she felt something like one of those wide plastic headbands little kids wear. Nervous adrenaline hummed beneath her skin when she realized the ends of the headband didn’t go behind her ears, but rather plugged into her ear canals.

We were taken. By the orange-eyed beings. Ben had orange eyes, the woman crying under the tree had orange eyes, and I think—I think that girl who roofied Xander had orange eyes!

After prodding the headband loose, she carefully, and somewhat painfully, pulled out what felt like super-long earplugs wedged deep in her ears. Fresh air filled the canals, along with a new sense of silence. Slowly, she sat up, careful not to pull or strain any of her sore muscles. The face shield dropped to the floor with a soft *thud*. A sweet scent drifted in the air. Whatever it was, she liked it.

Daylight filled the room from a glass wall ten feet in front of her that doubled as an exterior wall. The scene outside the window was breathtaking. A lone snowcapped mountain sat under a perfect blue sky. A lush green forest surrounded the base of the rocky mountain.

A quick glance at herself, and she was happy to see she was still wearing her own clothes, except for her sandals. When her fingers found the arcstone pendant beneath her shirt, she noticed the transesent bracer still around her wrist.

Damn thing. How do I get you off? First things first, though. Figure out where the hell I am.

Moving one stiff leg in front of the other along the hardwood warm beneath her bare feet, she reached the glass wall. When she pressed one hand to the sunbaked glass, a display screen activated on the window's surface. She flinched away, and it instantly disappeared.

"What the...?" She slowly pressed her palm flat to the clear surface again. The semiopaque screen reappeared along the glass. She removed her hand, and the screen disappeared. She pressed her hand to the window, and it returned. She surveyed the length of the entire window. It was like a giant tablet. She then glanced to the grounds below.

"Whoa! Are those people down there?"

A few stories below her, a small crowd of people was standing around and talking. There were a few off to the side, sitting on benches reading their tablets. Wherever she was, the vibrant gardens and stone walkways of the courtyard below were impressive and meticulously well kept.

Kenna returned her attention to the screen displayed on the glass. She shuddered when a large red symbol flashed in the center of the screen.

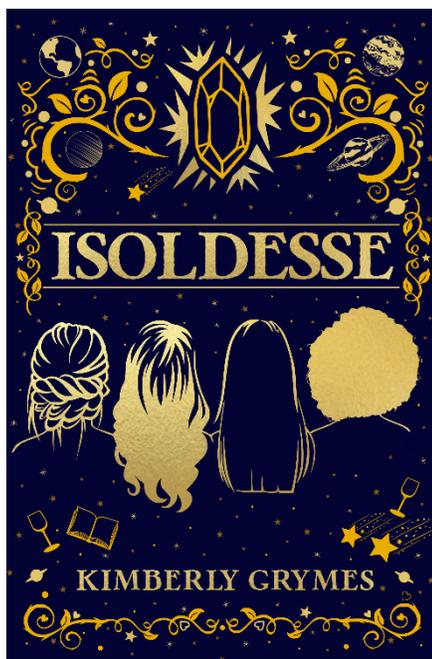
Red plus flashing never equals good.

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