

THE SHUTTLE

IMOGENE NIX

CHAPTER 1

“ I couldn’t believe my cursed luck. Needing to make this last supply run to the surface just didn’t really fit into my plan. I would much rather have stayed onboard the ship, but provisions were low and we needed this final shipment.

The scanner showed the approaching storm clouds gathering above my craft. I’d left Simon snug in our cabin just this morning. His sleepy farewell had warmed me all the way to my toes, even as I slowly made my way to the small shuttle bay.

The feeling that jiggled around in my belly as I remembered the morning filled me even as the chill winds gathered, tossing my hair wildly.



The last of the provisions were loaded onto my small shuttle. I preferred to use my trusty ZZ8 but today Simon had asked me to take his older ship to the surface, and I’d agreed. He didn’t ask much of me usually, except that I captain his craft with all due care and concern.

We’d been flying together for several cycles when things had just

happened. A natural conclusion, I supposed, but still. It felt odd to be both employed as his captain and being his lover.

Then I'd been called to fly for the empire. Their fighters needed exceptional pilots; I'd been informed at my draft interview. But the war with the Juran Commonwealth had ended as abruptly as it had begun, freeing me to return to Simon. In fact, I'd only returned mere weeks before.

The freedom to fly how and when I wanted to still made me uncomfortable, but Simon was there to support me during my active hours. He also held me, soothing the nightmares that still plagued my nights.

I shrugged off my thoughts and took another look at the boiling sky.

Definitely time to get the bird into the air.

When I turned it was to see the provisioning officer also scanning the wild clouds scudding across the sky. His grey hair and bushy eyebrows pulled together tightly, and his faded blue eyes carried a deep knowledge of the meteorological patterns of this planet. Something I couldn't hope to emulate, even if it was my home world. I'd been away too darned long to know its vagaries.

"Don't reckon you should go in this." His voice was strained and inside my head I agreed, though I refused to acknowledge that out loud. That would be tantamount to telling him of my inner turmoil.

"Well, I wouldn't normally, but..." I let the words trail away. Something deep inside told me I needed to get home and tell Simon how I felt, a feeling far more urgent than my concern over a brewing storm. I'd weathered so many, on far too many planets to allow myself to be cowed by this one.

At least, that was what I told myself.

"You sure? That sky... Flying will be difficult at best."

I shrugged. My stomach pitched and yawed but I needed to get home. Soon. And there was no damn way I was going to investigate the why's or wherefore's right now.

CHAPTER 2

I quickly signed for the docket and clambered inside the aging craft. The seats were ripped, and the shuttle certainly didn't look like anything spectacular, but I knew it was a grunty little machine.

It would see me home.



The engines whirred to life.

“Golden Echo, this is baby bird. Please acknowledge.”

Simon's face filled the viewing screen. “Lara? Maybe you should wait.”

“His voice filled the small cockpit, and I could hear his concern.

“It'll be fine Simon. Just trust me on this.” I smiled in a way that I hoped would soothe his concerns.

He nodded grimly. “All right then. You have everything?”

“Sure do, and I should be home in around three hours. So warm up the coffee pot for when I get home. And have Missy fed by the time I arrive.” Missy was our small dog. A constant companion for Simon during the months I had been away. She was a kind of surro-

gate child, offering him unconditional love for when the uncertainties of our shared future had hit home.

“Just...”

I sat up straighter in my chair and beamed my broadest smile at him. “I know. Take care, right?” The seed of disquiet grew but I brushed it aside and began ratcheting up the thrusters.

I checked my flight path one last time, and then punched away from the ground. The sooner I was on the way, the sooner I could reach Simon.



The ship climbed, whining as the small craft left the ground behind and I felt that familiar pull of excitement. The ground became indistinct and suddenly a crash of lightning caught my attention. I swore, volubly, and gripped the throttle more tightly.

I could do this. *Right?*

The sirens blared as the ship shuddered and shook beneath my hands. I continued my steep trajectory as the outside of the ship heated under the pressures of exiting the atmosphere. Lights flashed and my hands quivered as I carefully overrode the safety systems.

I was committed now, unable to return to the surface of the planet yet knowing the ship had sustained extreme damage in the single strike.

A truth hit home, one that scared me to my marrow.

CHAPTER 3

The shuttle shuddered wildly and this time, I knew it would be the last. Sweating and swearing like a trooper, I pulled one last time on the lever.

“Simon, if this doesn’t work, nothing will.” I knew the strain in my voice was telling.

“You’ll do it Lara. You always have.” I could hear the concern in his utterance, the way he bit out words. I’d never flown a shuttle so badly damaged. Wisps of smoke curled around me.

Even if I got it down, I personally doubted it would ever fly again. *If.*

A droplet of sweat prickled above my brow and then slid down my face, where it lodged in my eye, itching. I blinked, unable to pull my hand free from the lever that I held for grim death.

“Simon...” I swallowed the lump of fear lodged in my throat, needing to tell him. “Simon, I... I never wanted to leave.” I begged him silently to understand.

“Lara... it’s okay. It wasn’t the right time.”

I blinked again rapidly. This time my eyes stung from the roiling emotions within me, and tears prickled. “No. It’s more than that—”

Voices interrupted and I waited, watching out the front window of

the capsule. The visual screens had long ago stopped working and my hands shook violently, in tandem with the shuddering of the craft.

Screeching noises and thuds filled the air as I watched the ground rushing towards me. "Simon. I'm sorry. I should have told you, long ago."

"Just a minute, Lara." His words stopped me. I redoubled my efforts, hauling back again, feeling the infinitesimal give and then a crunch. I wailed. This was it. The end. The lever was now slack in my hands.

"Simon...it's dead. The lever broke."

"What?" His voice growled and I closed my eyes.

"I'm going to turn the audio off in a second." Calmness flooded my system. I knew now what I had to do. "I need to tell you... I need to tell you that I love you. Take care of Missy for me... Say goodbye now, Simon."

"Lara..."

"Say goodbye." The thick words barely escaped my throat, and I dashed the tears from my eyes.

"Lara, I love you. Just don't ask me to say goodbye." *Anguish.* There was pure anguish in his voice, and it tore at me. But my craft was dead, on a trajectory I couldn't change, plunging toward a planet at a speed I couldn't slow. I knew exactly what that meant.

"Goodbye." I whispered the words and toggled the audio to off, then strapped myself in. Here was the end.

I closed my eyes...

And felt a tingle whisper through my system. I opened my eyes and there I sat, in the command center of the main tower. *How in hell...?*

"You transported me?" Simon was there, grinning foolishly, but the tear tracks were still evident on his face.

"I told you I wouldn't say goodbye."

. . .

*T*he End

THE CELTIC CUPID TRILOGY



When Cupid—otherwise known as Diocail— is banished from his home on a remote Scottish Island, he's set a series of tasks by the great god Lugh, who also happens to be his father.

In *Blame The Wine*, he must bring two lovers together... BBW Cara and James, the man she's lusted over from afar who happens to be a super geek and head Veba Industries.

In *A Stranger's Embrace*, Diocail is driven to help an emotionally fragile Jane and Davis, a famous author. The task is more compli-

cated, with the existence of Carstairs her could-be ex-husband and teenage daughter, Frannie.

In *Revenge on Cupid*, Diocail must take the ultimate chance and find his own happily ever after with Simone. Sometimes the past gets in the way and HEA's don't come cheap though.

The dusty, dingy little diner was full, even with its current state of cleanliness—or lack thereof. People from the surrounding offices didn't care about anything except the incredible, well-prepared food at a reasonable cost. They flooded in, like waves to the shore. As one tide left, another swept in.

“Honestly, Simone. I'm going to try getting his attention one more time. If that doesn't work, I'm out of there. I mean, how long can I keep trying?” Cara picked at the caramel tart she hadn't been able to resist with the cheap metal fork and flicked the blob of fresh cream that sat on top to the side of the plate.

“You've said that tons of times before. Besides, what are you going to do to get his attention? Hmm? Walk naked through the typing pool?” Simone bobbed the straw in her smoothie as she eyed her friend with a frown. “It's been what? Eighteen months since you saw him, and you've mooned over him from a distance ever since you met him. You need to move on, Cara. That is, unless there's something you haven't shared?”

The query was arch. Cara shivered even as she shook her head. “No.”

Simone quirked an eyebrow, obviously unconvinced with the answer. Cara let out a deep sigh of frustration. “There's a position...it's only temporary, for a PA reporting directly to him.” She speared a forkful of tart, chewed quickly and swallowed, before continuing. “In his office, full-time for the period of the engagement. I saw the memo yesterday. I mean, I have the skills, right? I can type, answer phones, make coffee, file, greet people. What's more, I can probably do it better than all those size eights in the typing pool that Ms. Jackman seems to prefer.” She nodded thoughtfully. “All I have to do is get past the ogre in Human Resources.”

Simone stared at her, disbelief clear on her face. “Girl, I so remember that woman. If you think you can get past her, you’re doing better than I ever did. That’s why I left Veba Industries, remember? Maybe it’s time to haul out your resumé and consider some other options. Look for something better.” Simone shook her head and billows of her crimson hair swirled through the still air.

Cara understood Simone only had her best interests at heart. But this time she knew the outcome would be different. Hell, she could feel it in the air. The tingle of expectation.

“Cara, the HR ogre will hang you out for breakfast before she offers you anything like a position in that office. Remember her mantra? Good looks and good work make for a positive workplace!”

Simone didn’t sugar-coat anything. It was another great reason for their long- term friendship. Honesty. But Cara didn’t want to hear the truth in the statement. Even if it was exactly as her friend said.

Cara nodded quickly. “Yeah, I know, but if I don’t try, then I won’t know how close I can get to him, right? And the only way to catch his attention is to get past *her* and see him in person.” Cara quaked a little at the information she needed to share. The favor she needed to ask. “Anyway, I tidied up my resumé and dropped the application into a memo envelope yesterday, so it’s too late to back out now. I mean, fortune favors the brave. Doesn’t it? If I don’t snag an interview, I’m going to visit the career advisor across the street and register with them.” She shrugged. “I’ll look for temp work until something more long-term shows up. I can see what they have on offer and well...who knows? Maybe a job with the right boss is just waiting for me. But I’d rather this worked out, to be honest.” Her voice trailed off into a whisper. “I really wish he would notice me.”

Simone took a long slurp of her banana drink, and Cara noticed her questioning gaze even as she squirmed. Finally, Simone nodded. “It’s your funeral. So anyway, you’d better show me this memo if you want me to be a referee for you. I’m guessing that’s what you need, right? I’ll have to know what I’m supposed to say about you before they ring.”

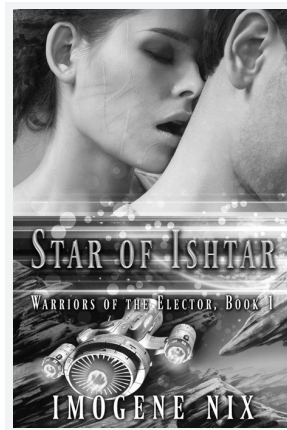
Cara smiled. “Thanks, Simone. I knew I could count on you.” She

slipped a piece of paper out of her handbag and handed it over. “Sorry it’s a bit creased. It was in the bottom of my bag, I stashed it so none of the others from the pool would see. You know how it is.”

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STAR OF ISHTAR



Warriors of the Elector Book One

The first time Elara laid eyes on Grayson was when he rescued her from the clutches of a madman and his scientists who were kidnapping humans and conducting horrific experiments on them. That was years ago. In spite of her attempts to deepen their relationship, they remained nothing more than close friends. Now Elara is a medic

with the Admiralty, and she knows what she wants. It's been Grayson since the beginning. When Elara is stationed on the *Star of Ishtar*, she arrives with a plan to further her career. But this time her plan has an added bonus—to finally get her man.

Grayson's spent years fighting the connection between himself and Elara. He's certain it only exist because he saved her life. But his will is failing, and he fears he just might give in to temptation.

"I finally made it." Elara Sudonne watched as the hull of the *Star of Ishtar* loomed in the inky darkness. She clutched her hands tightly together as the shuttle approached the hulking battleship.

This would be her new home and first combat ST placement for the Earth Empire. She quaked inwardly with nerves but fought to keep her serene exterior. Previously her deployments had consisted solely of on-planet expeditions and in rehabilitation and dirtside facilities. When the chance had arisen to move to the battleship, she'd grabbed it with both hands.

The frigid air chilled her bones as she sat in her shuttle seat, but a trickle of sweat inched its way down her back under the fresh gray wool flight uniform. Little puffs of vapor escaped her mouth as she rubbed her arms. Nerves stretched tight, she looked through the small portal at the front of the vessel. She wanted to tug at the collar that somehow seemed to have grown tighter as the ship loomed ahead, but instead she firmed her mouth, straightened her spine, and concentrated on the future.

"So damned long." She'd been working toward this outcome since the day Grayson Myatt and Duvall McCord had saved her from her Ru'Edan captors. She was lucky, she'd survived the 'experimentation' of the Ru'Edan leader Crick Sur Banden's scientists. "And all I have to remind me are my scars." She didn't grin at her own joke.

The person seated behind her jostled but she ignored it, lost in her memories. On that day, so very long ago, the young Elara, fresh-

faced and with idealistic views of the empire, was taken from the mall where she'd been shopping with friends, thrust into the back of a transport vehicle, and given to the Ru'Edan scientists to experiment on.

For days they'd worked on her and others, seeking an average pain threshold of humans, slicing her skin then noting reactions and how long it took to heal. They'd cut her arms, body, and even her face, and now she carried the extensive scarring of the exercise as a reminder to herself and others of what they were fighting for. Freedom. The freedom of Earth and its allied planets.

She'd never relinquished hope, it had been her constant companion as she fought against the all-consuming terror. Then they'd found her in that dirty, disused warehouse. They'd found others too, in various states of death and decay. The smells of despair had filled the air with a fetid ripeness that she'd never been able to forget.

Since that day she'd promised herself that she would pay the Ru'Edan back for what they'd done to her. What they'd taken from her. Over the years, she tempered and honed the rage while remaining adamant that she would see the final act played out. She couldn't physically fight, but she had learned about trauma, knew it and understood how it affected a person, and used it as a weapon.

The iron will forged through her experiences had fed her determination, and she'd applied herself to study, finishing in the top ten percent of her class. She entered the medical program at the academy, working hard to excel. Her family remained supportive if perplexed as to why she had chosen to keep reminding herself of what had happened.

The maw of the *Star of Ishtar* loomed closer, opening its cavernous mouth as she watched through the portal. She could hear the voices of the shuttle crew signaling their intention to enter and land, the tinny confirmation coming swiftly. She watched avidly while the shuttle maneuvered, imagining the invisible shields dropping to allow it entry.

Her hands twisted with fear and anger, but she tamped down her emotions. Anger never helped anyone. Staying strong, knowing your history, and ensuring it couldn't be repeated, they were the answers, she told herself firmly, pulling herself from the grip of a dark past so horrific she still saw it in her dreams. She pushed it away to the recesses of her mind and focused on what she was about to do.

A squawk overhead, the usual mechanical sound that alerted all on board to a transmission by the captain, caught her attention. "Attention all passengers. We are entering the shuttle bay. Please ensure when you disembark you remove all personal items. Move beyond the white line and wait for your designation."

The lights of the bay flashed as they entered, and once again Elara marveled at how far humanity had moved since they had first walked the Earth. She saw the opening of the structure as the shuttle moved into the bay, inching forward slowly until it stopped its ponderous motion and began its descent to the floor. Something deep inside warmed even as the shuttle's environmental systems began to synchronize with the cooler temperature of the *Star of Ishtar*, and she felt a smile crawl its way over her face.

Elara breathed in deeply, inhaling the metallic-tasting, recycled air and welcoming the calmness that settled on her body. Her eyes closed as she filled her lungs. "I'm here." There was more than a little satisfaction in her tone, and she smiled. She slowly exhaled, finding that center of peace she relied on.

A loud thud and clank echoed as the deep drone split the air. The engines were powering down, and there she was, on one of the Earth Empire's Emeritus class battleships. She sat in her seat, waiting for the all clear from the captain, and once it sounded through the cabin, she rose, tugging at the webbing belt and disengaging it.

The small backpack beside her was all she carried as she made her way to the exit, not needing to duck as so many others did. She stepped through the door, her hands gripping the rail of the cold, metal stairs which connected to the side of the gray shuttle.

She clambered down them slowly, savoring the experience. The sting of the cold on her hands from the stairs, frigid from even their

brief exposure to the blackness of space, made her flinch inwardly. The shuttle journey from the Admiralty's strategic base at Aenna to their current position had taken just over an hour, but the whole time it felt like her heart had been in her throat. Her mouth was dry as she followed the new recruits from the ship into the landing bay. She stopped, silently noting the slight mustiness of the air, the recycled quality easily recognizable. Everything, including the oxygen, needed recycling in space.

All around her people swarmed, either around the ships or into the dogleg line that now formed ahead of her. Someone had opened the baggage locker of the shuttle, and the sound of dropping bags hitting the plascrete floor echoed in the air. Another crewmember guided trolleys to the other side of the shuttle, pulling out boxes with important day-to-day items for the ship, including vaccines and plants. She watched briefly, all the while listening to the alien cacophony. Voices called in welcome to old crewmembers, while new ones watched, many goggle-eyed in the fresh uniforms of newly minted officers and crewmembers.

Her gaze flicked around quickly, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells, pungent with oils and grease; burning smells from the scorched plascrete and the press of sweaty or nervous bodies. She joined the line silently, tacking onto the end, and stayed at parade rest, knowing the welcoming voice would cut through the air soon enough. She felt somehow disconnected from the main throng. Perhaps the knowledge that this was the outcome she had worked for years to achieve set her apart. However, still, she felt so...distant from everything around her. She smiled secretly at the bout of whimsy.

"Attention!" The voice boomed out over the plascrete of the docking bay, and she snapped her body into position, noting the commander who had bellowed the words. Technically, she outranked most members aboard the *Star of Ishtar*, except for the command and leadership staff, but she knew all newcomers had to join the welcoming parade, regardless of rank.

Fleet Captain Elphin came into view, his tired features topped by salt-and-pepper gray hair, which highlighted his cool blue eyes. Elara

also recognized a body prone to a little middle-aged thickness. Following behind him was his second-in-command, Duvall McCord. A young up-and-coming officer, his status as a fast-tracking officer heading toward his own command, with Elphin both his mentor and captain, had become almost legendary at the academy.

She looked closely at McCord, noting the dynamic drive of his actions and movements. Soon he would achieve a promotion to captain, and she rejoiced for her friend. She'd followed his career with interest and had to tamp down a smile as his eyes betrayed the shock of seeing her before settling into their flat command persona. So he hadn't been apprised of her deployment, she noted, and she had to restrain the tiny feeling of surprise and satisfaction. She filed that snippet of information away.

She caught sight of the man standing behind Duvall. Grayson Myatt. He'd made her heart beat faster for years. Tall and blond with a muscular build and a sexy, tight, little butt, he had pools of deep-blue eyes that had always made her think of forever. He had a growth of stubble on his chiseled jaw, and her fingers itched to touch his perfect lips. Yes, since the day he'd found her in that nasty warehouse tied down like a ragged animal, she'd worshipped him from afar.

Now she had her opportunity to tangle with him, hopefully much closer than any chance that had ever come her way before. With a sigh, she pulled her gaze back to the captain and forced herself to concentrate on his words. She couldn't afford to have her commanding officer angry due to her being distracted.

"Welcome to the *Star of Ishtar*. Most academy recruits want to join us because of what we represent, but on this ship, we only take the best of the best. So, if you made it here, you're the ones we wanted to take a look at. Getting here is only the first step. Staying here is harder to achieve. Our people are the best. Earn your place, and in return, we'll make you one of our crew—a member of the *Star of Ishtar*. Only the best and the brightest wear our uniform and badge. You'll be expected to perform to your absolute limit then give some more. We don't tolerate people who don't pull their weight. Do us proud and wear your uniform with pride." The captain looked out over the new

members of his crew. His voice had echoed during his speech, and now it died away.

He scanned the faces before him, and she could almost read his thoughts. There were new security officers and a smattering of other crew. Some of them were young and impressionable, and she knew a few wouldn't make the cut as crewmembers. Others would carve out their place on the *Star of Ishtar* and move to better positions and placements, like she would: the new SurgiTech, a younger female, experienced but untried on board a ship. She smiled at that thought.

Some of those who stood with her would be replaced as they failed the exacting standards the captain set. She'd heard that he was a firm captain, fair but demanding. He'd have to be to command this ship. The *Ishtar* had well over five hundred at full capacity, and the captain could select their placements as his command staff saw fit from the many who applied to join the crew. She sensed his satisfaction with the choices in the relaxation of his body.

Abruptly, he turned to Duvall, breaking her study of him. "Get them to where they need to present themselves." His words echoed as he walked away. He had a purposeful stride. Quick but unhurried, like he knew where he was going and how to get there. A man who knew how to get what he wanted. Someone to respect and admire.

"My name is Commander Duvall McCord. I am your second-in-command, and my direct subordinate is Commander Grayson Myatt. While you are aboard the *Star of Ishtar* you will be required to fulfill your duties efficiently. As Captain Elphin said, do your job right and you will be one of ours, with all the benefits that come with being a crewmember of the *Star of Ishtar*."

He paused and eyeballed each of the newer recruits, those fresh from the academy. Many of them paled under his gaze, and she smiled inwardly. Even the older people in the line seemed to quake beneath his scowl. He'd always had that air of innate authority, even when barely out of the academy himself. She knew his methods and watched him make full use of the carefully practiced tone of presence.

"Each of you has been assigned. You will present yourselves to the

chief of your section. Those details will be found in your orders. Commander Myatt has organized a team to escort you to your cabins. You will have approximately one hour to prepare. We've arranged for crewmembers to escort you to your superiors. Be ready to present for duty. Any issues, you will, of course, take up with your section commander. Should there be need to take any further action, you will see Commander Myatt. You should only see me if you are a command crewmember or as a point of discipline. I am not one for small talk, so if you present to me, have a very good reason."

He delivered the words slowly and deliberately, and Elara restrained a small smile on hearing at least one gulp from those in the line nearest her.

"We run a tight ship here. Discipline and commitment are the two key factors we look for beyond loyalty in our crew. You will from henceforth represent our ship everywhere, and we do not tolerate anything less than the best." He looked around once more, the stern demeanor he wore so well reinforcing the message. If she hadn't known him for so long, she too might have missed the hint of humor glinting in his eyes, the one many took for coldness.

Her legs ached, and she wanted to move and relieve the pressure on them, but she held herself still, waiting for the command to dismiss. She wouldn't let herself or him down now. Not after she'd worked so long to achieve this position.

As the new ST, she had no previous experience on ships. She had vast experience in the field, but Elara was aware that would count for little in the eyes of most of the crew. She didn't intend to signal a weakness to anyone and least of all on her first day aboard the *Star of Ishtar*. That thought held her still and controlled.

She had big shoes to fill after her predecessor, Jamieson, had retired, even though she knew she could fill the void he'd left behind. As a long-term member of the crew—over twenty years—his tenure on the *Star of Ishtar* had placed him aboard since its launch. Due to his experience in the heat of battle with the Ru'Edan he had made a name for himself as the coldest of cold in the hottest of situations.

She hoped to emulate that herself and carve out her own place aboard the *Ishtar*, as its crew lovingly knew her.

Duvall and Grayson knew how much she wanted to prove herself. They just wouldn't have expected it here, on the *Ishtar*.

She watched Duvall study her, then, quickly turning on his heel, call to those assembled, "Dismissed."

Once they started to move away, she softened her stance, preparing to turn when the call came.

"Sudonne! A moment if you please."

Elara turned to face Duvall. "Commander?"

"Welcome to the *Star of Ishtar*, Elara. While I am surprised you're the new ST, Grayson and I are pleased you could join us. But how did you manage to pull it off? Keeping it quiet that you were the new ST?" he asked, his voice deep enough to make most women shiver with anticipation.

She smiled, thinking it was a shame she didn't have any feelings for him except sisterly attachment, but then again, given his lack of deep commitment to women, maybe it wasn't such a shame after all.

She understood what drove him. He wanted his own ship and to captain his own future. They'd spent many nights over wine or ale discussing his beliefs that commitment grounded a person. Inwardly, she shrugged. He'd make those calls for himself, though she was sure that one day he would come across someone who would make him consider his choices a little more thoroughly.

"I'm pleased to be here, Duvall. Having an uncle who happens to be an admiral, he was able to let Captain Elphin know that I wanted to surprise you. It's a small world in the Admiralty. Elphin already knew of me, so he okayed my placement. Once the powers knew there was no impediments to me joining the crew, it was fairly simple from there." She felt a small smile creep onto her face, then let it drop away. "What do you think Grayson thinks?"

"Ah, still chasing him, are you?" He grinned, his eyes twinkling. "I think he'll be pleased you're finally old enough and you're here." He looked her straight in the eye. "But you may just need to remind him

of that particular fact.” He motioned for her to go before him, barking out a deep laugh. “Come on, I’ll show you to your cabin.”

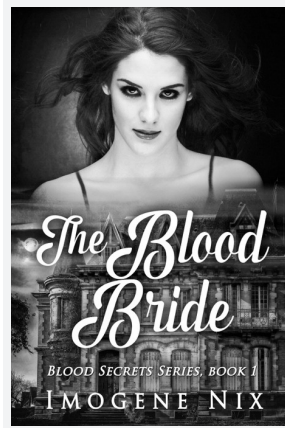
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THE BLOOD BRIDE BY IMOGENE NIX



Hope just wants to be an ordinary nestling. She went to college and escaped, but now she's back and there's a secret everyone is keeping from her.

Xavier is the new master of the nest, ready to welcome home the daughter of the house who he has never met. He's unprepared for the woman who steals his breath and enchants him.

Now Hope and Xavier must fight for lives and those of the innocents. After all, it is only by overcoming the rogues that they will have a chance of a timeless future together. But will it be in time?



PROLOGUE

As silence descended on the house, the shadows grew—dark grays and blacks that bled into each other. First one figure then another broke away, making a run toward the house. Silent as the grave, they moved swiftly over dew-slicked grass. Then they stopped still. Waiting. Not a movement betrayed them until a signal propelled them back into action and they started crawling upwards. The walls damp coating no barrier to the intruders that ascended in the darkness.

The sound of each window breaking shattered the quiet—the figures were inside. Screams echoed through the night. Yet, in this area of large estates, heavy with noise-absorbing shrubbery, no one could hear those within. The blood-curdling screams went on and on before finally dying away.

Just one sound echoed through the night: The sobbing of a child.

The front door opened and figures trooped out—ghostly specters against an inky night sky, broken by a single outline. A child in white, carried at the center of the pack.

No sound broke the silence as they moved toward the trees surrounded the house.

Flames now licked at the manor: A deathly glow of oily smoke rising.

All that remained was a single person—wrapped in a cape of midnight blue beyond the house—watching them melt away.

Jemima moved toward the burning structure, breaking into a run as she breached the threshold. Vainly she attempted to enter, but the heat drove her back.

Now dashing tears from her face, she raced across the graveled driveway toward the gates, where the guardhouse was located. No

sign of life existed within the building and some instinct of survival slowed her pace to a careful creep. Out of breath and heaving from exertion, she nervously checked within.

Small puffs of white vapor colored the glass. She darted from one window to another. Her cloak drawn tightly around her body, hoping it would camouflage her from sight.

Satisfied, Jemima entered through the heavy, wooden front door and moved toward the phone she spied on the floor. Her eyes darting here and there she dialed, listening to the rotary motor as it returned to the proper position. Time was short and if *they* came back, she needed to have shared the message.

The phone rang once. Twice. With a brrping sound it connected.

“Hello?” A male answered and she felt a warm flush of relief at the voice. A voice she knew well.

“The manor has been breached. The girl child taken.” The words erupted and her hand trembled.

“On our way.” The click of the receiver being replaced echoed loudly in the stillness of the room.

Copper. She smelled copper.

Her stomach soured, knowing it meant more deaths. Jemima looked around for the gun—a gun with deadly, holy water-infused copper bullets—she knew was hidden somewhere in the room. A gun she couldn’t find. *No divine intervention exists here*, she thought.

Hopefully *they* didn’t remain. Feeding. If they were still here, that’s what they would be doing. She found a corner and scrunched down, hiding from sight.

Crouched low, she tried to stay as still as possible, listening for sounds of the vehicles she knew would be coming. She dug her fingers into the flesh of her arms; remaining aware enough to stop before drawing blood. That would surely bring them out. Jemima dragged the cloak around her to capture the warmth, yet there was little to be found.

The sounds of engines roused her from the corner of the room. Jemima inched toward the window, the lead of the old glass

distorting her view, hearing raised voices she knew Mistress Cressida had arrived.

Jemima retreated. Remained hidden from the woman because if she knew, all may well be lost. From the shadowed room she listened to the conversation...

“It smells like Estersham.” The Mistress’ eyes closed. “If it is, we have a problem.” She turned once more, her face set and eyes now glacial in intensity. “James?”

The man nodded as if he knew what was to come.

“If I take those steps, I cannot return. Another must stand in my place.” Her voice hardened while her eyes glittered in the dim light, piercing in their intensity.

Then the Mistress’ voice called out in the near silence. “You and yours have been my loyal servants for so many years. I took an oath to protect you long ago. I renewed it with marriage and births, over and over. Now, my home and yours have been breached and this child taken from us. The girl child, who will be the hope and salvation of our kind, was ripped from the bosom of our nest. I will repay your loyalty and I will get her back.” The words of power rippled in the night and licked at Jemima’s skin.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Imogene is published in a range of romance genres including Paranormal, Science Fiction and Contemporary. She is mainly published in the UK and USA.

In 2010, Imogene Nix (the pen name not Imogene herself) was born. Imogene sat down and worked tirelessly for 3 months culminating in the book *Starline*, which became the first in a trilogy titled, "Warriors of the Elector." Since then she's had over 30 titles published and is now focusing on hybridising herself - with a mixture of traditionally published and self-published works.





In fact, she's taking control of many of her back catalogue books, which are slowly re-releasing as self-published titles.

Imogene is a member of a range of professional organisations world wide, and believes in the mantra of mentoring and paying it forward and is actively involved in mentorship (through NaNoWrimo and her vlog: *In The Chair With Imogene Nix*) and tutoring of new and upcoming authors.

In her spare time she loves to drink coffee, wine & eat chocolate and is parenting her spoiled dog and a ferocious cat along with her husband and daughter and looks forward to weekends away with her husband in their caravan "The Seven Year Hitch!" Do look forward to her caravan romance at some point!

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