

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Scars OF THE Soul

Sahara Kelly

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SCARS OF THE SOUL

Sahara Kelly

*"Love is not love which alters when it alteration finds."
(William Shakespeare, Sonnets)*

*"Then there are those who care not about extraterrestrials, searching for meaning in other human beings. Rare or lucky are those who find it. For although we may not be alone in the universe, in our own separate ways on this planet, we are all...alone."
(Jose Chung, The X-files, "Jose Chung's from Outer Space", Copyright Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation)*

Prologue

The two moons swelled into a dark purple sky bringing their cold light to the surface of an alien world. It was deserted, its residents buried snugly in underground caverns, waiting out the long and harsh winter months.

They were Raheeni, a race of sexual vampires whose very existence had been threatened up until a short time ago. Now things were improving. A spirit of enthusiasm rippled through the inhabitants as children were born, books appeared to flesh out the education and interest of the people and a firm hand—that of Master Noul Keirat—held the reins.

No one knew that deep below the underground cities a shadowy figure crept down ancient passageways. They would not have recognized him had they caught sight of him, since he was not of Raheen. His height, his golden hair and—most of all—his wings, would have revealed him as alien to this world, but he was careful to avoid detection.

He went deeper, his goal the oldest of the “Mistress” rooms. Down to the crypts where the bodies of several Raheen women lay, awaiting selection by a new Master. At that time their souls would return from the far-distant planets where they had been placed for safekeeping.

They were few in number, so their visitor on this night knew he had to be cautious and not disturb anything or anyone. Deeper he went, until he could barely see his way by the aged lights that flickered dimly.

There. The last door.

He entered, closing it behind him silently. Oh yes. This would do nicely.

A woman lay nude on a marble slab, hands crossed beneath her breasts. Her hair was the typical Raheeni silver of a Mistress, but it was dimmed by a light sheen of dust. She must have been here for several generations, never having been the “right” one for a Master.

The golden creature glanced at the wall. On it was a glyph, a galactic map, with the faintest thread of light showing where this woman’s soul had been placed. He narrowed his eyes. Yes, it was familiar. It seemed Raheen had recognized Earth for what it was, a safe haven for a few of its Mistress’ souls.

He’d been there once before. He could fit in. It was destiny.

He had no problem with the transportation unit cleverly concealed beneath the map. His race had once been lauded for its technical brilliance and he had retained that knowledge. His people had not. They had been exterminated.

He blinked away the thought as his fingers flew nimbly over indentations and small keys. It was time to leave his past behind and find a new home. His choices were limited to those places available to Raheen transporters. He knew this one would most likely not be used for many years to come, if at all.

He was ready. Ready to move on to a new life. To see if he could forge a new destiny for himself.

He was ready to feed.

There was a low buzz and a trickling flash of energy tugged at his wings. He closed his eyes and dematerialized, saying farewell to Raheen forever.

And winged his way to his new home — *Earth*.

Chapter One

"Release your pain. Beat your hurt. Reveal the truth that lies within you."

Special Agent Nora Carlisle huffed out an amused snort as she read the hyperactive blurb on the website. There was considerably more, detailing the enormous personal benefits of attending a seminar led by one Master Nathanael Tanner.

For a modest sum—modest to *whom* wasn't specified—guests could attend a two-day workshop and seminar, rid themselves of all their earthly woes and go home contented, successful, happy campers.

Yeah. Right.

She rubbed her eyes, stretched and returned to the text. Something, *someone*, had alerted the FBI to this man and his programs. To the odd happenings that occurred, and finally to the death that had followed one of his seminars.

She doubted there was anything in it, but S.A. Carlisle was nothing if not thorough. And it wasn't like there was much to do at the moment, anyway. They were fully staffed in her home office, things were quiet overall, in spite of the constant monitoring of Homeland Security threat levels and for once Nora fancied a little something out of the ordinary run of assignments.

When she'd found this one at the bottom of the day's briefings it seemed just the ticket, and sure as hell nobody else wanted it. But it was raining, she wasn't needed to follow any of the other cases right now and had spent a good portion of the day plowing through the Internet trail left by this...*motivational* speaker and his groupies.

Nora had to admit it was fascinating stuff. To her, anyway. Apparently Master Tanner "liberated" the true essence of his clients—with a whip.

"So how's it going there, Spanky?" The amused voice of her partner, Keith Nichols, sounded behind her, making her jump.

She turned with a grin. "It's more than a couple of red butt cheeks, I'm finding out."

"Hmm. Really?" Keith waggled his eyebrows at her. "How much more and can you send me the links to anything with photos?"

"Keith, don't be any more of a perv than you are already, okay?" Nora swiveled back to her monitor. "And besides, Margie would spank *me* if I gave you ideas."

"Hey, she and I are still newlyweds. We're allowed to get kinky." Keith sounded mildly offended. "At least until the kids arrive."

Nora shook her head. She adored Margie, thought she was a perfect match for Keith, and wished them both well. She'd danced at their wedding. But she knew that Keith would probably work to get fewer field assignments now he had a wife to take

care of. It was only single agents like her who thrust themselves into harm's way with deliberate intensity.

Although this particular project didn't look like there was much harm involved at all unless one regarded consensual corporal punishment as a felony, which the federal government didn't. Bullets killed. Whips left a mark. Maybe even a scar. But it didn't look as if any of Master Tanner's clients were complaining. On the contrary.

Nora paid no attention to Keith's teasing, but pointed at the screen. "Look at this." She indicated one of the many raves. *"Here. My life was in a hole. I was miserable, unable to connect with anybody. As a last resort, I signed up for one of Master Tanner's weekends. It saved my life. He freed me, taught me that pain can be ignored, overcome, put in its place and obliterated from my soul. I am free now to become the person I can be. Thank you, Master Tanner. You really did save my life."*

Nora glanced up at Keith. "There's a lot more like that. Seems a good old-fashioned whuppin' helps a lot of people."

Keith shrugged. "Different strokes, I suppose." He grimaced. "Pardon the pun."

Nora sighed.

"So what are *we* doing with all this stuff? Where does the FBI come in?" Keith rested his hip on the side of Nora's desk.

"Well..." She rummaged through her notes. "It seems the locals received an anonymous tip. About two months ago one of Master Tanner's clients passed away unexpectedly. Whoever wrote the letter felt that there was a connection." She chuckled. "The locals weren't about to touch it with a ten-foot pole, and since Master Tanner holds these seminars in several different states, they passed the buck along to us. With alacrity."

Keith wrinkled his nose. "Fetish stuff. Masquerading as motivational therapy and making this dude a rich man. Nothing new there. And people pass away unexpectedly all the time."

Nora nodded. "Agreed. I really doubt I'll find a damn thing, but it's raining..."

Keith grinned. "I know, you cat. You hate to get your feet wet."

"And you're going off on that profiling course. I'd rather have something useful and semi-interesting to dig into than a pile of paperwork." Nora laughed.

Keith stood. "Go for it. I'll be back in ten days or so." He leaned in. "Uh, if you get into leather or anything, remember to take pics, okay?"

"Get out of here, you asshole." She pushed him affectionately. "See you when you get back."

Keith saluted and winked.

Nora went back to her research hiding a smile. Nobody, not even Keith, knew about her secret obsession. It wasn't leather, it wasn't punishment. It wasn't being strung up, handcuffed or spanked, although the ideas had flitted teasingly through her mind from time to time.

No, it wasn't really a *fetish* at all.
It was *vampires*.

* * * * *

"Oh, Master. More. Please more..."

The woman dangling from the chains sobbed as she thrust her ass outwards, begging for more of the punishment Master Nathanael Tanner was administering. Her buttocks were reddened, the blood was obviously rushing down to her genitals and Thanael could smell her arousal.

He allowed his clients freedom within their sessions, to a point. This one had chosen nudity, and confessed that she would become sexually aroused by such treatment as he offered.

He'd agreed, knowing he wouldn't fuck her.

He sighed and lashed the flogger across her ass once more, a solid thud that rattled the chains and brought a cry of delight to her throat.

It was as it had been for the last several years. He had been able to parlay his skills into a lucrative career, but could not satisfy his inner desires. Not with these people, anyway. He'd mastered his urges, kept his fangs sheathed and his wings concealed and walked amongst them, revered by many as a healer. *How ironic.*

Sometimes he wanted to laugh. Other times, as now, he wanted to fuck one of his women so badly his cock screamed at him to just go ahead and *do* it. To thrust deep into her wet cunt and rip into her soft flesh with his fangs at the same time.

To drink of her blood, let it pour over his tongue and down his throat while he poured himself into her body. To truly experience *Arraho*, the massive Raheen orgasm he'd learned while living on that far-off world. An orgasm that could only be achieved by willing partners, sharing so much more than simple sex.

But he knew he wouldn't. He kept up his barrage of blows, occasionally letting the tails of the flogger catch her breasts, or sting her on the front of her thighs. She was writhing now, eyes closed, head tipped back.

She had long, pale blonde hair and for a few seconds Thanael's eyes blurred, seeing not a human client, but a Raheeni woman, a Mistress, who would answer his burning needs with fire of her own. Her eyes would be purple, her hair silver in the light of the twin moons and she would rip into him with a savage lust that matched his.

Then the woman cried out and the image vanished.

It was time to finish it.

Thanael moved slightly and kept up his punishment, the blows a little softer now as they fell on her nipples and her abdomen. He was barely leaving a mark, but she was responding, and he knew one or two more lashes would probably do the trick.

He was right. With unerring aim, he caught her between the legs, her swollen pussy folds shining as she cried tears of arousal. She hiccupped, thrust her hips forward and parted her thighs.

He answered the invitation, catching her clit with the final stroke of the flogger. She shattered, coming in mewling spasms, shuddering against the chains that held her arms aloft and sobbing out her climax in panting cries.

This was the moment he most enjoyed.

As her eyes glazed with the heat of her orgasm, Thanael unfurled his wings and stepped to her, enfolding her in his warmth.

She blinked as he stared deep into her eyes. "*Master. You are truly an angel.*"

He smiled, pouring comfort and peace into his expression. The emotions passed from his mind to calm hers, a mere brushing of her subconscious. "Let it go, my dear. Let it all go. You are free of the pain. Free of the chains that have bound you. They are no more. You are a good person and deserve to be loved."

Her eyelashes flickered. "*Oh...Master...*"

The delightful ache of his fangs heated Thanael. He dipped his head and permitted himself his reward.

Two tiny pinpricks, no more, and then her blood—a little taste of heaven on his tongue.

As always, she fainted. There would be nothing more in her mind when she awoke than a memory of her orgasm and the simple comfort he'd offered. No vision of wings or the pain of a bite. His fangs had already sealed the little wound, and he wrapped her in a soft blanket as he caught her senseless body, unchaining her and laying her on a convenient couch to recover.

But this time Thanael recognized he'd neared his own limitations. He hungered. He *burned*. His fangs still lay sharply on his lip and his wings shuddered as he fought his body's needs.

It was no use. He hurried to his private bathroom and closed the door behind him. Moments later, his cock was free, a heavy and heated weight in his hand as he closed his fingers around its length.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Very tall, well-muscled, golden hair past his shoulders, and blue-purple eyes—lit now with the fires of a hunger he could not deny. He stared into those muted depths as he stroked himself hard, wondering if the rest of his existence would consist of these masturbation sessions fueled by sips of human blood. If he was condemned to hide his wings and his nature for eternity.

If he was destined to live out his life being denied the true release he needed. Having to settle for the *Tapaha*, the lesser orgasm, where feeding was not involved.

He didn't know. He didn't want to think about it. He was racked with a simple urge—to *come*.

Within a few moments, he did.

Violently and with a choked moan, Thanael erupted in jets of fiery semen, easing his balls and his body. He shuddered and leaned against the sink, breathing hard and allowing himself a few moments to find his control once more.

Pink-tinged tears leaked from his eyes. It wasn't fair. In a rare moment of self-pity, Master Nathanael Tanner wondered if he should have simply died on Raheen, like the rest of his race.

Then he sucked in a breath and watched his fangs recede back into hiding. His wings furlled into nothingness against his spine, and his cock hung limply in his hand.

It was over.

He was once more the controversially popular motivational therapist. The persona he'd carefully created to meet what few of his needs he could without attracting attention. To help people at the same time.

To make amends, perhaps, for the fact that he'd nearly destroyed an entire race in his blind rage. He didn't know. And most of the time he didn't care.

Except for moments like this, when he admitted a truth to himself.

He was lonely.

Chapter Two

Nora stretched out her feet on the sofa and reached for her wine.

She had her favorite blanket over her knees, the latest S.A. Moss vampire novel on her coffee table and all was right in her cozy world. She'd turned the TV on, but kept the sound low on the news channel. It paid to stay on top of the latest developments when you worked for a government agency, but she really didn't care about most of the stuff they broadcast.

She could read, relax and keep an ear open for anything in the way of breaking news that might require her presence in the office.

Tonight seemed thankfully free of anything that could cause the FBI to prick up its ears, so she settled in to her cushions and picked up her book. Three hours later, she sighed and closed it.

Damn, that woman had written one hell of a story. *Scars of the Lash: The Challenge* had rocketed to the bestselling lists as soon as it had hit the shelves, and of course the fact that S.A. Moss had passed away some time ago did nothing to slow sales.

Nora stared blankly around her. She was still thrumming from the heat of the tale, an erotically savage recounting of a world where sex was mixed with blood and pain, and swept the vampires into a maelstrom of desire that had gotten Nora's panties soaked just reading about it.

She closed her eyes, wondering. Trying to imagine herself restrained with manacles, arms outstretched and taut, held in position while being lashed by a whip and slashed open, only to be healed and slashed once more. To desire this punishment, since each wound, each blow, drove the sexual arousal higher and ever higher until...

Until the *feeding*.

And that particular part of the story had attracted Nora more than anything else. She'd reread those passages, shivering at the words on the page. They came alive for her. She felt the sensations of the heroine as the hero sank his teeth into her body and began to drain her blood, only to fill her with his cock and allow her to feed in her turn.

To experience an orgasm like that. Holy shit.

I really must be sick in the head.

Or I need a date. Bad.

She chuckled at herself as she got ready for bed. Dating was one thing she'd let slide willingly, knowing as she passed her thirtieth birthday that her career was taking the place of a lover.

She enjoyed being a Special Agent, the feeling that she was doing some good in the world. Much of her job was mundane, television shows notwithstanding, but there had

been moments where the adrenaline rush had surged through her and danger had stared her in the face. It was after those times when Nora knew she got horny as hell.

The one time she'd allowed herself to tumble from a successful hostage rescue into bed with a casual friend, she'd fucked him so ferociously he'd cried out for mercy. She'd been embarrassed and so had he.

They hadn't seen each other since.

All this research on Master Tanner and his little peccadilloes, combined with that vampire novel must be having an effect. Nora grinned, then paused, struck by a random thought.

She opened her laptop once more and clicked through a few files. Were there any other suspicious occurrences in connection with Tanner and his toys? Had anyone bothered to check?

It took some work, and Nora folded her bare feet over each other for warmth as she perched on her dining room chair in nothing but her pajamas. Little showed up as worth pursuing on the FBI database so Nora changed course, first plotting the journey Master Tanner had taken across country—five states so far—and then searching the local newspapers for reports of anything “suspicious” around or after those visits.

She noted the seminars were held in smaller, rural towns and were very restricted in the number of attendees. No assistants or helpers were listed...it looked like a one-man operation. Other than the website, he did little if any promotional work, preferring to let his clients spread the word amongst the interested.

Her curiosity was aroused when she stumbled over one small report from the second town.

“Jane Small, noted local artist, is recovering from her coma, according to her physicians. No explanation has been forthcoming as to the cause, but a full recovery is expected.”

The only reason Nora noticed it at all was because she'd read the praise lavished on Master Tanner and the name “Small” rang a bell. She checked, quickly clicking through windows and finding the page of client comments.

Yep. There it was. A note in praise of Tanner from one Jane Small.

Armed with this information, Nora narrowed her search to more specific keywords. She hunted through reams of websites, looking for any cases of unexplained comas that correlated with Master Tanner and his seminar and found two more. One was a man, a software designer, the other a woman whose occupation wasn't listed.

Hoookay. This certainly sent up a red flag. All the cases were listed as “recovering” or “expected to recover”, but it was too many for Nora's peace of mind. When added to the unexpected fatality, it painted a picture that certainly warranted a little more investigation.

Cold now, Nora quickly put together her notes into a brief report before heading off to bed. Tomorrow she'd present them to her boss and get some feedback. It might be nothing at all.

Or it might be *something*...

* * * * *

On a quiet street, in an overgrown garden, a tall man stared up at the night sky. Somewhere out there was a star that had died, the spectacular and messy death that marked the passage of matter from one form to another.

As it had gasped out its last nuclear particles, the yellow giant had engulfed a planet, sending the inhabitants on a desperate and futile search for sanctuary. A search that had killed them all.

Except him.

Thanael stared at the stars and let the emptiness flood him, overwhelming the sadness plaguing his thoughts this evening.

He was the last of his kind. The last living one, anyway.

It had been many years now since he'd managed to occupy the body of a Raheeni male. He'd attempted revenge, a scheme born of the madness following the destruction of his people. Raheen had automated defense systems that could not distinguish between invaders and refugees.

Possessed of the technological brilliance of his race, he had done his best to eliminate the whole Raheeni population. He had failed, and not only had he failed, he'd come to think like a Raheeni. In an ironic twist of fate, *he* had been the one contaminated by them rather than the other way around. He knew his physiology had been changed, altered by his sojourn, warped in some way into a blend of two species.

But he had left that body, that Raheeni male, driven to seek his own future, his own destiny. And perhaps—just perhaps—find a way to survive alone. Buried in his mind was the entire knowledge of his people. A small area, a small section of his brain, filled with data. Each refugee had been implanted with it, as a necessity for their survival wherever they landed.

This way, it was hoped that at least *some* of their race might be able to utilize the skills they'd developed. Build a new life for their people on a planet that wasn't jeopardized by a sun that had reached the end of its existence.

So Thanael's brain possessed extraordinary secrets, but ones that he could share with no one, since there was no one left. He could access them if necessary, and had found them of use here on Earth.

Within months of his quiet arrival—an unnoticed materialization in the shadows of a small town—he had established an identity, a past and all the necessary information for himself that would allow him to live here.

The computer technology was rudimentary to him, but interesting. It told him a lot about the society he was going to be sharing from now on. Money, it seemed, was vital, so he made sure that several new bank accounts appeared. Shortly thereafter, he had secured this lodging, located in a section of the town that reminded him of his home for some unknown reason.

It was quiet, untroubled by traffic and suited his needs. He followed all the rules, researched these humans for many long hours and finally found his niche as a motivational speaker/therapist.

Now he could expect his seminars to be filled and his need for the taste of blood fulfilled, even if only in the most arbitrary of ways.

It worked. But only up to a point.

Thanael's Raheeni experiences had left him with the urge to feed, yes, but also with the urge to share so much more. His punishment seminars took the edge off those appetites, but again they too fell short of what he knew should be his.

He'd tried to sublimate these emotions in his work. He traveled, returned to continue his research and then traveled again when he hit a dead end. He could see no other future for himself than this endless round of trips, seminars and then more work on the one project that dominated his soul.

An escape from this planet. He knew he could not access the Raheeni transport system. He wasn't sure he wanted to remain here, alone, for the rest of his life. Ergo, he needed some way to leave this world, to travel on through the galaxy and perhaps, one day, find others like himself. Not his own race—they were gone. But other beings possessing some of his characteristics.

He tried to ignore the possibility that he might find that which he desired more than anything else.

A mate.

Thanael stretched and glanced around the empty property. There was nothing to see but greenery and beyond that lay the fields of a local farmer. He felt his fangs slide free and smiled. With a little shudder he allowed his wings to unfurl and his mind to activate the small device that shielded him, hid him from the light wavelengths perceived by human optic nerves.

He was, to all intents and purposes, invisible. A small flicker of light in a dark sky, no more.

He smiled. And flew off into the darkness.

Perhaps one or two humans might note the rather bright firefly, but he did not care. He would not feed, although his fangs might leak juices of desire. He dared not allow that need any fulfillment, lest it override his control. An occasional flight was the one activity he permitted himself that produced nothing but pleasure.

It was all he had.

* * * * *

"Jeez, Carlisle. This is kinky shit."

Nora smiled back at her Regional Director. "Yes, sir, it is indeed."

He thumbed through the report once more. "You think there's something here?" One graying eyebrow lifted over shrewd blue eyes.

Nora pursed her lips and thought before speaking. "Honestly, sir? I don't know. The locals passed the case along to us, I took a look and found what you see there in my report." She rubbed the back of her neck. "It could be coincidence. Most probably *is* coincidence."

"But...?"

"But...oh hell." She shrugged. "There's something about the whole scenario that makes me a bit itchy."

The Director stared at her. "Define *itchy*."

"Well, to start with, there does seem to be a small trail of comatose seminar attendees. I linked one of them by name. Then there's the death, of course. Haven't gone into the ME's report on that yet. Plus one other thing, something I dug up this morning when I got in."

"And?"

Nora met his gaze. "I can't find any records of one Master Nathanael Tanner's birth."

"Oh?"

"Nope. He's clean...no history of offenses or fingerprints on file. No DNA on file in the CODIS database. Not even a parking ticket. He has a Social Security number, his finances are sound and he seems like an exemplary citizen."

"Go on."

"But I can't find any school records. Any medical history at all. Or any birth certificate." She paused. "It's like he didn't exist until a few years ago."

"Not totally convincing, Carlisle."

Nora chuckled. "I know, sir. It happens, especially in rural areas. But putting all these facts together, circumstantial though they are, sort of sets off a couple of alarms someplace."

"What are you thinking?" The Director played with a pen, rolling it between his fingers as he listened.

"I'm thinking this guy bears looking into. That a little more research and possibly attending one of his seminars on the quiet might be useful. Maybe get enough on him for a warrant to go deeper. If there's anything there, of course. If there isn't? No harm done."

The Director grinned. "Got some pain you want to get rid of?"

Nora shook her head. "No sir."

"How are the ribs, by the way?"

She shifted, remembering the discomfort of the through-and-through shot she'd taken last year. "Fine, sir. All healed. Just a scar left, that's all."

"Good." He looked away.

Nora remained silent, letting him think. She liked her boss, respecting his decisions and trusting in his opinion. Most all the agents in this particular office did. They were lucky to have him.

He tapped his fingers on the desk. "Okay. Go with it. Your partner's gone for a bit, I don't have much of anything I can assign you to, right now, not without a lot of background stuff..." He nodded his head as he made his decision. "Yeah. Go check out this guy."

Nora's pulse leaped. "Thank you, sir."

"Don't thank me. I'm not real comfortable with any of this fetish crap. So here's what I'm going to do." He gazed at her. "I'm going to give you vacation time. Officially. As far as anyone here in the office knows, you're taking a few days while your partner's off."

Nora swallowed. "Er...okay."

"That's *officially*. Unofficially, I want you to keep in touch. With me. A call now and again, a message...you find anything at all that makes you suspicious, I want to be the first to know about it. Got that?"

"Yes sir."

"I mean it, Carlisle. This isn't a major undercover assignment in a possible terrorist cell, but sometimes the simple stuff ends up real complicated. I don't want you biting off more than you can chew alone."

"Understood sir." Nora rose from her chair. "Thanks for trusting me."

"I trust that *itchy* feeling." He grinned. "Get it myself from time to time."

Chapter Three

“Good evening.”

The conversation subsided as a tall man walked into the cozy reception room, and Nora Carlisle got her first good look at Master Nathanael Tanner.

It was the “greeting hour”, an informal get-together of the attendees and a time for introductions, snacks and the awkward interaction of people who knew they were about to get spanked. Literally.

“If you’d like to take a seat, we can begin.”

Master Tanner walked to the fireplace and stood, relaxed, watching the half dozen or so guests as they found chairs, grabbed more cheese or balanced their wine nearby.

Nora had been surprised to find so few people at this particular seminar, but all things considered, she probably shouldn’t have been. It was the summer, the most popular vacation month, and this was an out-of-the-way location. She’d almost missed it herself.

But she’d eventually found the right road and driven the last ten miles through rolling hills to the private home hosting the event only to find it absolutely charming. Even if this entire investigation led nowhere, she’d get a nice vacation out of it.

She sank back into her comfortable chair toward the rear of the room and observed the proceedings. And Master Tanner.

All eyes had turned to the commanding figure. He was tall, very tall, probably around six-four or so. And his hair was that pure shining gold that Nora had seldom seen on an adult. It was long, past his shoulders, and he could easily be described as quite a hunk, with unusually blue eyes that almost took on a lavender hue in some lights. She couldn’t really tell from this distance.

She’d need to get a closer look. For some reason, the thought sent a little trickle of purely feminine interest down her spine. She shrugged it off. Hell, the dude was a cross between a movie star and a Renaissance angel. What wasn’t to like?

He was looking at them all with a smile. “I’m very glad to welcome you here this evening. I hope you found the facilities to your liking?”

There were nods and murmurs of agreement.

“Good. Over the course of the next day or so, I shall get to know all of you. Not just by name, but by *soul*.”

His *voice*, thought Nora. He’s got one really fine speaking voice. Almost hypnotic, to judge by the focused attention he was receiving after only a few commonplace phrases.

"I shall know your deepest pain, your fears, and together we shall share them, explore them, take them out of your darkness and into the light. We shall examine them, diminish them and eventually banish them." His gaze carefully scrutinized each face.

"You will feel this pain. Release your fears. To me. And together we shall overcome them, learn how to put them aside, to forget them."

His gaze passed across Nora's face. This time there was no mistaking the tingle that shot through her body. It was a sexual thrill the likes of which Nora couldn't remember experiencing. *Ever*.

She forced herself to remain still, to remain expressionless. To absolutely not reveal that all of a sudden a moist heat had begun to bloom between her legs. The effort it took surprised her and the flood of adrenaline sharpened her instincts.

This man was *dangerous*. On some primitive level he had penetrated her carefully created shield of objectivity. It scared her—and yet she wanted more.

His gaze had halted, stayed lingering on her face, then moved on. "For this evening, we shall simply talk. About anything and everything that strikes our fancy. We shall discuss the mundane and the profound and hopefully share a laugh or two." He stepped forward, extending an arm to a desk at the side of the room. "Over there is a schedule book. I would ask that you each sign your name next to a session time for tomorrow. Because of the size of this gathering, I can spend a little more time with you than I would normally be able to, so feel free to pick a time that suits you best."

His smile was all-embracing. "And now...shall we have dinner?"

They stood, chattering eagerly, mingling with each other around the sign-up book. Nora hung back, watching, observing the interactions.

"You are cautious."

He was behind her, and she hadn't even seen him move. Little hairs stood up on the back of her neck, but she smiled noncommittally. "Probably."

"Afraid?"

She turned to look up at him. Yes, those eyes were real killers. Pale blue around the pupil with lavender streaks ending with a darker purple ring at the edge of the iris. She could drown in those eyes.

Nora blinked. "I don't know." The words tumbled from her mouth without forethought, another unusual event. He certainly had unsettled her and she struggled for her equilibrium. "No. I'm not afraid. I am here for a reason."

He studied her consideringly. "Yes. Yes indeed you are." He looked away. "As are we all." His gaze returned to her. "You don't trust me."

She smiled and shifted her head, glancing down and breaking eye contact. "I don't know you."

A deep chuckle followed her words. "You will."

He laid his hand casually on her arm, and only by the skin of her teeth did Nora avoid jumping a foot in the air. His touch was electric, zinging through her nerves, sending an ache to her damn *teeth*, for Chrissake, and lighting up every sexual impulse she had.

Carefully she broke contact and put some space between them. "I believe you mentioned dinner?"

* * * * *

Thanael couldn't eat.

He chatted, smiled and listened to his clients as they discussed a variety of topics. But his eyes returned again and again to *her*. She'd introduced herself as Nora, but in a guarded way. She was holding something in reserve behind a screen of social expressions.

One look at her and he'd been caught by an aura of *something*, like a shimmer in the air around her. His loins had heated, and he'd fought to control an erection that had caught him unawares. He seldom responded so thoroughly to human females, especially in the bland environment of his seminars.

There had been no interaction between them. No contact, no lash of his whip, no feeding. And yet there it was. An ache in his cock and his fangs, a deep-seated need unleashed by no more than a look at her.

Touching her had been even worse, and he'd been relieved when she'd pulled away. Any longer and he might have lost his inner battle.

Now he could gather his emotions, tamp down the fires and study her, along with everybody else, of course.

She wasn't beautiful. Not in the conventional way that humans appreciated. Short dark hair seemed to spike of its own free will around her head and face, framing it with a tousled prickly halo that screamed "hands off".

Her eyes were sherry brown, golden highlights flickering and reflecting her thoughts. She had a strong nose, a firm chin and lips that were a shade too full for the rest of her face.

Her body, too, was less than the accepted standard for "perfect". She was tall and solidly built, shoulders wide, breasts full, hips rounded above legs that were firmly muscled. No slender supermodel, this Nora, but an athletic and challenging woman who looked like she ran on a daily basis and enjoyed a good meal afterwards.

She wasn't enjoying a good meal now, however. She picked at her food as she spoke with those on either side of her, and Thanael hid a grin of satisfaction. She was nervous and apprehensive and not a little aroused herself. He could smell her, even amongst the muddled scents of the people at the dinner table.

Spicy and sweet, her unique fragrance pierced his brain like a knife. It was hard for him to lift his wineglass and appear relaxed. He was anything *but*.

He sighed and wrenched his head away from her, turning deliberately to the woman next to him. This was the blonde attracting more than her fair share of glances from a couple of the men, since *she* fit the human ideal.

Willowy and delicate, she admitted to a painful divorce and was hoping to set it all behind her. By the looks of things, she'd get plenty of help, since the man on Thanael's other side was already sympathetic and encouraging, despite his recent job loss, the trauma of being unemployed and—in his own mind—of no worth to anybody.

Thanael led the conversation, directing them toward each other, helping them open a little, share some of what they were feeling. Much of the "healing" during these weekends began by the simple act of speaking aloud. Talking to other people who would understand and having *somebody* listen.

Such a simple concept, and yet so underused, he'd discovered. The ability to communicate on an honest level seemed incomprehensible to humans. They bottled up their innermost emotions, left so much unsaid and as a result carried their pain and loneliness with them.

And he'd found that any excuse, a spanking, a whipping, under situations of control and restraint, broke down the barriers that prohibited the release of these emotions. They did indeed find freedom from their agony through pain. But it was far more their *own* pain than any he administered with his flogger or his lash.

He wondered what Nora's pain would prove to be, and found the thought stimulating.

Shit. This would *not* do. He never *ever* involved himself with a client. But then again, not one of his hundreds of clients had ever affected him in this particular way. Not one had ever made his cock hard with a mere look, or aroused the urge to release his fangs and feed on her—just by simple conversation.

Because that's what she'd done. He was supposed to help her release her pain. For some unknown reason, she'd tapped into his.

Lost in his thoughts, Thanael was surprised to find the meal ended, and faces staring at him as if in question. *What next?*

He was wondering about that himself.

* * * * *

Nora paced.

She'd said goodnight right after coffee, passing on the general move toward the small bar and after-dinner drinks. She needed time to think, and preferably without Master Tanner's physical presence to distract her.

Because distract her he did. In a *big* way.

She'd retired to her room and worked, finding a measure of contentment in writing an interim report.

The clients were, by and large, a typical cross section of the general populace. There was the blonde getting a divorce. The out-of-work software designer. An older man still dealing with his wife's death. A woman who believed herself the victim of abuse as a child...all issues of self-esteem, pain, betrayal—the plagues that haunted the human condition.

The only difference was that they had selected the pain of punishment as a tool for healing rather than the psychiatrist's couch. It could be desperation, a way to expiate guilt, or a last resort. Or, in the blonde's case, perhaps a way to meet new men.

Nora curled her lip and deleted that observation. So she didn't have much use for blondes. *So sue me.* Not being a blonde had bugged her as a kid, especially when the guy she had a major crush on rejected her for one of the several girls lucky enough to possess those damned silky, sunshiny tresses.

Yeah. No love lost there. She grinned. Perhaps that's what she should confess to Master Tanner as *her* private pain. An inherent dislike of blondes. That would go over like gangbusters, since his head was more golden than the rest of 'em put together.

She rose from the little desk and started her pacing, wondering for the first time if this investigation had been such a good idea after all. She was going to have to confront this man, one-on-one, and let him spank her or whatever, to rid herself of her "pain".

She'd better come up with a realistic reason for being here in a hurry or she was up shit creek.

After seeing him, the thought crossed her mind that this might be some kind of sexually perverted weekend. Did he fuck his clients? He was good-looking enough to get away with it. The fact that several attendees were men would be no deterrent, not if he was bisexual. And any kind of punishment often went hand-in-glove with arousal.

Somehow, though, she doubted that assumption. His interaction had been coolly professional, detached yet interested. She'd seen nothing as yet to account for comas, unexpected death or anything threatening in any way whatsoever. A real accredited, licensed psychologist couldn't have led the conversation better, since the meal had ended with everybody chatting like old friends.

Except, of course, Nora. God forbid she allow herself to be drawn in to his spell. She was a professional, an FBI agent investigating him. She simply could not participate in any of his games on more than a cursory level. Just enough to maintain her façade.

It's gonna be fucking hard.

The thought crossed her mind as she moved to the window and opened it onto the fresh air. Cool and soft, the breeze caressed her cheek and she looked down to see a deserted terrace overlooking a shadowed golf course. Just the place for an evening stroll.

The confining space of her room pressed inwards, along with her thoughts, and Nora reached for her key and her jacket. She needed to move, to breathe...to *think*.

She was outside in minutes, drawing in great lungfuls of sweet grassy air. The fragrance of wildflowers had lingered after sunset, adding their own bouquet to the night. It was perfect, barely a sound breaking the magic spell of the growing darkness.

The Master had picked an ideal spot, secluded and clearly well-maintained by some wealthy but absent estate owner glad for the income from opening his house to a seminar of this nature. Perhaps even a graduate himself. Or perhaps simply unaware of the exact form Tanner's "healing" methods employed.

She had no difficulty imagining a jet-set millionaire delegating such things to an agent on his behalf. The owner might be cruising the Mediterranean or attending some conference in China. He'd be none the wiser, and she doubted the staff would bother to inform him of his guests' activities. There weren't many of them around, anyway.

No, it was truly the perfect setting, and most likely similar to all the other places Master Tanner chose. A clever man. Very clever indeed.

On the horizon, a glow heralded the rising moon and Nora dropped her jacket on a chair as she walked to the edge of the stone terrace, leaning against it, letting her senses absorb the peaceful tranquility of the place.

This is...nice.

Closing her eyes she cleared her thoughts, focusing on nothing, thinking about nothing, just—relaxing.

And that was when she sensed a *presence*. In her mind at first, and then physically, behind her.

"I thought I'd find you here."

Chapter Four

Thanael saw the ripple of awareness as it crossed her shoulders. He did indeed know he'd find her here. The lure of the tranquil scene had appealed to him on the same level, drawn him like a magnet as it always did. Apparently they shared that delight in the night and the darkness.

"It is quite lovely."

Still so in control. Her voice was calm, polite, offering nothing. He continued to be intrigued.

He moved beside her, turned and sat on the low wall, folding his arms across his chest and crossing his ankles comfortably as he stretched out his legs. Near enough to intrude on her personal space and make sure she knew he was there, but far enough away not to be an immediate threat.

Her face was pale in the half-light, an oval blur. He watched her. "Yes it is. One of the reasons I picked this place. It's lovely at any time of year."

Her throat moved as she swallowed. "You live around here?"

He grinned. Such a commonplace question. "As a matter of fact, yes. I have a small house a couple of miles down the road. This is one seminar I always enjoy hosting, since there's no travel involved other than a quick drive." He glanced around. "This is a charming place but a little opulent for my tastes. Works very nicely for functions like mine, however."

There was another pause as she chose her words. "I would imagine it's not easy to find the right...location for your events."

He paused in his turn. She was fishing. Asking careful questions. Once again hiding her true interests behind that damn shield. He had a feeling it was something that came naturally to her, a second nature. He would get past it, certainly, but for now he could play along. "As a matter of fact, it's not as hard as you might think." He shifted slightly, noting the tension in her body, the controlled alertness shimmering around her.

"There are plenty of houses like this. Owners anxious to make them pay for themselves by renting them out. You'll find conventions held here, business meetings, family reunions, that sort of thing."

She allowed a low chuckle to escape. "Very few of which involve corporal punishment, I'd bet."

"You'd be surprised. There's a large number of people who practice a lifestyle which includes punishment, Nora."

She nodded. "I know."

"Do *you*?" Time to dig a little, throw her off balance perhaps.

Instead she laughed. "No."

"Really? What kind of lifestyle do you practice?"

"I...um...I don't think I practice any kind of *lifestyle*." She stumbled a little for the first time. "I just live."

Her face turned slightly toward his and Thanael saw the moonlight reflected in her eyes. Oh yes. There was a spark there.

"How?" He pursued the thought. "How do you live, Nora?"

Immediately the shield snapped back into place. "Like everybody else, I suppose. From day to day."

"Hmm." He stroked his chin. "Now why do I find that hard to believe?"

"I have no idea." Her shoulders straightened. "And I'm not sure it's relevant to my being here."

Thanael's lips curved. "On the contrary. I need to know about you — *all* about you. I need to peel back the surface and expose the pain beneath." He heard a quick little intake of breath, and his smile widened. "After all, that's why you're here, right?"

Another pause. He could practically hear her mind working. "Yes, of course."

He pushed her some more. "It's why you signed up for this weekend. You have an inner pain you wish to release. Something that troubles you to the point where you're willing to try anything to free yourself from it."

This time the swallow was quite audible. "Correct."

"Is it a man?"

She snorted a laugh. "No."

"I'm surprised. You're attractive, intelligent, in good health... I'm thinking you probably work at a demanding but satisfying job...what else could be hurting you other than a man?" He paused. "Or perhaps it's...the lack of a man in your life? The inability to find a lasting relationship?"

She ignored his question, replying with one of her own. "Do you enjoy doing this?"

"Doing what? Digging around in your head?"

"No, not that." She waved her hand. "This whole setup. Having people spill their guts, their agonies, on a regular basis. Then walloping it all out of them." She tilted her head. "Or whatever it is you do."

He stood, closing the distance between them and standing beside her, staring into the night. "Yes. Yes I do, Nora. I help people. It is, admittedly, an unusual way of doing it. But I *help*."

Fuck it. She'd done it again. Turned the tables and easily made him open up to her, when it was supposed to be the other way around.

"That's good." There was an odd note in her voice. "Good that you help people."

He needed to establish his equilibrium, retrieve the control from her capable hands, so Thanael moved behind her. "Let me help *you*."

"That's what I'm here for."

This time there was the slightest tremor in her voice as he brushed close. "Good. I want to help you, Nora. Whatever it is that is troubling you, driven you here to my seminar, we'll deal with it together. Face it together and banish it together."

"Okay." She nodded absently.

Thanael placed his hands on her shoulders. "You're very tense. Perhaps you could start by relaxing a little?" He moved his fingers, a gentle massage through her thin shirt, registering the fact that she wore nothing beneath.

Her scent was overwhelming him, his sexual arousal was growing by the second and he was only too aware that she'd notice that fact pretty damn soon.

For once, Thanael broke one of his own rules. He wanted to be inside her head. To find out what made her tick—and what made her passionate. To see if she burned somewhere for something...and to explore the possibility of sharing that fire.

"Relaxing...doesn't come easy to me." Her neck eased a little under his gentle touch.

"I can tell." He kneaded and soothed, finding taut muscle lying firmly beneath her soft skin. "You are tight here. All the tensions in your body have found their way to this very point..." He pressed harder, a small spot on one side of her neck, smiling in the darkness as she muttered an exclamation.

"No kidding." A little tremor ran through her.

"Breathe, Nora." He continued his massage. "Look out into the darkness. Don't try and see anything, just fill your eyes, your mind, your heart with that darkness. It's soft, it's warm, it's soothing, calming you..."

Thanael poured comfort into the tone of his voice, coupling it with the skillful touch of his hands.

And offered up a silent prayer that it would work. He'd never violated any of his own preset rules of behavior. Never engaged a client in anything other than treatment. But from the first minute he'd set eyes on Nora, he knew she would force him to break those rules, in spite of himself.

He wanted her. In all the wonderfully terrible ways he could imagine.

He needed to know if she was strong enough to want him back.

Almost without volition, her back arched a little, leaning toward him. "Mmm. That feels heavenly..."

Thanael's fangs ached. He didn't dare release them—she was too fragrant, too close, too...*everything*, right at this moment. But it would be a near thing. He moved his fingers, finding that special place known only to him. The place where her body's essence ran freely to her brain.

And as he covered it with his palm, she sighed and he felt the mental cloak fall away. "Share with me, Nora. *Show me what you want.*"

He let his palm rest against her skin and closed his eyes.

* * * * *

Shit, this guy was turning her on. *Big time.*

Nora fought the urge to tear herself away from him, reach for her weapon and slap cuffs on him. Although she'd never arrested somebody for sexually arousing her, and it wasn't a crime, the reaction was there. Something about him unsettled her on a purely fundamental level, and she was, strangely, enjoying every damn minute of it, inner struggles notwithstanding.

Her reflex responses were all business, all law-enforcement, but her deeper psyche seemed to crave his touch. She wanted nothing more than to plaster herself all over him, explore that nice body, and possibly fuck him senseless.

And she'd also have to hang on to her professionalism with her back teeth. His voice urged her to tell him her secrets. To share her thoughts with him. She found herself wanting to do just that.

And it was, of course, utterly and completely impossible.

For a fraction of a second she wished that she'd prepared better for this assignment. Developed a plausible back-story for herself that included some inner "pain" she could reveal at the right moment. But she'd had no inkling that matters would take such a personal turn so rapidly.

By tomorrow, when her "session" was scheduled, she'd have been ready. Tonight, she was...vulnerable. The atmosphere, the night, his voice—they worked together against her natural caution.

Plus she had no idea she'd be so physically attracted to Master Nathanael Tanner. She fought it. "Master Tanner..." His hands heated her skin, sending pleasurable trickles of sensation over her body.

"Call me Thanael."

She blinked. "Not Nathanael?"

"No. I like Thanael, don't you?" He kept up that rhythmically soothing pressure, finding that one spot on her neck that had a tendency to ache at the end of a long day. More than a massage, he was almost sucking the tensions from her body, bearing down onto that kink, then easing off.

Nora could feel her muscles beginning to melt, and a new kind of tension building. A purely sexual one. "It's different."

"So are you."

His breath brushed her flesh, a smooth and silken caress. He made her want things, forget things, and for a second or two she surrendered to his lure. Wondered what it would be like if she was just a normal woman enjoying the touch of a man like this on a dark and quiet night.

But she wasn't a normal woman, not by any stretch of the imagination. She dredged up some resistance. "You overestimate me."

"I don't think so." He sounded amused, his body radiating heat through her thin shirt, all the way down her spine. She wanted to lean back into that heat so badly she ached with it.

"Yes, you do." She surrendered and let her skin meet his. "I'm just...ordinary. No deep terrible scars on my soul. Just the usual stresses..."

"You are so wrong."

He was definitely hot, in more than the lustful sense of the word. His touch almost burned, like he had some kind of internal fire going on. And yet it wasn't painful – not really. It was seductive and, like a moth to the flame, Nora was fascinated by it. "You think so?"

"I know so." He shifted a little, touching her fully, singeing her flesh with his, pressing his hardness against her. And she thrilled at the realization that his cock was solid, rigid, riding the swell of her buttocks.

Fuck. She *ached*. Her pussy drooled at the thought of him riding her, taking her, sharing his heat with her. It had been one hell of a long time since she'd been hit with such a solid bolt of lust.

"Nora." His voice was a whisper in the darkness. "Let me in. Share your soul with me." His hands slipped around her neck. "Show me."

None of her self-preservation techniques kicked in. A man she didn't know was standing behind her with his hands around her throat. She should have immediately gone into defense mode, moved clear and separated herself from the potential threat.

She did none of these things. She simply said one word. "How?"

Chapter Five

“Close your eyes – and open your mind.”

Thanael reached within himself to touch places he’d long closed off. Rusty mental abilities stood up and stretched, freed for the first time in years. This was in direct opposition to everything he’d done, every rule he’d set for himself since coming to Earth.

Any kind of mental link was, in some ways, torture. Human thoughts were random, scattered, chaotic and – to someone with his sensitivities – deafening. He’d shut them down almost immediately, knowing it was intrusive for him to listen, and would most probably drive him insane.

The most he permitted himself was a slight brushing of thoughts, useful if a client could not identify the true source of their pain.

But now, at this moment with Nora, he wanted it *all*.

He knew no hesitation whatsoever as he let himself slide into her mind, into the secret places where ideas played, fantasies were born and the real Nora lived.

And she let him in. No – that was wrong. She *welcomed* him. Her thoughts opened to him like a flower in the sun, unfolding and beckoning with silken ease.

It was sensually seductive, this blending of two people, and Thanael willingly followed her into her fantasy.

They were seated, Nora on his lap, legs splayed wide and hooked over his thighs. And they were nude.

Thanael choked back a groan of pleasure as he delighted in the touch of her skin, the pressure of her buttocks against the sensitive hardness of his cock. She was aroused, nipples gleaming tightly atop her full breasts, and he could scent the honey as it seeped from her pussy.

It would seem they were watching something. Someone. *Two* someones.

Their surroundings were indistinct, but Thanael definitely felt they were outside, surrounded by trees. A forest perhaps, or a deserted golf course. And in front of them in the darkness was a couple. Two people, also nude.

Hmm. So Nora was having sexual fantasies. *Interesting*.

He could see them clearly, although there wasn’t much in the way of light. Apparently Nora’s mind was focused on them too intently to create much in the way of detail.

She squirmed, a sliding of flesh against flesh, and Thanael reminded himself to watch, not lose himself in Nora. He needed to see what she saw, find out what she wanted – what she dreamed. And then maybe make those dreams come true.

The woman was blindfolded and bound, her wrists tied tightly with rope. She was on her knees, head lowered between her forearms, ass in the air.

The man was behind her, fully engorged, his cock dripping slightly as he looked at the nakedness in front of him. He was well-built, trim and featureless, an indistinct face on a very distinct body.

He raised his arm and a sharp slap rang out into the silence as he spanked one shining buttock.

The woman moaned, a sound similar to the one that crept from Nora's throat. Thanael felt her body jerk in response to the slap, and when the man before them repeated his stroke, Nora once again moved on Thanael's knees.

It was erotic, this punishment, this creation of Nora's mind. A sensual, impersonal fucking with the sting of pain.

Once more a slap rang out, harder this time, and the red imprint of a hand glowed from the white skin. The man moved even closer, kicking the woman's knees wider apart, opening her completely to his gaze.

He reached down, fondling the swollen tissues, spreading the liquids he found there all over the naked skin. He caressed the tight ring of muscles between her cheeks, finally sinking a finger deep into her anus and bringing yet another moan of pleasure from the bound woman's throat.

Still penetrating her, he spanked her once more, a rain of blows that brought the blood rushing to Thanael's cock and a cry of desire to Nora's throat.

The woman squirmed, spreading her thighs even wider, inviting more of this treatment, more of this pain, more of the delights it offered.

She got it. The man knelt behind her and took his cock in his hand, rubbing it hard over her pussy, pulling back, slapping her once more, then returning, just teasing her cunt with the swollen and purpling head.

Thanael dragged his mind back from the couple and focused on Nora. He felt her excitement, her arousal, heard the blood as it thundered through her body, and the slick swish of her tongue as she licked her lips.

He also felt something else. *Distress*. Fear that surrendering to such enjoyment would take away her control. She was a woman torn at that moment. A woman who desperately yearned to be fucked like that, but afraid of what she would lose if she ever allowed it.

This was her private pain. The conflict of her mind with her desires. She couldn't let go. Simply could not release her hold on the rigid grip she maintained on her conscious emotions.

Perhaps it was time to help her.

The man before them had found what he was looking for...that warm dark place between the woman's legs. He thrust—hard and deeply—bringing a cry to her lips. He withdrew and thrust again as she sobbed and pushed back onto him, needing more of his cock, more of his punishment, needing to come.

Thanael and Nora were sharing these emotions. She had created a fantasy in which she could almost participate, *almost* share the experience. Without letting go. But this time, he was there to hold her. And she *would* let go.

He allowed his hand to slip from her neck and stretched his arm around her, down over her belly to her mound. Soft curls greeted his fingers, and he riffled them lightly, feeling the shiver of pleasure that shook her at his touch.

He went farther, seeking the heated moisture he knew was there. As the couple in front of them fucked furiously, Thanael found Nora's clit, hard and wet, amidst the hot swollen ridges of her pussy lips. He stroked it, playing delicately, then pinching it quickly as the woman screamed out loud.

Nora's breath hitched as she bit back her own scream.

She moved, an involuntary shifting of the hips, but Thanael read it clearly for what it was. A desire to escape, to hide, to avoid the honesty of her own fantasies. And he would not permit it.

His other arm encircled her, banding her like iron to his body. He slid two fingers through her juices and into her cunt, sinking them deep within her darkness.

Her head fell back against his chest as she gasped.

Thanael wouldn't let up. He cupped her breast, seeking her nipple and finding it with his thumb and forefinger. Once more he pinched, harder this time, shudders of his own desire rippling through him as she responded with a soft cry of pleasure.

His fangs ached, and he knew they were probably free, lying whitely on his lip, dripping anxious drops of liquid onto her shoulders. He ignored them as best he could, forcing himself to focus on Nora. On her responses to his touch, the way her breast thrust into his hand and the way her cunt soaked his fingers as he worked her, deep, stroking her innermost places with unerring accuracy.

The couple before them approached their peak. The man groaned aloud, hammering his hips into the woman, his balls slapping audibly against her. The woman cried out, her muscles hardening beneath her skin, her hands fisting and fighting against the ropes that bound her.

Thanael skillfully took Nora to the edge of the abyss, aware of her every indrawn breath, every slick twitch of her body beneath his hands. He tasted his own blood and knew he'd bitten down on his lip, but ignored it. He *had* to take her past her limits.

As the final seconds neared, the man plunged himself to his groin inside the woman and reached forward, grabbing her hair and tugging her head cruelly toward him.

She rose up on a scream, and he pulled the blindfold off her. She began to come, great orgasmic waves rattling her body, shaking her and holding her rigid in the man's grasp.

Nora began to come too, a sudden sharp indrawn breath and a whimper signaling that she was on the brink of her own orgasm.

Thanael wanted to watch her, to see her body ripple with the climax, but his attention was drawn to the couple in front of them.

Locked in their release, the man's mouth had opened. Fangs emerged. He leaned forward, pulled the woman's hair aside and *bit her*. The woman sobbed with delight and turned her head. *It was Nora.*

In his arms, Nora cried out, racked by great tremors, her cunt seizing Thanael's fingers in a savage spasm.

He parted his thighs, stretching her open even more, pushing her past her restrictions and into the madness of her release.

His cock exploded, jets of hot semen erupting over her back.

Unable to suppress his desires, he too surrendered. With a sigh that came straight from his soul, he sank his fangs deeply into her neck.

It was real, although the images were illusion. It was incredible, it was the culmination of too much denial. It was what Thanael had wanted from the minute Nora had walked into his seminar.

And for the first time since arriving on this world, Thanael truly *fed*.

* * * * *

Nora awoke to the sound of birds chirping and the glare of sunlight pouring in through her windows. She stretched, feeling very relaxed and almost sated.

Something was teasing the edges of her mind...some dream...some nighttime craziness. She yawned and pushed it aside, gathering her thoughts, getting her head into its usual morning order.

A glance at her watch told her she'd slept later than usual, but she shrugged that off, too. Nobody said there was a clock-in time for an assignment like this. Her "session" with Tanner wasn't until late this afternoon. She could find something to do in the meantime.

The summer air lured her, and an invigorating rush swept through her as she looked out at the green lawns of the golf course and the surrounding countryside. *Oh yeah. A good run would be perfect.*

Most of Nora's exercise regimen took place within the confines of a gym, so the chance to get out and run with the sun on her shoulders was enticing. It took her little time to freshen up, slip into her shorts and sports bra and head outside.

There were well-trodden paths here and there, so she picked one at random, striding out with pleasure, feeling her muscles warm and stretch. Soon she was jogging comfortably along, letting her thoughts ramble freely as they always did when she worked out.

This particular track circled the golf course, winding in and out of the trees, and occasionally past a deserted putting green. The silence was broken by the occasional trill of a bird or the soft rustle of leaves in the breeze. It was idyllic, and Nora relaxed into her stride.

She was, to her surprise, rather enjoying this weekend. She cataloged her thoughts, keeping them as orderly as possible. She'd seen nothing that would indicate any attempts at foul play on the part of the Master. Nothing that might produce a coma in anybody.

In fact, he'd been charming, attentive and professional—even last night on the terrace he'd listened to her, chatting in a delightful manner.

She stumbled a little, as a quick image of a naked couple flashed through her mind. *Jeez*. Master Tanner was one hot-bodied dude, but she really shouldn't allow his sex appeal to create inappropriate erotic fantasies in her head.

They'd said goodnight quite formally, and she'd returned to her room. Where she'd slept. And possibly dreamed.

Nora frowned at a tree as she passed it. For some reason, her recollections were a little blurred, a little hazy. Like she'd been drunk, although she knew she hadn't. Perhaps it was just the aftermath of arriving for this assignment. An adrenaline rush that had worn her out.

It could often be like that. The focus and concentration required took its own toll sometimes. The control needed to be constantly vigilant, especially when working a big and potentially dangerous case, was intense and could often produce a letdown worse than a hangover.

At least this one didn't come with an attached headache.

Nora slowed her pace and then stopped, leaning forward, letting her hands rest on her knees as she caught her breath. The sun felt good against her body, drying the sheen of sweat and easing the flush of heat that always accompanied her workout.

She straightened, pushing her hands into the base of her spine and stretching. It was really rural out here, rolling hills, barely the sound of a car in the distance. She looked between the trees across the untamed acres that surrounded the golf course, and a glint of light on glass caught her attention.

With a squint, Nora brushed a drop of sweat out of her eyes and focused. A house perhaps, nestled deep in the forest? The path led that way, so Nora simply resumed her jog, at a slower pace, letting the soft grass cushion her steps as she headed toward the unknown.

On a practical level, this weekend was pretty much turning out to be a bust. There wasn't a damn thing for any FBI agent to hang their hat on as far as suspicious activities went. Not even one as careful as Nora.

Her long legs ate up the distance as her mind wandered freely. When she returned, she'd check in with her boss and leave a message—nothing to report. It had been, officially, a waste of time. Unofficially, she'd allowed herself a few moments of major physical lust. No big deal. Hormones were hormones regardless of one's occupation.

The path dissipated into a short stretch of grass and a hedge loomed up in front of her. A tall hedge, thickly pruned and definitely possessing some pretty off-putting thorns. It worked well as a first-line intruder deterrent, mused Nora. She walked its length and finally discovered a large gate, almost medieval, set into an arch in the hedge.

She pursed her lips. To follow her instincts and go inside might well be construed as illegal entrance onto private property. Especially since she had a damn good idea whose house this was. There was a small road nearby, but no traffic, and she remembered he'd said he lived in the vicinity.

She was prepared to bet her professional reputation on the fact that Master Tanner spent his off-hours behind these high hedges, and damn if she didn't want a peek at that particular facet of his life.

Strictly in the interests of the investigation, of course.

Her hand reached for the ornate handle in the gate then jerked as a small charge of static electricity leaped from her palm to the metal and back again.

"Ouch." She rubbed her hand. "That stung." She frowned. This wasn't the sort of day one would expect to produce such a charge. The air was soft, summery and moist.

"Oh hell. I give up." Nora shrugged at herself and turned away. There was nothing here. Some idiot with a sense of humor had probably wired up the entrances to his tennis court. A twelve-volt battery and a couple of hours on the Internet and anybody could invent their own security system.

The silence of the morning was broken by a loud click and the gate swung inwards, not another sound coming from what must be extremely well-oiled hinges.

It was an invitation—an encouraging hand of welcome. *Come inside. Come visit with me.*

Nora froze, caught on the horns of a very real dilemma. If she accepted this invitation, she had to do so as Nora Carlisle, private citizen. To do otherwise would be to compromise any shot she had at continuing her investigation. She knew she should turn and walk away. Even though this was apparently publicly accessible, it was a grey area for an FBI agent.

She even turned her shoulders a little bit.

But her feet refused to obey. So did her heart. She wanted to go inside. To see if this was Master Tanner's home, and if so, how did he live? To find out more about this man who intrigued her on a variety of levels.

Fuck it. Why not?

With shoulders straightened and senses heightened, Nora stepped through the gate and into the garden beyond.

Chapter Six

"Nooooo..."

The anguished shriek emanated from the man on his knees. He was tied to an ottoman, bent forwards, with his trousers pulled down in a wrinkled pile on the floor. A large backside was thrust upwards by his pose, covered incongruously by underwear featuring small white and pink flowers.

This backside was being soundly thrashed by Master Tanner. *"You are a good boy."* *Smack.* *"You do not deserve this punishment, Edward."* *Smack, smack.* *"You can tell me to stop any time you want..."*

Thanael took a breath and held the leather strap loosely, waiting, panting a little, listening to Edward's broken sobs. All the man had to do was say *stop*. To take control back to himself. It would be the first step in overcoming so many of his difficulties.

The flower-covered ass waggled. Apparently Edward wasn't quite ready. Thanael sighed and lifted his hand. Another very satisfying smack followed, and Thanael couldn't help but notice a certain amount of enthusiasm now for this treatment on the part of his client.

He narrowed his eyes. He realized that over the years, Edward had learned to enjoy punishment. In that complex way the human mind can work, he had come to see his sufferings as desirable. Sexual, even. No wonder he was having a hard time saying "no" to it.

Perhaps he needed some help.

Thanael reached out and yanked off Edward's underwear, letting it fall on top of his trousers on the floor.

"Aaaargh. What are you doing?" Edward's head jerked upwards, his body fighting against the restraints.

Thanael brushed the leather strap over the naked and reddened buttocks. *"You're enjoying this too much, Edward. You've got yourself a healthy erection here. If this is all about the sex, then so be it. But don't come to me begging to free yourself of your inability to see anything but a failure when you look in the mirror. Not if that failure gets a hard-on by such abuse. Don't lie to me, Edward. More importantly, don't lie to yourself."*

This time the strap met bare flesh, and the sound was galvanizing, bringing a genuine shriek to Edward's throat. It was followed by a distinct moan as Edward rubbed himself against the ottoman.

Oh great. Now he's humping my furniture.

Thanael kept up the punishment, light but stinging blows that made Edward sob and writhe into a frenzy. Hard balls swelled between his legs and the harsh fabric of the ottoman must have been sheer hell against his cock. All these things registered in Thanael's mind as he tended to his client.

And all these things sat next to one large distraction...Nora. The sweet flavor of her blood had lingered on his tongue for hours, and even though he'd held his feeding to a small bite, his desire had risen like a tidal wave throughout his body. It had been painfully difficult to hold himself in check. But he'd done it. He had not claimed her as he wanted to, not fucked her, not made her scream with satisfaction.

But damn it, he was going to. He knew he could not avoid it. She was his destiny, his nemesis, looming large in front of him, complete with sword and shield, and if he ignored her she'd probably cut his balls off and snap his fangs at the gums.

Resolutely he shoved her to the back of his thoughts as Edward groaned loudly and thrust his hips forward in search of release. Thanael snorted. Perhaps Edward needed to learn a lesson about control.

"So you want to fuck, huh, Edward? Want to stick that cock into something? Be forced to come? After all, you're tied up, right? It's not your fault if somebody does something that makes you come." Thanael ran his fingertips down Edward's spine. "It's never your fault, is it? From the first time somebody dropped your pants and spanked your ass. You surrendered. You let them take control and you've never been able to take it back."

Edward whimpered. "I don't know."

Thanael slapped him with the flat of his hand. "Do you like that, Edward? Does it turn you on? Really? Be honest, man."

Edward nodded, burying his face into the ottoman.

"Good. Now we're getting somewhere." Thanael reached for his cabinet, laying the strap aside. "Let's see what else turns you on."

Edward jumped as a thin stream of oil dappled his spine. "*What the fuck...*"

Thanael's hands began to rub the oil into Edward's back, kneading the muscles, easing the tension, but staying away from his ass for the time being.

"You have some kinks, Edward. In your body as well as your mind. Somewhere along the way, through no fault of your own, you have come to equate being beaten with being wanted. This vision you have doesn't work with the intelligence you possess as an adult. So you feel a failure every time you need to be punished in order to feel loved. Do you see the connection?"

Edward moaned as his body relaxed. "Sort of."

Thanael allowed his hands to start massaging the rosy ass cheeks. It was to Edward's credit that he didn't flinch. "Then there's the whole sexual overtone thing, as well. You've taken this mindset one step further down the road and equated your sexuality with punishment and surrender as well. Which is fine, in and of itself..."

Thanael paused and dribbled more oil into the cleft of Edward's butt. "Many people do. But you have to separate all this, Edward. It's getting blurred. You're not seeing the clear picture anymore. You need to let go of the various parts and stop trying to tie them into a whole."

Thanael reached for a short and realistic-looking dildo. "You need to make choices, Edward. Conscious choices. About what you want, who you are and where you're going from here. And you need to do them with as much information as possible at your disposal."

Edward nodded "Okay."

"So here, today, you're going to make a choice." Thanael looked at the man. His skin was glistening, his balls tight and his ass spread wide, rosy muscles puckered and inviting. It was a sight that would have moved any Raheeni vampire male, or female for that matter, to their knees behind him, fangs bared, ready for the claiming.

But Thanael could and did separate himself from Edward. It was easier than ever with the image of Nora and her passion lurking just beneath the surface of his thoughts.

Clinically he observed Edward's responses as he pressed the dildo against that little spot.

The man didn't exactly hit the roof, but it was close. "*JesusfuckingChrist...*"

Thanael kept the pressure up, allowing the soft dildo to slide in, to penetrate a little. Edward sobbed. "What are you *doing* to me? Dear God..."

"I'm ass-fucking you, Edward. Do you wish me to stop?" Another slight pressure, another half inch deeper.

"Aaargh...I can't...I don't..."

"You can say 'stop', Edward. One word and I will stop. The choice is yours. The power is yours." Thanael kept the dildo where it was, moving it just a little to heighten what he knew would be an exquisite sensation for Edward.

"I'm not...I've never..." Edward squirmed.

"I know." Thanael eased the dildo inside a tiny bit more. "You're not gay. You're confused. You're feeling things you never dreamed you could feel. Your cock is aching and swelling and your balls are hard." Muscles relaxed as the dildo slipped deeper now, pulled by a reflex Edward probably didn't even know he had.

"You can accept this pleasure, Edward. *Choose* to accept it. I am not forcing it upon you. You can say 'stop' and I shall immediately stop. I am giving *you* the power of choice. Freely and without condition."

Thanael leaned over and swiftly unfastened the ties that bound Edward to the ottoman. He pulled the man to his knees and slid behind him, keeping the dildo firmly in Edward's ass, but pulling him back against the warmth of Thanael's chest. "Take control, Edward. Begin your journey to a new life. Accept or reject what is offered here. Come or don't come. Enjoy the pleasure or refuse it. There are no strings attached, no punishment. There is *no wrong choice*. Only *Edward's choice*."

Of course, thought Thanael wryly, when a man has a cock that is about to explode, a dildo up his ass and a hard arm around his body, there aren't a lot of choices that make sense.

And predictably, Edward took the line of least resistance. He leaned back into Master Tanner, reached for his cock, pushed his ass onto the dildo and began to stroke himself, blindly seeking that moment of pleasure that would release him into his own private galaxy of delight.

Thanael watched, holding Edward tight, encouraging him to let go. He was completely comfortable sitting in this way, clasped to a man who was about to masturbate himself to orgasm.

For Raheeni vampires, sex was never restrictive. There was no need to make the choices that humans forced upon themselves every day of their lives. Males, females, groups—any and all combinations were perfectly acceptable on Raheen.

And even though Thanael was not a Raheeni vampire, he'd come to accept their ways—*embrace* their ways.

Edward's erupting orgasm seemed as natural to Thanael as breathing. He kept his arms around the man, letting him spurt and shudder his way through the experience, only withdrawing the dildo as the tremors subsided.

And as he slumped, Thanael leaned forward, allowing his fangs the merest scratch along Edward's neck.

"That was wonderful, Edward." He hissed the words past the white lengths of sharp teeth that gathered precious droplets of Edward's blood then sealed the tiny pinpricks. "I want you to rest. To lay down your burdens. They are gone. You are strong now, ready to face your life."

Thanael opened his mind and allowed himself the merest brush of thoughts with Edward. A touch here, an idea there...it took little to assist the readjustment process into channels that would make this life a more positive and better experience.

As Thanael withdrew, he passed his hands over Edward's eyes. "Sleep now. Rest. It's been a long afternoon."

Edward slept. He would wake with nothing more than a sore ass and a greatly improved sense of self-esteem.

Thanael nodded. He had done what was necessary.

Suddenly, a bolt of lust shot from his balls to his spine, knocking the wind out of him for a moment or two. *What the fuck?*

He hurriedly tucked Edward's snoring body into a blanket then moved from the room into the small alcove he was using as an office. His cock throbbed hungrily, in a way that had nothing to do with Edward and everything to do with Nora.

He'd tasted her blood. She was in his veins, in his body, a part of his psyche now. Where was she? What was she doing?

He clicked on his computer and activated the several wireless remote security devices. It took no more than a minute to locate her. She was in his private garden, looking at his statues.

His lips curved even as his cock lengthened. She was doing a little more than looking, too. He released his fly, letting his swollen flesh lie loosely along one thigh as he settled in to his chair to watch her. It was either expose himself or strangle to death. He wasn't ready to die. Yet.

Idly he ran a fingertip up and down his cock as his eyes followed one very shapely ass around his private property.

* * * * *

Nora's sneakers made little sound upon the slabs of white granite that lay beyond the gate. She stepped through, unable to resist the lure of the hidden, the unknown, and relatively at peace with her own appalling sense of curiosity.

The high hedges had screened in a small courtyard, not much larger than the average tennis court, but there was no net or markings here, just a dazzling display of granite slabs, green turf – and the statues.

As if laid out by the master hand of an artist, stone plinths held statues of varying sizes and varying subjects.

No. Nora blinked. *Strike that.* The people were varied but what they were doing was not. Well. Not really.

She swallowed. It was the Kama Sutra rendered in stone. A rich purple stone, too, some kind of exotic marble perhaps, that twinkled and glistened lushly in the sunshine. The figures twined around each other, touched each other, claimed each other, in petrified erotic embraces of passion and desire.

Nora stared at them closely...feeling more and more certain that they weren't quite human. Something about them, an expression perhaps, the line of a leg or a neck, was just a little "off".

Daringly, she approached one of the larger ones. A woman knelt at a man's feet, her arms outstretched and bound to a wooden rod that lay across her shoulders. Her head was tipped backwards, her eyes blindfolded and her mouth inches from the cock of the man standing before her.

The artist had done one helluva job, mused Nora. She could almost feel the excitement that must have run through the woman as she waited, knowing how close her man was, yet unable to move.

They were executed in perhaps one-third scale, and yet the vibrancy and sexual tensions rippled through the figures like a veil of heat from an asphalt highway in July. Nora was helpless to resist their lure.

She reached out a hand and stroked the line of the man's cock, sliding her hand from the base to the swollen head.

And cried out as the air around her thickened, darkened and swept her into a similar pose.

It was *impossible*. She was on her knees, arms outstretched to either side, secured at their full length. Sightless, the pressure of a blindfold held her eyes shut, yet she could feel the heat of a body scalding her naked breasts and face. She fought, straining against the bonds that held her, knowing they were unreal.

They were also unyielding.

As she struggled, hands reached for her, seeking her nipples, squeezing them, pulling them until she gasped aloud at the pain.

"It's so good, my Nora. So good."

A deep voice—was it Master Tanner's? Nora wasn't sure. Her hearing seemed fuzzy, like she was underwater. Her throat was working, but she had a hard time forming words or making sense of the inputs her body was receiving.

Hands lifted and separated her breasts, playing with them, teasing them, making her ache between her splayed thighs and sending rivulets of tension zinging from her clit to her shoulder blades.

A laugh told her he knew. He knew exactly what he was doing to her.

Something sharp—very sharp—found her nipple and pierced it with a sweet agony that brought tears to her eyes and juices of need gushing from her pussy.

Then the pain was gone, a lingering memory of arousal, leaving emptiness in its wake.

"You taste so hot, my Nora." A tongue licked her nipple hard, circling and laving the taut bud with intense strokes. "So hot and so good."

Her knees ached and she longed to sit back, to rest her ass on the ground, but the restraints held her in position, and try as she might, she was stuck.

She was also becoming very aroused. The helplessness, the knowledge that her breasts were now at another's disposal, that her body was spread nude for his appreciation—it was all exciting in a way that Nora had never imagined.

Surges of adrenaline pulsed through her, following hard on the heels of her sexual excitement. The pain of his caresses heightened her awareness, and she felt the hot juices leak from her pussy down the inside of her thighs.

He laughed. "You want this, my Nora. Oh how you want this."

Something velvety-hard brushed her lips and she opened her mouth, wanting that taste, that touch against her tongue. He teased her, letting the swollen head of his cock rest in her mouth for barely a moment before pulling it away.

Nora licked her lips, trying to capture the salty, musky essence of him.

He was close, so close, and yet there were others there too. In spite of her blindfold, Nora could sense other bodies, and within a few moments, the light touch of other hands.

"You are a plaything, my Nora. And we shall play with you."

"Ooohhhh..." She could moan. It was the only sound her throat would produce.

That cock touched her lips once more, this time accompanied by a hand caressing her head, tugging gently on her hair, moving her at his whim.

She sucked on him, only to have him retreat, leaving her frustrated and needy.

Again and again, she was allowed a moment of bliss, a moment when the hot and swollen ridges filled her mouth, but it was too brief, too teasingly agonizingly short.

And then the touches began in earnest. Hands stroked her body – everywhere – and although she fought to identify pairs of hands, to put a number to the bodies around her, Nora's thought processes refused to function on that level. They stayed firmly rooted in the erotic torture she was beginning to experience.

Little pinches, little nips and then a softly arousing caress of her clit.

A sharp sting, a heated tongue and more touches, tracing the folds of her pussy lips from her clit to her ass. And always the cock, darting around her head and her face, stroking hot moisture down one cheek, then pushing hard into her mouth, only to withdraw almost immediately.

Nora sobbed. She writhed and panted, needing more of whatever it was they were doing to her. Her clit ached, her cunt was throbbing and empty and she could feel the shocking hardness of her nipples as they were grabbed and tugged by a hungry mouth.

She was being bitten – the boiling slick of her own blood unmistakable as it trickled over her skin. But then it was gone, swallowed by a pair of lips that savored it with a sigh. The pain was minimal, the pleasure extraordinary and she wanted to come.

To explode with that cock in her mouth. To suck it to the back of her throat, tease it and learn it with her tongue and then pull the velvet silk until it exploded as well, shooting hot come down into the emptiness that built inside her.

She burned, a fire searing her cunt and spreading outwards, venting at the surface of her skin like magma as teeth ripped and tore into her flesh.

Each wound was a savagely passionate caress, driving her arousal higher, her need swelling along with it.

A mouth found her clit, sucking hard then biting down on the little pearl of taut flesh.

Nora screamed past the obstruction in her throat, only to have the sound blocked by the instant penetration of his cock. Reflexively she began to close her jaws but a firm hand grabbed her chin.

"Let go, little one. Surrender to the hunger. Soon you will feed. But not yet."

His words made no sense, but any chance Nora had of thinking about them vanished as more hands found her, more teeth tasted her, and a tongue forced its way into her cunt.

She shuddered and trembled and felt the brush of air as the cock near her face was stroked, violently now.

A touch against her mouth, a drop of burning hot liquid at the tip of the swollen flesh. Nora licked at it, thirsty for the slightest taste, wanting this to be over. Wanting to come, wanting to suck him off, wanting to *see*.

Her agonies drove her mad, the mouth on her pussy working her past the point of frustration. Other mouths fed on her, biting sharply on her buttocks and the backs of her thighs, only to cover the wounds with tongues that apparently healed.

Hands squeezed her breasts, mounding them, pulling them, cruelly extending the nipples into points of exquisite agony.

She was one writhing mass of aroused delight, aching with the flood of erotic pain and pleasure that was drowning her.

"Now." One harsh word before her, and she opened her mouth wide like a hungry bird.

Teeth penetrated her everywhere, and she didn't care. Her clit was pierced by a savage bite, and she still did not care. She trembled on the brink of her orgasm—waiting—waiting for the moment when she could share it—with *him*.

Her Master.

She knew who he was. *Her Master*. And he was coming. Suddenly pulsing jets of boiling liquid scalded the skin of her neck and her shoulders, dripping down over her breasts and coating her body.

He had come, but not in her mouth.

Tears filled her eyes and her jaws ached, a strange pain in her gums overriding the sensual torture. She was coming as well, an orgasm building low in her spine, making her ass cheeks clench in readiness and her pussy weep hot liquids.

But her lips felt the strangeness of fangs as they grew and lengthened over the rosy softness. A hunger began that was distantly linked to her orgasm, but more closely to the scent of the man before her. The musk of his come that soaked her, the salt of his sweat and the essence of his blood.

Nora wanted him. Wanted to tear into his body and devour him.

And as she fell apart and shattered into a massive orgasm, she knew she wanted to feed.

She was a *vampire*.

Chapter Seven

"Nora? Nora...are you all right?"

Something cool was lying across her forehead. *Not* a blindfold. She lifted one hand, pleased to find there were no restraints holding it in place. In fact, she was lying on her back with a damp handkerchief decorating her brow.

Nora opened her eyes to see Master Tanner frowning worriedly above her.

"Oh thank goodness. You gave me one hell of a scare, woman."

"I..." She touched her head. "What happened?"

"Near as I can tell you slipped and caught your head on one of these statues." Tanner's hand speared through her hair and pressed on a spot that was indeed slightly sore.

"Hmm."

"Can you sit up?" A strong arm slipped beneath her shoulders, and Nora found herself lifted almost to her feet in one smooth move.

She swayed, strangely content to be in his arms. He smelled — right.

"Easy now. Let's get you indoors." Tanner shrugged and bent, lifting her clean off her feet and taking her breath away.

"Hey...you don't have to..."

"Quiet. Your sneakers have no grip on this stone. It's not designed for them."

Nora bit her lip. "I'm sorry. This is your home, isn't it? And I'm here uninvited. I really didn't mean to...to..."

"Snoop?"

She glanced up to catch a quick grin cross his lips. Her sense of the ridiculous rose to match that smile. "Well, okay. Yeah. I was snooping. I am sorry, however. I truly meant no harm."

He gathered her closer and for a second Nora could've sworn a pair of lips dropped a quick kiss on her head. She frowned. She must have taken a harder thump than she realized.

Tanner was carrying her into his house, a relatively nondescript piece of architecture that would have occasioned little comment from the outside, other than the note of rather higher than usual hedges.

But inside?

Oh my.

Nora's breath caught at the beauty surrounding her as Master Tanner carried her through a large set of glass doors and into what must be some kind of sunroom.

He set her down on a soft chaise. "Stay here. I'll be right back."

She couldn't have moved if she'd tried. Flowers were massed around the perimeter, great scented blooms of lilac and lavender, blush roses and delicate stems of irises. It was a riot in purple chiaroscuro, and was echoed by the exquisite artwork that filled the walls.

Landscapes, seascapes, strange skies and mythical creatures—the paintings told a story of adventure and romance as Nora's head turned, following each picture to the next.

Something seemed familiar to Nora, although she knew she'd never seen anything like these paintings before in her entire life. Once again her psyche jangled at half-remembered images, thoughts that had flitted vaguely through dreams—and she lifted a hand to her head dizzily.

That must have been one helluva crack out in the garden.

"Here, drink this."

Master Tanner was back, with a glass of something fruity-looking in his hand and another cool cloth.

"What is it?" Nora stared at the drink.

"Fruit juices whipped up into a smoothie. That's all. Honestly." He grinned at her and gently placed the damp cloth over her head.

She sipped, paused, tasted and sipped again. It was delicious.

He was watching her, sitting next to her on the chaise with an odd light in his eyes. "Good?"

"Yes, very." Nora licked her lips. "I'm sorry, Master Tanner. Really sorry." There was a time for brazen and professional behavior. To try and talk herself out of a predicament. This wasn't it. She'd been busted, fair and square.

"There was no excuse for me to pry or to invade your privacy, and all I can do is apologize." She looked up, finding those amazing eyes fixed on her face. "You have been very welcoming, most charming, and I have abused your hospitality." She put the empty glass down. "I should leave."

"I thought we'd decided you would call me Thanael?" He tugged the cloth from her hair and ran his fingers through the damp strands.

"I...look, I..." Nora hesitated. "I have behaved—poorly, to say the least."

His lips turned upwards into a smile. "Have you?"

"Yes, I certainly have." She stood and moved to a glorious pot full of jasmine, inhaling the scent. "You have other clients this weekend. I don't know how you found me here, but you had to leave them and your seminar because of me, and basically I've been trouble all around, haven't I?"

"Yes."

Nora blinked. Well, that was blunt.

"But not in the way you mean." Thanael's eyes laughed at her.

"Er..."

"My clients are content. The only one I had left on my schedule before you was Miss Blonde-Haired Divorcee. She's decided that Mr. Software Designer might just be the next multimillionaire in the field and is busily fucking his brains out." He pursed his lips. "Which is probably just about as good a therapy as any I could offer."

Nora couldn't help it—she laughed. "You're a realist."

"And I'm practical, too. Which is why I don't insist on any kind of wrap-up session with my clients. I've found they're mostly too embarrassed to face me after our time together, and it was time wasted. Not surprising, I suppose, since so many of their issues revolve around sex. Or the lack thereof." He sat back. "So I'm now free of any other commitments. I'm at your disposal."

"As I said, you're a realist."

"In many ways." He stood, reaching into the back pocket of his pants. "Which is why I need to do something here."

She watched him, not sure what to expect. His eyes had turned serious. "Oh?"

"This, Nora, is your check for your weekend." Carefully he tore it into little pieces, letting them flutter to the floor.

Nora's mouth dropped. "What the..."

* * * * *

And now it was time to put everything on the line. Thanael drew a deep breath. He could have persuaded her mentally to do whatever he wanted. But that wasn't in his plans—not for Nora.

She would be his of her own volition—her own choice.

He prayed she made it soon.

"Nora, from the first moment I saw you, I knew you'd make me break my rules." He reached for her hand and tugged her back down onto the chaise beside him as he sat. She left her fingers curled in his and his heart jumped. "There was a light around you that called to me. On so many levels. Here, I thought to myself, is a woman who has needs and desires. Ones that I can fulfill."

Thanael watched the color ebb and flow beneath her soft skin. "I never *ever* get involved with my clients. *Ever*. I swear by everything we both hold holy." He raised her hand to his lips and brushed a light kiss across her knuckles.

She sucked in a breath and Thanael saw the hairs on her arm stand up at his touch. He smiled. "Which is why you are no longer my client."

Her eyes widened as she stared at him, letting him tug her close into his body. "What am I then?"

"That is what I am looking forward to finding out."

Thanael kissed her. A slow slide of lips at first, a light hug around her body as it turned to his.

But as he got his first real taste of her, Thanael's blood heated and pounded through his veins.

She parted her lips hesitantly, then more confidently as he swept his tongue inside, claiming her hot moist cavern for his own.

He sucked in her breaths, giving them back to her as he strengthened his hold on her body. Together they tumbled backwards onto the chaise, Nora's breasts crushed against Thanael's chest and her lips locked to his.

Her arms had twined themselves around his neck as they fell, and Thanael found himself with a hot and twisting woman slithering around on top of him.

It was a very good thing.

His arms held her tight and his hands slipped down beneath the waist of her running shorts to the tight, muscular buttocks beneath.

He pushed her into his crotch, grinding his cock against her pussy through their clothes, desperate to feel her burning cunt where he wanted it most.

His grip was fierce, fingers digging into her ass cheeks, squeezing, pinching and pushing and she kissed him back just as fiercely. Her teeth clashed against his as she helped him, forcing her own body down on his cock, panting into his throat and pulling harshly on his hair.

It was animalistic, this rush of savage desire, and Thanael relished it. He'd known it would be like this between them from the first minute their eyes had met.

Nora moaned as his cock battered against her clit, spreading her thighs wide in an effort to maximize the contact.

Her breasts were hard and hot, tipped by sharply defined nipples, which she rubbed over his shirt. And all the time she kissed him as if she was unable to stop kissing him.

Thanael kept his needs under control. Lord forbid his fangs should pop out right at this moment—Nora would have a heart attack for sure.

But it was fucking hard when the woman he desired with his whole damn soul was moving on top of him like a snake with an itch.

It was time to scratch it.

Thanael tugged on her ass, lifting her a little and bringing her pussy down squarely on his cock. It hurt but—as they say—it hurt so *good*.

He pushed upwards as one hand slid between her legs, past her clothing and into the soaking flesh of her pussy lips. Two fingers found her cunt, the others tugged the sensitive folds of flesh around her clit.

Nora screamed and shattered, forcing her body against his cock with enormous strength as the tremors overran her. Her cunt gripped his fingers and her thighs tightened around his, spasms of delight rocking through her and spilling over onto him.

He sighed and gave up the battle. He came.

Holding his fangs withdrawn, Thanael permitted himself an orgasm, letting the hot semen soak the fabric of his pants and seep through into her shorts. Soon, there would be no barriers between them, but for now, this seemed as good a way as any to get acquainted.

Eventually she slumped, heedless of their wet clothing, or the fact that his hand was still inside her body. "Holy shit."

Thanael snuffled a laugh as he rubbed his chin on her head. "Yeah."

"I...er..."

Oh here it comes. Thanael waited. Humans were so predictable.

"I honestly don't know what came over me. I don't do this sort of thing..."

Yep. There it was. The inevitable apology for a hell of a good fuck. He sighed. "Nora, you came over *me*, not the other way around. You obviously *do* this sort of thing, because you just did. However, I'll accept that you don't do it with anybody else, which is probably what you meant."

She snapped her mouth shut and frowned at him.

"Now. To get back to the original question—what are you now that you're no longer my client? Well..." He slipped his hand from her body, sliding out from between her legs on a gush of her body's juices.

He touched one wet finger to her nose and then put it to his own lips, sucking it. "You will be my lover. A woman I want to lose myself inside. A woman I want to do things to..."

Nora clearly fought a battle with herself. And lost. "What things?"

Thanael looked at her. She sparkled with desires, some of them sated at the moment, but so many more unfulfilled. So many she probably didn't even know she had. And she was bright, intelligent and might even be someone he could talk to—about *things*.

Wouldn't that be crazy?

He decided to try a little experiment. He dropped the smallest of his mental shields and crept into the top layer of her mind. He left images of bondage, sexual rituals, pain and erotic passion.

Sure enough, her hips twitched, pushing down once more on his. Her pupils dilated.

"What do you think we should try, Nora?"

"I...well..."

"Will you let me restrain you, Nora? How about if I strip you naked and have my way with you while you're tied to the bed? Or perhaps to a tree in my garden, with the hot sun on your bare pussy? Do you think you'd like me to nip my way down to your clit, Nora? To put some clamps on those rosy nipples of yours until you cry out for me not to stop tightening them?"

She licked her lips, saying nothing, and Thanael knew she was looking at the pictures he was painting in her brain.

"Will you share your deepest secrets with me? Let me share mine with you? Will you surrender control of your body to me, Nora? Let me fuck you 'til we are both exhausted and sated?"

He left one last image. Sharp white fangs sinking into throbbing bloody flesh. "Will you let me feed on your passions? Your desires? Will you feed on mine?"

Nora's eyes were glazed as she lifted her head from his chest and stared at him.

"Yes."

* * * * *

"...So I must conclude that this investigation is without merit. There is nothing here that alerts me to the possibility of any kind of foul play. End of report. S.A. Carlisle, sixteen-thirty hours, Sunday the tenth."

Nora snapped her cell phone shut on the brief message she'd left on her boss's machine and frowned at herself.

Nothing she'd said was untrue. She'd examined the evidence available to her, watched the proceedings of the weekend, and observed the attendees of the seminar.

There had, as she'd told the director, been absolutely *nothing* that would indicate Master Nathanael Tanner had nefarious intentions of any kind.

She tucked her phone back into her bag and pulled the thick robe around her. Thanael had led her to a guest room, told her he'd have her bags sent from the seminar center and offered her the use of the luxurious shower.

And sure enough, when she emerged from the steamy and sybaritic symphony of chrome, glass and plumbing, her luggage was on the bed along with a decadently lush bathrobe.

She'd slid into it with a sigh of pleasure and reached for her phone, knowing she had to check in.

And knowing she'd be committing a sin of omission with whatever report she left. Nora had no intention of letting the director know she'd developed a serious case of the hornies for Master Tanner. Nor did she intend to tell him that there was a distinct possibility she'd end up in bed with her subject before the night was over.

A shiver of excitement threaded through Nora's veins at the mere thought. His presence—his touch—had unleashed a torrent of emotions and desires inside her. Ones that she'd suppressed for a long time, refusing to even acknowledge.

Dangerous desires, powerful passions, throbbing needs that Nora knew lay deep inside her but had never been brave enough to face. She'd found an outlet by reading vampire novels but they'd fallen short, inevitably, of fulfilling Nora's personal fantasies.

She sat on the bed, staring at nothing, looking inwards into her own dark places. She had found a man who seemed to understand them, might even be able to equal them with a darkness of his own.

A man who could make her come with a touch, and make her want to surrender to his every whim. This was strange indeed, since Nora was nobody's plaything.

Plaything.

The word sparked a memory, a brief image of pain, blood and sexual arousal that was off the scale.

Nora shook her head and reached for her clothes. Where the hell was all this shit coming from? Was there something in the water? She was supposed to be a professional, highly trained, objective and able to remain apart from emotional crap like this.

And she had done. Up until now.

She tugged soft silk pants up her legs and twitched the matching top into place. *Screw it.* She was a woman and she was horny. She wasn't violating any federal regulations. She had no classified secret information she could spew during the most intense moments of sexual relations.

So what if she decided to get herself well and truly fucked? She was overdue. Waaaay overdue.

And if her little non-investigation lasted a couple of days longer than she'd originally intended, who'd care? She was supposed to be on vacation.

Time to make that supposition a reality.

Nora Carlisle was about to *take* a vacation.

And get herself some serious sex while she was at it.

Chapter Eight

"You won't need shoes."

Thanael smiled down at Nora as she glanced around her for her sneakers. "No?"

"Nope. This house isn't meant for shoes." He grinned. "Or clothes at all, for that matter."

She colored slightly but followed him on bare feet. "A sensualist, I see."

"Indeed." Thanael relished the warmth of the setting sun on his bare shoulders. Had he been alone, he would have been completely nude and quite comfortable. He still hoped to be.

But it wouldn't do to shock Nora. *Yet*. He led her across the enclosed courtyard to a small table set for two. "I guard my privacy, and love the touch of soft air on my skin. Is that so bad?"

Nora shook her head and allowed him to seat her. "Nope. I guess not. Not when you've made sure that you really are private." She glanced around. "I suppose the hedges help."

Thanael served her some salad and crispy bread. "Yes. As do the walls, the security system, the state-of-the-art surveillance equipment and a couple of other modifications I made myself." He crunched down on a stick of celery with enjoyment. "When I say I guard my privacy, Nora, I mean it."

She nodded. "Can't say as I blame you. Your taste in artwork, for example, might raise a few eyebrows." She smiled as she sliced up a tomato.

"Ahh." He chuckled. "My statues."

Nora inclined her head, her mouth full of bread.

"They're by a...er...Danish sculptor. Are you familiar with Danish sculptors?"

She shook her head. "Nope."

Thank the lord for that. "Well, I like his work. I like his medium...a rather rare form of purple marble. And of course I like his subject matter."

Nora toyed with a lettuce leaf. "The people in those sculptures. They seemed – not quite human."

"Really? What makes you say that?" Thanael chewed carefully.

"I don't know." Nora gazed absently at her plate. "Just something about their bodies, I suppose, their proportions..." She blinked. "I can't put my finger on it. Just something seemed a little *off*."

"You're thinking perhaps they were Raheeni aliens?"

Nora's mouth dropped open. "*Ohmigod*. You read S.A. Moss vampire novels?"

Thanael grinned. *Oh baby, if you only knew.* "Yes I do. Love 'em. Got all of them, I think."

"Me too." Nora looked at him, a sparkle of excitement lighting her sherry-brown eyes. "There's something about the way she wrote of those people. It takes me there, involves me in the action—jeez, I don't know how to explain it." She sipped from her wineglass. "I suppose it's seductive. It plays into so many fantasies, doesn't it?"

"She was one hell of a writer. And an amazing woman as well."

"You knew her?" Nora's expression revealed her thoughts very clearly. *Oh wow.*

Thanael swallowed. "I had that honor, yes. Briefly though. She died not long after we first met." *With her fingers in her cunt and an orgasm screaming through her that damn near shattered the time-space continuum.*

"What was she like?"

Thanael jerked his thoughts back from that savagely important second when a woman had made a choice—and a planet had survived because of it. "She was fun. Had a great sense of humor."

"Really?" Nora's eyebrows rose. "I'm surprised. All that intense erotic sex..."

Thanael's lips curved. "She believed in Raheen, you know. Believed it existed."

"Riiiiiight."

"Nora...I know you're a very practical and grounded person. But haven't you ever wondered? Haven't you looked up at the night sky and really asked yourself if you truly believe we're alone?" Thanael studied her carefully, interested in her thought patterns, her beliefs, and what they would reveal.

She pursed her lips. "Thanael, I'm a realist. As you said, practical and grounded. I have to be. I believe what I see, what is proven beyond a reasonable doubt. I need hard evidence. Solid facts..."

"And yet you can lose yourself on a world like Raheen, swept there by the mere words of a woman who believed the planet existed..."

"That's different." Nora frowned, waving her fork in the air to make her point.

"How?"

"That's not real. It's pure fantasy. The wild imaginings of a writer. Of course we all have fantasies, it's how we cope with life. But they're not real. We know the difference. In fact..." She looked thoughtful. "It's when we don't know the difference that trouble can begin."

"You are so sure of your reality, then?" Thanael wiped his mouth and laid his cutlery aside.

"What do you mean? *My* reality? Surely reality is reality for everybody?" Nora pushed her plate away with a puzzled look.

Thanael stared at her. How much to reveal? How much to show her? How not to scare her?

It was a challengingly difficult moment for him, and he knew that much depended on what he did next.

He steepled his fingers in front of his face and watched her over the tips of them. "Nora, suppose I were to suggest that your reality is...incomplete."

She was silent for a moment as she considered his words. "*Incomplete?* I don't understand."

He breathed in and out on a sigh. "Over the years I have been able to enhance some basic mental skills. To many they seem magical, to others mundane. I would like to show you, so that you may judge where they fit into your reality."

"You mean you can read minds? Sense auras? That sort of thing?"

The decidedly skeptical look that accompanied Nora's response spoke volumes. She had no intention of believing anything he was about to say.

He grinned. Time for a small demonstration.

"Not *exactly*."

* * * * *

Nora's world went black and she gasped. "Whaaa—"

"Relax."

His voice was soothing, calm, an anchor in the whirling void into which she'd been plunged. She clung to it even as her senses registered her nakedness. And the fact that she was unable to move.

A hand caressed her belly. "You are safe. You are in no danger. You are under my control now, Nora."

"Where am I?" She swallowed down her fear. She was blind. She could not *see*. No blindfold held her eyelids shut—there was just a total blackness surrounding her.

"You are in a fantasy. One we share, perhaps." The hand lifted, finding the underside of her breast and teasing it.

"I can't see anything..."

"You don't need to. For this experience, all you need to do is feel." Fingers touched her nipple, toying with it, playing with it—and then pinching it.

"Oww..." Nora pulled against whatever was holding her arms and legs away from her body, but nothing loosened. She was splayed taut, on her back, helpless and completely under Thanael's domination.

Her pussy began to throb and weep at the realization.

"You will let go, Nora." A hot mouth replaced the cruel fingers, and Nora's nipples were thoroughly suckled, laved and nipped. There was nothing gentle about it, either. Thanael demanded her response and would accept nothing but her body's total surrender.

"I can't—" She tossed her head from side to side, fighting to retain control.

"You can. And you will."

Something incredibly sharp pricked the delicate skin surrounding the tip of one breast and Nora whimpered as she felt a quick flash of hot pain. Then a lick of moist tongue sent rivulets of warmth cascading along her nerves and the pain was gone, followed by the sweetest of shivering arousals.

"Noooo—" The denial poured from Nora's throat, but she had no idea if it was a protest or a plea.

Her hips moved restlessly, legs pulled wide apart, baring her intimate secrets to the darkness.

"I want to fuck you, Nora." Thanael's body slithered over hers, his cock thudding hard against her, slipping then sliding once more as he moved. "I want to come deep inside you. To feel you fall apart around me, shattering into a million miniscule pieces that I can hold in my hand."

She choked as his lips fastened on a breast once more, only to be followed almost immediately by a hard pressure on her clit.

"Mmm." He nibbled and licked. "Good." And once more the pain of a bite was followed by the pleasure of his mouth.

Nora finally released a scream. "*Why?* Why are you doing this to me?"

"I am doing nothing you do not want, my sweet flower." His voice was almost irritating in its smoothness.

He knew, damn him. He knew what she wanted, what she yearned for, and it aroused her anger along with her desire. "I don't want this."

"Liar." His mouth moved down her body and found her cunt. He pushed his face into her pussy, cruelly spearing his tongue into the soft, hot folds, smearing her juices around violently and finally latching on to her clit, sucking it hard.

"*Oh God, oh God, oh God...*" The litany broke the silence as Thanael suckled Nora's most sensitive places, harshly finding every spot that was guaranteed to drive her insane with desire.

It was almost a relief when she felt the hard kiss of something sharp and the exquisite agony of a stabbing penetration through her clit. Her awareness floated above the pain, registering the sweet hot flow of her own blood over the already soaked folds of her pussy lips. And it registered Thanael's tongue as he devoured her, lapping and licking and healing, the burning sensation of his touch driving her higher up toward a peak of desire the likes of which she could never have imagined.

She wanted to bite back. She wanted to feed on him, to fill herself with his lust, his heat, his passion, to make it hers and then return it tenfold. She wanted so much, but at this particular moment, it would seem he was going to permit only one thing.

"Come for me, Nora. I want to see you come. I want to taste you as you come."

Bravely, she shook her head against the darkness. "No. Damn you. If I can't see, why should you?"

She heard his laugh as she challenged him. "Such a brave one. You would be a good Mistress, I think."

His words made no sense, but any questions she had were swept away as his hands slid to her ass cheeks and lifted her a little. His cock touched the ring of muscles below her cunt, and pressed.

"*Shit*. No...*wait*..." Nora's gasp caught in her throat. She'd never been taken this way. And yes, she was afraid.

"Oh I will wait. But can you?" There was warm laughter in the words, and the pressure of his legs beneath her buttocks aroused her even more.

Thanael's hands teased her mercilessly, bringing her to the edge of her orgasm again and again until she was crying out senseless sounds of anger and need. Each time he aroused her, his cock slid a little further into her darkest places, its path smoothed by the ocean of juices she'd produced at his command.

And as he stretched her, he teased her, until the stretching was forgotten in the teasing and the lung-emptying need to climax.

"*Thanael*..." Nora sobbed out the word. She knew it was a plea, a surrender of sorts, but she also knew that she could not survive if he denied her this release. There was no way she could continue to tremble on the edge of such a harsh precipice.

"Yes."

He was there. Inside her, around her, part of her, buried in her darkness, stroking her fires with flames of his own. Her blood boiled, her muscles shuddered and she knew this would take her beyond her own experiences.

He moved – a tiny thrust, combined with just the right touch of his fingertips on her clit.

And she fell apart.

Screaming out his name, Nora tumbled into madness, limbs fighting invisible restraints, ass clamping down around a cock that filled her soul and cunt exploding into shudders of exquisite ecstasy.

She screamed and screamed, tasting blood as her mouth ached and something sharp ripped at her lips. The metallic salty tang seemed to heighten the experience and she keened out a wail of need for something – although what, she didn't know.

And as she screamed, her world shifted, lightened and changed.

She sucked in a lungful of air and struggled to open her eyes.

There before her on the table was a half-eaten tomato.

She looked up at Thanael who sat quite comfortably on the other side, watching her across the dishes. "Not *quite* reading minds, is it?" He grinned.

Nora whimpered.

* * * * *

It had taken quite a bit of control for Thanael to remain casual after what had just happened.

He'd intended for it to be a pleasantly arousing orgasmic experience, and it had been. He'd intended to push Nora's limits, and he had done that too.

He had not realized her orgasm would give birth to the amazing sight of fangs protruding over the ripe redness of her lips.

It was too much. Too strange, too unreal to accept, and Thanael was glad that Nora's confusion and post-orgasmic haze allowed him a few moments to gather his thoughts.

He'd been aroused, of course, but in better control. He was going to fuck her, but he was going to be inside her when he came the next time. Not up her ass, or in her mouth, or anywhere but that hot cunt. It was a promise he made to himself as she fell apart around him.

But the fangs? How had that happened?

She panted as she clutched at the arms of her chair and stared at him. "God, Thanael."

"Er, not quite." He smiled modestly. "But I did tell you I have some skills with my mental abilities, didn't I?"

"Yeah, but...but..." Nora squirmed. "I...um...I need to use the bathroom."

I'll bet you do. "Of course." Thanael pointed the way and watched her walk self-consciously from the room. She was wet and still hot, and he could scent her arousal like the fragrance of a unique flower.

His flower.

His mind spun furiously over this new development. Nora had manifested the typical fangs characteristic of a Raheeni vampire. And yet she was a human, light years away from Raheen, with no more knowledge of that planet than might be gleaned from novels.

How could it be?

Thanael mentally ran through the possibilities, rapidly ending at the only logical conclusion. He had used the Raheeni travel portal and followed a trail that led to Earth. *And a Raheeni Mistress' soul.*

It was an old one, never selected by a Raheeni Master. Thanael had no idea what happened to such entities, and there was nobody he could ask. He also had no idea how long this particular soul had been on Earth. Was Nora its first host? Probably not, since what he could recall of the Raheeni crypt was covered with the dust of eons.

Nonetheless, it would appear as if Nora was, in fact, sharing her consciousness with a Raheeni vampire Mistress. It would explain a lot.

And it would require a lot of explaining.

Thanael sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. It seemed typical of his colossally appalling bad luck. He had found a perfect mate, and she was part Raheeni, part human, and had no clue about any of it.

She'd probably think he was nuts and have him committed if he tried to explain it all to her. She might go nuts herself if he tried to show her what was inside her. Even if he managed to convince her of her Raheeni heritage, there remained the question of revealing his own identity, his part in the history of Raheen and his current objectives, stalled though they were, at the moment.

It was going to be an interesting conversation, to say the least.

Hey Nora. Did you know you've got part of a vampire from another planet in your head? And that I tried to exterminate them all a while back? Oh, and by the way, wanna help me rebuild my species before we head off into outer space?

Oh yeah. This was going to take *quite* a bit of work.

Chapter Nine

The woman frantically splashing cool water on her face and staring at her trembling hands bore little resemblance to a calm, professional FBI agent.

In fact, Nora Carlisle was in deep shit with this man, and she was only just beginning to realize *how* deep said shit actually was.

She struggled for control as she dried off the droplets of water and looked at herself in the mirror over the sink. Her color was high—well, no kidding. A massive mental orgasm will do that to a girl. Her eyes shone with an odd light and overall she appeared to be in glowing good health.

Okay, so there had been no detrimental physical aftereffects to Thanael's...what could she call it? *Intrusion*? His visit into her mind?

So what the hell was he? Nora had heard all the rumors about mind-control experiments at Langley. She wouldn't have been in the least bit surprised to learn they were all true. But she would have been shocked rigid if Thanael had had anything to do with them, since she couldn't imagine anybody with an ounce of intelligence letting him go free.

His powers were—*incredible*, if her experiences were anything to go by. He was unique in his abilities to fathom and enter another human mind.

And yet she'd sensed no threat to herself. It had been almost purely sexual, a desire that seemed to bloom between them that overwhelmed any ideas Nora had ever had about sex and fucking.

Could he be a threat? Probably. Anybody who could create images, fantasies that were so real they elicited a genuine physical response...well, it stood to reason he could accomplish other tasks as well.

Not so benign tasks. Possibly even dangerous tasks.

Nora's spine straightened. She needed answers. She needed to assess Thanael on terms other than how he turned her on. Somehow she needed to separate herself from him emotionally, and decide how to proceed.

And that wasn't going to be easy, since she was already in serious lust with the guy. He read S.A. Moss vampire novels, for Chrissake. How much more compatible could they be?

Nora sighed and left the room. Why the hell she couldn't just find a nice uncomplicated relationship, she had no idea. A little fucking, dinner now and again—was it too much to ask?

She rounded the corner and saw him. Thanael sat in the rays of the sunset, head golden and glorious as it reflected the light. He turned and smiled at her.

Okay. Never mind the dinner and fucking thing. She'd pay whatever the price turned out to be. *This* was the guy for her, mind games notwithstanding.

She smiled back. "Hi."

"Hi yourself." He pulled out her chair with one foot. "Feeling better?"

She laughed. "I wasn't exactly feeling bad to start with, and you know it."

He chuckled. "Yeah. I sort of got that impression."

Nora sighed and folded her arms in front of her. "Okay, Thanael. Enough with the lighthearted chitchat. Put aside the charm. What the hell are you?"

He raised one eyebrow. "What do you mean?"

She stared at him. "You know what I mean. You have — *uncommon* mental abilities. Ones that a large number of agencies would probably sell their secrets to possess. Obviously they don't know about you, or you'd be stashed away someplace behind thick stone walls by now, while they tried to figure out how you did what you do."

"You think so?"

"I know so." Nora was quite firm in her reply. She knew exactly where he would end up. "I conclude that you've managed to conceal your skills damn well, and fly low under everybody's radar for quite some time. A feat which, I should add, impresses the shit out of me."

She raised her wineglass and toasted Thanael. "So, back to my question. Who the hell are you? How do you do what you do? And why?"

Thanael's gaze dropped to his hands for a moment as he folded them quietly on the tabletop. "You seem well-informed about the government's perspective on things like this, Nora."

She paused, then realized the futility of trying to hide anything from this man. His mind was something new, something she could not comprehend. To try and conceal her identity would be absurd. He could pop in behind her left ear, take a quick look around and pop out again before she knew it.

Although, somehow, she also knew he wouldn't.

She shrugged. "I'm with the FBI."

Thanael tilted his head. "Really?"

She snorted. "As if you didn't know."

He frowned. "Nora, I know this is hard for you, but I'm going to ask you to believe one thing, if you believe nothing else. I do *not* enter people's heads at random, snooping around in their thoughts." He tapped his fingers on the table. "Whatever skills I have, I control. I have to, don't you see? Human emotions, chaotic and undisciplined — they'd drive me insane otherwise."

Thanael sighed. "I have never *read* your mind, or attempted to. I have shared your emotions, created fantasies for you based on what you shared with me. But I have never

gone into your head to pry, and I never will. If you tell me you're with the FBI, then I believe it, but because you told me, not because I saw it in your brain."

His lips twisted. "Which raises another interesting question. Are you here in an official capacity?"

Nora swallowed. "Not really. Sort of. Well, maybe."

Thanael choked back a laugh. "There's a definite answer."

She felt the color heat her cheeks. "Look, this isn't easy for me. I don't usually discuss my assignments with civilians."

"I understand."

"Yeah, well, I'm *not* here officially if it makes you feel any better. There were a few issues surrounding some of your earlier clients. One passed away—I don't know if you knew—and a complaint was filed." Nora stood, uneasy with the information she was divulging, but seeing no other option than honesty at this point. "It landed up with our office, and I had nothing else to do—"

"And you were intrigued?" Thanael's voice was impersonal, but his gaze followed her, burning her as it traveled over her body.

"I suppose. Certainly enough to run a preliminary investigation." She turned away. "I have found nothing to implicate you or these seminars in any suggestion of foul play, by the way. I have already filed a report to that effect."

Thanael rose and came to stand behind her, his body a wall of heat shimmering mere inches from her skin. Together they stood, looking out across the hillsides and watching the last rays of the sun.

"I did hear of the passing of a client. Very sad. There have been a couple of others whose health was not as advertised. I make sure that my guests are fit, Nora. You must have realized that when you completed the application."

She nodded. "I did."

"Death is a tragedy that even I cannot prevent or avoid. If more than one of my clients has passed on, I'm deeply sorry. These things happen in life. I deal with people who are not always as healthy as they would like to believe, especially psychologically." He rubbed his chin. "I suppose it's possible that the therapy raises new areas of awareness in my clients. Sometimes perhaps they cannot adapt to that knowledge. I don't know. I've never heard of a complaint, Nora. Not directly, anyway. Never been sued or otherwise litigated against."

"I know. I was not expecting it to be anything other than coincidence, to be honest."

"And so—what happens now? You are no longer my client. Am I still your suspect?"

His hands lifted to her shoulders, lightly brushing them, a searing caress of flame. Lord, the man was hot—in more ways than one.

"No. You're not a suspect. What you *are*—I don't know." Nora found herself truly at a loss for the first time she could remember. "I don't know, Thanael."

She turned in his embrace and rested her hands against the firm planes of his chest. He was so tall, she had to tip her head backwards to look into his incredible eyes. "You scare me. You intrigue me. You excite me." She swallowed, knowing she was making herself more vulnerable with every word she spoke, but unable to stop. "You turn me on, and you can get into my mind, where you discover my deepest desires. Then you make them come true."

She closed her eyes for a moment, trying to hide from the intense brilliance of his stare. "I have never met a man like you. A man who brings out things in me I had no idea were there. Things that scare and arouse me. Things that confuse me and make my head swim with images and visions of strange places and even stranger people."

Opening her eyes again, she saw the fire burning in Thanael. She felt it, a palpable haze of heat that surrounded them both. "You do things to me, Thanael. And I like them. And I want more of them." Daringly, Nora tilted her hips, letting her groin rub against his thighs and the erection that tented his loose pants. "I want this, Thanael. I want it more than I've ever wanted anything. And I want to explore dark pathways with you as my guide." She thrust hard, sucking in a breath as he thrust back.

"Oh yeah, Thanael. Forgive me...it may not be ladylike or eloquent. But I want to fuck you. I want you to fuck me. I want..."

She paused as Thanael's cock pressed hard against her body. God, it felt so good. She was wet all over again.

"What? What do you want, Nora? Tell me..." Thanael moved his hips, rubbing her clit through their clothing with the head of his cock.

"I can't." She shook her head. "I don't really know." She dragged in a breath. "You'll have to find out."

His arms tightened around her as she gave him *carte blanche* to mess with her mind. *You've lost it, woman. This could be the worst thing you've ever done in your entire life.* Her head echoed as she mentally rebuked herself for her amazingly crass stupidity.

Or the best.

Three little words, a whisper no more, and chills followed the shivers down Nora's spine. Thanael hadn't spoken aloud.

He'd spoken to her mind – with his.

Cooooool.

* * * * *

Thanael couldn't help his smile as he sensed Nora's excited response to his mind link. Her eyes were shining, her body trembling – she had shed many of her inhibitions and invited him *in*. In more ways than one.

Now it was time to expand her knowledge, both of herself and the people who played an important role in making her who she was. Neither revelation would be easy, believable or acceptable.

They would, however, be interesting.

"Come on." Thanael scooped Nora up, cradling her high against his chest and striding from the dining room down a passageway.

"Where are we going?"

Lights flickered on and off as Thanael passed, going down stairs, along corridors and down even more stairs. "To my private residence. I want to show you something."

"Okay." Nora snuggled comfortably against him. "This is real weird, you know. Besides everything else, I'm not used to being carried."

Thanael grinned. "Your point?"

"Don't have one. Just figured I'd mention it." Her voice tapered off as they entered Thanael's "lair", for want of a better word. "Oh my."

He set her down, watching her bare feet as they sank into the soft carpeting.

She turned a full circle, lips parted, eyes wide. "*Thanael*. Good God."

He jumped onto the massive bed, bouncing and leaning back against the rich purple velvet pillows. "Like it?"

Nora giggled. "It's...breathtaking. Sort of like a royal palace crossed with a French whorehouse. Decadently wonderful."

"Thank you." He wrinkled his nose. "I think." He turned to a small console next to the bed and the lights dimmed. "Come here. By me. I need to show you things. Tell you things."

She dragged her eyes from the heavily embroidered canopy, glanced at the paintings on the walls and sighed. "Okay. But I reserve the right to prowling and look at those landscapes in a bit." She paused. "If you don't mind?"

"Of course not. But there are things we need to talk about. Important things." He settled himself into the pillows. "Oh, and you won't need those." He nodded at her clothes.

"Okay." Nora repeated the word as she reached for the fastenings to her top and dropped it on the floor, following it with her pants and underwear. She jerked her head up and stared at Thanael. "*Hey!*" Her eyes narrowed. "You *made* me do that."

He chuckled. "You wouldn't have if you hadn't wanted to."

Nora snorted. "So." She raised an eyebrow. "I'm the only naked one here?"

"Fair is fair, I guess." Thanael easily slid out of his loose pants and kicked them off the bed. "Better?" His cock was hard, a solid length between his thighs, and it twitched as Nora's gaze went directly to that particular spot.

He stroked himself. "I want you, Nora. Make no mistake. I want you in every way we can imagine." His cock lengthened and flexed. "But we have a few matters to discuss first."

She muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "shit", and Thanael grinned. "C'mon. Sit down. The sooner we get started, the sooner..." He paused as she

clambered up beside him. Her pussy was perfect, gleaming folds of flesh peeking from a neatly trimmed fluff of dark curls. He couldn't resist.

She sighed and squirmed as he cupped her. "...The sooner we can get to the good stuff."

Nora's thighs parted, giving him better access, inviting his caresses. It was a struggle not to lose himself in her immediately. Drown in her moisture, devour that heat he knew was building beneath his palm, and fuck her until she couldn't stand, couldn't remember her own name, could do nothing but come—again and again, at his command.

She whimpered, that little sound of arousal that sent bolts of fiery electricity to his balls.

"Damn it, Nora." He hissed the words as his gums threatened to erupt with a hard white length of fang. "Not yet."

She half-sighed, half-sobbed as he wrenched his hand away. Thanael shivered himself but fought for control, reaching to his console and activating his viewing screen. "Watch, Nora. Just watch, okay?"

The brilliant illumination that appeared over most of the blank wall opposite the bed distracted Nora. "Wow. That is one helluva display." She frowned. "This isn't plasma, either, is it?"

Thanael shook his head, busily searching for the data he wanted.

"What the hell..." She paused, head to one side, gazing at the blurred and flickering index images. "Jesus. This is polymer stuff, isn't it? That TFT array material? Thin film, flexible projection..." Nora frowned. "I didn't understand it when I read about the research. I'm damn sure they haven't gotten this far with it, since it was fairly recent and still in the experimental stage." She turned a raised eyebrow to Thanael.

"Quite." His response was brief. This was not the time to explore the technological differences between Thanael's appliances and those of the planet he was currently calling his home. They had a way to go before they reached that particular point.

Assuming they ever got there at all. The way Nora's scent was befuddling his mind, Thanael wondered if he might just spend the rest of his life with his cock buried inside this woman, and screw the rest of the galaxy.

There were many worse ways to live.

For the first time in more years than Thanael could remember, he settled down to watch his past without feeling lonely.

This time, he was about to share it with a special woman—one who might well be his mate.

Provided she didn't have a heart attack when she realized he was actually an alien, or suffer an aneurism when she discovered she had a bit of alien in her brain as well.

Yeah, they had a way to go yet, but—Thanael's lips curled into a grin—getting there was going to be half the fun.

Chapter Ten

Okay. This is a new experience.

Stark naked, snuggled into luxurious purple velvet bedding, and next to the most gorgeous nude guy—who had a very respectable hard-on going for him along with everything else—Nora was about to watch a movie or something. On a projection unit that had nothing to do with any Japanese electronics company that she knew of, state of the art or not.

Oh, and the handsome guy with the hard-on? He could read her mind.

She sighed. *So what?* Life had gotten a bit humdrum anyway. She'd shoved her personal life to one side for too long. It was break-out time.

Although, thought Nora as she gently stroked the rich velvet of the bed, this was one helluva huge break-out.

The lights in the room dimmed even more, and the picture on the wall resolved itself into a purple landscape where two moons were rising to illuminate the scene.

"This is Raheen." Thanael's voice broke the silence.

"Riiight." Nora chuckled. "If they'd made a movie of any of S.A. Moss' vampire novels, I'd have known it, and been there on opening night. Trust me on this."

Thanael's hand reached for hers, and in a surprisingly nonsexual manner, he held it gently, interlacing their fingers. "Nora, put *your* reality aside. Just for the moment, watch, listen and suspend your comments. Please?"

The intensity in his voice caught her attention, and she stilled, held as much by the touch of his hand as the content of his speech. "Okay."

"This is Raheen." He repeated the words as the moons flooded the sky with light. "This is the Glade of Arraho, where Raheeni meet, fuck, mate and sometimes—die."

Images of people followed—beautiful, strong people, engaging in a variety of bondage and ritualistic activities. Nora watched, wide-eyed, as they took each other, regardless of sex, lashing, whipping, striking, using different toys, different pieces of equipment...

Her breath caught as one striking woman fixed a strap-on dildo around her hips and drove deep into the ass of another restrained woman. The scream tore into Nora's heart and she squeezed Thanael's hand without realizing it.

"Yes, they're violent. Watch." His voice was solemn.

The woman was pounding her hips against her submissive, crying out and pinching her own nipples until they swelled. Her "victim" was moaning, writhing and

begging for release as she was plundered savagely, hands restrained, ankles lashed wide apart, completely at the mercy of the one claiming her.

Nora shuddered.

"Watch, Nora. Watch carefully." Thanael squeezed her hand back, offering what comfort he could.

Nora watched. As the woman's orgasm neared, something white appeared in her mouth—growing, downwards over her red-purple lip.

It was...they were...fangs. Long, gleaming sharp fangs protruded from the mouth of the dominant female. Her lips parted in a fierce snarl of lust as her hands cruelly pinched her own nipples. Full hips drove the strap-on into the ass of her victim, arousing her at the same time.

Her orgasm crept over her, the skin of her buttocks flushed and tightening, her muscles hardening and her cries growing harsher by the second.

"Now, Mayara—*Arraho*." She screamed out the words and threw herself forward, burying the cock as far as it would go in Mayara's ass. Then she struck, her fangs sharp in the light of the moons.

She sank them deeply into the area around the spine of the woman Mayara, who was convulsing beneath her.

And she fed.

Nora's heart stopped as she watched this...this Raheeni...feed and orgasm and feed again, great shivers racking her body as she climaxed and fed on the woman beneath her.

It was terrifyingly erotic, voyeuristic, savage and unbelievable.

And as she watched the picture moved, turning from the feeding and fucking to another woman, wrists lashed high above her head. She too was watching the wild orgasm, and behind her was a shadow—a man, his hands touching the woman's body, caressing, then lashing, striking, pinching and tugging, only to caress once more.

This woman had long silver hair, and a lithe body that moved now in a dance of need, of desire. Strong hands slipped between her thighs and she threw her head back on a gasp.

Nora gasped too. "I *know* her. My God." She blinked and focused on the woman's face, trying to make out the features in the dim light. "She looks like..." She paused, unsure.

Then the woman moved once more and Nora knew. "She looks just like S.A. Moss. *Ohmigod*. It is S.A. Moss. What the fuck?"

Thanael didn't answer. He nodded at the screen. "Watch."

The picture had returned to the two women, and the dominant one had ripped flesh from the spine of her submissive.

Rivulets of dark maroon blood poured over her body, shining traces of life fluids making trails over full breasts.

She licked her lips, cleaning them, and withdrew the strap-on. She smiled, a contented yet malicious grin of satisfaction.

The limbs of the woman Mayara slumped unmoving, and the picture shifted quickly back to the face of the silver-haired Raheeni – or was it S.A. Moss?

Whoever it was, her expression told a story all by itself. Desire, frustration, sexual passion – they were all there in her eyes.

And yet they faded as she stared at the scene before her. Replacing them were tears, a soft glitter of unshed moisture as she swallowed down a sob.

In that second, looking at that face, Nora knew what had happened. The woman Mayara was dead. And it had had a profound effect on this silver-haired beauty.

The picture clouded and darkened, fading away to nothing.

To her amazement, Nora found she was sweating. There was a pool of moisture between her thighs and an ache in her body that probably echoed the one in the body of the Raheeni female.

She gulped down a lump in her throat and turned her head to Thanael. “I don’t understand.”

His gaze met hers, a limpid and glowing blend of blues and lavenders. “I know. But you will. You *must*.”

* * * * *

Thanael let the images fade away before turning to Nora and pulling her close to his body. He knew he had to reach her, not on a mental level, but on a sensible and logical level that would help her past her self-imposed limitations, and open her heart *and* her mind to impossible possibilities.

She had to travel this road by herself, led by him certainly, but reaching the end under her own steam.

He could not use his mental abilities to adjust her thinking. Not if what he suspected was true.

Thanael had helped one Raheeni Mistress make the choice to free herself. At that time they’d both returned to fulfill their destiny on a far-off world.

This time, the Raheeni spirit was going to have to coexist with a human. At least he thought so. He wasn’t quite sure what would happen once Nora recognized the essence he believed was residing within her.

“What you saw were images of Raheen, Nora. Just for a bit, put your rationality to one side, and consider the notion that we are not alone. That there is indeed life elsewhere in the galaxy. Many of your most noted astronomers haven’t been shy about voicing this opinion. The numbers of habitable planets are just too large to ignore.”

Nora nodded slowly, taking in a deep breath. “Okay. Let’s suppose for a moment you’re right. That there is life elsewhere. I can live with that notion. It seems logical.”

She leaned her head against his arm. "I run into a problem when you tell me I've just watched a documentary on it, however."

Thanael chuckled. "God, you're wonderful." He brushed his lips across her head. "It is a stretch, isn't it?"

Nora laughed. "Yep." She relaxed even more, probably unaware that Thanael was feeding her very small mental signals that helped her unwind. He encouraged her mind to set aside all the concerns and issues that regularly plagued humans whether they realized it or not.

He helped her ease away from the mundane levels of her conscious thoughts, and allowed her subconscious to hold sway for once. To open herself to new ideas, new concepts, without the immediate dismissal that would have otherwise occurred.

He absolutely was not going to get distracted by the rosy nipples that lured his tongue, or the fragrance of Nora's pussy—a sweetly delectable spice that made his mouth water. He simply couldn't afford to. Not right now.

Oh fuck it.

Thanael pulled her body onto his lap and gave her breast a quick suckle. *The hell with it.* He was alien, not some kind of superhuman. He had needs. Nora fulfilled them.

They'd get around to the important stuff.

In a minute or two.

She filled his arms and melted against his skin, a wave of warmth and desire that swamped him physically and emotionally.

Relaxed and willing, she opened herself, letting her legs part freely as she slid over his thighs, and her mind welcome him as her hands caressed his face. "Thanael." She breathed his name, the whisper an arousal all its own.

He was lost. It took but a second to turn her, settle her facing him, straddling his thighs and his cock. The hot wetness between her legs seared him, and he gasped as she leaned forward, rubbing her nipples over his chest and nipping his neck gently with her teeth.

He let her play for a moment or two, loving the swift licks of her tongue—flickers of fire against his sensitive skin. He felt her desire burning inside her mind, and slowly—carefully—Thanael allowed tendrils of his own passion to enter her thoughts.

Her body stiffened a little at the unusual intrusion, then eased as their emotions melded, blended into one mass of need and yearning. She moaned as he let her feel his arousal, the hardness of his cock, the ache in his balls and the urgent, feverish drive to sink into her cunt.

He sighed in his turn as he felt her pussy throb, the crackle of sensation that energized her clit and the low thrumming of an orgasm that built deep in her gut. This linking of thoughts allowed them both to share each other's physical responses, and it was unique.

He knew she was ready.

She knew he was about to claim her.

They both embraced each other's souls as Thanael's cock slid into Nora's cunt, plunging home into the boiling darkness with the ease of a well-oiled machine. They were truly mated, and Thanael held still for a second or two, just experiencing the ultimate fuck with his ultimate woman.

Their thoughts were as one, cock to pussy, breast to chest, lips to lips. Words were irrelevant, since the flow of desire was unrestricted by any physical barriers.

In response to his unspoken wish, Nora tightened her inner muscles a little, and as he smiled, Thanael moved his own hips to maximize contact with her clit.

It was a symphony for two, a *pas de deux* without music or choreography. A mating of the minds and thoughts of two beings, a joining that far surpassed any Thanael could remember.

He could feel the electric sparks of Nora's orgasm as it began low at the base of her spine. He pulled her close, sinking deep, deeper than he'd thought possible. He wanted them both to explode with this climax—to share this release in a way she'd never have believed if he'd tried to explain it to her.

His hands cradled her buttocks as hers locked around his neck. Their eyes remained fixed on each other, unblinking and almost unseeing as the emotional whirlwind began, sweeping them up into a realm of sensation and passion.

Nora's fingers clamped down, finding the small irregular knobs that marked the upper end of Thanael's spine.

He gasped at the sensation, and she sucked in a breath as she felt it through their mind link.

The shudders took them, fierce and overwhelming, their hips shaking with the force of their explosions. Thanael's cock erupted hot jets of semen, filling Nora to overflowing with his passion. Her cunt milked him, draining him of every drop and then some.

And at the very final moment of their shared orgasm, Thanael let his shields drop completely.

He leaned forward, held Nora tight and unfurled his wings.

With a slight rustle they encircled both Thanael and Nora, enclosing them in a world of their own. Joined by their orgasm and protected within his wings, Thanael let his emotions seep into Nora's mind. He held back his fangs with difficulty, but released his hold on everything else.

Joy...passion...need...loneliness—all that he'd felt, suffered, experienced as a human—it came out, a greater flood than he'd realized. His feelings gushed freely into the woman still holding tight onto his cock, much as his semen had gushed only seconds before.

Nora sobbed, tightening her thighs around his waist, refusing to let him go. She threw her head back and closed her eyes, accepting all that he gave her, and lightening his sorrows with her acceptance.

Some of her awe seeped through, her astonishment, and—yes—a little fear. He felt her questions, her disbelief, her confusion and yet over and above all those emotions was one of welcome. Of passions to be shared, of warmth to be given and returned tenfold. Thanael heard Nora's voice clearly in his head.

"Yes, Thanael. Yes. Whatever you are, share it with me. Let me in. Give me—all of it."

He wondered if this might be something he'd never dreamed he'd find.

Love.

* * * * *

She opened one eye carefully.

Her eyelids still worked, and she was breathing, but that was about all she could identify as being "normal". The rest of her world had just flipped itself upside down, turned inside out and then run off to hide its head under a galactic pillow.

It was dark, very dark, with just a faint glow coming from a low table beside the bed.

She was cocooned in a snug bundle of soft bedding, warm and comfortable, and lying next to her lover, who was snoring.

And who happened to be a vampire alien dude with wings who could make her come like crazy.

Crazy. Good word. It fit the emotions that roiled through her brain—the passions, the strangeness of it all. The flood of new feelings that now resided in her mind, prime amongst which was a desire for this man...this *being*...whose sensuality and needs so perfectly matched her own. It was an experience that knocked Nora's knees out from under her, shifting her perceptions of herself and her life into something unique and way beyond anything she'd ever imagined.

She shifted her position and gently kneed him in the thigh. He turned over and the noise lessened.

Apparently, Einstein didn't have a lock on galactic or universal constants. No matter what species you were, if you were male and slept on your back, you snored.

Nora suppressed a chuckle.

This was so surreal it couldn't possibly be true. Any minute now she'd wake up with one really huge headache and find herself on the ground in Thanael's garden. She was probably languishing in a massive coma, induced by head trauma.

And yet—*what if?*

What if even a small part of what Thanael had told her was true?

What if Raheen *was* a real planet with real people living on it someplace else in the galaxy?

The light in the room changed slightly, and Nora realized the paintings on the wall were providing their own illumination. In one, the moons were rising, and spilling soft light from the frame.

Curious, she slipped from the bed and stood in front of the picture, watching as the subtle movements within lit the landscape with a soft purple glow. It was certainly unique. Nora had never seen anything like it.

Almost like —

"...Living art."

Strong arms surrounded her and Thanael's words threaded into her mind. She smiled. "Yes."

"Are you all right?" His hold tightened as he tugged her back against his chest and rested his chin on her head.

"I don't know. I'm muddled, confused, and very well fucked. I need to use the nearest bathroom." Nora grinned. "If you tell me it's on the far side of the Horsehead Nebula I may weep and puddle on your carpet."

She felt him chuckle and he steered her across the room to a shadowy alcove with a door on one side. "Here."

She peeked in.

Thanael sighed. "Yes, of *course* we use toilet paper."

Nora narrowed her eyes. "Go away." She went into the bathroom and shut the door on his laugh.

Bastard. Alien, mind-reading, winged, nosy, intrusive bastard.

Nora thought up a few more epithets as she used the rather mundane facility and freshened herself at the sink. Then she remembered how it felt to have him deep inside her and she forgave him for the toilet paper comment.

Things were changing inside her mind. Shifting, readjusting, coming to terms with—if not fully accepting yet—the evidence of her eyes and her brain. Not to mention her heart.

On an impulse, she pinched herself. It hurt. "Ow."

Shit. I am awake after all.

Rubbing the small pain, Nora left the room only to find Thanael waiting for her, hand outstretched. "Come."

Again? She raised an eyebrow and experimented with sending the thought loudly across the space between them.

Thanael blinked and then grinned. "Okay. This newly discovered talent for communication of yours..."

"Yes?" Nora kept an expression of extreme innocence on her face, knowing Thanael was a little out of his depth. He'd never had anyone he could interact with the way he was interacting with her.

It all might be magic and mirrors to Nora, but to Thanael it was the Fourth of July and Christmas all rolled into one. She loved his amused and delighted astonishment.

"Let's try and keep our communications on a verbal level. First off, it's easier for both of us, I think. Secondly, while we're here and isolated, mental communication is acceptable. But if we get used to it and happen to leave this house, you'll find it's most unpleasant when unrestrained." Thanael pursed his mouth. "Like a thousand birds screaming inside your head."

Nora kept her hand locked in his and pulled their naked bodies close. It astounded her how much desire she felt for this man. Or whatever he was. She smiled up at him. "I believe you. Just sensing *your* thoughts is confusing enough. But..." She pressed her breasts into his chest and moved a little, abrading her body with the whorls of soft hair that dappled his body. *Mmmm*.

His cock grew hard and thudded against her. "But?" He tilted his head.

"Hmm?" Nora was seriously distracted.

"You said 'but' and then stopped." Thanael found the vee at the top of her thighs and nestled his hardness into the welcoming space.

"Oh yeah." She sighed contentedly. "But."

Thanael waited patiently.

"But I reserve the right to get inside your mind when this..." Nora nudged his cock with a movement of her hips. "When this big fella is about to make me a happy woman." She rocked sensually against him. "Feeling what you feel when we're – when you're – well, you know what I mean."

Thanael smiled. "Yeah. I know."

Nora chuckled softly against Thanael's skin. "I just realized something."

"What?"

"Here I am with my own private sex god who can read my mind, make me come at the twitch of a mental finger and has wings to boot. It's like I'm in heaven." She paused and glanced up at him. "You sure I didn't die when I hit my head on that statue? That this isn't really Heaven and your name is Gabriel or Michael or something?"

Thanael hugged her. "Nope. I'm no angel and this isn't Heaven. Not the way you mean. And Nora...we have further to go tonight."

"Huh?"

"There is more you need to know. Much more. About me, and most importantly, about you. It's not going to be easy."

Nora groaned. "Couldn't we just fuck the night away like ordinary people?"

Thanael squeezed her. "I wish we could. I wish we *were* ordinary people. But we can't because we're not."

"*You're* not. I am." Nora tugged a little curl with her teeth.

"That, my sweet flower, is actually the most incorrect thing you've said so far this evening."

She felt his chest rise and fall with his breaths, and waited. The tension shimmered around him, rising as she let the silence lie between them.

"You are beginning to understand who I am. Now it's time to find out who *you* are. And maybe...just maybe...it's time to do something I haven't done in too many years. It may be time to feed."

Chapter Eleven

Thanael knew he was trembling as he swept Nora into his arms and strode through the dark house to the doors leading outside.

So much was resting on the next few hours. How would she respond? Would the part buried so deep inside awaken? And what would happen to Nora when it did?

Should he even do this? Was he right to even *consider* waking the soul of a Raheeni Mistress, knowing that there was no corporeal body awaiting its return to Raheen?

And yet...if he did not—well, he could pretty much forget the chance of ever finding another woman who might possibly become his mate. There would be no other heart so ready to accept him, to care for him, and to meet his challenges with spirit and heat.

It had to be fate that had brought Nora to his seminar, or some mystical force at work in the universe that Thanael didn't understand. He *knew* with every iota of his being that she was his match, his mate...the other half of himself. Had he remained on his own planet so long ago things might have been different, but as it was—

He was the last of his kind. Truly he'd changed to the point he was no longer sure exactly what his kind *was*. But he had survived.

Alone.

And if all went well, tonight that would end. Tonight another species would be created—a blend of human and Raheeni that had been unknown up to the present time.

Thanael's lips curled wryly as he stepped outside into the soft night air. *If all went well*. That would be the kicker, right there.

"Why are you worrying?" Nora's voice was gentle. "I can take whatever you show me, you know. Whether I'll believe it or not is another matter, but don't doubt my abilities to at least look impartially at...things. I'm trained to observe, Thanael. Not to judge."

He looked at her, her face a white blur in the darkness of the night. "Will you submit to me, Nora?"

"Huh?"

"Submit. Will you surrender your body and your soul to me? Trust me enough to grant me total control over you? Let me take you to a place where any chains that hold your spirit captive will shatter. A place where there is joy and pain and pleasure beyond imagining. A place where..." His voice tapered off.

"Where what, Thanael?"

The silence of the night surrounded them. Not a creature moved or leaf rustled—the world around them held its breath.

"Where she who is within you can be released."

Nora was still within his arms. He could hear her breathe, but deliberately held his mind apart from hers. He didn't want to know her reactions to his outrageous statement. Not yet, anyway.

She stirred and he set her down on her feet, loving the slide of her silky skin as her body slithered to the ground.

She turned, resting her back against the planes of his chest, and tugging his arms around her, folding her own within them. "Tell me." Her head tipped back as she stared at the night sky. "Tell me, Thanael. Tell me of these far-off worlds and people. And tell me why you think there's something inside me." She paused and drew a breath. "And perhaps it will explain why I feel as if a question was just answered. One I never asked."

She half turned. "And yes. I will submit to you. Readily. Do with me as you will. Take me to these places where passion and pleasure are doubled by pain. I know they exist, Thanael. I have always known. Somewhere, somehow, that knowledge has been in my head, but I've ignored it, hidden it, suppressed it." She huffed out an amused chuckle. "Too shocking, I guess."

Thanael swallowed. "I sensed something like that."

"You did?" She seemed unsurprised. "I didn't really pay much attention. I found my vampire novels could take me places I wanted to be. Places I never reached in bed with a man." She squirmed a little. "Sorry. I probably shouldn't go there."

Thanael waved it away. "It's of no consequence. Not to us. Not now." He hugged her then released her. "Are you familiar with the submissive resting position?"

He saw her eyes close then open again, dark pinpoints of reflected starlight. "Er..."

"Kneel, Nora. Next to me please." Thanael settled himself on the grass that had been precisely planted at various points amongst the marble slabs in the statue garden.

She obeyed, thrilling Thanael to his toes. He swallowed, trying to keep calm. "Rest back on your heels and spread your knees wide apart." He observed her carefully, the sounds of her body as it arranged itself a sweet music to his ears. "Now let your hands lie, palms down, on the tops of your thighs. Good."

He ignored the little ache that had begun to throb in his mouth. His fangs were hungry for her. But they would not be satisfied quite yet.

"Ordinarily, you would be looking down. But tonight I need you to look up. Up at the stars. While I tell you a story and show you images of Raheen. I will need to be in your mind to do this, Nora. Is that okay with you?"

"Yes." The word was firm, resolute, and Thanael's body responded with as much pleasure as his brain. His cock was already hard, throbbing and ready for what was to come between them.

"Very well. Look at the universe, Nora. It is spread out before you, a small showcase of wonders unimagined."

Thanael let his mind bloom open, loving the fact he could drop any pretense of control now. That Nora was ready to accept his thoughts and share her own.

He slipped into her head and opened images of Raheen to her visual cortex.

"Raheen is a savage planet, ruled by a Master and a Mistress. Long ago, the Ancients decided to protect those rulers. They gave the Masters great strength and wisdom, and the Mistresses..." Thanael paused, seeking the right words.

"They protected them too, didn't they?" Nora whispered the question aloud.

"Yes they did. A Raheeni woman who had the right blend of personality characteristics to be a Mistress was separated, and her spirit was 'cleaved' from her body." Thanael shook his head a little. "It's the only way I can describe it. Her body remained in a special crypt, resting, not dead, but not alive. Her spirit was transferred away from Raheen, to other places in the galaxy. These locations were known to only a few privileged Raheeni, usually women who would become the closest advisors and friends to the Mistress when she was returned to herself."

Nora was silent and still, absorbing this information. He could sense her thoughts whirring rapidly around the images he was showing her, scenes of darkened rooms, women lying quiescent under soft lavender lights, and a map—tiny trails of sparkling glitter, leading away from Raheen and out into the stars.

Her mind slowed, and one thought emerged. "S.A. Moss. She was a Mistress of Raheen, wasn't she?"

"Her body contained the spirit of a Mistress. Yes." Thanael showed Nora what he remembered of the current Master and Mistress of Raheen. Noul Keirat and his wife, Suliana.

"They are happy." Nora's voice sounded pleased.

"Indeed. Suliana is...unique." Thanael allowed himself the pleasure of looking at her image once more. "I had the honor of being her servant. She's special, Nora. Her humanity, the parts of S.A. Moss she brought with her, have made her so much more than a simple Mistress. She saved Raheen."

From me. The thought was immediately squashed, and Thanael covered it rapidly with other visions—Raheen at night, the two moons, the Glade of Arraho...

As soon as those thoughts crossed his mind and entered Nora's, the atmosphere between them changed.

Nora straightened, and Thanael sensed the skin of her thighs heat beneath her palms. *Arraho* was the culmination of the Raheeni sexual experience. And it was going to take *Arraho* to awaken the sleeping spirit within Nora.

Silently, Thanael reached for Nora's hands and stretched them out to either side of her body. They bridged the distance between two statues, and the convenient rings that were part of the marble plinths.

With a smooth movement, he secured her wrists to the dangling cuffs, cool metallic bangles that encircled her completely and locked tight.

She tensed, testing the strength of her bonds. He felt her arousal build as she discovered how helpless she was.

"You are mine, my Nora. Mine to do with as I will." He tugged on her arms, raising the rings from the marble to the top of a protruding block. These statues had been specifically designed to be part of *Arraho*, but there was no need for Nora to know that. Her mind was working overtime as it was.

She was upright on her knees now, spine erect, arms held taut between the figures in his erotic garden of marble pleasures.

A compartment slid open and Thanael reached inside.

His blood heated as he flexed his wrist and grasped the object hidden within.

He shared Nora's scream of anguish as he brought the whip down in the first lash across her buttocks.

And he shared her stinging agony of pleasure as he leaned forward and licked the wounds closed.

* * * * *

The blood roared in Nora's ears as the first blow caught her fair and square across her ass. She was excited, aroused, throbbing with the pain and yet eager for more.

The feel of Thanael's tongue lavng the weal was erotically stimulating, and she knew her cunt was already weeping tears of anticipation.

"We heal this way, Nora. We secrete liquids that wipe away the wounds. We wouldn't survive otherwise." His hands gentled her, finding her breasts and cupping them, weighing them as he sought their tips. "Are you all right?"

"Oh yes." She swallowed down a slight sob. "More than all right, Thanael. Don't stop."

And she was telling the truth. This experience was everything Nora had ever imagined, fantasized about, dreamed of in secretly private moments alone. She would never, not in a million years, have actively sought this sensual torture. But here she was, loving it, wanting more, wanting to go—wherever Thanael could take her.

Her arms were secured, she was totally in his control and her cunt ached to be filled with him. She was bared, physically and mentally and she felt tendrils of his arousal creep into her brain, adding to her own levels of desire.

His fingers found her nipples, pinching them, gently at first then harder.

"You like this?" He tugged them, extending them out from her breasts, making her suck in a breath.

She nodded. "Yessss..."

"Good." Something cold and hard touched her and within seconds each nipple was held erect by a clamp device, tight and securely latched. Nora could feel the brush and hear the chink of a chain that swung across her body, obviously attached now to her nipples.

Thanael reached around her and pulled it, distending her breasts and making her cry out. "You're mine, Nora. Do you realize that?"

He shielded the strongest of his thoughts, but she sensed the heat in him. "Yes. I realize that. I'm yours." Her nipples burned with a savagely searing pulse that shook her from her toes to her eyelids, and settled in her pussy.

Once again the thong fell across her buttocks, making her jump and choke down a cry. She could feel the skin split and the trails of her own blood as it trickled down her already supersensitive skin.

And once again Thanael's tongue was there, licking, flickering over the slashing wound, sealing it closed with loving touches.

"Mmm." His lips sucked on one buttock, teeth nipping, biting, tasting and healing. "You taste hot. Sweet. A tangy flavor that entrances me, feeds my hunger." He smacked her ass this time, a hard swipe with the palm of his hand.

The pain was different, a throbbing sting that brought the blood rushing to the surrounding area, spreading it all the way to her pussy and her cunt. He knew it, too, since she could almost feel his smile. "Good. Very good."

More blows followed, some hard—making her sway against her bonds and cry out—while others were light love pats, followed by a delicately smooth caress. Her ass was on fire, the least movement in the air around it a stimulation of major proportions. Thanael's punishment had increased her arousal and her sensitivity, driving her higher along a road she'd only dreamed about.

Nora was lost. Lost in Thanael's domination, longing for his possession, and eagerly ready for whatever came next. The world could have collapsed around her and she would not have known or cared. Aliens, humans—distant planets, all these things faded from her mind as she responded to Thanael.

She wanted him. More than the next breath, more than life itself, she wanted Thanael. And with that want, an ache began—deep in her cunt, spreading outwards, traveling up to her breasts and farther to her throat, landing finally in her mouth.

She wanted—what? His kisses? His tongue plundering her? His cock? Hard and velvet and thrusting across her lips to fill her emptiness?

Any and all would do, but there was something else—something more Nora had yet to identify.

For a brief moment she sensed a thrill of excitement that wasn't hers—*Thanael*. His thoughts flared into her head, his arousal, his heat, his anticipation...they blended with her own into a sort of private mental orgasm that rocked her back against the chains that bound her.

"*Thanael...*" She whispered his name, reveling in his passions as they merged with her own.

"Yes, my Nora." He was in front of her now, pulling on the nipple clamps, bringing hot tears of exquisite pain from her eyes. He kept the clamps taut as his hand reached between her legs, seeking and finding the hot juices that soaked her thighs and her pussy.

His fingers parted her folds, finding the hard tender button of flesh that screamed its need through her arteries, her veins, through every nerve ending in her body.

He flicked it with a fingernail, roughly, cruelly, tugging on her nipple clamps as he did so.

A scream of pure sensual agony erupted from Nora's throat and she tasted the hot coppery flavor of her own blood on her lips.

Then his mouth was there, pushing against hers, forcing her teeth apart and driving his tongue deep inside. He licked her clean and nipped her lower lip, all the while keeping her nipples burning and her clit pinched hard between his thumb and forefinger.

Nora wanted to scream again but his mouth stopped her cry. She wanted to writhe away from the torture as much as she wanted to force his hand deep into her cunt. She wanted him to keep her nipples stretched to their limit, and yet she wanted them released from their bindings.

And as she surrendered to these desperate wants, a new ache began, a fiercely burning ache in her mouth, just above her teeth. She moaned and wrenched her mouth from Thanael's. "Oh God, it *hurts...*" She choked out the words.

Thanael's mind linked with hers immediately, and his presence soothed the savage ache in her gums. "I know." He spoke quietly to her, even as his mind withdrew. "Let it come, Nora. Release that pain. Be free."

His hands slid to her buttocks and he lifted her a little, positioning his cock between her legs, ready to take her.

She was spread so wide, her thighs stretched to their limits as she straddled Thanael's body. She felt the tension in her bonds slacken a little and she sagged—right down onto a hard length poised beneath her pussy.

Once again she moaned. "I need you, Thanael. Fuck me. Please fuck me."

"I will. When you're ready."

Nora sensed the tremor that shook Thanael. Her own body was shuddering, her juices soaking him, her breasts swollen and burning and her cunt desperately crying out for his cock, his come, his penetration—anything to ease her need. Anything to finish this incredible ride into erotic and savage madness.

It was all that Nora had ever wished for—and more. She wanted to linger for a moment, suspended in a glittering fog of aroused sexual insanity. Buffeted by a harshly

and painfully exquisite whirlwind of punishment, dominated by a man who could sense her every unfulfilled desire.

But she couldn't. She knew she was going to come within seconds—there was no way she could hold back the orgasm that was beginning to shimmer at the base of her spine.

"It's happening, Nora." Thanael's face neared hers, and as she opened her eyes, Nora found herself staring at two shards of whiteness lying against his lower lip. Two glittering stilettos of teeth, dripping liquids down onto his chin and his chest. "*Thanael.*"

"I need to feed from you, Nora. I need to take *Arraho.*"

His words were strange, hissed around his fangs, but Nora felt his overwhelming desire for her, and a hint of the incredible passion they would share.

And as she explored these feelings, she became aware that her own mouth was changing, that something was moving—growing—lengthening from that sore place beneath her upper lip and extending outwards, downwards—*oh my God.*

"Let it free, Nora. Please..." Thanael's voice and mind echoed the same words as he lifted her a little and poised his cock at the boiling entrance to her cunt. "*Let go.*"

Nora blinked, her mind struggling to cling to some kind of rationality, and yet understanding more and more of what Thanael was asking, what he needed.

What she needed too.

Her—*fangs*—felt strange, yet natural, and the hunger that went with them rose up inside Nora like a flooding tide of desire. A new awareness danced into her brain, stretching, laughing, taking shape and form and twining around everything that was Nora until there were no borders, no distinctions between the dual realities.

"Yes..." She threw her head back and shrieked at Thanael, finally accepting all that was inside her. "I surrender. I surrender *Arraho.*"

With a move that was mutual, Nora thrust her body down onto Thanael's cock at the instant he thrust upwards, and they were joined, filled with each other. His hardness stretched her impossibly, his heat seared her cunt, and her clit pulsed as he thrust and thrust again into her.

"Take *Arraho*, Thanael..." Nora screamed out the words.

Thanael ripped off her nipple clamps, the pain sending her over the edge into a cascading orgasm that began as small tremors and threatened to explode into impossible spasms of pleasure.

She fought him, writhing on top of him, demanding that he plunge into her with every ounce of strength he possessed. She may have submitted to him, but she was an equal partner in their climax, their release.

The earthquake grew and rose through her muscles, her arteries, her veins, a heated pounding of blood and spasms that made her lungs seize on a breath and stilled the choking shriek of pleasure that filled her throat.

"*I take Arraho—*"

Nora had no idea whether Thanael had spoken the words aloud or whether they were in her mind. She was flying, soaring toward some brilliant vortex of sensual completion. She only needed *one thing*...

The newly awakened consciousness inside Nora Carlisle screamed out its wants, its desires and became part of her.

She curled back her lips in a grimace of sensual fever, and let the heat of her blood drive everything else from her brain.

She knew now what to do, and how to fly above anything she'd ever imagined could exist.

She knew how to share *Arraho*—to give to Thanael as she took from him.

She felt her fangs as they hungered and she surrendered to that hunger. For the first time in her life, Nora did what she'd yearned to do for so many years. She indulged that hidden desire, followed her shuttered and darkened instincts, and went deliberately into a place where human limitations had no domain.

In tandem with Thanael, she lowered her head to his shoulder as he lowered his to her breast.

And in tandem with Thanael, she bared her fangs—

And fed.

Chapter Twelve

The soul that was Thanael Tanner soared.

With the first squeeze of Nora's cunt around his cock, his mind flew, and as he filled her heat his heart thudded and pounded out a rhythm that drove his hips while they thrust his swollen length to its limits within her body.

It was the ultimate fuck, and as her mind opened to embrace the sensation, Thanael's arousal exploded. For the first time in his recent memory, *Arraho* was within reach. He was no longer alone.

Nora's fangs slid free and he soothed that savage pain, merging into her thoughts as slickly as his cock had slid into her body. The Raheeni spirit inside her awoke as Thanael watched, a ravenous and needy light flickering faintly at first, then bursting into flame as Nora orgasmed.

It was a consummation of the body and the mind, a blending of thoughts and souls into a seething, writhing mass of sexual desire and hunger.

His fangs were aching and dripping pink-tinged tears, liquids that would seal the wounds he was about to create. His whole being yearned for Nora, and that yearning found a reflection inside her thoughts. A yearning was growing there, too, as her orgasm rippled and increased in intensity.

And along with the yearning was the knowledge, the Raheeni part of her that was settling in, finding its place within her psyche and expanding to fill those empty parts, answering those questions that had troubled her.

Her fangs lengthened, newly sharp and blazing white against her lip. She lowered her jaw, experimenting, breathing rapidly as her body shook with the force of the climax sweeping over her.

"Take *Arraho*, Thanael..." It was a scream he heard with his soul and a sound that changed his existence.

His orgasm thundered in his ears as he ripped off her nipple clamps and felt the pain sear her breasts. He shared each spasm, experienced each agonizing second as the burn of her flesh pushed her release higher into madness.

Thanael's joy soared as his mate offered herself, submission complete. "I take *Arraho*..." The words were in his mind—he did not know if they were on his lips as well. He simply knew she'd heard.

They mirrored each other's movements, and as Thanael's cock erupted inside Nora's frantically grasping cunt, he did what he'd needed to do for so long.

He sank his fangs into his woman's breast and fed even as she mimicked him and found his flesh with her teeth.

The taste of her blood as it poured through his body chilled him with a liquid fire that crushed his balls as they pumped his come into her.

He drank, thirsty for every drop, aware she was suckling him frantically, seeking to fulfill her own thirst.

She drained him with her fangs much as her cunt drained his cock, a savage feeding that thrilled him, launched him from his reality into something—someplace—else, and bonded him to her more strongly than he could have imagined.

He felt lightheaded, on fire and about to disintegrate into a million shards of icy burning heat.

As his orgasm finally eased, he peeled his mouth from her body and gently slipped his hand between his own flesh and her fangs. She didn't want to let go, but he let his mind soothe her, coax her back from the madness, and savor what they had just shared.

She moaned, her tongue already seeking to spread the healing juices over his ripped and bloody flesh.

This licking, this nurturing affection—with Nora it was a sexual dance all its own, and Thanael was amazed to feel his cock stir within the overflowing passage between her thighs.

He sighed in his turn, laving her skin, licking her whole, all the while sensing the heat of her cunt as it sent shimmers of pleasure into his softening cock. She too seemed aware of him, as her hips still moved a little on his lap in a gently stroking inner caress.

He smiled and reached between them, tenderly seeking her pussy, the swollen lips so sensitive she whimpered at the merest brush of his fingers.

He cupped her—a light touch, no more—but it was sufficient to renew her spasms, her clit hard and protruding against his palm as the mixture of juices from her body soaked their skin. She moaned again, relaxing into the aftershocks, riding them down from her peak, letting colors and pleasure swirl through her thoughts in an uncontrolled spiral of delight.

Thanael shared it, riding along beside her, the soft ripples of her ebbing passion flooding his exhausted mind much as her blood had flooded his soul.

It was an *Arraho* unlike any he'd ever experienced, and Thanael realized that this was the difference—this was taking *Arraho* with one's *mate*. A merging of so much more than bodies, an arousal so much deeper than the pain stimulating it.

He sighed, unable to shape a thought for a few seconds, content to rest against Nora's body, to savor the brilliance of loving his mate.

She whimpered, and he realized she was still restrained. It took a mere moment to free her and let her rest her arms on his shoulders. He rubbed her neck and her spine, easing her, relaxing her muscles, massaging her with a gentle touch of mind and body.

She slumped into him, and he smiled, loving the limp, sticky armful of woman panting against his chest.

"Ah, my Nora..." Thanael breathed the words, the taste of her in his mouth, his heart, his soul. Her scent was mingled with his, heated sex and tangy blood merging into the sweetest perfume, a scent uniquely theirs.

She made a slight sound, and Thanael felt her exhaustion drop over both of them like a cloak.

Awkwardly he stood, keeping Nora snugly in his arms, and grimacing as his legs straightened and took the extra weight of his burden. They both needed rest, sleep, and then probably a lot more fucking. He grinned as he walked into the house. He'd never get tired of *that* particular activity.

His cock bobbed in agreement, stirring in the most delightful way at the mere thought of repeating this pleasure all over again.

Nora was still quiet, content perhaps to lie against his heart. She was truly part of him now, and he was part of her. That could never be undone.

And that was exactly the way Thanael wanted it.

His flush of joy was shattered as Nora began to stir in his arms, pushing herself away and uttering a harsh groan.

Carefully he lowered her to the huge bed, frowning as she cried out. "Oh God, it *hurts*, Thanael. What have you done to me?"

His mind sought hers, finding only a white sheet of blinding pain slipping over her consciousness. It scared the shit out of Thanael. It shouldn't be happening.

Nora was sobbing and folding herself into a small ball, turning away from him as she trembled. "*My back*. I'm dying here. You've killed me, you bastard."

The words were whispered into the room and shrieked into his brain. Thanael moved onto the bed and reached for her, but his hand stopped halfway between them.

To Thanael's horror, Nora's spine was beginning to move beneath the silky skin of her back. Like some weird cinematic special effect, ripples distorted her flesh, shimmering up and down from her buttocks to the back of her neck.

He caught his breath on a gasp as the skin parted and two wet, weak and shaking wings flopped free onto the purple velvet quilt.

Nora screamed and he felt the blackness drop over her mind as she passed out, leaving him bereft, alone and terrified.

What *had* he done?

* * * * *

"Great Ray of Light, what have you *done*?"

The voice echoing his thoughts shocked Thanael rigid and he turned to see a woman looking at him with disgust on her face. His jaw dropped. "*Adella. Mother.*"

She blinked. "You are no son of mine, although you pretended to be. I don't know whether to kill you now, or see if we can untangle this mess, *then* kill you."

"I...I..." Words deserted him. He could only stare at the woman who had mothered him on Raheen, not knowing the body of the son she tended was occupied by something *else* – him. "Er...how's Talot?"

The older woman sighed, then pushed him away from Nora, still an unconscious form on the bed. "He's fine. Lacking some of your spark, if you must know." She leaned over and pressed a hand to Nora's neck, seeking her pulse. "I suppose I should be grateful to you for not killing him when you left, but seeing as how you nearly killed all of *us*..."

"How did you know?" Thanael sat quietly, watching Adella as she tended to Nora, touching her, pressing here and there, leaning in and listening to her heart and her body.

"In a minute. First things first." She turned Nora comfortably onto her stomach, letting the wings stretch and dry across her naked back. "Will they retract?"

"Huh?" Thanael blinked and jerked his thoughts back to the present. "Oh—er—I suppose so. They do for me. Sometimes I have to do it consciously, but most often I just forget they're there and they're gone."

"Good." She patted Nora's naked backside, then carefully covered what she could of her body without disturbing the wings. "Then we will let her rest for now. I can't feel any internal damage, and her *Arraho* wounds are healed."

Thanael blushed then cleared his throat. "What the hell are *you* doing here, Adella?"

She settled herself next to Nora and stared at him. "Did you think nobody would notice when a Mistress' soul arose from its slumber?"

He swallowed. "I didn't know. Honestly. I wasn't sure until I touched Nora's mind that there was part of a Mistress in her. Even then..." His voice tapered off beneath the ferocity of Adella's gaze.

"Our Mistresses are cherished, you...you...whatever you are..." She frowned. "What *is* your name these days?"

"Nathanael Tanner. Thanael, please."

Adella snorted. "Close enough. Anyway, I keep an eye on things in the crypts, so I wasn't likely to miss the fact that one of our sleeping Mistresses had suddenly turned to dust." She looked once more at Nora. "I simply followed her spirit to find out what had happened."

"And we have been here, to Earth, once before." Thanael risked a glance at her. "For Mistress Suliana."

"Yes we have. *Then* I thought you were my son. Now—well, now I know better." She turned away. "It didn't take too long for our scientists to finish working out all the details. Most of Raheen believes the plague was the work of a jealous woman. Only a few of us know the truth. That an alien obsessed with eliminating our species took over the body of my son and tried to kill us all." She shook her head. "The real Talot was the

key. He kept remembering odd things..." Adella eyed Thanael carefully. "Enough things to convince me he had shared his body with someone—*something* else."

Thanael slumped. "Adella—"

She waved a hand. "It's past. I have also come to believe that you are not a malevolent spirit, Thanael-whoever-you-are. You had enough chances to murder us one by one. You didn't. You tried to extract a global revenge on our race and you failed. Instead of a massacre, you left quietly, fleeing via the only exit from our world you could manage. You left the body and soul of my son intact." She shrugged. "Not the actions of a vicious killer, but a confused and lonely being."

"One day perhaps I can tell you about it." Thanael met Adella's gaze with his own, trying to hide the pain her words had brought.

"One day perhaps I can listen. But right now we have a more immediate problem." She touched Nora's still body. "You have awoken a Raheeni Mistress' soul only to force it to inhabit a human host instead of her own Raheeni body. This host. Is she strong?"

Thanael thought of Nora and her amazing intellect, her humor, her warmth— "Yes. She is strong. Very strong."

"Good. Then that's in her favor." Adella gingerly ran one finger over the wings that had dried to a soft haze over Nora's back. "But you fed from her and she fed from you, Thanael. I'm sure it was a magnificent *Arraho*, but..."

"But *what*?" The cry was wrenched from Thanael's throat.

"She fed from *you*. Don't you understand?"

Thanael shook his head. "No. I don't." He rested his palm on Nora's calf, feeling the warmth through the quilt. At least she was still alive.

"Thanael. Your stay in Talot's body gave you the instincts and some of the physiology of a Raheeni. You have adopted a human form, so you have some human physiology too. Nora here shares both those things." Adella's expression firmed as she drew in a breath. "But beneath *that*, Thanael—*what are you*?"

Thanael's world rocked with Adella's words and his throat closed shut.

"What are you? What kind of alien chemicals still run through your blood? What sort of regenerative chromosomes caused *this*?" She waved her hands at Nora's wings. "Did you think she could feed from you without any effects at all?"

Thanael gulped. "I *never* thought..."

"Of course you didn't. Not with your *brains* anyway."

Adella's attention hurriedly shifted to Nora and Thanael moved closer to them both. Nora was moving. Or at least her wings were moving.

With small trembling motions, they were beginning to fold in on themselves, retract into her spine, retreat from the air and the gaze of the two people on the bed. Finally, they were gone, their presence a mere ripple of prominent bones on Nora's spine. Nothing noticeable to the average human eye.

Thanael sighed and sagged against the bedpost. "Do you think she'll wake now?"

"I don't know. I have no experience with this kind of phenomena." Adella bit her lip. "I fully expected to arrive and find this host dead. We're way out of my field of expertise, Thanael. I can't help you. And I can't stay, either. I must return to Raheen before I am missed. There are explanations to be made. A Mistress has never passed during her slumber before."

Thanael's throat moved as he swallowed down a rather large lump. Adella had truly taken the place of a mother for him, and he'd come to feel very strongly toward her. "I shall miss you."

She looked at him. "I miss you already. I love Talot, but you did give him a charm that he never got from his father *or* me." She smiled then, a warmth radiating from her that eased Thanael's bittersweet ache. "I doubt I'll be back. To my knowledge there are no more Raheeni spirits located here. Once I return, this portal will close."

Thanael nodded. "I understand." And he did. Once Adella left, he would be unable to return to Raheen using the locator device attached to the souls of the Mistresses. He had broken the link by awakening the one inside Nora.

He would be quite alone.

"Any last suggestions?" He moved to hold Nora as she slept on.

Adella pursed her lips. "Let her rest, at least for a while. If she doesn't rouse within a few hours, you may need to try and touch her mind. Call her to you the way we would call our Mistresses. I don't know, Thanael. But I do believe this was destined... I believe she is meant for you, not us."

She stood, and stepped away from the bed. "She will be your responsibility now. Love her, take care of her. Fulfill both your destinies, Thanael. Be what you *know* you can be. Let her strength combine with yours and push you both beyond your limits."

Adella's voice began to fade and Thanael found his hand outstretched toward her in a gesture of delay and farewell. "Wait, Adella..." So much remained unsaid between them.

"Come to Raheen one day if you can. We welcome new friends now that we are learning how to distinguish them from invaders." Adella's body grew faint and transparent, tiny pinpricks of light dazzling Thanael as he watched.

"Take care of yourself, my one-time son. May the Great Ray of Light shine on you and your mate..."

And Adella was gone.

* * * * *

A soft mist enveloped her. It was thick, cloying—making it difficult to move—so she just sat there, accepting her immobility. It was a little frightening, but she knew she was not alone.

There was another with her, another being, another essence, another consciousness, separate from hers, but as familiar to her as the back of her hand.

It was her human host.

They were together as they had been for longer than either could recall. Separate and not separate, apart yet joined.

Something had happened, though, something out of the ordinary. A cataclysm that had driven both of them into a state of recognition—awareness, possibly—arousal, certainly.

She had awaited the call. The flood of sexual desire and need that would pull her away from this resting place, from this slumber, and restore her to her world. But it had come from nearer than expected. And she had awoken, but not to find herself complete and alone.

She was still a part of something, someone. Still sharing thoughts. Although the separation was blurring now, the fog thickening around her. She was sinking, and expanding at the same time.

How could that be?

Wonderful colors appeared, gleaming around her as she swayed this way and that, buffeted by images, visions, ideas and concepts not her own. And she shared back, opening up that which she'd held so closely, allowing her own knowledge to flow freely like a purple river into the maelstrom of brilliance surrounding her.

She felt a touch, a delicate brush of another mind. There was warmth and passion there, strength and resolve too. It was seductive, appealing, and it lured her like a moth into a flame.

It was a place where she could exist, with emotions that were hers, needs that she shared, and desires she could fulfill. There were things she did not understand, but they were only things she had yet to learn.

She smiled into the fog.

With a silent shudder of happiness, the soul of a Raheeni Mistress settled in to its new home.

Nora Carlisle.

Chapter Thirteen

Thanael paced.

It was unlike him to surrender to such a human trait, but nevertheless he paced. Nora still slept, unmoving, on her stomach as Adella had left her.

He checked her every now and again, just to make sure her chest still rose and fell with her breaths and the little pulse in her neck still beat strongly. Both continued to function as normal, but still she did not awaken.

He parted the heavy curtains and let the sun shine in through the high windows, hoping that natural light might stimulate her. He turned on his sound system, allowing quietly delicate music to steal into the silence of their room.

He even made coffee. A last resort, but one designed to appeal to her sensory receptors.

And all the while he reproached himself, argued with himself, discussed the entire situation with himself and got heartily bored with his own conversation.

His mate was lying motionless in his bed. She should be writhing on top of him in a fury of frenzied lust. He should be deep inside her, emptying his balls over and over again. She should be screaming for him, feeding on him, bleeding for him and draining him dry.

He got angry.

Then he looked at her and his anger evaporated as he wondered what the hell he'd done to her—this woman who had walked unsuspectingly into his life as part of her job.

Finally, as the darkening sky marked the end of a very long day, Thanael knew it was time. Time to go get her. She wasn't going to come to him by herself.

He stripped and slid into the bed next to Nora, gently easing her into his arms. She was limp and cool, unresisting as he settled her.

He lay back, head on the pillow and closed his eyes, letting her scent flood him, her presence flow over him like a blanket and her thoughts—*ahh*, her thoughts.

Slowly, gently, Thanael's consciousness entered Nora's.

And there he found her. She was sitting, curled up, in a long white gown, staring off into the sun as it set over some magnificent mountains.

"Hello."

She turned and smiled at him. "Hello. Want to come and watch the sunset with me?"

"Yes please. I missed you today. I was lonely." He sat down next to her, realizing he was now the proud possessor of a very elegant cloak, a crisp white shirt and breeches. Not to mention boots.

She lowered her head and turned away from him "I know. I felt you."

"Are you all right?"

She sighed. "I'm frightened. I hurt. I can't understand so many things, and those I do understand seem quite impossible. So I thought I'd stay here for a bit and sort stuff out." She glanced at him and blushed. "I'm glad you came though."

"Me too." He looked down at his clothes. "Interesting wardrobe you've given me."

Nora laughed merrily. "Aha. That's because you are my vampire lover. All vampires dress like that. And now that the sun has set, you are free to emerge from your casket and prey upon unwary maidens." She giggled. "Like me."

"Hmm." Thanael waggled his eyebrows threateningly. "A tasty maiden indeed. Do I get to take your virginity?"

Nora snorted. "We're not taking the maiden thing *that* far, thank you." She rose. "You simply put me under your spell and do unspeakably wonderful things to me that of course I would never permit under ordinary circumstances."

"Of course." Thanael rose too. "But this might get in the way." He reached for the shoulder of her gown and tugged, grinning as it fell dramatically apart as if ripped by a savage hand. "I like your designer."

Nora gasped and clutched the remnants to her breasts. "How...how dare you, Lord Chauncy."

Thanael, tickled to death at being cast in the role of vampire seducer, and fascinated by this playful side to his Nora, entered into the spirit of things. "I dare, my sweet Hydrangea. You will be mine 'ere this night ends."

Nora raised an eyebrow. "Hydrangea?"

"Hey. I'm trying. Give me some credit, okay?"

"I suppose. But *Hydrangea*?"

"You would have preferred Pussy Willow?"

Nora bit back a laugh. "You made your point. Now." She pulled herself back into her role. "You must escort me back to my uncle's estate, my Lord, since it was your carriage that cast a wheel on the way home from the ridotto."

"Never can trust these foreign coaches, can you? I should've insisted on a domestic brand." He followed Nora as she started to walk through the trees that shaded the hillside from the last of the sunlight. "Er...what's a ridotto? And...where's your chaperone?"

"A dance, you twit. And as for Mrs. Whiteside, she is unwell, my Lord. That is why we are most improperly walking alone together." Nora paused. "Into this very dark forest." She paused again. "Where there is nobody to see us or hear a maiden scream."

"I get it." Thanael grinned into the rapidly darkening shadows. "Your gown is falling away from you, my dear Hydrangea. I am concerned you might trip and fall. Here." He tossed his cloak aside and stripped off his shirt. "Take this to cover your luscious nakedness."

With a dip of her head, Nora let her gown drop and accepted his shirt, flashing him her pussy as she slipped the folds of fabric over her head.

"My dear Hydrangea, what beautiful breasts you have."

"Wrong story. That one has a wolf in it. I have a canine allergy. You shape shift into a wolf and you're *sooo* out of my fantasy."

"Sorry. Let's try again. My dear Hydrangea. I find myself strangely affected by the moonlight on your ravishing body." He paused. "May I ravish it?"

Nora sighed. "You don't *ask*, idiot. You just *take*."

"I see." He moved to within inches of her, watching her eyes widen with excitement. "You mean like *this*?"

With flair and style, Thanael swept Nora into his arms, recreating the best "movie star" embrace he could recall from his extensive research into human cultural behavior. He felt her shiver of delight as he kissed her with lots of tongue, and lots of heavy breathing, body squishing and all the other charming activities that represented passion to humans. Human *women* especially.

He kept his thoughts in check, quiescent, content to just be with Nora, even though it was in some hidden corner of her mind.

He understood why she was sheltering here. He understood this little fantasy game of hers, and he respected her for seeking her own answers, her own solutions to the impossibly incomprehensible things he'd shown her and shared with her.

He wondered if she'd accepted the spirit of the Raheeni Mistress yet, and then knew somehow that she had. The two had coexisted long enough that absorption, joining, melding would not pose a difficulty. It was the element *he* had introduced that scared and hurt Nora.

For that, he would probably never forgive himself.

In the meantime, he kissed her, pouring his emotions into his lips and stealing her breath until she drew back, dizzily pressing a hand to her forehead.

"My Lord—I am in your thrall." She let her head fall back against his hand and sagged weakly against him. "Your kisses render me powerless to resist your passion." One eye opened slightly and peeked at him.

He nodded. "*I got it.*" He whispered low and watched her grin come and go across her lips.

She was creating a scenario where she could surrender, lose control, do all the things she'd wanted to do in her everyday life but had not been able to. Where she could let the vampire wanton free, and there would be no conflict between what that woman did and what Nora knew was plausible.

It was a resolution—a coming to terms with what she wanted and who she was. A chance to explore the new dynamics of her personality, and set aside her ever-present fear that pursuing her pleasures would put her existence in jeopardy.

If she could function here, in this mental fantasy, then perhaps she could function in the real world as well. If she could accept all that had happened to her on this semiconscious level—and *embrace* it—then perhaps there was a chance for the conscious Nora to accept it too.

Thanael sincerely hoped his assessment was correct. Because he wanted Nora in the real world more than he'd ever wanted anything in his life, with the possible exception of having his species back.

Until then, however, it looked like "Lord Chauncy" was going to have to ravish his beautiful "Hydrangea".

Oh well. One must do what one must do.

"Fair Hydrangea, I would feel your hands upon me." He intoned the command as he stepped back from Nora, releasing her and putting his hands commandingly on his hips.

"Ohhh. Okay." Nora blinked. "I mean...I am helpless to resist your will, Lord Chauncy. Where would you like me to touch you?" Her eyes were all mischief as the pure and innocent question dropped from her lips like rose petals.

Thanael cleared his throat of something that seemed stuck in it. "Ahem. You may remove my clothing for a start." He glanced down. "What's left of it, anyway."

"Very well, my Lord." Nora eagerly reached for his belt buckle and unfastened the laces on his breeches.

"Er...my boots?"

"Shit." Nora wrinkled her nose. "Sorry. I forgot. Anxious to get to the good stuff." She grinned and patted the hard length of "good stuff" that was distorting the front of his breeches.

Thanael sucked in a breath and sat on a convenient log, extending one booted foot toward her. She was going to have to tug the bloody things off, since he had no clue how to get out of them otherwise.

Nora knew her literature. She turned away from him, bent over and placed his foot between her legs in order to pull off his boot. She also presented him with a wonderful view of her pussy, her ass and the curve of her buttocks beneath the hem of his short shirt.

The "good stuff" got bigger and harder.

Thanael sighed and repeated the process with the other foot, trying not to drool or let his fangs drop out of his mouth onto his knees. By everything that was holy, he wanted this woman. They were soul mates, indeed. And she took his breath away.

He also found himself breathless when she tossed the second boot aside and turned to finish undoing his pants. Kneeling before him, that damned shirt sliding off her

shoulders and just stopping short of baring one breast, Nora efficiently completed her unlacing chore and smiled as Thanael's now-rigid cock tumbled out of the opening into her grasp.

"Oh *my*, Lord Chauncy." She ran her hands over his length, nails just lightly catching the ridged head and making him shiver. "What magnificent manhood is this I find in my grasp?"

Thanael clenched his teeth and slithered out of his breeches, wincing a little as his naked ass met rough bark. "That's *my* magnificent manhood, Hydrangea. It awaits your caresses. It hungers for your lips, your kisses, it..." Amazingly enough, Thanael ran out of flowery phrases. A lot of this had to do with the fact that Nora/Hydrangea had knelt low and sucked his cock into her mouth without any ceremony.

Thanael's eyes crossed. "Oh *shit*."

A thought struck him as Nora slid her mouth erotically up and down his cock. He hadn't had sex quite like this before. His memories were all tied up, literally, with bondage and pain and blood and feeding, and the many terribly savage and wonderful ways to reach orgasm and take *Arraho*.

This—this simple pleasure was—different. And, he realized, rather *fun*. Extraordinary fun, as a matter of fact, especially when a really skilled tongue was sending tremors up his spine and making his balls clench.

Nora was struggling free of his shirt, and letting her breasts brush his legs, touching him wherever she could with her naked body. And all the while making sure her mouth remained on his cock, tonguing it, suckling it, playing with the valleys and the dips, tracing the large vein all the way from the base to the swollen and purpling head.

"Mmmm. You taste delicious, my Lord." She licked away a drop of moisture from the tiny eye as it wept tears of tremulous joy.

"Good." The word pushed past whatever was strangling Thanael, and making it difficult for him to speak. It was probably her tongue.

His hips moved with the urge to thrust into her throat, and his body heated where she touched him. When her hands cupped his sac and tumbled his balls tenderly, he almost lost it on the spot.

This sexual dalliance had become solely about the body. His body and her body. He had quenched any lust for blood, and could see no sign of it in Nora. They could have been, at that moment, two simple humans about to fuck each other blind.

Or one simple human sucking off another who was about to shoot his load down her throat if she didn't stop playing with *that* particular tender area...

Thanael drew back and dredged up outrage from somewhere or other. "*Hydrangea*. I'm *shocked*. Your skill with your tongue is admirable, but surprising."

Nora settled back on her heels and looked downcast. "You are correct, my Lord. I crave your forgiveness. I have been a very naughty girl." A truly wicked twinkle crept

into Nora's eyes as she glanced quickly up beneath her eyelashes at Thanael. "I think I should be punished." She licked her lips. "Don't you?"

Oh yes. Thanael's vision blurred slightly and he had to blink to clear away the heat that swelled over his body and nearly blinded him. "You have been very bad, Hydrangea. Yes, you must be punished. And I shall be the one to reprimand you."

He fought to stay in his role, and it was a difficult battle, especially when a downcast and repentant Nora/Hydrangea turned on the soft grass and presented her ass for spanking.

He groaned with delight. Twin globes of soft flesh gleamed in the twilight, the darkness between them a lure and leading his eye to the mysteries she hid between her thighs.

"Spread your knees apart, Hydrangea."

"Oh my Lord, I can't." Her ass wiggled with delight.

"I gave you an order." Thanael moved behind her and gave her a solid spank on one buttock.

She sighed. "Yes, my Lord." Her legs moved, parting wide, opening her pussy to his eyes and his pleasure.

"Better. But you were slow in obeying me." Another smack, this time on the other cheek, and harder. A red flush spread over her skin and she moaned.

Thanael knelt, pushing his way between her legs, finding the perfect position from which to "punish" Hydrangea's bottom. It was a hell of a tempting target, too. He lifted his hand, bringing it down sharply on the white flesh, the sound of his blow ringing around them and dancing off into the growing darkness.

"More. Oh please, more. I have been so *very* bad."

Thanael reached over her body and pushed the loose shirt over her head. It fell to her wrists. "Leave it. Wrap it around your hands."

Eagerly, Nora tangled herself in the fabric, binding her arms and wrists together. "Yes, my Lord."

Thanael had a sudden flashback—they were recreating Nora's fantasy. The one he had crept into in the garden just a day or so ago. There was no rope or blindfold, but there were two people in a forest, one submitting to punishment, the other controlling her pleasure.

It was the fantasy that Nora had created but held herself away from, the fantasy she wanted but was afraid to experience.

Well, the gloves were finally off. She could have her fantasy now, and it was going to be a good one. Thanael pulled her head backwards roughly, grasping a handful of her hair. "You are helpless, Hydrangea. Mine to control, mine to punish, mine to fuck. Do you understand?"

A little shiver crossed her skin. "I understand. Will you hurt me?"

The question was in keeping with the fantasy, but Thanael knew instinctively that there was more behind it than a simple concern for the sex they were about to have.

He'd hurt her once, in an unexpected and unanticipated way, simply by fucking her and feeding on her—by sharing *Arraho* with her. What he'd given her had hurt more than he could ever have guessed.

She was confronting that experience in this mental dream, dealing with it, looking at it and wondering if she could handle it in the overall scheme of things.

He thought carefully. "I will never hurt you on purpose, Hydrangea. I will pleasure you with pain, drive you wild with desire, push you to experience the true heights of passion. But no, I will never, ever *hurt* you."

She was still for a long moment. Then her thighs parted even wider and she thrust her ass back against his body. "Then ravish me, my Lord. Take me as you will, punish me, fuck me blind. I want to go to those heights of passion. I want you to take me."

Thanael closed his eyes for a second and dropped a soft kiss on her back. "Okay."

Chapter Fourteen

Nora smiled to herself. This was so new, this sharing, this learning, this—*freedom*. Exploring that which had previously been forbidden, tucked away in the darkest places, never revealed, never mentioned.

Her life, her career, her world had no place in it for the desires she suppressed so fiercely. Now things had changed. Her desires had taken on the life they were meant to have, sharing with Nora a soul that yearned for things—the very things Nora had denied.

Things like she was currently enjoying with *him*. Her Master.

It was funny how she now thought of him in those terms. He was her Master, and yet they were not unequal to each other. It was simply what he was.

And when his hand smacked her ass again, making the blood boil beneath the skin and her pussy ache for him, she knew that all the pieces of the puzzle were finally taking shape, turning her mental chaos into a more coherent pattern.

One where she could be *herself*. Whole at last, complete at last, able to demand those passions she knew were rightfully hers.

She smiled. This time she did not bother to hide it.

* * * * *

Thanael sensed a change in the woman beneath him. Her skin flushed now, her muscles moved, hardening, tensing, asking for more of what he had to give.

Her eagerness surrounded her like a shimmer of heat, and when she rubbed her ass against him, it left him in no doubt of the pleasure she was enjoying. More than enjoying—welcoming. Accepting. Wanting.

Whatever the reasons that had driven Nora into this fantasy, they were fast disappearing, being replaced by the sheer delight of this idyllic sexual experience.

His cock hardened even more, if such a thing were possible, and he winced as her body touched it. He wanted in, and he wanted it *now*, but he also wanted to prolong her pleasure.

He leaned over her and found her breasts as they swung free of her body. “Hydrangea, you have beautiful breasts. Too beautiful. I can’t believe they’re real.” He pinched the nipples hard, pulling and tugging them, extending them into elongated buds that protruded from her body.

“Ahhh, my Lord...” She choked out the gasp of mingled pain and pleasure. “That hurts. Don’t stop...”

Thanael grinned. Yes, his mate was coming to terms with herself and her inner desires. "Very well, you demanding wench. I must ravish your body. Plunder your innocence, then feed on your blood, Hydrangea. I shall not hurt you, but you must know I am Master of the Night."

One very hot ass thrust backwards into one hard abdomen. "Oh *fuck* all that shit. Just *do* me, for Chrissakes, before I explode here."

"Why Hydrangea. You little slut." Thanael chuckled at the exasperated wiggle as he rubbed his cock around her pussy, soaking them both in the burning juices that flooded her swollen folds. "It will be as you desire." He released her breasts and held on to her ass cheeks, pulling them apart. "Almost."

The skin beneath his palms was red and heated from his spanking, and the tight ring of muscles rosy and pulsing slightly as the blood poured through the aroused veins and capillaries of her genitals.

He rubbed his slick cock over her anus, enjoying both the feel of it against his arousal and her gasp of excited anticipation.

"My Lord, 'tis a virginal hole you play with." Apparently Hydrangea was back.

"Mmm. What better place for your Master to begin your possession, my sweet?"

She sighed and wriggled a bit more. "I am helpless to resist you, my Lord. *Helpless.*"

Sheesh. Like he hadn't got the point, already? "I know, little flower. I am going to take you, feel you as you spend your pleasure around the hard length of my cock."

Thanael blessed his research into the literature of this planet. Of *course* the vampire novels had fascinated him, as they would anybody fresh from Raheen. Now, his rapid consumption of the most lurid of them was going to pay off. *Big time.*

"I'm going to fuck you, Hydrangea. Sink my cock into your body. I'm going to find the seat of your pleasure..." His hand slid between her legs, pushing and teasing her pussy lips until he felt the hard nubbin of her clit appear. "I'm going to cherish it, touch it, encourage it to send messages through your body. Fiery pulses of such passion they will take your breath away."

As he spoke, Thanael suited his actions to his words, using his thumb and forefinger to stimulate her clit, sometimes gently, sometimes harshly, treating it to the same savage tug that had extended her nipples.

She sobbed out her delight and thrust herself into him, encouraging him, egging him on, demanding more—always more.

He intended to give it to her.

With gentle precision, Thanael began to penetrate Nora's ass. He kept the pressure constant, easing his cock past the first tight ring of muscles on a slick slide of her own juices.

He felt her relax and accept him as his hand kept up the fierce attention to her clit. Her arousal was building and her body welcoming his intrusion. He wanted to thrust deep, to claim her in this way as well as so many others. But he controlled himself,

knowing that even though this was a fantasy, the sensations were real. He wanted this to be good for her too.

He had hurt her once. That would never happen again.

"Oh my Lord—God, *Thanael*—that feels so...so..." Nora sighed out the words, arching her spine as his cock entered her darkest places.

He wanted to howl with delight. She *knew* him. She *accepted* him, wanted him inside her as much as he wanted to be there. There was no fear, no hesitation and now—no games.

The fantasy had become a living, breathing, sexual experience for them both. Nora wanted Thanael, Thanael wanted Nora. The bond between them had expanded, encompassed the new dynamics that had twisted Nora's brain into a suffocating immobility while she sorted it out.

She had arrived at her conclusion. She had embraced what she had denied, opened to what she possessed and come to terms with the impossible.

Nora was back. His mate was ready.

And he was almost totally buried up her ass.

Thanael felt moisture on his face. Not the healing droplets that would have been leaking from his fangs right now had this been anything other than a mind-fuck of extraordinary implications.

No, this moisture was coming from his eyes. Tears were forming and spilling over, wetting his cheeks as he took Nora, sliding out then reentering, each thrust stronger, easier and each thrust bringing a moan of pleasure to her throat.

"Yes, oh God *yes*—" Her muscles began to tighten, quivering around his screamingly sensitive cock. His balls hardened in response, slapping against the boiling wetness of her pussy with each move he made.

He wanted to scream out his pleasure, cry hot tears of passion over his mate, and somehow tell her what this all meant to him.

"*Now*, Thanael. Come with me. Be with me. Fuck me—*love me*." Nora screamed it out instead, ripping the words from his heart.

The Master obeyed.

He let go, feeling the flood of his come pour from his balls through his cock and into her ass, overflowing, running down her flesh unabated. She shrieked as he exploded within her, and suddenly he was clamped in a rhythmic velvet vise that clutched at him, held him tighter-than-tight, then released him, only to do it again.

Her orgasm was a harsh and painful thing, squeezing his cock beyond its limits, drawing him into her, body and soul. They shuddered together, a tangled heap of limbs, locked into a climactic embrace that soared beyond reality, beyond fantasy, into a fiery furnace of passion.

And very gently, Thanael lowered his lips to her body and pricked her neck with his fangs, giving her a traditional "vampire kiss". Enough to conclude her fantasy,

enough to give him a taste of his mate's essence, and enough to make her sob out her desire and pleasure as she collapsed limply beneath him.

He felt her mind as it resonated with a cry from her heart. "*Thanael. Oh my Thanael. How can I love you so much so soon?*"

* * * * *

Nora slowly surfaced into wakefulness, enjoying that blissful time between sleep and the need to get out of bed. She felt bathed in a rosy glow, that rare feeling that something good had either happened, was about to happen or was currently happening.

Sort of like knowing that one had lost eight pounds in a week or hit the lottery and won enough to cover the totally gorgeous shoes one had guiltily bought. And not worn.

She opened her eyes slowly, stretching and rubbing the tiredness away. She ached a little, the ache of a body that had slept in the same position for hours on end.

The room was dark, lit by small lights low on the walls and those lovely paintings. There was enough illumination to see Thanael as he slept on beside her, tucked cozily into the purple bedding, his hair a golden slick on the pillows.

Lord, he was gorgeous. And Lord, how on Earth could she have tumbled headfirst into love with him? He was alien, could read her mind, she'd known him for a length of time that could be counted in hours – she'd originally targeted him for an *investigation*, for Chrissake – none of it made any sense.

And it was all so right that Nora couldn't dismiss any of it. She loved him, this...man, this...whatever he was. And she'd found a new depth to her own desires, a new place in her head that was now clearly settled into her hypothalamus, or wherever the souls of Raheeni Mistresses settled.

She'd confronted the most debated issue of the century and found the answer.

We are not alone. The theological implications were earth-shattering. The scientific community would go out and get seriously drunk, the conspiracy theorists would probably take to their bunkers and never come out – basically the world would never be the same.

So obviously, Nora had to keep this information to herself. She didn't want the government doing it for her and – given her experience with bureaucracy – she knew they would.

Okay. It's a secret between me and him.

She hugged her knees and rested her chin on them, looking at Thanael. She knew him so well, so intimately, more so than anybody else on the planet. They'd linked minds as well as bodies, and in that link they'd shared more than their thoughts.

She'd felt his beliefs, his standards, his way of living his life, and she'd found them all in keeping with her own. He was a good...um...being. He cared about other beings, about doing things right, about not hurting anybody or anything.

And yet there was so much she didn't know about—his home world, his time on Raheen—all of it. His favorite food, his favorite color—how old was he when he first had sex, how many species had he slept with?

Nora giggled. This sure as hell wasn't the sort of experience she'd shared with most of the guys she'd dated. There were so many questions yet to be asked and more to be answered. And maybe the fact that she could share his mind might start this process off on the right foot. It would go a long way to alleviate the typical human-to-human communication problem.

Perhaps it was time to find out.

She slid under the covers next to Thanael and rested her head on his pillow. Closing her eyes, she let her thoughts drift, opening her mind in a way that was becoming easier for her, more familiar.

And in so doing, Nora entered Thanael's dreams to find him—and learn more about him, this wild and seductive entity that had stolen her heart.

* * * * *

A cool mist enveloped her, and yet she was not cold. There was nothing beneath her feet, nothing holding her up...except her *wings*.

"Oh coooool." The exclamation was drawn from her throat as she glanced over her shoulders and found a quite respectably sized set of wings gently thrumming behind her.

She could barely feel them, certainly wasn't controlling them at all and was rather relieved to see that they were a simple arrangement of delicate membranes and webbing. At least she wasn't going to have to worry about grooming feathers or molting in the spring.

Apparently this flying thing was something one did automatically. Fortunately for her she was taking her maiden flight in a dream world. Things like gravity and turbulence probably weren't going to be a big issue here...wherever *here* was.

Nora felt a little disoriented, rather like the sensation of flying through clouds in a plane—there was no sense of direction or depth. Her mind told her she was upright, gravity was working just fine, and her wings moved in an autonomic reflex, keeping her hovering in place and stirring little whorls of mist into tiny tornadoes around her.

Then they parted, revealing Thanael.

He hovered as well, but around him the mist was thinning and the bright rays of a sunny day glanced off his golden head in an aura of rainbows.

Nora sucked in a breath. "This is amazing."

His head jerked around and she felt his astonishment as his jaw dropped. "*Nora? You're here?*"

She rolled her eyes. "No. I'm hovering over Tau Ceti 7 waiting for the Enterprise to beam me down to the surface. Jeez, Thanael."

He blinked. "Huh?"

"Never mind. Yes, I'm here. Tell me where we are? Talk to me, Thanael. I *need* to know stuff. I have so many questions I could spend a lifetime asking them and still not have enough time..."

Thanael reached for her hand and held it, anchoring her next to him as their wings throbbed in tandem. "Time. It's always about time, isn't it?"

"Is it? Help me understand what that means..." Nora squeezed his fingers.

He squeezed back. "All right. Hold on."

He tugged her and she followed him, enjoying the kiss of the air against her skin as they flew. If skinny dipping was anything like skinny flying, she really ought to make a note to try it.

The mist thinned even more and suddenly dissipated completely, revealing a landscape below that took Nora's breath away. "*Holy shit...*"

"Welcome to my home, Nora."

Chapter Fifteen

It was almost blinding.

Nora stared down at what must be a city, but one unlike any she could ever have imagined.

Soaring towers and delicate spires reached high, while curving roofs and delicate walls clustered around their bases. Everything was sparkling, glistening with a thousand colors that had no name.

The solar spectrum would have looked like a dead crow next to the myriad shades reflecting and bouncing around the incredible architecture.

"My people have lived here for millions of years, Nora. We are an old race." Thanael flew them slowly over the city. "When they first arrived, this was a cold planet, dominated by ice. Being a tough folk, they decided to see if it was habitable, and sure enough within a few generations, they'd terraformed enough of the surface to create a home world."

"Along with the associated greenhouse effect?"

Thanael nodded. "Yes. The ice retreated to the polar caps, and everything proceeded along predictable lines. Over the eons we developed many technologies, eradicated most of our diseases, in fact this was truly what you would describe as Utopia."

Nora stared around her. "Thanael? Where is everybody?" It was a beautiful fairy-tale scene, but empty of life, of movement, as far as Nora's eye could see.

"At their studies, I expect."

"Their studies?"

"Yes." Thanael allowed them to drift downward, slowly descending through the rainbows and past glittering architectural confections that made Nora gasp. They landed softly in what looked like a park or recreational area, and some kind of plant was blooming profusely around them, scenting the air with a perfume that made breathing a delight.

"So lovely, Thanael. It seems a shame to be indoors when this is here to be enjoyed." Nora looked around, fascinated.

"*That*, my sweet flower, is the crux of things."

"Pardon?"

Thanael sighed and leaned against a pillar, brushing away a small cloud of sparkling pollen from the vine that grew there. "My people were extraordinarily intelligent, Nora. Evolving in a peaceful and logical way, more and more time was

spent in perfecting our lives, improving our minds and developing our mental abilities.”

Nora nodded. “Yeah. Utopia with telepathy. Sounds good to me.”

Thanael bit his lip and frowned. “It wasn’t. Good, I mean. It was bad. Very bad.”

“You’re crazy. This isn’t bad...” Nora stared around her at the crystalline beauty of this place.

“It’s stagnant, Nora. Nothing has changed or been improved for several centuries now. My people stayed inside, not just inside these buildings, but inside their *minds*. I had very little contact with actual, real, living *people*, until—” He stopped speaking and turned away from her, his luminous eyes distant and unreadable.

“How the hell did the race survive if all the development was psychological?” Nora ran through the information she’d been given, sorting it out in her head. “How did you eat? Provide for yourselves? It couldn’t have been a totally telepathic community, Thanael. That’s impossible.”

He turned back, a small smile creasing his lips. “You’re right, Miss Brain. It wasn’t completely on the mental plane. Food became more and more streamlined, however, produced artificially according to nutritional needs, rather than a desire for a good hamburger.”

Thanael tilted his head to one side. “I don’t think there ever were hamburgers. Not here, anyway.”

Nora waved that aside. “How about children?”

Thanael snorted. “You know how we have sex here, Nora?” He raised one eyebrow.

“Er...no?”

“Close your eyes.”

She did as she was told and closed her eyes, letting her senses revel in the breeze wafting past her wings and her naked body. Warm and sensual, it was like the touch of a lover’s hand – Thanael’s hand. She smiled with pleasure.

Suddenly, her brain exploded into a brilliant firework display of colors that lifted her clean off her feet. Shades of indescribable hues slid through her body, infiltrating her nerve endings and funneling sensation to her clit and her cunt. They exploded into an orgasm of such intensity, Nora swore her heart stopped for a few moments.

And then, just as quickly, it was over, leaving her off-guard, surprised, trembling and stunned. “Thanael?” She held on to a tree trunk and stared at him while her blood pressure and heart rate returned to normal.

He was staring back. “That’s it. That’s sex for us.” He glanced down. His cock was limp and wet, leftover strands of his come shining from the softening head.

“Sheesh. It’s a pretty good bang, but not exactly the Big one, is it?” Nora shook her head. “And what a waste of these wings.”

“It’s effective. Relieves tension. And it doesn’t take too much time away from other, more important, studies. Sperm was collected this way, female egg donations were

always abundant and children were created in our Bio-Creation Labs on an as-needed basis. We had no unwanted children, Nora, but we didn't have a lot of kindergartens, either."

Nora struggled with the concepts Thanael was sharing with her. Much of it made sense. It was a logical progression of the evolution of an intelligent species. From the physical to the mental.

If she remembered her science teacher's discussion correctly, this society would eventually evolve itself out of corporeal existence and into the realm of energy beings. Of course, that particular discussion had taken place after quite a few beers and two viewings of the special edition DVD of the best science fiction movie ever made.

But now she was confronted with a situation that could have potentially proved the theory. Helluva thing. "So what happened, Thanael?" She touched his arm, and he jumped. "What happened to your race? Why are you on Earth now, and how did you get to Raheen?"

He squared his shoulders. "First things first." He turned away and Nora followed him into the lush foliage that sparkled brightly around the park. Under the shadiest bough he stopped. "I don't want you to look at it directly, but have you noticed how bright our sun is?"

Thanael gestured upwards and Nora noticed the very sharp delineations of the shadows and the light. "Now you come to mention it..."

"Our sun is dying, Nora. The natural life cycle of a star is about to end. We knew it, and prepared for it as best we could. Several generations beforehand, we slowed bio-creation. We let our numbers dwindle and concentrated on producing the most efficient ships possible. It was hard, apparently." He pinched the bridge of his nose as he told her the story. "So many years spent in mental rather than physical labor, and then to have to construct spaceships..."

"But you did?" Nora was spellbound by his tale.

"Yes. We did. Our entire population, greatly reduced in numbers, boarded these ships and fled our home before it was engulfed by the massive giant our sun would become." He looked around. "What you see no longer exists."

"Oh Thanael." Nora moved to stand in front of him and put her arms around his waist. "I'm so sorry." She leaned her head on his chest. "So much beauty. How sad."

He swallowed. "It's nature. Life. Existence. Whatever you want to call it."

"So you escaped?"

"Yes. Our ships evacuated the planet and we began our search for a new home. I was one of the youngest at the time. All of us had implants, Nora, knowledge, memories, data, all that we would need to recreate — *this*..." He waved his hand around. "We contained it all in here." One hand tapped the side of his head. "But in here..." The hand moved to his chest and his fingers tapped once more. "We were barren."

Nora dropped a little kiss on his skin. "Tell me."

* * * * *

Tell her? How could he tell her? He could barely stand to remember it himself. But he knew he owed at least honesty to Nora. His genetic material was now part of her, too, through no fault of her own. She deserved the truth.

"Very well." He picked up her hand and they soared off the surface, through the leaves and plants and into the brilliant sky. Higher and higher he climbed, until they eventually reached the cool shadows of space.

The planet glowed whitely beneath them, and Nora gasped as she noticed a flotilla of dark spots silhouetted against its atmosphere. She pointed. "There. Your fleet?"

"Yes. We'll follow them."

And in a blink they were away, leaving the huge expanding sun to grow ever bigger until its supply of nuclear fuel was spent.

A new planet appeared as Thanael held Nora close. They were flying through his mind, but he still appreciated the warmth of her body, the affection in her touch. She had brought a new dimension with her, a sense of companionship, friendship, which seemed almost alien to Thanael.

He wished for a moment or two to consider the symmetry. Just who was the alien now?

But the planet drew nearer, and his fleet of ships was slowing. Two moons appeared, casting a soft light on the clouds skittering across the surface and highlighting massive mountains and endless plains.

"Raheen." Nora spoke the word as a statement, not a question.

"You recognize it?"

"From your paintings, not anything else." Nora blinked. "And yet those moons seem familiar somehow. Perhaps that's a little bit of *her* remembering."

Thanael hugged her. "There is no *her* anymore, Nora. She is you and you are she."

"Yeah, I know. Just give me a bit of time to get used to having some new thoughts inside my head that aren't my own, okay? It's kinda weird now and again." She snorted. "Not to mention the wings."

"My God." Thanael held her away from him and stared into her eyes. "What have I done to you?"

She frowned. "Nothing I didn't want you to do. And I swear, Thanael, that even if I had known what lay ahead, I wouldn't change a thing." She pushed his arms away and plastered herself back against his chest. "Not one damn thing. And you'd better believe it, Mister."

"I haven't told you the rest." Thanael stiffened even as she held him tight. What he was going to tell her would be hard to accept.

"So what are we waiting for?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all."

There was nothing holding him back from revealing the truth of his existence and the loss of his race. Nothing but the fear that Nora would turn from him in horror. He prayed she would not, wanted to believe she would not, but didn't—deep inside—know.

And he could not read her thoughts in this non-corporeal dream world.

It had to be done. And it scared him to his soul.

The planet loomed closer and suddenly a thin spider web of light appeared, crisscrossing the upper atmosphere.

Nora jumped. "What's that?"

"We had no idea." He swallowed a bitter taste in his mouth. "It's Raheen's automated defense system. One of the few things we could not anticipate, although we should have. Such a simple thing wouldn't have crossed the minds of our brilliant scientists."

"Oh God." She breathed the words, transfixed by the sight of one after another of the ships fizzling and popping out of existence. "This is...God, this is murder. This is terrible."

Her grip on his arm was savage. "Didn't you try and contact them? Stop this terrible destruction?"

Thanael struggled to speak. "Of course we did. They couldn't hear us. So many invaders have tried to conquer Raheen that this whole grid is set up to protect the planet without asking questions. We were caught before we had chance to act. We were too busy *thinking*."

His words tumbled out, shocking him as he realized what he'd said. "Trying to think of a solution instead of acting. Being logical, considering the possibilities, ignoring the adrenaline that should have been spurring us to the 'fight or flight' response. We were being what we had become, and Raheen was being what it was. And combined, it was a total disaster." A drop of moisture chilled a trail down over his face and he realized he was crying for his people.

It shocked him. He'd never cried for his loss before. "You fly into Raheeni space, and you die. You try and think about the best way to evade it and you die quicker."

"Just like moths to the flame." There was horror in her voice as the images continued to unfold, ships exploding, disintegrating, one after another.

"See there?" Thanael pointed to the dark side of the planet. "My ship made it through, but crashed in the mountains. Everybody was killed except me, and why I didn't die too, I will never know."

Nora leaned against him. "You don't need to show me any more, Thanael. Not of this. It's too much. Too hard to watch." There were tears in her eyes too.

"No—you must see all of it, Nora. *All of it*."

"Then show me, Thanael. Whatever it is, it cannot be as bad as this." Her gaze touched his and his pain lessened, diminished by being shared with another.

Could she ever accept what she was about to see?

He took her hand and drew in a breath. Nothing he'd ever done in his life was as hard as this.

"I am a genocidal killer, Nora. A monster. And I will understand if you never acknowledge my existence after this."

She looked at him, her face expressionless as she absorbed his words. Then she spoke, her voice calm. "Show me the evidence."

* * * * *

The professional law enforcement officer that was such an intrinsic part of Nora's personality leaped to the fore at Thanael's confession. She'd heard people assume responsibility for many things, including murder. Some had told the truth, others had lied for their own reasons.

But none had confessed with the touch of agony she'd just heard in Thanael's voice. There was something going on here, some terrible pain within him. She needed to know what.

"Thanael, I work from facts. Hard scientific facts. I always have. Sure, this is crazy stuff you and I have gotten ourselves into, and I've had to leave a lot of my practicality in a heap on your bedroom floor." She stared into his luminous eyes, willing him to hear her words. "I have overcome a lot of my personal beliefs in the last day or so. I have accepted things I would have laughed at just last week. I'm part of your mind, flying over a planet God-knows-where in the galaxy. And I *still* want to see you produce evidence of what you claim."

Thanael shivered a little. "Very well."

He pulled them both down toward the surface of Raheen and pointed to a path leading down from the mountains.

"There I am."

Nora squinted. "That's *you*?"

The figure strode past boulders and onto the plain, carrying a large bundle. "Yes. A Raheeni male found what was left of my ship. I took over his body."

She blinked at that. "You have that ability?"

"I wasn't sure if it would work, since it had been only theory up until then amongst the scientists on my world. It was hard, but I had no choice. Fortunately, this Raheeni was young, strong and his mind was passive enough to allow me entrance. I surrendered my physical self for a while and used his body."

He took a breath. "It's kind of hard to explain, but we can *think* ourselves into somebody else. Our corporeal selves *become* that person, live as that person, even though that person still exists. Their consciousness just sort of gets slowed down. Minimized, if you will. It was all supposition up to that time. Guesswork,

assumptions... The Raheeni are a striking race and if I wanted to survive I had to blend in. I wanted to *survive*, Nora. That desire drove me to try this...this *melding*. It worked."

"Of course. Survival is inherent in all species." Nora continued to watch as they traveled over the surface of Raheen.

The being that now held Thanael returned to a hero's welcome and Nora gasped as several heads tumbled from the bundle, earning him even more praise.

"I felt the Raheeni mind." Thanael's voice was thick with emotion. "Savage warriors, sensual and sexual. I knew this was the way to return." He glanced at Nora. "I *became* Talot. I lived like him, ate like him, thought like him and fucked like him."

He took a breath. "Except when I was doing *this*."

Night had fallen and Nora could see little but some machinery-like equipment. Then she spied him, Talot, hunkered down over an open pipe of some sort. He was emptying a bottle down into the darkness beneath. "What are you doing?"

"I am poisoning the planet's water supply." Thanael watched himself coolly. "I am attempting to eliminate the Raheeni species."

Nora swallowed. "You are? Why?"

Thanael was silent for long moments. "I was totally insane, I suppose. I knew that my race had died. That I was alone. I was furious at the Raheeni for what they'd done. I wanted them to pay for their crime against my people. I wanted to punish them, to make them hurt like..."

"Like you were hurting?" Nora finished his sentence for him.

He nodded. "Yes. I can't...the pain...the knowledge...the loneliness...sometimes it was indescribable. I fought it, submerged it in my Raheeni life, but it haunted me, Nora. It was always there."

"So how many died from this poison?" Nora found she was holding his hand, their fingers tightly interlaced.

"I don't know. It was a waterborne bacterium that affected parts of the Raheeni brain. At first I didn't even know if it would work on their species. It was the only thing I had at my disposal. A simple adjustment to the components of one of their own bacteria." He looked embarrassed. "I did rather well in biology when I was young. It was my way of making a weapon. Others would have made explosives or something, I suppose. I liked the subtlety of this plan. It fed my anger and my pain. Even though I had no idea whether it was successful or not. Then their older people began to pass away a little more quickly. And then..."

Nora held her breath.

"And then it began to affect the younger ones. Turned them from their lives to one thing and one thing only, a pursuit of pleasure. Savage sexual pleasure."

"But they were Raheeni. That's normal for them, right?" Nora's thoughts circled around the things Thanael was revealing.

"Only to a point. They were becoming less and less interested in anything but their own fulfillment. The needs of the planet were being neglected for the needs of the Raheeni body. It wouldn't have been long before..."

"Before the entire culture collapsed?"

Thanael nodded. "Exactly."

Nora thought for a moment. "So. Let me get this straight. You occupied the body of a Raheeni in order to survive the extinction of your race. You attempted to destroy Raheen with a poison that might have hastened the death of some elder Raheeni, and which made the younger ones horny as hell, which they were to start with." She squeezed his hand. "Am I right so far?"

"Well, yes, but..."

"Let me finish. I need to document the evidence. To see if what you tell me matches the facts. When you left Raheen, was Talot dead?"

Thanael looked offended. "No, of course not."

"Why not? Why didn't you kill him? You were inside him, for God's sake. You could have stopped his heart on the way out of his body."

"I couldn't..."

"Why?" Nora tugged him around to face her. "Why couldn't you kill him, Thanael?"

His features twisted into an agonizing caricature of a grin. "Because I *liked* him, Nora. I *liked the Raheeni*. I betrayed my own race by becoming *friends* with our *killers*. Can you understand what that did to me?" His voice broke. "Can you imagine what I felt?"

She shook her head. "No, Thanael. I can't."

Tears were falling down his face onto his chest. "I can't stay here. I have to go. I can't *bear* it..."

A darkness descended on them and Raheen vanished. It got very cold and Nora began to shiver. It was time to get out of Thanael's brain, to return to something approaching normalcy and sort out the information she'd gathered.

The cold intensified, making Nora gasp as her wings cramped. His fingers clung to hers. "Thanael, you must let go of my hand. I will not leave you, but you must let go." Her teeth chattered as she hugged her free arm around herself as best she could.

His mind was closing down, surrendering to the hurt that scarred his soul. She wanted to help him, and drowning with him wasn't going to do it.

"I love you, Thanael. Trust me. *Let go of my hand.*"

The fierce clenching grip tightened for a moment, scaring Nora. Then it slowly eased, leaving white bands of bloodless flesh behind. She closed her eyes and willed herself back to consciousness with a sigh of relief.

Chapter Sixteen

The coffee tasted soooo good. So *commonplace*.

Taking out the grinder, finding the filters, the entire ritual of making herself a good hot cup of joe in Thanael's kitchen, had grounded Nora, brought her back to her own existence with a thump. The slight ache across her shoulders was all that remained of her adventures in aviation, and an awkward twisting peek over her shoulder at the bathroom mirror revealed little more than an unusually knobbly spine.

Well, *that* was a relief. No strange looks at the gym.

For the time it took to brew that first mug, Nora let her thoughts sit, preferring to focus on the mundane, clear her emotions and try to achieve some mental balance.

Hugging the soft robe around herself, she snorted. *I doubt I'll ever feel balanced again.*

The percolator wheezed out its last breathy gasp and beeped at her. The scent, the taste, the feel of a warm mug between her chilled palms – Nora let the familiarities soak through her as she settled into a chair near the kitchen window.

The sun had risen. *I don't even know what day it is.* The thought surprised her for a moment, since her life tended toward the highly organized, personal calendar, rigidly scheduled end of the spectrum.

That is, it *had*, until she'd met Thanael.

Now she'd been whisked into some odd science fiction maelstrom, complete with her own personal favorites – vampires. Oh, and some really, *really* hot sex too. *Can't forget the hot sex.*

Her thigh muscles tightened at the mere thought. *Okay. Hold off on the hot sex thoughts until I've worked all this out.* Nora swore her cunt pouted.

Wrenching her head away from her erogenous zones, Nora took another hefty swig of coffee and began the process of analyzing data – one of her favorite things to do. This was the part of a case she loved, turning facts over and over, then upside down, then shaking them to see what fell out.

Several times her approach had led to a new avenue of investigation, and her co-workers knew when she got very quiet over her coffee that she was “kicking it around”. They always left her alone.

She sure had a hell of a lot to kick around today.

There was nothing she cared to put down in writing. Her usual method of working out problems was to jot notes on a whiteboard near her desk or on bits of paper. The simple act of writing it down often brought ideas into focus that hadn't been present before.

But not this time. Oh no. Nora was damned if she was putting one damn thing in writing. If anyone ever found a single word that she wrote right now, they'd have her committed to some psychiatric care facility.

So she simply sat and gazed out the window at nothing in particular while letting her mind come to terms with the extraordinary situation in which she found herself. She found her thoughts expanding, shifting a little, considering various scenarios, absorbing information she'd learned and matching it with information she knew.

There was a new depth to her analysis, occasioned she knew by the presence which had made itself known in her head. The Raheeni Mistress was there, a part of her, a friend, a memory, a hint of reminiscences that weren't Nora's, but were still as clear as day. And this part helped when it came to reconciling her acceptance that Raheen was *real*.

Given that fact, many others fell into place. The visions Thanael had showed her, the things she'd seen and felt—they were real too. They were incontrovertible evidence that Thanael was indeed who he said he was.

Nora's coffee grew cold as she tried to imagine what it must have been like for him. To come from a planet like his, lose his entire species to a horrid miscalculation and then find himself immersed in the sensual savagery of Raheen—almighty hell! It was a miracle he was still sane.

Or *was* he? Was it possible he was actually quite *insane*?

Somehow, Nora doubted that. He'd been too practical in his establishment of his life here on Earth. No lingering urges to murder anybody had appeared, in fact he'd become someone who helped rather than harmed.

And wasn't that an interesting notion?

Although her law enforcement training had not included any advanced psychological studies, it didn't take a PhD in profiling to deduce that Master Thanael Tanner might well be trying to make amends.

Guilt was a massively powerful motivator in so many circumstances, driving people in directions they might not otherwise consider. Why would it be any different for other species? Especially one as intellectually advanced as Thanael's.

Nora was prepared to accept this as fact number two.

She turned back to a consideration of Thanael's species and what he'd shown her of life on his home world. These thoughts tumbled over each other in disarray, the concept of a race devoted to intellectual pursuits being rather alien to one as physical as Nora.

Christ, the sex these people were missing. How the hell had they slid from an incredible mental *and* physical fuck to one blinding ten-second orgasm? Was the end product worth it? What would it be like spending endless days, weeks—years perhaps, just *thinking*?

One thought randomly followed another as Nora emptied her forgotten coffee and poured another fresher cup. An intellectual race of winged aliens, exterminated in a random act of fate.

The sole survivor plunged into a warlike and erotic society where sexual fulfillment and gratification went hand in hand with vampiric feedings and savagely painful punishment. God, no wonder Thanael was confused. And now here on Earth, hiding his true nature, creating a persona who helped people in a limited way, yet catered in some small fashion to his learned desire for blood and hot, *very* physical sex.

Nora wondered how long he'd lived with this contradiction...this conflict within himself that might well have begun even before he'd sailed into disaster on his home world's fleet of escape ships.

And now, without realizing it, she'd forced him to confront it—himself, really. There was absolutely no assurance he could accept the convoluted process of events that had made him what he was. What sort of mind could deal with this?

It had been hard enough for her to even consider sharing a consciousness with another being. That was a simple task compared to what Thanael was facing. So many deep conflicts, so many changes to an existence that had bordered on the celibate and ascetic.

Nora stood and stretched, finding that once again a cup of coffee had gone untouched. She might as well give up the caffeine completely if this kept on happening.

However, she'd sorted some things out in her mind. What it seemed to boil down to was that she and Thanael were intergalactic mutts of universal proportions. Their DNA would probably make a geneticist weep and rip his hair out in frustration, and if they ever had a child...

That thought froze Nora in her tracks. Would it be possible? Could the two of them mate egg and sperm and produce an offspring? What the hell would it look like? A human? A Raheeni? Thanael himself? A bug-eyed monster?

Nora shivered as she realized that they'd never used protection during sex. Involuntarily her gaze dropped to her belly and she placed her hands protectively over it in a gesture handed down through time from woman to woman. There was nothing to indicate pregnancy. Nothing to say that creating life was possible for Nora and Thanael.

Plus, on the old-fashioned side of things, he hadn't expressed any interest in fathering her children, making a future with her, or even—come to think of it—stirred from his sleep.

Nora gave up trying to figure out the crazy and improbable universe. It sure as hell made no sense whatsoever as it pertained to herself and Thanael.

Her analysis of the situation was pretty much done, as far as she could see. She'd gone and fallen head over heels for an alien being, and he needed her help. So what if she had wings and a rather splendid set of fangs? A girl couldn't have too many accessories, right?

Nora grimaced. Sure she could joke about it, but this was really heavy shit, way outside her usual realm of problems and issues. She knew she needed Thanael awake, alert and able to discuss things with her, answer questions, and perhaps make her eyes roll back in her head when they got tired of talking.

This was something that needed two brains, two opinions, a double dose of whatever intelligence their assorted species could produce and probably a fifth of scotch. She returned to the bedroom where Thanael was still sleeping in the same position.

His chest rose and fell in slight movements, but other than that his body lay motionless.

Nora had fled into her mind to find answers to her problems, and it looked as if Thanael had done the same. Now it was her turn to bring him back. But this wasn't a time for fun romps in the woods of Transylvania. This summoning would have to be done on Thanael's terms—somehow she had to show him what could be and get him to leave behind what was past, along with his guilt and his pain.

She had a strong suspicion that he was running from both, and had been for some time without consciously realizing it. He had scars on his soul, deep ones...ones that Nora wasn't sure she could eradicate. The healing would have to start with Thanael himself, and perhaps at that point she could play a role. But for now, it was time to go back into his mind and take him to a place where he could let it all go.

There was only one place she could think of that fit the bill.

Raheen.

* * * * *

Thanael knew he was drifting. Lost in a void of pain, a harsh and unforgiving ocean of grayness where his sins swam around him, tugging at him, trying to pull him beneath the surface and choke his life away.

Images of various members of his race, all dead, rose up from the misty whorls of his mind and pointed angry fingers at him, leaving impressions of words like "betrayer, defiler and traitor" echoing in soundless whispers around him.

Raheeni faces and voices mingled with his own people, angry at his murderous intentions, and taunting him with his own delight in their sexual pleasures.

How can you kill that which you have come to desire?

You must avenge your people.

I have no people.

I am alone.

The agonized mental scream of his suffocating confusion threatened to deafen Thanael as he closed his eyes and accepted his fate. He surrendered, no longer fighting the waves of despair but flowing with them, down...down beneath the level of conscious thought.

He was on the edge of sliding away to pass beyond all pain when something struck him across his buttocks—*hard*.

The shock of the blow sent a stimulus to his fading soul and he jerked, freeing himself of the deadly pool. Another vicious lash to his ass and he gasped out a cry, struggling to open his eyes.

"Don't bother, Thanael. You are blindfolded." It was Nora's voice, but slightly different—deeper, more husky and definitely more commanding. "You are mine. My toy. I have requested you and my request has been honored for this evening."

His wrists were held taut above him by some sort of restraint, and he stood stretched, naked, open to whatever was about to happen.

His cock stiffened as yet another blow slashed his buttocks, this time producing the hot sting of a bleeding wound. It stiffened even more when a moist tongue laved the injury, lapping at the blood and sealing the weals with that magical fluid produced by familiar fangs.

I'm on Raheen.

If he'd needed any confirmation of that fact, he got it when two sharp fangs caressed the swell of his ass and nipped the rounded muscle, sipping a small amount of blood from the punctures and healing them again just as quickly.

"I play rough, Thanael. I'm told you like it that way. Can you take it?"

He swallowed harshly, moving his throat, seeking for his voice, for words, for anything to communicate his wishes and his desires.

"I will hurt you, pleasure you, pleasure you with hurt and hurt you with pleasure. Do you think you can stand such punishment, Thanael? I will be Mistress one day, you know. I will never hold back...I cannot." She grazed her fingernails around his hip and danced them over the tip of his swelling cock. "Tell me now. Before it's too late."

Thanael sucked in a breath. He knew now who this was. This was the Raheeni Mistress who had been within Nora's mind. She was still there, only now a part of Nora, and Nora was a part of her.

So who was he being punished by? Nora or the Mistress?

Nora would tease him, drive him up to incredible sexual heights and then fuck his brains out.

The Mistress might well kill him.

Chapter Seventeen

There was no choice for Thanael. He would meet his destiny here, within his mind. Either accept death as the ultimate punishment for his accumulated sins, or life and possible redemption.

His fangs lengthened and he relished the familiar feel—a cool slide of sharp enamel over his lips. His cock hardened as his ankles were pulled wide and cuffed, chained to some unmoving object that held him splayed and vulnerable.

Air wafted around his balls and for a second he thought perhaps he heard the swish of a lash.

But no blow fell. Instead, a hard head butted the backs of his thighs and a tongue swiped the balls hanging free between his legs.

He moaned.

"I'm going to take that as a yes, Thanael."

Thanael nodded. "Yes, Mistress." The words were grating and harsh around the dryness of his throat.

A husky laugh greeted his words. "You are anticipating that which has yet to happen, but no matter. I rather like it."

Her voice shifted, telling him she was circling him, and this time the brush of air was followed by the flick of something sharp across his nipple. Her mouth suckled blood from the flat disk and its screamingly sensitive pebbled center.

"Mmm. Nice, Thanael. I like your taste. Sweet, sexy, hot..." She nipped his shoulder, sucking blood slowly, not draining him but taking enough to heighten his arousal.

"You are all man, aren't you?" A hand cradled and stroked his cock. "Very nice indeed." Sharp nails raked down his length, making him groan. He felt his excitement rise, beading into a drop of moisture that seeped from the tiny eye at the tip of his cock. It was cool on his hot flesh as she smeared it around.

"Perhaps too much man for just one woman..."

The words were scarcely spoken when Thanael felt a lash across his buttocks that pushed him forward and into the body of the Mistress. "Allow us to help."

A male had joined them.

"Oooh, yes. This could be fun." Hands ran up Thanael's thighs and soft breasts rubbed over his skin. A woman. Now there were three people around his naked body. And he was blindfolded.

Perhaps it was a good thing. He preferred not to see the faces of his executioners. He would much rather hold a more pleasant image in front of his mind's eye—Nora.

So he permitted her face to float in his thoughts, and let the rest of his body respond to his sensual torture. He desired this pleasure-pain, he wanted a last explosive moment of release, a final climax where his life could shoot into the darkness of night along with his come.

His people would rest. Raheen would be avenged. He would suffer no more.

Three clever Raheeni began working on Thanael with delight, passion, savagery and skill.

One had a whip, and whoever he was, he knew his tool well. The lashes were deep, scarring blows, bringing the trickle of hot blood over Thanael's buttocks. Almost instantly they were sealed, leaving the pain and the tingle of desire, and permitting more punishment. The flicking wounds traveled down the sides of his thighs and back up, past his hips to his armpits, always breaking the skin, always being laved closed, and always heating his aching cock.

The woman—it wasn't the Mistress, he knew *her* scent—seemed to love Thanael's skin, since she rubbed her body over his at every opportunity. Dodging the lash, she straddled one of his legs and rubbed her pussy hard against his thigh, hot wet folds branding him with her juices. She ground into him, masturbating herself roughly on the solid muscles stretched by his position.

To hold herself steady, she grabbed one of his ass cheeks, sinking her nails into the firm globe. A small sting, but another addition to the pain that was sending Thanael into a whirlwind of sensual pleasure.

His eyes teared behind the blindfold.

Through the red blur of the pain, he felt *her* come nearer, closing the distance between their bodies. The Mistress. Or was it Nora? He didn't know. The scent was familiar, and yet he could not tell one from the other.

"Ah, Thanael. Such a delicious toy." Sharp fangs drew down the side of his neck to his chest, leaving the dual trails of sharp incisions behind. "So truly delectable." Her tongue retraced the route, sealing the injuries and making his cock shudder with savage delight. "You please me. I think I should return the favor."

He felt her lower herself to the ground between his legs. He felt her warmth caress his sensitive skin, and he felt a hand touch the back of one of his thighs.

Then he felt her fangs against his cock.

Just a brush at first, the slight sharp sensation as she dimpled his skin and then pulled away. He trembled, aroused, waiting for the next blow, the next caress. Deprived of his sight, he relied on his other senses, listening for the swish of the lash through the air, or the feel of the other woman's pussy against his skin. Hot and slick, her clit grazed him and she panted as she climbed the ladder toward her peak. Every now and again the man would lash her instead of Thanael, and she sobbed out her pleasure into Thanael's ear.

"Please...I'm coming..." She muttered the words as her hips pushed harder into Thanael, her juices sliding down his leg in a waterfall of desire.

"Not yet." The man's voice was harsh, and Thanael heard the thud of the lash as it dropped to the ground.

"Yes...*oh Great Ray*..." It was a choked cry of need.

Her warmth was ripped away from Thanael, who listened, hearing the sounds of the woman's cunt being penetrated, the slide of a hard cock into a wet and wanting passage quite unmistakable. He heard her whimper with delight as she was thoroughly fucked, the slamming of flesh against flesh, balls against cunt, male against female, clear as day to his mind.

Nora whimpered too, he remembered, a not dissimilar sound of pleasure. She made it seconds before she exploded around him, and Thanael wished for a moment that he was that man taking his woman, and that Nora was the willing recipient of his passion.

The sounds and screams next to him peaked and were followed by the trembling breathy silence of climax. He could imagine it, envision it in his mind's eye and envy the man. He'd forgotten the mouth so near his cock.

When lips and fangs slid over its swollen head, he jumped and clenched his teeth. He wanted to come, but knew the time was not yet...he hadn't suffered enough.

He was right. A hand clamped around the base of his cock—a strong hand which gripped him and held him tight. "Not yet, Thanael mine. But soon." The voice came from his groin, her breath dusting the wetness of the saliva she'd slicked over his length. "I want to play with you first."

He sucked in a breath as her teeth once again scraped over his cock. Would she pierce him? Suck his blood along with his come as he exploded into her mouth? Could he possibly survive such an extreme sensual torture?

She did more. She dipped her head low, pushed hard against his cock, and opened her mouth as wide as she could, enveloping his balls and holding them against her fangs.

Thanael's heart stopped and he froze. If she decided to slash him open *there*, he knew he'd surely die. He'd been lashed between his legs and had his balls teased and tortured in many different ways. But seldom did Raheeni men permit their soft sacs to be penetrated by a female's fangs.

His cock trembled, his pulse thudded and he awaited the Mistress's pleasure.

Gently, slowly, her tongue slid around his balls as they hardened and shrank toward his body. Then, equally slowly, she released him and returned to his cock, sucking it strongly into her mouth and squeezing the base tight with her clenched fingers.

He wanted to come. He needed to come. His fangs were fully extended, dripping onto his chest and he was sweating as she worked his cock with her mouth. Fangs

scraped the swollen ridges sending chills of exquisite delight darting through his body on paths of flame.

He was burning, freezing, dying and alive to every sound, every movement in the air around him.

The couple beside him panted and probably lay in a heap...maybe even watching as his cock was tormented and his body punished. The air was soft, wafting over his nakedness as he moved his hips in rhythm with the mouth sucking him. He could not touch her head as he longed to do. He could not sift his fingers through silky strands of hair and imagine Nora's head, Nora's mouth — *Nora!*

How he wanted her. How he wanted to come in *her* mouth, around *her* fangs, with *her*. His desire notched upward as he surrendered to his desire for her, aching with every inch of his being for this woman who had turned his carefully created world upside down.

As the mouth sucked harder, Thanael's passion grew. Lips moved, fangs grazed and his life passed in front of his eyes. His buttocks hardened as his balls nestled tightly between his legs and his orgasm crept nearer and nearer.

He opened his mouth and drew in a deep breath, accepting that it might be his last. He threw his head back, seconds from climax, and loosed a roar through a throat that had locked shut for too long.

"Nora."

* * * * *

The Raheeni Mistress was certainly in control, but there was still a part of Nora that functioned quite well within her. She had watched the proceedings with fascination, feeling the Mistress's arousal as clearly as she could see Thanael's.

The behavior of the other two Raheeni had aroused Nora, catering to the well-repressed voyeuristic side of her personality. Seeing the woman as she masturbated against Thanael had reminded Nora how alien these beings were, and yet how freely they enjoyed their sexuality and each other.

The blows from the lash on Thanael's buttocks had made her wince, and yet she shared the ache she felt within the Mistress and knew they both yearned for the same treatment.

In this species, as in Nora, the sting of pain lashed the level of passion, creating an arousal that surpassed any she had experienced within a "normal" sexual relationship. When the Mistress had taken Thanael's balls into her mouth, Nora shared the urge to bite, to tear into the soft and tender flesh and feed voraciously.

But it was Nora's shock that held the Mistress back from that very course of action. It was Nora's humanity that checked the savagery of the Raheeni woman and it was Nora's love for Thanael that overrode the urge to feed and destroy.

She could taste him, feel the ridges and veins as they dappled over the Raheeni tongue, and share in the uniquely delightful sensation of his cock tugging against fangs. She could even sympathize with the sharp need to pierce the silken skin and drink from the wound, to take *Arraho* from this most delicate and vital part of Thanael.

But when he threw back his head and shouted her name, Nora knew she would never permit anyone but herself to take that wild ride with Thanael. The love he felt for her pulsed around them both in a heated fog, blending with the lust that arced between them in sharp flashes of harsh desire.

"Thanael. Do you want Nora?" She forced the words from the Raheeni's lips.

"Yes. Oh yes." He sighed out his answer, body taut, naked, aroused and still restrained by his bonds.

"Do you want to live?"

"Only with Nora."

"Can you live with yourself?"

"Only if she is there beside me."

"She is."

"Where?"

Nora felt the Raheeni Mistress smile as she rose and lifted her hands to Thanael's face. And the next words were hers, not Nora's. "She is here, Thanael. She is me and I am she. We are yours. Together. All of who we are, who we will be." Gently she unfastened the blindfold and Thanael blinked against the sudden light.

"You must come with us, Thanael. You must take this hand and believe in our future. Can you do that? Can you leave your past here on Raheen? I can. Nora can. It's up to you now."

His chest rose and fell with his breaths as his wrists were freed and his ankles released. The other couple had left, and there was only Thanael and his Raheeni Mistress in the Glade of *Arraho*. Physically, anyway.

Spiritually, there were three of them.

And two of them waited anxiously for Thanael's answer as a hand was extended toward him.

He glanced down at the hand, then at the woman. He swallowed, his throat moving as he gulped awkwardly. "I am not ready to die."

Nora smiled and strength flooded her limbs.

"I know I can make a future with Nora." Thanael straightened, his luminous eyes lightening and beginning to shine.

Nora shifted, repositioning herself within the Raheeni woman—becoming the Raheeni woman.

"It will not be easy, but the two of us together will be an unstoppable force."

The transition was complete. Nora had taken the place of the Raheeni Mistress. Once again they were as they should be, part of each other.

"Then take my hand, Thanael. Let's go figure out our future together."

He looked at her and slowly smiled. "Yes, Nora."

Chapter Eighteen

Once again the darkness greeted Nora as she opened her eyes. Thanael was beside her, sleeping, but this time his chest rose and fell in a regular rhythm and he snuffled, a comfortingly normal sound.

He also displayed a prominently delightful erection beneath the purple sheet.

Nora grinned.

It *wasn't* going to be easy, he was absolutely right about that. But Nora knew that they had something special together that transcended their DNA blend, their heritage, their past and their present. They had each other.

Not to mention their shared preference for really, *really* hot sex. Nora licked her lips as Thanael rolled over onto his back, propping up the sheets with a very respectable woody.

For the first time, Nora consciously reached into the Raheeni memories inside her brain. There was much there she had yet to absorb, but the sensual images were prevalent, and she soon found what she sought.

Eventually she'd probably blur the lines between herself and the Mistress, and she looked forward to that day with pleasure. It was hard to believe she would have memories of a planet she'd never seen.

Gingerly she drew the sheet down Thanael's body, revealing the piece of obvious masculinity that pointed proudly skyward into the shadowed room. She remembered their interaction in his mental Glade, and reached for him, her hand curving in the way the Mistress's had, and finding the correct position at the base of his cock.

She gripped it. Hard.

Thanael jerked awake on a deep groan of need, his cock trembling and shuddering in her grasp as his hips thrust and his thighs tensed.

Nora hung on, refusing to release her hold. "Whoa, easy there big boy." She laughed aloud as he subsided beneath her, watching her curiously as her fangs slid free with the ease of experience.

"Mmm. Fffeeels fffffunny..." She lisped around the white blades lying across her lower lip.

Thanael tilted his head. "They're not for conversation." He looked down at her hand as it clasped the base of his cock so tightly, and his own fangs appeared.

"I know." Nora leaned toward him and experimentally nicked his shoulder, licking her way around the tiny drop of blood then sucking it into her mouth. As she knew it would, the wound healed and she felt the bolt of pleasure as it shot through Thanael to his cock. It matched the one that shivered across her skin.

He cleared his throat and smiled at her, raising one eyebrow. His thoughts burst into her head like sunshine after a shower. *Your turn. Give me your breasts.*

Oh yeah, baby. You want 'em? You got 'em.

Without hesitation Nora leaned over him, dangling her nipples just within reach of Thanael's mouth. The gleam of his fangs sent a ripple of excitement to her cunt and she knew her juices were already dampening her thighs.

Release me, Nora. I have control now.

Aroused by the heat that was suffusing her body, Nora obeyed, sensing that she had no further need to hold his climax at bay. He was awake, this was real, and he could control his own body. And most probably hers at the same time.

He proved he could by lifting her bodily off the bed and positioning her on top of him, no mean feat for somebody who'd just been saved from himself in a mentally stimulating sexual voyage to another planet.

Nora couldn't help it. She giggled. This was just too fucking *insane*.

Isn't it?

His thoughts answered her unspoken words, but the smile that creased his cheeks was reassuring. The heat in his eyes was even more so, and when he reached between her legs for her clit, Nora surrendered and closed her eyes, relishing the feel of his fingers against her pussy. *Wings?* The question followed a trickle of excitement that teased her spine.

Not this time. Just fuck me, Nora. Fuck me blind.

Okay. That she could do.

Her breasts dangled lower brushing his face and she closed her eyes once more, waiting for him to take the hint.

A sharp pain made her jump and cry out, and as she moved the fang through her nipple pulled hard on her breast. His fingers pinched her clit at the exact moment, and a silent shriek of exquisite pain flooded her body. Nora gasped as it vanished, healed by the hot tongue that laved her nipple and the fingers that smeared her own juices over her pussy and her clit.

She was wet and wanting now, moving her hips on Thanael's body, asking with each squirming slide of her groin for his penetration.

She was empty, needy, hungry for him, and she knew he could read her like an open book. There was no need for messages between them, mental or otherwise. She let herself sense his emotions, the pleasure he was feeling, his desire as it rose beneath her.

He hungered, and Nora realized she did, too. Once more she dipped her head and this time found a spot on his shoulder that appealed to her. She bit, more savagely this time, letting his blood flow in a heated stream over her tongue and savoring it. The finest wine never tasted so good, or caused such an instantly erotic reaction within her.

It was echoed by Thanael, whose shudder of ecstasy filled Nora's head and shook her body.

They were climbing higher with each bite, each wound, each drop of blood that passed so intimately between them.

Nora fed from Thanael's chest, while Thanael fed from her breasts and her belly. She slid lower, finding a juicy spot inside his thigh. Thanael flipped her over onto her back after that daring adventure and ducked his head to her pussy, almost throwing her over the edge by running his fangs over her clit and gently piercing a swollen pussy lip.

She screamed aloud at the savagely sexual pain, thighs spreading wide then clenching tight around Thanael's ears.

Now, Thanael. I can't hold back... Her mind cried out the words that her throat could not form.

Yes, now...

He rose over her and thrust his cock into her cunt with a mighty groan, filling her completely and forcing the breath from her lungs. *Fuck, yessss...*

Nora opened her mouth to drag in a breath, only to find her body encompassed by Thanael's arms. He drew her upright, impaling her thoroughly, keeping his length encased in her heat. She lifted her legs, sliding them around his hips and waist and pulling him into her even deeper.

Her arms went around his neck and he settled them both, nose-to-nose, fang-to-fang in this most intimate of embraces.

"I love you, Thanael." Nora spoke the words as she drowned in his eyes, pools of heated blues that would have shamed the most beautiful tropical ocean.

"You are mine."

It was a rather alpha response, which ordinarily would have gotten him a sharp rebuke from the independent-minded Nora. But as she stared at him, felt him move within her body and relax within her mind and soul, she knew he spoke no more than the truth.

She *was* his. Just as he was hers. They were uniquely mated, in a way impossible to describe and equally impossible to duplicate.

Her thoughts crossed the slight space between them and she felt his arms tighten as he sensed her emotions.

Then he began to move. His strength rippled through each muscle, each nerve, and Nora gasped as his entire body thrummed and pulsed in time with his cock. Small thrusts at first, just little retreats and advances, but enough to let her know that something wonderful was building, heating, tantalizing her cunt with caresses of silken velvety steel.

She was so sensitized that she lost track of who was feeling what. The trembling anticipation of her cunt became the swelling ache of need Thanael was experiencing, the gnawing sensation within his balls sending shimmers of lightning to her clit. They were one, moving faster now, hips pushing and retreating, flesh parting on a hiss of moisture only to rejoin on a river of desire.

Thanael's nails dug into her buttocks as he held her and moved her and Nora's hands clenched his shoulders with a grip that whitened her knuckles.

Their fangs were fully extended, and Nora knew hers ached with a fierce need for Thanael—for the taste of his blood, so sweet and wonderful, as it flooded her mouth and her soul.

Her orgasm was building, rising redly through her skin and followed by a singeing heat that flamed its way through her veins and arteries.

Thanael's fangs dripped burning juices onto her breasts and their movements smeared the liquid against their skin, adding yet one more sensation to this wild ride to oblivion.

I need...

Nora's thoughts fractured as the first small tremors of her orgasm began.

I know...

* * * * *

Thanael fulfilled his dreams as he fed from Nora and they claimed the heights of *Arraho*. Would it always be like this? He had no way of knowing. And at that moment, with the taste of her sweet and hot on his tongue, he didn't care.

The sharp rip of her fangs through his flesh sent him over the top and he exploded, drowning her cunt with his come and feeling every thrilling pulse and spasm they shared. It was incredible, a screaming ride into the whirlwind of ecstasy, and the indescribable mind-fuck that came from sharing it with one's mate.

Her body squeezed his cock, her mouth drank his blood and her heart and mind opened to take him as fully as her cunt.

For his part, he filled her with his seed and his soul, the one overflowing from between her legs, the other finding a new home within her spirit.

It was a give-and-take that defied description, a fuck that surpassed any he'd experienced, and it left him with the urge to weep tears of pleasure as hot as those that Nora's pussy shed on his cock.

When the last shudder had faded, the last wound had been licked whole and they'd collapsed, sated, on the bed, Thanael finally spoke. "*Holy shit.*"

Nora giggled. "For a super-intelligent intergalactic being, that was a pretty mundane comment."

Thanael grinned back, exhausted. "Yeah. Sorry. But it fits."

"I know." Nora snuggled down. "You know we have some decisions to make, Thanael. Tough ones."

He took a breath and blew it out from between his lips. "Yeah. I have so much to tell you, to show you. We have many things to work out, like where we're going to live, if we should stay here...oh, I have to show you my lab..."

"Excuse me?" Nora rose up on one elbow and stared at him. "Where *we're* going to live?"

"Yes. Is this house big enough? Should we buy another? What sort of location would best suit us? I mean, this one works for me, sure, but..."

He tapered off at the rather fierce glare he was getting from his mate. "Er...Nora? What is it?"

"Didn't you forget something?"

"I don't think so. What?"

"Like *asking* me?"

"Asking you what?"

Nora rolled her eyes and collapsed on the pillow with a groan. "I'm in love with an intergalactic asshole." She covered her eyes. "It's a universal constant. Males are jerks. From here to Alpha Centauri."

Thanael grinned. "Oh wait a minute...is it possible that I neglected to ask you to be my mate?"

Nora blinked. "Your mate?"

"Yes. You know the word? The person you share your life with? The one you feed from, in our case? The one who fucks you silly then brings you coffee?"

A snort made it quite clear Nora was listening.

He chuckled. "Nora, do I need to ask?" He reached out and stroked her cheek. "We share souls. We're a mixed-up crazy soup of races, species and genetics. And we're good in bed." He followed his words with a light kiss on her lips. "There isn't anybody else on this planet for me, but you."

"Awwww." Nora's eyes filled with tears. "You old smoothie. You convinced me." She ran fingers down his arms. "You're the only winged, mind-reading, blood-sucking alien I know who'll smack my ass and make me come like gangbusters."

"That's good, yes?"

"Oh yes." Nora snuggled close and closed her eyes. "I like this place. It's good enough for me if it's good enough for you."

Thanael settled them both beneath the covers, a feeling of deep contentment flooding his bones and matching the rare happiness that had percolated through his soul. "Anywhere you are is good enough for me."

"Right answer." Nora's voice was sleepy.

"I know." Thanael snickered to himself and backed out of Nora's brain as she fell asleep next to him.

Chapter Nineteen

"Thanael, you *can't*."

"Why not?"

Nora stared around her at the amazing underground laboratory her mate had created for himself. Some of the equipment looked vaguely familiar—there was a box that could be an electron microscope, something that might be a gene sequencer, and maybe a mass spectrometer.

But the majority of the stuff was all science fiction to her, as well it should be if Thanael was intent on doing what he said he would.

Creating a way to leave Earth.

He was staring at her, waiting for an answer to his question. *Why not?*

"Er...gravity?" Nora was completely out of her depth with anything related to astrophysics, space travel or Einstein.

Thanael shook his head pityingly. "You haven't a clue what I'm talking about, do you?"

Nora, who wouldn't have been able to find a clue with a clue magnet while standing under a clue tree if this sort of science was involved, snorted. "Of course I do."

Thanael stared at her.

Finally she threw up her hands. "Okay. Okay. I don't understand. It's way beyond me. Happy now?"

Thanael shrugged. "Look, I'm not going to give you a course in space flight. I am trusting that you believe I have the knowledge."

Nora nodded. "Sure, oh Winged One. You can fly. But leave Earth? Dude, your wings are going to get rather tired lugging around a couple of light years worth of oxygen and supplies."

Thanael drummed his fingers on a metallic plate. "You don't believe I can do it."

Nora rolled her eyes. *Men*. Winged or not, they still possessed egos the size of Montana. "Look, honey, I am quite sure you can do it. But...what happens if you do?"

"Huh?"

"I'm guessing you're not planning on building a big spaceship. That would sort of stick out like a sore thumb here in rural America unless you build it to look like a...a...grain silo." Nora paced the spotless floor. "So you're looking for something smaller. Something that will carry just the two of us." She paused and looked over at him. "It had better be for the two of us?"

"Of course."

"Good." Nora resumed her pacing. "But if you don't know where we're going, how are you going to know where to aim it? How to power it? I need *stuff*. How much stuff am I going to need? Two weeks? Two years? These are important questions, Thanael."

She came to a halt in front of him.

"Scared, huh?" He rested his hands on her shoulders.

She straightened. "Certainly not." There was a pause. "Okay. Yes. I'm scared."

Thanael let his mind caress hers in a sensual wave. *I will never leave you.*

She cuddled against his chest trustingly. "I know, Thanael. But I am scared of this whole space thing. Sure, I have a bit of Raheen in me, but that's more like being Irish on St. Patrick's Day. And I've fed from you which gave me wings to play with." She giggled. "I like them. I like what we do when we fly."

Thanael smiled too remembering the delight of shielding the two of them and making crazy love in a cloud lit only by the sunset. It had been—*magical*.

"But the thought of leaving Earth...Thanael, I haven't even dealt with the issue of my job yet. I'm still on vacation as far as they know. I can't just disappear, it would raise far too many questions."

Thanael rested his chin on his love's head. "Don't worry, sweetheart. We'll work it out."

She sighed. "I know. Together, there's nothing we can't do."

Thanael smiled.

* * * * *

Much later that night, after a bout of quite exhausting lovemaking during which Nora demonstrated that sex had no limits as far as she was concerned, Thanael crept from their bed and left the house, heading to his favorite spot in his garden where quiet held sway and the stars loomed large.

Nora slept on undisturbed, and he was glad she did. She had earned her rest and he needed a few moments to think.

He stared upwards at the small points of light that gleamed through the wisps of high clouds. He remembered the times he'd done this, stood exactly in this spot and stared at these same stars. He remembered the loneliness and the longings that had flooded him.

And now? It had all changed thanks to one brave human woman. His mate. His other half. The only person in the universe who understood him and loved him for what and who he was.

Who had given him the courage to forgive himself...no mean feat. And who had walked into a new life, a new reality, with nothing but her love for him to guide and to guard her.

She was truly one of a kind. And this was her home world.

Did he have the right to ask her to leave it with him? Did he, when all the chips were down, did he really want to leave this planet himself?

Thanael Tanner stared at the sky and waited for the longings to begin. But they were silent now. There was no voice whispering words of challenge, of escape, of longing for the void. No urge to rush onward with his work, design his own ship and run away from himself once more.

The scars on his soul had been healed by the love of his mate.

And he knew, in that instant, that he was now standing on *his* home world. He need look no further. This one held everything he'd ever want.

It held Nora.

* * * * *

Several months later

"Special Agent Nora Tanner. How can I help you?"

Nora frowned at nothing as she listened to the voice on the other end of the phone. "Ma'am, I..." She swallowed. "Ma'am, if you'd just let me..." She pinched the bridge of her nose. "Yes, ma'am. I understand. That is your right, of course." She hung up the phone. "And fuck you too."

"Another disgruntled customer?" Keith grinned at her from across the desk.

"She doesn't understand why her boyfriend's being booked for interstate transportation of a controlled substance. She swears the pills were for her sick aunt. Just like he did."

"But it wasn't until that husband of yours talked to him that we found out her aunt was selling them or something?"

Nora nodded. "Yup."

"He reads minds or what?" Keith tilted his head.

"Something like that."

"Well, it's damned handy having a really good consultant psychologist on call, even if we did think he was into some kinky shit. Remember that, Nora? You figured you'd have to get some leather gear." Keith chuckled.

Nora chuckled too. For somebody who had been tied with leather, lashed with leather and loved with leather only the night before, she remained remarkably calm. "I remember. We didn't know it was all research for a book. We do now."

"And marrying into the FBI gave him the perfect chance for more research and us the chance to get a damn good psychologist at our beck and call. It worked out for the best all around, didn't it?" Keith leaned back in his chair contentedly.

"It sure did." Nora straightened her desk and put the last remaining file back in a drawer for the next day. "Oh—Keith?"

"Yeah?" He locked his desk.

"Take some flowers home tonight."

"Huh?"

"Trust me on this. I have a hunch. You know, that woman's intuition thing. Just take flowers home, okay? What's it gonna cost you to stop off and grab some?"

"Uhh..." Keith looked puzzled. "How come?"

"I have a feeling, that's all. Just a feeling. Hey, worst comes to worst..." Nora stood and smiled at Keith. "You make your wife happy and you get lucky. Win-win, babe."

"Well, I guess..." Keith blinked and nodded. "Okay. I'll go with your gut." He grabbed his jacket and waved. "See you tomorrow."

Nora chuckled. Her "little bird" had told her that Keith's family would be growing by one in nine months or so. A favor for her partner was the least she could do.

Perhaps she and Thanael might create a child at some point. Right now, though, they were both busy with FBI business and Thanael's books, and the life that had seemed to fall into place as soon as they decided to settle down together.

On Earth.

Nora felt a wash of affection flood her as she thought once more about Thanael's momentous decision to stay here. With her.

It had been the right thing to do. Nora knew there were times Thanael wondered about what lay beyond the horizon. She did as well. But those were the times she'd take him by the hand, lead him outside and strip them both naked. Then they'd fly and fuck high above the clouds.

They were aliens in their own world, and natives of none. But they were happy together, concealing their secrets and using their skills where they were of most use. Before long, Thanael's experiments would determine whether creating a child would be possible, what characteristics of his or her parents would be passed on, and whether Nora would have a "normal" pregnancy and delivery.

These were all-important questions, and Thanael was using the knowledge of his race to research and answer them. When he did...then their lives would change yet again.

It seemed constant, this ebb and flow of surprises and corners yet to be turned. She shrugged. *It's life, I guess.*

It's our life, honey.

Nora looked up as the words whispered in her brain to see her husband peering around the door. He grinned. "Ready?"

"How did the book signing go?" Nora hurried to him. "Lots of customers?"

"Yep. They had to order extras." He laughed. The life of a bestselling self-help author suited him. The experts applauded his conclusions, his books sold like hotcakes

and his picture on the dust jacket assured crowds of women at his personal appearances.

She hugged him, getting a rib-cracking hug back. "You threw away all the phone numbers you got, I hope?"

His laugh rumbled through her ear. "Sweetheart, they never touched my hands. I had the manager intercept any and all love notes and pass them over to the guy who was stacking the books. He was rather good-looking too, so I doubt anybody minded."

They left the building, checking out with the guard and removing their security passes as they got to their car.

Nora glanced inside to the backseat. "Flowers?" She turned a questioning eye on her husband as she slid into the passenger seat.

"Yep."

"So what's the occasion? It's not Thanksgiving yet, my birthday's gone, we haven't decided when we're going to celebrate yours, and I haven't got a promotion."

"Right."

"Oh dear." She grinned. She could read his thoughts, but sometimes they enjoyed the simple interaction of a husband and wife, no mental links involved. "I know. The plumber fixed the toilet in the guest bathroom."

"That would be a cause for celebration, but that's not it. You'll have to wait." He smiled over at her.

Nora would wait. Not very patiently, but she'd wait. Simply because it gave Thanael pleasure, and she loved him. And she'd tease him, he'd tease her back, and it would probably go on until dinner was ready.

Then, over wine, he'd share his news with that light in his beautiful eyes that only appeared when he looked at her.

Life was pretty damn strange, when you were married to an alien. But being loved by an alien? Aaaah. There was truly *nothing* like it.

Epilogue

On a purple planet with two moons, a little girl awoke in the middle of the night. Her eyes were an unusual shade of blue—not unlike her mother’s—and quite different to the rest of her race. She was an oddity, but a much-loved oddity.

As was her wont, she slipped from her bed and pattered on bare feet to the next room where she knew her friend Adella slept. Her parents were away for some kind of important business, so she and Adella had free run of the large home.

“Adella?” She whispered the woman’s name and touched her shoulder. “Adella?”

“Hmm?” Sleepily the woman turned and blinked at the girl. “Juli? What’s the matter, sweetheart?”

“Nothing. I had a strange dream, that’s all.” She clambered up onto the soft bed and snuggled beside Adella.

“You did? A scary dream?”

“No. No, not scary.” She sighed as she tucked herself into Adella’s shoulder. “I dreamed I saw somebody. It was a boy. He had wings and he was really, really tall, taller than Father, and his hair was this *really* funny color, all shiny, not like anybody I’ve ever seen here on Raheen.”

Adella was quite still. “An interesting dream.”

“Yes, it was. And you know something, Adella?”

“No, what, sweetie?”

“I liked him. And I think he liked me and he smiled at me.” Little Juli yawned and closed her unusual blue eyes. “Perhaps I’ll meet him one day.”

Adella stroked her hair as she slid back into sleep. “Perhaps.”

The End

About the author

Sahara Kelly was transplanted from old England to New England where she now lives with her husband and teenage son. Making the transition from her historical regency novels to Romantica™ has been surprisingly easy, and now Sahara can't imagine writing anything else. She is dedicated to the premise that everybody should have fantasies.

Sahara Kelly welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1056 Home Ave., Akron, OH 44310.

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