

THE SOCIETY 3  
**ENFORCING  
JUSTICE**



**BRENDA  
BRYCE**

# THE SOCIETY 3: ENFORCING JUSTICE

Brenda Bryce

LooseId®

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Published by  
Loose Id LLC  
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924  
Carson City NV 89701-1215  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

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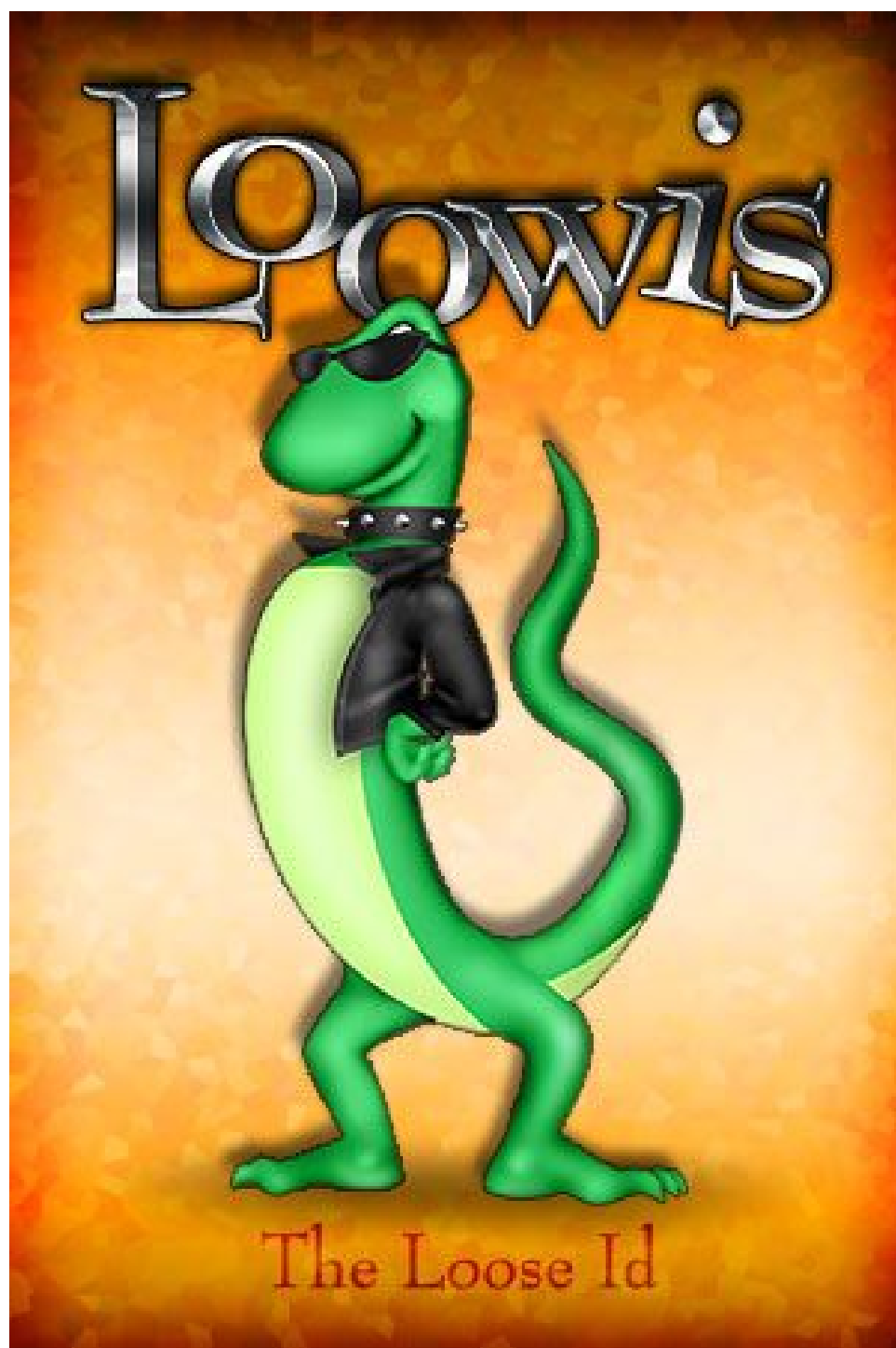
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ISBN 978-1-59632-426-8

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Catherine Gilbert  
Cover Artist: Laura Givens



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## Chapter One

Eyes. Glowing, red eyes.

They filled her vision and her soul. She knew those eyes. They were the eyes of her love. She had known this time would come. She had waited patiently for his summons and he'd called for her. *Finally.*

His voice whispered through her mind. *You must come with the others. They mean to harm, but we shall prevail. Our children ... all the children need you. You'll come to me and you'll save the innocents.*

*I don't understand. With whom must I go, and where? Please, I need more information.* Pleading with him got her nowhere. As usual, he spoke, and then began to fade away. *Wait! Don't leave me again. I need you!*

*I will never leave you. Come to me and we'll never be apart.* The eyes of her love changed to ice-blue. *Come with them, my love, and I will never let you go.*

The eyes floated deeper into the mist. Begging him to wait did no good. He continued to fade and soon disappeared altogether.

Chanda Petruse woke with tears on her face. The dream had been different tonight. For years, she had seen the interchangeable eyes of her dream man. She didn't know *who* he was, but she knew *what* he was. A vampire.

Wiping the tears from her face, she considered the instructions in the dream. She had to go with *them* to save the children. *Why do dreams have to be so obscure? Why can't they just say what they mean? In detail.*

Chanda sat up and turned on the light by her bed. Her room looked like every other unmarried person's bedroom at the compound. It contained a twin bed on a metal frame, a nightstand with a lamp, a desk with chair, a dresser with an attached mirror, and a closet. A

main switch that only the dormitory leader could touch controlled the overhead light. That light came on at five a.m. and went off at nine-thirty p.m.

This had been her room since the age of four, when her parents had joined the Pocatsu; a refuge for those people who knew about and feared vampires.

Her parent's fear had killed them soon after joining. The residents routinely went out on hunting missions, and they'd joined a party searching out a vampire's lair. Their jeep had overturned, killing them both instantly. Chanda had been left with no family except for the residents. They had housed, fed and clothed her, and taught her the basics that all schools taught. She had been trained in hand-to-hand and small arms combat. Seventeen years later, she was still at the compound, as well or better trained as anyone else living there, and had never seen a vampire.

Except in her dreams. He had been coming to her dreams for two years now, which is how she knew what he looked like. He was big and dark; black hair, olive-complexion, firm jaw, beautiful lips. Although his skin tone suggested that he should have dark eyes, they were the ice-blue of a rare diamond. She supposed anyone looking into those eyes might imagine he could freeze a person with just a look, but Chanda saw only warmth and love emanating from them.

Strangely enough, she'd never found the men of the compound attractive. There were some extremely handsome men living in the dormitories, and most of the people her age bed hopped or married. None of the men, or for that matter any of the women, appealed to her. There had been offers of sex or cohabitation, but she had turned them all down. Now she seldom received propositions. Everyone knew she wasn't interested in promiscuity, and consequently, she spent a lot of time alone.

She had always felt different from the others. They believed that all vampires were evil and should be destroyed, but Chanda had her doubts. When she'd been small, a book about modern witches had made the rounds. It said that as long as you don't hurt anyone you may do as you please, and it mentioned the witch's adage "An it harm none," which she'd taken to heart.

Most of Chanda's knowledge of the world had come from books because she'd never been off the compound. She knew that an entirely different universe stood outside the fences, and she was going to get her chance to explore it. But first she had to find out who *they* were and join them on the mission.

As she turned off the light to settle back into sleep, she felt a tingling sensation run the length of her spine. She analyzed the sensation for a moment before she recognized it. Excitement. She was actually feeling excited about leaving the compound, knowing she would never return. Chanda knew *he* would never allow it.

Drifting off to sleep, her last thought was to wonder what his name was.

\* \* \* \* \*

Shifting his position in the chair, Alexi Torkilov looked over at Johann. For two years Alexi had kept a secret from everyone, even his best friends. Johann Detriksson and Mykil Votad had been his friends and companions for centuries. Mykil, though, was still busy teaching his mate, Aileen, vampire basics, and had spent little time with his two friends lately. Alexi understood the need to spend time with one's mate. He felt that ache keenly, and he hadn't even met her face to face. Which brought him back to his secret.

Johann broke him out of his musings. "Are you going to the Gathering this week?"

"I have to attend this gathering, Johann." Alexi took a sip of blood from his glass. "It is there that I will collect my mate."

Johann sent Alexi a startled look. "What do you mean by that? The only females that attend are already mated."

Alexi studied Johann for a moment and decided that only the truth would suffice. "Chanda is human, but she will be at the Gathering."

"How is this possible Alexi?" Johann fidgeted in his seat. He always liked knowing everything that was going on, and when he didn't, he got antsy. It nearly caused Alexi to smile.

"The hunters know about the Gathering and are planning to raid the site to kill as many of our people as possible. Chanda will accompany them." Alexi waited a single heartbeat for Johann to come to the realization on his own.

"But that would mean ..." Johann stopped, unable to say the words aloud.

"It would mean that my mate is one of the Pocatsu. It's true. Chanda has spent the majority of her life on the compound but doesn't hold with their belief system." Alexi took another sip from his glass.

"Alexi, have you lost your mind? How do you know all these things about this hunter? All hunters are brainwashed to believe that we're blood-crazed killers and they would give their own lives to destroy us. You can't be serious about taking one to mate." Johann jumped out of his chair and began to pace.

Alexi watched his friend work off his aggravation for a moment. "I've been dreaming of her."

Johann froze in mid-stride and glared over at Alexi. "Since when? You haven't mentioned dreaming of a woman to me. At least, not since ..."

"I have spent the last two years since the trial of Owen McNeely dreaming of Chanda. At first I didn't know if she was real or just a figment of my imagination. The wounds I sustained caused me to dream lucidly, and she predominated. I did some checking and found out the dream girl is real." Alexi stood and walked over to the standing bar and refilled his glass.

"Two years? You've been dreaming of this hunter for two years and haven't mentioned it to Mykil or myself? No, wait. Is this the young girl you mentioned then?" At Alexi's nod,



he grunted. "I realize you like to keep things to yourself, but this is ridiculous. Besides, how do you know she has the gene? She might be a regular human, maybe a psychic. I think you're taking a lot for granted." Johann continued his pacing, but added wide arm movements.

Returning to his chair, Alexi sat and tried to explain. "I may be taking many things for granted, but know this, Johann, Chanda has the gene. Furthermore, she belongs to *me*. I don't care what happens to the rest of the party that she'll arrive with, but if a male thinks to take her before I do ..." Alexi paused and shook his head. When he looked up, Johann blinked, clearly startled. Alexi knew his eyes were no longer blue, but fiery red.

"I will need your assistance getting her out safely. But I must warn you; I'm not entirely stable when I think of anyone touching her. Full understanding of Mykil's reactions toward us when he first mated has come to me. I was offended when Mykil placed a barrier between his new mate and ourselves, even though we would never harm a female. Now, simply the thought of another male even breathing the same air as my Chanda is enough to drive me into a killing frenzy. I ask that you help me, but also to beware of my reactions to your nearness." Alexi bowed his head, and waited for Johann to give his answer.

Sighing heavily and shaking his head, Johann studied his friend. "You knew I would assist you before you asked. As for your warning, I'll try to keep my distance. However, if she tries to harm one of our kind, I don't know if the two of us alone will be able to prevent her death."

Alexi nodded his understanding.

"You know, you're going to owe me big for this one pal," Johann teasingly chided his friend.

"Yes, I know," Alexi answered him seriously.

Changing the subject, Johann asked Alexi how the Pocatsu's hunters knew about the Gathering.

"The Society's human spies have issued a warning. Didn't you get the memo? You should really check your e-mail more than once a day, Johann. A rogue vampire has informed the Pocatsu of the meeting. I don't think they know that females and children will be attending as well. It hasn't been done in over a half century, and even a rogue wouldn't want the deaths of the children. He has apparently been excluded from Society business for a while, but found out the location and the date of the Gathering before he went into isolation." Alexi gave Johann the packet of information that had been gathered, and it all pointed to an attack.

"But how do you know your woman will be part of the Pocatsu's force?"

"I've informed Chanda that she must join their assault team."

"How?" Johann sighed noisily, as if he were becoming exasperated at Alexi's short answers. "Exactly how have you informed her?"

“When she sleeps we share dreams. I told her in her dreams to join the squad and that she must come to me. She’ll come. It’s time, and she knows it.” Alexi calmly waited for Johann’s reaction. He didn’t have to wait long.

“Dreams? You communicate through dreams? This is getting to be too much for me. Dreams!” Johann paced for a few minutes shaking his head and muttering. Finally, he came to a stop and looked at Alexi. “Fine, I’ll assist you on this mission, and help you retrieve your mate. I’m not sure I believe it, and I sure as hell don’t understand it, but I’ll help you.”

Alexi nodded his head in thanks.

\* \* \* \* \*

The morning tone sounded and the room’s overhead lights blinked on.

Chanda stretched, still half asleep, got out of bed, and went to her dresser. She pulled out clean clothes, a towel, and her bathroom kit. The kit was a bag that contained soap, shampoo, toothbrush, dental floss, toothpaste, deodorant, and a razor. The same kit was issued to every member of the commune. If it weren’t for the last four digits of her social security number stenciled on the side of the bag, she wouldn’t know which one was hers.

She left her room and headed for the communal showers. The stalls were all full so she went to the sinks to brush her teeth. Looking in the mirror at herself, she saw a small, thin woman with long black hair. Her skin was pale for a woman of Indian descent, and her eyes were brown. High cheekbones and a strong chin caused her to have a stern look about her, and her unsmiling attitude perpetuated the idea. Her parents had both been natives of India, and unbeknownst to them, they had named her aptly. Chanda meant “fierce” and she did her best to live up to the name her parents had graced her with.

Finished brushing her teeth, she found a newly opened shower stall. She washed as quickly and efficiently as she did everything, and was soon out and dressed in her military style fatigues. Brushing her hair, braiding it, and putting it in a tight bun she accomplished by rote. She had tended to this task most of her life and didn’t need to see herself in a mirror to complete it. Rarely did she look in a mirror. There was no need; she knew what she looked like.

Leaving the shower room, she headed back to her room. Putting her sleepwear and her shower things away took but moments. She made her bed and looked around to make sure that everything was in its place. The inspectors would find nothing wrong with her quarters and therefore find no need to discipline her. She left the room pulling her boots on as she went down the hall, only stopping to tie them tightly and then headed to the cafeteria for breakfast.

While she ate, she thought about the dream man. Last night’s dream was different in that he told her to join *them*. She could only surmise that the commune had a raid planned, and she was supposed to go along. They were the only *them* that went anywhere. She would

have to speak to Nolan. Chanda hated speaking to Nolan. Overbearing egomaniac would describe him perfectly.

Nolan was the Force leader. Chanda's opinion was that he'd gotten the job through intimidation and terror, but if asked, he would say it was because he was the biggest and the strongest in the camp. Needless to say, he didn't appreciate it when Chanda floored him. He always came at her like an enraged bull, and she regularly managed to beat him in a fight, fair or not. He wasn't above cheating, but Chanda could counter all his moves. Because of that, he didn't like her, and she would have to give him a darned good reason for wanting to accompany the force on their next mission.

After a nourishing but tasteless meal, she went in search of Nolan. She found him in the arms room checking weapons.

"I want to come along on the next mission." Beating around the bush wasn't her style.

"Why?" He didn't even look up from his task.

"It's time."

At this, he did look up. "So, you think it's time, do you?"

"Yes."

"And you think you can handle it?"

"Yes."

He studied her for a few minutes, then gave his consent. "All right. You can come along. But if you fuck up, I'll kill you myself. Understand?"

Chanda knew he planned on making the attempt on her life anyway, so it made no difference. The intent was in the way his eyes flashed to her neck and back to her eyes. She understood what she was up against on the home front. She just wasn't one hundred percent sure what she faced on the dream man's front. The vampire from her dreams constituted the more dangerous threat and she knew it.

"Yes, I understand you. When?" Not that it mattered. She could be ready to go at a moment's notice. She only had one item of sentimental value, and she never removed it. It was against code to wear it, and even after repeated punishments, she refused to remove the gold collar with the ice-blue diamond that her parents had padlocked onto her neck when she turned four. And it was the very reason Nolan would try to kill her. The commune leaders wanted the valuable torque enough to avoid damaging it, but taking her head off would be no problem.

None of this bothered her. She didn't plan on spending any more time with the Pocatsu. There had been no previous escape for her. If she had tried to leave on her own it would have meant her death. No one had ever escaped the compound alive. Chanda would change that record. She had found a way out, and if the dream man didn't meet her expectations, she would leave him as well. But first, she had to get away from the compound.

Nolan finally deigned to answer Chanda. "Twenty-six hours. Can you be ready?"

“Give me the list of supplies I have to bring and I’ll be there.” She held out a hand, and when he reached into his pocket and pulled out a wadded up piece of paper, she took it and left the arms room.

Gathering the items on the list took a little over an hour. She spent the rest of the day practicing at the firing range and in the fighting ring.

That evening she ate her solitary dinner, took a shower and went to her room. Sitting on her bed in the lotus position, she relaxed her mind and body. Chanda knew she would get very little privacy anytime soon, so she took advantage of what she had while she could.

It took her longer than usual to clear her mind of thoughts and expectations. But once she did, she felt an internal calm envelop her that sent her floating. She barely managed to climb between the sheets before she drifted off.

Sleeping, she dreamed of him. Ice-blue eyes invaded her entire existence. Chanda could smell his essence of musk and male. She could feel the contours of his body pressing against hers, and could hear his husky voice calling to her.

*Do you come to me, my small warrior?* She could feel his breath on her ear and she shivered.

*I’m coming but I still don’t understand. Who are you?* She needed to know why she reacted to him in such a strange way when she had never acted this way before in all her twenty-one years. Her body tingled and she ached in places she had never given a second thought.

*You don’t need to understand. We have a battle to fight, but you must come to me if we are to win it. As to who I am; you only need to know that you are the most important thing in my existence. I’ll be able to tell you more when we are together.* His voice was dark velvet. As it passed over her, she felt the caress of it as if it were an actual touch.

The ghostly touch of a hand brushed her waist. It caused her to shiver and she couldn’t contain a groan. The wisp of feeling strengthened until it felt as if he were actually touching her. His hand slid over her stomach to her breast. Her back arched into the caress, and a gasp left her mouth. She could feel his lips at her ear, pressing, licking, sucking, sliding down to the curve of her neck around her necklace, repeating the exciting kisses there.

She knew it was a dream, but her body didn’t seem to realize it. Every touch, every kiss felt so real, she couldn’t keep still. His lips traveled from her neck, over her chin, to her mouth. Opening her lips to him, she felt his tongue enter her mouth. She could actually taste him. Wild and smoky. Exciting. She couldn’t get enough of his flavor. It made her heart pound and her breathing quicken in expectancy. Of what, she didn’t know, but whatever he was doing to her, she wanted more. Much more.

His fingers tightened on her nipple, tugging lightly. The sensation of white-hot flames shot from her breast to her clit. Digging her head into the mattress, her chest arched into his hand and her hips moved uncontrollably.

A whisper of a chuckle echoed against her ear. *Yes, you like that.*

Chanda moaned, unable to speak.

His hand slid down her side, causing ripples to erupt in her stomach muscles. Her lungs expanded with air when he slid his fingers between her pussy lips and touched her aching clit.

She had to bite her lip to keep from screaming. The lightning licked her body, she couldn't breathe, she was going to faint.

When he smoothed his finger over and over the sensitive bundle of nerves, her world shattered. She bit her wrist to keep from yelling her completion. Fast and furious, the waves hit her and slowly faded.

Her entire body relaxed, and she felt soft kisses to her neck and shoulder.

*You belong to me, Chanda. Never forget that.*

*But what's your name?* She could sense him leaving her. It felt as if part of her were being removed forcibly. She needed this small part of him to keep to herself. *Please, what is your name?*

As she woke to the sound of her cries she felt the touch of his hand on her cheek, and then his whispered words *Soon. All your questions will be answered soon. Just come to me, Chanda my heart.*

Touching her hands to her cheeks, she felt the tears trailing down her face. It had happened again. She sat up in bed, pulled her legs up, and rested her head on her knees. For seventeen years, since her parents had died, she'd been in complete control of her emotions. It was galling that a dream man could reduce her to tears just by leaving her alone every night. Chanda knew she was in love with the dream man, but that didn't give him the right to shatter the discipline she had worked so hard to build. Love was the only explanation she could come up with that encompassed all the feelings she had towards him. In her usual stoic way, she accepted this knowledge without argument.

However, the stress she had been under for the last two years she deemed unacceptable. Vowing to pay him back for every tear she had shed during that time, she relaxed back onto the bed and fell asleep. She remained undisturbed by dreams for the remainder of the night.

In the morning, she followed the usual routine. Got up, showered, brushed her teeth, brushed her hair, got dressed, cleaned her room and ate breakfast. This morning, though, she had the added chore of gathering the duffle bag she had packed the day before with the items on Nolan's list. Taking a last look at the room she had spent seventeen years of her life in, she closed the door and walked away with no regrets.

Chanda joined the group of people that made up the force. Including herself, there were forty-three people. A driver was chosen, and after stowing her duffle in the lower baggage compartment, she filed onto the bus with the rest of the troop. Finding a window

seat, she sat down and proceeded to look out the clear Plexiglas as they began their journey. The Montana countryside was lovely in the summer.

Passing through towns of civilians seemed strange to Chanda. Never having lived like them, she didn't understand them. They didn't have the structured lifestyle she had lived. The people she saw walked around laughing and doing exactly as they pleased.

Chanda passed the time on the bus going over her life and ignoring the other passengers. When they stopped, she got out, took care of necessities, and returned to her seat where she resumed the contemplation of her life. Thirty-two hours after leaving the compound, they arrived in the California town with the stadium purported to be the next meeting place of the vampire Society.

They stopped at a cheap motel near the stadium to spend the rest of the daylight hours. Chanda took her duffle and went to her assigned room, showered, and changed her uniform. Then she sat in one of the room's chairs and waited patiently for the signal that meant it was time to leave.

One hour before dusk the signal came. Chanda gathered up her duffle and vacated the room. Returning to her seat after putting her duffle bag in the outside compartment, she rode to the stadium in silence. The others chattered, excited about the upcoming events. The men and women of the force looked forward to making kills.

Chanda knew the only deaths tonight were probably going to be to the passengers on the bus. The dream man knew they were coming and if he knew, Chanda thought that the whole Society probably knew.

It didn't take long to arrive at the stadium. Leaving the bus parked a few blocks away, Chanda and the Pocatsu's people gathered their personal gear along with an M-16 that was issued to them. Chanda quickly broke down the weapon into several pieces, and with a canister of one thousand rounds for the rifle, placed the items carefully into the backpack she'd been handed. She adjusted the straps on the backpack so she could carry the duffle comfortably in her hand. Lining up, the members of the force were each handed the rest of the team's equipment. One first aid kit and three empty twenty round clips for each person.

M-16's could do a lot of damage to a body. Especially if set on automatic. A rapid-fire spray could empty a clip of twenty rounds in just a couple of seconds. With that kind of firepower, they wouldn't even need to aim, just point and spray.

If Chanda had been the type of person to show her feelings, everyone would know that she was as skittish as a cat on a hot sidewalk. But all she showed the others was calm acceptance of whatever was to come.

Quietly, they entered the stadium. Chanda received her position assignment and separated from the group. Reaching her spot, she set down the backpack carrying the canister of bullets and the rifle, and dropped her duffle bag. Squatting against the wall, she waited. For what, she wasn't exactly sure, but she waited for it in her normal calm, unemotional way.

Hours passed. Chanda began to hear noises in the main area of the stadium. Laughing and talking, men, women, and children passed her position. From her location, she could see that all the children were being placed in one room. She guessed it might be a nursery or daycare.

Chanda had never been exposed to children. The Pocatsu kept her away from them so she wouldn't be able to influence them. She had never been considered undisciplined, just not up to standards.

Eventually the stadium quieted. It wouldn't be long now.

Chanda heard a noise in the corridor, and adjusted her position to see what had caused it. Nolan was messing around with the door to the room the children occupied. Whatever he was doing couldn't be good for the children. *These must be the children I'm supposed to save. So be it.* Accepting that the vampire children had to live, she rolled her head on her neck to rid herself of stiffness. Standing, she heard another noise behind her.

Whirling, she confronted an unknown male. He wasn't her dream man. This one was big and blond and had black eyes. He didn't have the ice-blue eyes of her man.

When he made a move toward her, she assumed a defensive stance. "I'm not here to harm, and if you leave me alone I won't hurt you." Apparently trying to reason with the huge man was useless.

He charged her in the same manner that Nolan always did. *What is it with big men who think little means slow?* Shaking her head, she sidestepped his rush, and as he passed, hit him in the back with her doubled up fists.

The vampire slid across the floor on his stomach. Roaring, he jumped to his feet and charged Chanda again. Whirling around, Chanda turned to the wall and ran toward it. Nolan had completed whatever he had been doing at the door, and had moved away from the fight when he noticed it. Chanda had to find out what he'd done, but she had to slow the blond bull down a bit first.

He reached out a hand to grab her shirt. Chanda took a feet first flying leap at the wall. As her feet hit the wall, she bent her knees to absorb the shock and pushed herself away again. The blond man was right behind her so when she put her hands out, she caught his shoulders and used him as a pivot to vault over him. With a single flip, she landed softly on her feet while the startled man hit the wall face first.

She didn't look back as she ran for the spot where Nolan had been. Damn! He had planted a homemade pipe-bomb on the door. It was large enough to send a concussion into the room and eliminate anyone in there. Still running, she reached out, grabbed the bomb, and ripped it off the door. The blond had recovered and was charging after her.

Looking around she spotted a large metal trashcan near a closed concession stand. Ripping the lid off, she shoved the bomb deep into the mostly full can. Slamming the lid

back on, she picked the whole thing up and carried it behind the counter. She wasn't sure how much time she had, and while the bomb would devastate the concession stand, it wouldn't throw shrapnel far enough to hurt anyone or anything else.

She could hear the big vampire coming up behind her, and she was sorry that he would probably be a casualty of the bomb, when she heard a shout.

"No, Johann! She is the one. Do not harm her!"

The blond man skidded to a halt and she saw him turn to the man who had hollered. Chanda dropped the trashcan behind the counter and looked up. Her eyes met the ice-blue eyes that she knew so well. He was as handsome as she'd known he would be. He had black hair and a face that could have been chiseled out of marble. He was beautiful. He took a step toward her. Chanda held up a hand and shook her head. Her dream man froze and looked at her questioningly. The blond vampire started yelling about a bomb, and as Dream Man caught the gist of the explanation, his eyes widened in shock. He took one step forward and held out his arms in denial. Chanda saw his mouth open and shout *No* when her world exploded around her.



## Chapter Two

Alexi watched as the bomb went off behind Chanda. The concussion threw him back into a wall. Luckily, he didn't lose consciousness, and Alexi quickly jumped back onto his feet and ran in the direction that he had last seen her.

He could see Johann climbing to his feet and was glad that he lived. In a hurry to get to his mate, he didn't slow down to find out the extent of his friend's injuries.

The concession stand area was on fire and the remains of the counter barely identifiable. Alexi feared that the chances of Chanda surviving were low. *No! Damn it, I won't lose you now. Where is she? Where? Wait, what's that over there?* "Chanda!" He ran to the spot where he saw a piece of camouflaged uniform. He grabbed a huge piece of metal that lay on top of her and tried to push it off. Even with his extraordinary strength he couldn't move the debris off her.

"Johann, help me! I can't get to her!" Alexi strained his muscles trying to lift the metal. "Please Johann, hurry. She can't die!"

Alexi didn't see Johann join him but he did feel when the slab started to move. It wasn't enough! They needed more help.

It came. Many hands joined theirs to assist in getting the piece of metal off Chanda. It finally moved enough for Alexi to slither underneath it and pull out Chanda's still body.

When the vampires who had assisted him saw what she wore, they started to grumble. They didn't understand why they had helped save one of the enemy. And many of the raised voices said to take her away and destroy her as the others had been.

The information that the hunters would attack the gathering had given the vampires plenty of time to set up a counterattack. The hunters had been located and defeated easily. All of the Pocatsu members fought capture and were quickly destroyed.

Alexi had dispatched the hunter he'd drawn. He would rather have let the human live, but the humans had all tried to kill and Alexi had had no other choice but to give the order. Then he had gone in search of Chanda.

While Alexi picked up Chanda and stared the angry vampires in the eye, Johann explained what had happened from the moment he had come upon the woman.

Johann glared at the vampires surrounding him and stomped to where Chanda's backpack lay. "Look." He dumped out the broken down M-16 and waved the pieces at the vampires. "She never even assembled it. She didn't attack me, instead it was the other way around, and all she did was defend herself. What did she do instead? Grabbed the bomb off the door and risked her own life for the life of our children. *Your* children.

"And, for your information, she is Alexi's mate." He nodded his head at the many shocked gasps. Alexi was well favored in the Society. He had saved many vampires during his existence, and they were distressed that his mate would prove to be one of the enemy.

Johann stressed that she wasn't the enemy. "She is Alexi's mate and any who think to harm her will have to go through Alexi and myself."

Alexi was not surprised when Mykil Votad and his mate, Aileen stepped forward and added their support. They were good friends and as close as family. Chanda could be a demon from hell but since one of them claimed her as a mate, he would be backed one hundred percent.

While Johann, Mykil, and Aileen spoke for Alexi, he carried Chanda to a nearby locker room. It had all sorts of supplies that might help if Chanda still lived. Alexi hadn't stopped to find out.

Pushing his way into the room, he strode past the lockers to the small room that they used for first-aid. Laying her on the examination table, he was shocked at what the bomb had done to her.

She was covered in blood. Lacerations too numerous to count adorned every exposed inch of her. Fearfully, he placed his lips to hers in a soft kiss. He jerked his head back as he felt a puff of air touch his lips.

*She's alive!* He didn't have much time left if she was to survive. Quickly, he sank his teeth into her abused neck above her necklace, and drank from her. He had to transform her into a vampire immediately so she could heal or he would lose her to death. She had lost a lot of blood already and bringing her to the point of complete blood loss took only seconds. Ripping open his wrist, he put it to her mouth and coaxed her to drink.

When he estimated that she had ingested enough to start the transformation, he sealed the wound on his wrist with his saliva. Moving to the sink, he wet some towels, and took them back to the table where Chanda lay.

Using the towels to carefully wipe away the blood and debris from her face, he prayed to the Annunaki that he had been on time. That he had affected the transformation soon

enough to save her life. This beautiful stranger was his mate, and had been for two years. He wasn't going to be very happy if she died.

Alexi pulled Chanda to a sitting position and began to unbutton the jacket of her uniform. The door to the locker room opened and he looked up ready to protect his mate.

Aileen walked into the room followed by Mykil and Johann. Taking in the scene, Aileen shook her head and asked no one in particular, "What is it with you guys? Find a woman, turn her without her consent, and then the first thing you do is take off all her clothes."

Alexi pulled Chanda close to his chest and stared at his three friends. Mykil and Johann had stopped at the door and were watching him. Alexi's eyes had turned red and his teeth had elongated. He couldn't control his reactions to the men, but Aileen just strolled up to him and looked him right in the eyes.

"What's up, Alexi? You gonna let me help her or what?" Blinking her eyes innocently she smiled prettily at him.

Looking directly into Aileen's eyes he concentrated on her and not the men. "She needs to be bathed. I don't want her to know how badly she's been damaged."

"Right. I can do that. If you would escort the men out of the room, I'll get right to it." Aileen touched Alexi's hands to remind him that he had his arms around Chanda.

Forcing himself to pry his arms from around her, he carefully laid her back on the table. Running the back of his fingers down one side of Chanda's face, he looked at Aileen. When Aileen smiled at him approvingly, he pulled away and walked toward the door. He waited until his two male friends walked out before following them into the other room, closing the door behind himself.

While Aileen cleaned Chanda, the men stood in the locker room, looking at each other uncomfortably. Mykil cleared his throat. "So that's your mate."

Alexi blinked at the comment. "Yes, that is Chanda."

Johann rubbed his forehead. "How badly is she hurt?"

"I'm not positive, but I think she had internal injuries. I felt several broken bones, and the damage to the back of her head was severe. Her whole body is covered with cuts and gashes. If I hadn't initiated the transformation, my mate would most likely be dead by now." He looked over at Johann. "May I ask, what the hell happened back there? I finally find her only to see you chasing her, and then she blows up! No matter how I try, I just can't understand this."

Johann sat on one of the benches. "Alexi, are you sure this woman is your mate? She's some kind of maniac." He looked up, gaze earnest. "Honestly."

"Just tell us exactly what happened, Johann." Mykil shook his head and looked as if he were trying not to laugh.

“I was unfortunate enough to draw her position out of all the humans that came here. I walked up to her and she stood up, turned around and got into one of those oriental fighting stances. She said something, but since she was a human I naturally ignored her.” He paused when Alexi growled at him. “Stop! How was I supposed to know that ‘she’ was ‘her’? Anyway, she was able to defend herself. I went over to her and she knocked me to the ground. Seriously! She may only be about five foot two and weigh maybe a hundred pounds, but she’s a scrapper. So, I picked myself up off the ground, and when I tried to grab her, she climbed the wall and did some kind of flip thing right over my head. I don’t think she’s really human.”

“Johann, get on with the story before Alexi rips out your heart.” Mykil was laughing by this time. But Alexi was becoming more and more angry.

“Fine. The next thing I know, she’s tearing across the hallway. She grabbed something off the door of the nursery and ran toward the concession stand. The woman tossed the thing into the can and put the can behind the counter. I didn’t realize what the hell it was until too late. I tried to warn you about the bomb. You know I did. You shouted and everything exploded. That’s all I know.” Johann shook his head and rubbed his forehead. “I have such a headache.”

“She saved the children just like the dream said.” Alexi blinked slowly, shocked.

Both men looked at Alexi questioningly.

“Chanda and I have been sharing dreams for about two years now. Just after Mykil mated with Aileen, as a matter of fact. Recently though, I’ve been telling her in the dreams that the time had come for her to join me and that she had to save the children. I didn’t know what that meant until just now.” Alexi stood and strode toward the door of the examination room. He knocked lightly and waited until Aileen opened it. “May I come back in?”

He needed to be near Chanda. The closed door made him uncomfortable. Aileen opened the door wider and stepped back. Chanda lay on the table, clean now and dressed in an oversized t-shirt and some athletic shorts that Aileen must have found in the room. Her hair was still a tangled mess though. Aileen had a hairbrush in her hand and had been about to use it on Chanda’s hair.

Alexi took the brush out of Aileen’s hand. “I will finish her hair if you don’t mind.”

Aileen seemed to understand Alexi’s need to be with his mate when she woke. “I don’t think she’ll be out much longer. She started to stir as I dressed her.”

Alexi nodded his head to show that he had heard her, and sat down on the exam table by Chanda’s shoulder. Carefully he picked up her head and placed it on his lap, then pulled the pins and rubber band out of her hair, spreading the satin length out on his lap.

He didn’t look up as Aileen left the room and closed the door behind her. All of his attention stayed riveted on the woman whom he had made his mate.

"Whoever that girl is, she's been abused." Aileen stomped into the room and began to pace. "Someone's hurt her, and it's been going on for a very long time."

"What do you mean, love?" Mykil watched his mate carefully. She had the emotional control of an infant and he didn't want her to create havoc in her wake, as was entirely possible with a newly transformed vampire mate.

Aileen looked at Mykil, and to his dismay, she was on the verge of crying. "Someone has beaten her. She has scars on her back. Lots of scars, Mykil. Why would someone do that?"

Mykil went to her and pulled her into his arms. "I don't know, dearheart. There are very evil people in this world. The woman must have met a few at the camp she lived in. Remember, she was one of the force that came here to destroy us."

"Yes I know, but you didn't see her back." Aileen was unable to keep herself from crying. She turned her face into Mykil's neck and let the tears flow. "What will happen when Alexi sees her back?"

Shaking his head, Mykil was afraid to guess.

Coming awake, Chanda carefully scented the air. She smelled smoke, blood, burnt hair, and the subtle scent of a man. She didn't know him. Chanda knew the scent of every male she had ever come into contact with, and this was one she had never encountered. He smelled good. Very good. She inhaled his scent once more just for the pleasure of it.

Without moving or opening her eyes, Chanda did a reconnaissance of the area and of herself. She hurt all over, but she was alive, and she was no longer in the hallway. Whatever she'd been placed upon had padding, and her head lay on the lap of the unknown man. He, strangely enough, seemed to be brushing her hair.

"Chanda, you may open your eyes now. You won't be harmed."

His voice sent electricity down her spine. Unable to help herself, she opened her eyes and looked directly into the ice-blue eyes of her dream man.

Chanda could feel the tears well up in her eyes. A dream, it had all been a dream. Closing her eyes, she rolled her face away from the man and willed herself to wake.

"Chanda I'm not a dream. Come, test me." When she looked back at him, he smiled.

She realized that she could see his whole face, and his whole body. Chanda looked around. She could even see the room that they were in. In her dreams she had only been able to see his eyes and portions of his face, the rest of him had been shadowed and indistinct. But if this wasn't a dream, that would mean ...

Chanda launched herself into his arms and hugged him fiercely, afraid that if she let him go she would lose him. He in turn wrapped his arms around her waist and held her close. It hurt, but she wasn't about to complain.

“Oh, Chanda. I have needed the feel of you in my arms for a long time. They’ve been so empty without you. Chanda, my small warrior, we are finally together. Nothing will separate us now. I promise.”

After getting control of her emotions, Chanda pulled back in his arms and looked at his face and asked the question that had gone unanswered in her dreams. “What is your name?”

He laughed, a happy sounding, chest deep laugh. Chanda liked his laugh. It wasn’t snide or at the expense of anyone. He laughed because he felt like it.

“I am Alexi Torkilov. And you are my Chanda.” He continued to smile and asked, “Are you satisfied that the introductions have been completed?”

Chanda answered him tentatively, “I suppose so.” She said his name just so she could taste it on her tongue. “Alexi.”

The name whispered from her lips into his as he took her mouth in a deep, breath steeling kiss. His tongue entered her mouth and she could taste him. Hot, wild, sexy. For the first time, she allowed, no, *needed* someone to be a part of her. Slowly, he parted their lips and pulled away. Breathlessly, she said his name again. “Alexi.”

He groaned and Chanda’s eyes darted to his. “I didn’t mean to startle you, I just liked the way my name sounded on your lips. I have waited a long time to hear you say it.” Alexi brushed his lips across her forehead. “Come, there is much we need to discuss and if we don’t want to have to repeat our stories, we should join my friends in the other room and tell them all together.”

Standing, still holding her in his arms, he let her slide down his body. Every part of her body hurt, inside and out, but she could feel every hard inch of the man, and there were a lot of inches to him. He stood at least six foot three and he was all muscle. Not the bulky type of muscles like that blond giant had, but the tight muscles of a martial artist. The feel of him distracted her from the agony of breathing.

Memories flashed through her mind at the thought of the blond vampire. *The children!* Chanda looked for the door, and when she located it, tore herself from Alexi’s arms and headed straight for it. She had to find out if the children were all right.

“Chanda wait, the children are fine. The blast didn’t get anywhere near them. You were the only one hurt in the blast.” He stopped her headlong flight with a hand to her arm. “Come to think on it, we need to discuss that bomb and what you were doing, other than blowing yourself to kingdom come with it. The images of the explosion directly behind you will never leave me. I’m absolutely sure of that.”

Chanda stopped and looked at Alexi. “You’re sure that no one was hurt?”

“Positive. But Chanda, there’s something I must tell you before we go out to speak with my friends.” Alexi ran a hand through his hair in agitation. “First, you were hurt badly in the blast. I’m not sure how you can move around even now. You must be in severe pain. To save your life I had to initiate the transformation. I have started the process that will turn you

into a vampire. You are mostly changed now, and only one thing is left to complete the process.”

Chanda stared at him for a moment and then nodded her acceptance.

“One more thing. Do you know how vampires mate?” When Chanda shook her head negatively, he went on. “We have to find a female with the Sumerian gene and turn her to take her as a mate. We are inexplicably drawn to our own mates, and when we were dreaming of each other I realized ...” He paused and took a deep breath.

“You realized that I was to be your mate.” Chanda stated it simply and directly.

“Correct. When I turned you, I essentially began the process to take you as my mate. I’m sorry that you weren’t consulted. I’d planned on letting you get to know me before we initiated the transformation, but you blew yourself up and I had no choice but to save your life. We have been connected for two years and if I lost you now, I would go insane. I have enough training in me to be able to devastate a huge part of any population I encounter. I made the decision to save you, and I’ll stand by that decision, but I’m sorry you weren’t consulted first.”

As usual there was no reaction. No reaction on the surface anyway. Under her expressionless face, her heartbeat had risen, and her mind processed thoughts at a million miles an hour.

“I’m your mate. Does this mean we’re married?”

“Essentially. Mating is permanent. No divorces. Only death can separate us. If one dies the other should choose to follow. We are dangerous when we lose our mates. It’s one origin of rogues.” Alexi spoke slowly, pausing between sentences as if hoping for insight into her reactions.

Chanda blinked and turned toward the door again. “Fine. I can live with that, for now. Since I came here to join you in the first place ... Well, we’ll see how it goes before I make my final decision.” She didn’t wait for a reply, instead strode smartly out the door. Only her extensive training to ignore pain kept her on her feet. Her ribs hurt, her head felt as if it were splitting and everything ached. Show no weakness.

She heard Alexi chuckle as he followed her. Chanda stepped into the room, slid one step to the side of the door, and looked around. Before anyone could blink, she had taken a defensive stance and stared to the right. When Alexi looked in that direction, he made a curious humming noise.

“Johann, it seems my mate is leery of you. Why should she be if you have spoken the whole truth in your story?” Alexi had said it in a joking way, but seemed surprised when Johann reddened.

“I apologize, woman, for what happened earlier. I did not know that you were the one I was supposed to be looking for.” Johann stood stiffly at attention as if awaiting her verdict.

Chanda watched his reactions carefully and knew almost to the word what he was thinking. *These people are so open, how have they survived at all, much less centuries?* Chanda relaxed her stance slightly, and looked at the other occupants of the locker room. When she had walked through the door, the only thing she had noticed was the known threat. The big, blond giant. It figured that he was one of her dream man's friends. The other two in the room were in no position to be an immediate threat. A tall woman was sitting on an even taller man's lap. It would take them a moment to untangle themselves to be able to attack anyone other than each other.

Looking at the others she wondered if all vampires were so tall. She felt like a child compared to all these huge people. Chanda did not like feeling uncomfortable. Pain, she could live with. Embarrassment was another story.

Carefully skirting the room so that her back was always to a wall, she maneuvered herself near the exit. She needed to be able to escape if things turned bad.

When she caught her reflection in a window across the room she was shocked. Chanda turned to Alexi and asked him calmly, "What's this?" Indicating her change of clothes.

Aileen spoke up in Alexi's defense. "I cleaned you up and changed your clothes. The men were all out here, so it was just the two of us in the other room at the time. Your uniform was pretty much the worse for wear and it wasn't giving happy thoughts to anyone who saw it."

Chanda nodded. The vampires would not like seeing the uniform of their enemy and since she didn't plan on returning to Montana she didn't need it. And with the cuts and scratches that covered her body, she didn't guess there was much left to the clothing anyway.

"May I check on the children?" Chanda needed to see for herself that they were unharmed. "However, I would prefer that the members of the force do not see me. If possible I would like to be considered dead."

Johann spoke before he thought. "You are the only survivor."

"Pardon?"

Alexi cut Johann off before he could repeat himself. "None of the other force members would surrender. They all perished. I'm sorry, did you have friends on the squad?"

"No. I have no friends. All are accounted for? The squad was forty-three members strong including me. Is the count accurate?" She needed to know the exact numbers for her own safety. Chanda felt no remorse at the deaths of people she had known for most of her life. She hadn't cared for them in life, death was no different. But if even one person got back to the camp and reported that she was alive, she would be hunted until they had proof of her destruction.



"I will check the numbers if you promise not to kill me if I go toward the door that's beside you." Johann smiled at Chanda, but it soon disappeared as he realized that she didn't take it as a joke. She just nodded her acquiescence and stepped to the side, out of the way.

Johann went to the door and opened it. "I'll try to remember to knock before I come back into the room. She's liable to rip my head off before she knows who's coming in." He laughed, but hastened out the door and into the hall.

After Johann left, Alexi walked to Chanda and took her hand. "Come and sit down. You need to rest. You have a long way to go before you are properly healed. I've said that I'll allow no one to harm you. Everyone here -- in this room and in the stadium -- knows that you are my mate and any attempt to harm you will piss me off. Ask around, no one likes me to be pissed off at them." Alexi smiled at Chanda and ignored the blank faced look she gave him. "I'm going to keep trying until you feel comfortable enough to smile back."

Chanda nodded as if she agreed. She didn't, and wouldn't know how to relax enough to let her expressions show. Although Alexi pointed to a chair, she didn't sit down. She did walk away from the area near the door, knowing a better defensive area was across the room.

Aileen looked at Mykil. The movement caught Chanda's eye. A sort of silent communication waged between the man and woman until a green glow popped up around the woman. The glow startled Chanda, but she didn't let her astonishment show. She could handle unexpectedly glowing vampire women the same as anyone else.

"Alexi," Aileen started only to stop then start again. "Chanda, I haven't spoken to Alexi about what I saw when I cleaned you up and changed your clothes. I'm sorry, but it's better for him to know now and not be surprised at some later date." Aileen looked at Chanda expectantly as if she were hoping for something.

Chanda had no idea what Aileen was talking about and said so.

"Your back, Chanda."

"What about it?" Chanda still had no clue where this conversation was going.

Aileen sighed and turned toward Alexi. "She's been abused. There are scars on her back."

Alexi looked at Chanda. "Show me."

"It doesn't matter. They're from the punishments that I received for slacking or not giving them my necklace." To show them what she meant she touched her neck, the shirt covered the necklace and she didn't move the collar to show it to them. "I refused to let them cut it off me. It's the only thing I have left of my parents."

"Let me see your back Chanda, please." Alexi was speaking softly, but the anger simmering behind his calm façade could be easily seen.

Chanda shrugged her shoulders, turned to the wall, and pulled off her shirt. She used the shirt to cover her chest in a semblance of modesty, and tugged her hair over one shoulder, but when she heard Alexi suck in his breath, she looked at him.

He was staring at her back, but his eyes were no longer ice-blue. They were the glowing red of her dreams. Chanda started to turn around to face him, but he halted her by wrapping the fingers of one hand around her upper arm. He ran his other hand across her back feeling the rough texture and the permanently welted skin.

Alexi hissed through his teeth. "To do this kind of permanent destruction to a person, the beatings must have been repeated often over a period of years. Damn it. Even turning you hasn't healed these scars. All of your new wounds began to heal the moment I changed you, but these ... They would have had to have been very extensive not be affected by the transformation."

As he ran his hand over the scars, she saw something hit his shirt. When she looked down she saw a dark spot on his chest. Alexi raised a hand to his own face and when his hand came away wet, they both realized that he was crying. "What kind of animals could do this to such a small person?" When he ran his hand across her back again, he paused. "They're all old scars. They had to have been made when you were a child."

Chanda felt only confusion at his lack of composure. The scars were nothing to her. They had happened long ago, and she had made sure they hadn't continued.

Clearing his throat, he asked her, "What could you have possibly done to warrant this kind of abuse, Chanda?"

Turning to face him, she answered honestly. "I would not give them my necklace and I had a tendency to upstage my instructors. These are punishable offences. The canings and beatings stopped when I learned to keep to myself in all things."

Alexi further confounded Chanda when he took her in his arms and hugged her for all he was worth. It hurt, but Chanda had not been touched like this since her parents had died, so she stood stiffly in his arms and let him get it out of his system.

She wasn't exactly sure why he was showing all this emotion over disciplines that had happened years ago, but she was finding that she didn't understand a lot of things in the real world.

There was a knock at the door, and Johann entered carefully. He visibly relaxed when he looked across the room and saw that Chanda was wrapped in Alexi's arms. "I have some bad news. There are only forty-one bodies out there. Chanda makes forty-two. If she's sure the force was forty-three, then we have a missing human."

## Chapter Three

Pulling the shirt over her head, Chanda began asking questions.

“Have you looked for any other humans in the vicinity, and have you located the bus that we arrived in?” She headed for the door to look for herself.

Alexi pulled her to a halt before she could reach it. “Chanda stop. Right now, no one knows whether you’re alive or dead, and until we locate the missing human, I’d like to keep it that way. Let Johann’s team do their job. He’s the head of security for the Society, and he and his team have the job of seeing to the safety of everyone at this Gathering. If the human is nearby, Johann will find him. If not, then you can go look at the bodies to determine who we’re looking for. Acceptable?”

Skeptical, but willing to let them use their own resources for now, Chanda nodded her acquiescence. “The bus is a few blocks north. It won’t be hard to find if it’s still there.”

Johann left the room and Chanda could hear him bellowing orders. To whom, she hadn’t a clue.

Turning away from the door, she looked at the people left in the room. No one spoke for a few minutes. She squinted and posed the question that had occurred to her earlier. “What’s the green glow surrounding you, Aileen?”

Alexi jerked his eyes from Chanda and glared at Mykil. “I wouldn’t hurt her, Mykil, and you know it.”

Chanda turned her head toward Alexi, wondering what that outburst was all about. Alexi seemed to be full of overflowing emotions. *It can’t be healthy, switching emotions like that all the time.*

Mykil, waved a hand and the glow went away. Now however, it seemed he thought his own safety was in question. Chanda watched as he set Aileen to the side and out of harm’s way, then stood.

"I wasn't sure how you would react to the news of your mate's abuse. You'll find that you'll need to protect Chanda, as I need to protect Aileen. I worry about her safety constantly, in crowds, in bad weather, all the time. I become frantic anytime she's out of my sight. It's inevitable I worry that when my suddenly volatile friend finds out that his mate's been abused, he might erupt. The barrier was just peace of mind for me that the fallout wouldn't harm my mate. I hope you understand, but I'll not apologize. You'll learn soon enough." Mykil watched Alexi carefully, and relaxed when Alexi nodded, accepting the explanation.

Chanda stared between the friends. "She can't protect herself?"

Every eye turned to her.

"She's not helpless. Can't she be trusted with her own safety?"

Aileen laughed, startling Chanda. "I'm not helpless, Chanda, but when it comes to mates, these guys are old fashioned and think of us as ... hmm, not wimpy, but not as capable as they are."

"But ..."

Shaking her head, Aileen cut in. "Might as well get used to it. They're rather neanderthalistic in their ways."

Chanda stared down at the floor trying to process this information. She was perfectly capable of taking care of herself. After finally obtaining a measure of freedom, she wasn't going to relinquish it easily. It could be a cause of contention between her and Alexi.

Alexi nodded at Mykil and smiled. "I understand about the barrier. It was a bit of an eye-opener for me, watching her blow up. Chanda, promise me you won't do that again. It nearly killed me when I couldn't get to you."

"No."

Aileen snorted, but Mykil shushed her.

Alexi blinked. "Pardon?"

"I can't promise that I'll never do something like that again. If I find myself under similar circumstances, I'll most likely do the same thing again." Chanda didn't believe in lying, and had told him the full truth no matter the consequences.

"Chanda, it's my responsibility to keep you safe from harm. I can't do that if you're running around grabbing bombs off doors. You'll have to think of your own safety, before placing yourself in danger." Alexi stared at her a moment as if he were trying to will her to do as he asked. "Will you at least promise me to think of your own safety first?"

"No." Chanda stated calmly. She knew that she was angering Alexi, but would not lie. "Start as you mean to go on" had always been a motto that she had believed to be true, and she meant to do just that.

Alexi turned away from her forcefully and stomped around the room cursing.

*Mykil's right. Alexi is volatile.* She hadn't seen so much emotion out of any one person, in such a short amount of time, ever before in her life. Chanda wondered how he could function efficiently if he let his emotions control him. Her expression never changed as she watched him emote.

Watching him, she was silently amazed. If he were an example of typical vampire behavior, she wouldn't fit in with the Society any more than she had fit in with the Pocatsu.

She sighed very softly, before looking around the room. Chanda located a chair, walked over to it, and sat down. She was still very tired and she had to sit or fall down. Her head hurt miserably. She could sleep for a week.

While Alexi continued to stomp around and yell, Chanda considered her new situation. So, now she was a vampire. All her life she had heard bad things about vampires, and even with her "live and let live" philosophy, she realized she had some preset ideas about how vampires were supposed to act.

Now that she had met some actual vampires, she knew that they didn't conform at all to what she had been told or had imagined on her own.

Mykil was protective and clearheaded enough to make explanations to his friend so as not to offend. Aileen came across as kittenish, the way she was always touching her mate, but Chanda could tell that she probably had a latent stubborn streak. Johann was a jokester and not above tooting his own horn, but when it came to his job, his eyes had turned serious and he got right to business.

Alexi though, seemed to run exclusively on emotions. In the short time that she had been awake, he had run through a plethora of emotions. More emotions than she had expressed in five years. She wasn't sure that she could live with someone so volatile, but she would try.

Later she would be able to make a decision based on what she still had to learn of the real world. She knew that the world was money based and since she didn't have any ... she would have to do something about that soon.

Alexi turned toward Chanda and noticed her distraction. "Are you listening to me?"

"No."

Alexi stared at her, Aileen burst out laughing, and Mykil shook his head.

"May I ask why you weren't listening to me?"

Since he asked it calmly enough, Chanda answered. "You were blowing off steam so it wasn't imperative that I listen. When you burn off the excess emotion and are able to converse without them interfering, I will listen to you."

"What exactly do you mean, without my emotions interfering?"

"I have found that people who express their emotions all the time have very little control over themselves. I work hard not to let emotions control me. I need to have complete control. Always. The times that I lost that control, I was punished." Chanda would not give

anyone a reason to try and beat her again. She would fight to the death before she'd let someone hurt her again. Being strong meant that she was in control. Control was everything.

Alexi looked stunned. "I know from your dreams that you strive to be emotionless, but I hadn't realized why. And now you think I'm completely controlled by my emotions?"

Chanda nodded.

"Great. That's just wonderful. Until tonight I'd been a rather placid fellow, doing my job with the minimum of emotional effort. My anger is known to be quiet and fierce. Ask anyone."

When Aileen and Mykil nodded, Chanda wondered what had changed.

"However," he continued, "I realize I *am* acting highly emotional at the moment. I think I've had entirely too much happen in just a few hours. It isn't even midnight yet and already I've had a busy night."

He took a deep, steadying breath, and blew it out slowly. "Fine, I'm calm now. I ask you to at least think about your own safety before you go barreling into danger." He held up a hand to stop her from answering in the negative, as he knew she would. "I understand that you feel you must do what you have to, but I have to do what I need to as well. And what I must do is keep you safe. If you insist on endangering yourself, just remember that I'll be attempting to keep you alive. Do you understand?"

Chanda thought about this for a moment. "Yes, I understand. But I can't let innocents be harmed. Do *you* understand?"

Alexi ran his hand through his hair. "Yes. I understand."

There was a knock at the door and Johann strode in. His face was fierce and he walked directly to where Chanda sat. She stiffened and suddenly a thick golden barrier surrounded her. Before she had time to ask about it, Johann stopped in front of her, and unknowingly imitated Alexi by running a hand through his hair. He sighed loudly.

"My people found where the bus had been parked, but it's gone. The hunter that escaped left in it. We followed his back trail and it led from the bus to ... you'll never guess ... the nursery. We think that the same human who planted the bomb survived, and left on the bus." Johann began to pace. "I'll need you to verify who's missing, Chanda. Okay?"

Chanda nodded, stood, and headed for the door.

"Wait!" Alexi stepped in front of Chanda. "Just so you know, I have placed a shield around you that is similar to the one Aileen had around her. If you look closely, you'll see a gold shimmer surrounding you. This is for your protection, however you must know for others' safety, that you must not approach too close to anyone or they will get hurt. Only I can penetrate the barrier unharmed. Got it?"

"Yes." She nodded and headed for the door again.

Johann followed her and pointed the way to the bodies of the humans that had been assembled in one of the corridors. Alexi strode directly behind Chanda, and Mykil and Aileen followed Alexi.

Chanda looked at the bodies lined up on the floor. The vampires had done a thorough job in eliminating the human force. There'd been an attempt to place severed arms, legs, and heads, with their respective bodies, a difficult undertaking.

She walked down the line of dead, decimated humans that she'd known for most of her life and showed no emotion. There were vampires acting as guards over the bodies so no one could further damage the remains. The vampires who weren't of these forces muttered that they wanted to hoist the bodies on pikes and line the streets with them, as it had been done centuries ago.

Chanda mentally ticked off every face from her list except one.

"Johann, you're right. The missing human is Nolan, the leader of the attack forces. He's also the person who placed the detonation device on the door of the nursery. Come to think of it, he had the keys to the bus." She shook her head and looked at Johann. "He's going to have to be caught before he makes it back to the commune and informs the leaders of the failure."

Johann cursed. "Give me the details on the bus and the direction he would take to get back to the commune. We have to try to intercept the human before he can make a report to his superiors."

Chanda briefed him on all the details she knew, and Johann assembled a unit and left the area.

She wanted to accompany them, but knew she would not be able to keep up. She was becoming fatigued and the force would need to move fast.

She looked up when Johann returned. With him was another vampire. But this vampire caused a reaction in Chanda. She analyzed it and decided fear was the best description for what she felt.

Alexi met Johann and the newcomer a few yards from where Chanda stood. The three men spoke quietly for a few moments.

Chanda felt strange. The men's quiet voices rippled across her nerve endings in vastly different ways. Johann's voice was acknowledged and ignored by her senses. Alexi's low rumble caused a warm rush across her skin. However, the third vampire's deep voice created the same feeling she got when in the presence of the Command General of the Pocatsu. It wasn't a bad feeling, nor a good feeling, but a feeling of power, of unlimited control of everyone and everything.

She, who had never been afraid of anything or anyone in her life, was afraid of this vampire and she didn't even know who he was. Chanda studied him, trying to find out why

he would cause such a reaction. He was a tall man and very muscular, but as she hadn't seen any short males yet, she discounted his height as the cause.

Even if his long black hair and the color of his skin hadn't told her that he was of Native American descent, the feather in his hair would have. He wore his ancestry plainly for all to see, and he wore it well.

Chanda looked around. She noticed that every woman in the vicinity wore a colored barrier. Not one woman was without one. She would have to remember to ask Alexi about that later.

Wanting to sit down, Chanda looked around and noticed that there was nowhere she could rest. Not even a convenient wall to lean against, as the bodies were there. Sighing, Chanda decided that this wasn't her night. She looked up, intending to ask Alexi where she could sit, when she noticed the three vampires heading her way.

Leaching any possible expression from her face, she waited patiently until they stopped in front of her. The big Native American was in the middle, and he casually looked her over.

He was silent for a moment, then in that deep voice that caused her spine to ice, ordered, "Let's talk in the other room, I have questions, and you have answers." He turned and went to the locker room.

Chanda knew authority when she heard it. She entered the locker room seconds behind him. Alexi, Johann, Mykil, and Aileen followed them.

His eyes passed over the room before he crossed over to a chair and sat down. "Come, sit, and we will talk."

Chanda found a straight back chair and placed it so it was in front of the vampire's chair and facing him. She sat at attention and waited for his questions.

Alexi stood behind her and placed one hand on her shoulder. Chanda knew that she would have to face an inquiry -- she was defecting, and all defectors were heavily interrogated -- but Alexi was acting defensively. She could feel the discontent rolling off him.

The man in front of her leaned back in his chair and stared at her for a few moments.

"I thank you for the lives of our children." He continued to stare at her. If she had been the type to fidget, she would be doing so now.

Instead, she sat straight-faced and waited for the interrogation to begin.

"You are an interesting woman. Tell me, why did you endanger yourself for a bunch of bloodsuckers? I know you were raised by the Pocatsu and I know how they think of us." He continued to watch her carefully.

"I have never followed their beliefs. And no matter what anyone says, children don't deserve to die. Innocents should never be involved in battles." Chanda stated this calmly and clearly. She wanted there to be no misunderstandings on her part. This vampire looked like



he would just as soon kill her as look at her. And she hadn't escaped the compound to die because of a simple misstatement.

The vampire exuded power. He had the ability to sit quietly while giving off such an aura of power that it was impossible not to acknowledge it. The leaders of the Pocatsu could never manage to accomplish both of these things simultaneously. If the vampires whom she had met so far were a pack of wolves, then the man in front of her would be the alpha male.

"I am Shiye Moonshadow, and I am, at the moment, the leader of the Society. Anything that affects my people, affects me. This group that you come from have harmed and in some cases, killed not only men, but women and children as well. I will not let this continue." He paused and looked around the room at the assembled vampires. Cocking one eyebrow, he addressed the room at large. "Does anyone mind if I question her about the Pocatsu?"

Alexi stiffened in preparation to object. She could not allow him to do that and stood. "The small room is private."

"I will need Johann, but I would ask the rest of you to wait out here please." It was not a request. "Alexi, I will need her unshielded."

Reluctantly it seemed, Alexi dissipated the shield that surrounded her, and Chanda, Johann, and Shiye went into the first-aid room and closed the door.

The woman sat on the examination table. The leader's Guardian stepped to one side out of the way but where he could still see everything. Shiye stood a few feet in front of Chanda, looking around the small room. It would work for what he needed to do. He took a deep breath and began.

"Johann, I'm going to need you to make a thorough report of this meeting -- I wish it to be labeled as such and not as an interrogation -- I will want copies made in the rotating code." When he received Johann's affirmative nod, Shiye looked into Chanda's eyes. "I need to know everything you know about the Pocatsu. However, I don't question people as humans do. I take the memories directly out of the mind of the individual. It is time effective and I'm confident of getting the whole truth. The procedure doesn't hurt and as I have to delve into your whole life, you can be assured that any secrets you have will still be your own. Johann and I will know them, but we swore oaths when we took our offices that disallow mentioning anything that we may learn that does not concern the letter of our mind scan. Before I begin do you have any questions?"

"Yes, sir. How does this mind scan work, and what will be expected of me? Also, if Johann is taking a report doesn't he need a tape recording device or at least a steno pad?"

"I will place my hands on either side of your head, and stare into your eyes. All you have to do is stare back into my eyes and think about the Pocatsu. If you were human, there would be the possibility of a mind wipe, but a vampire is not affected by the scan at all if I so deem it. I tell you this to alleviate any possible worry due to rumors that might have passed

through the Pocatsu. As for Johann, he doesn't need anything but himself. He has a photographic memory which I use to its full potential. He will observe everything while I'm scanning you. When I'm finished scanning, he will scan me to get all the pertinent facts."

"Why don't you have him probe me in the first place, and eliminate the middle man?" Chanda only asked out of curiosity, not as a question to his command. He was glad of that.

"I need to know first whether I need to kill you or not. If you are not exactly who and what you say you are, I will eliminate you. Johann, as an observer, can't add or detract from this meeting. He can only chronicle what transpires. Everything that has happened since I told him to make a report will be in the accounting of this meeting. Not a word will be changed, nor will anything done to you be inaccurate in the slightest. That's why Johann will be the one to scan me. He will know everything I know about you and will know if I have altered you in any way. That's what you are worrying about is it not?" Shiye watched the woman and was amazed at her calm. He had worked for centuries to attain the exact discipline that she had mastered in under a quarter of a century. If she hadn't already belonged to Alexi, he would have considered taking her for himself. Providing, that is, she survived the scan. If she wasn't exactly who she said she was he would dispatch her as a threat. He would then have to deal with Alexi, but a movie made from an old television show said it best; "The needs of the many, outweigh the needs of the few." While he waited for her to process her thoughts, he remembered how much he had liked the original version of that television show and it was a shame it had been canceled.

Chanda looked over to where Johann stood. The Guardian had the blank, middle space stare that he always adopted when recording anything. The woman watched him for a moment, before turning back to Shiye. "He can either do as you say, or he's good at dissimulation. Since you have all the game pieces, I'm not in much of a position to disagree. However, is it possible for me to get a copy of the report?"

Shiye nodded and instructed Johann to make sure that Chanda received an official copy of the exact report he would receive himself. "Alexi can read it to you if you wish him to know the details, or you can take the code key from his mind and make your own interpretation."

Johann stood as still as a statue and stared into the middle ground not acknowledging the request at all. Shiye nodded, approached Chanda, placed his hands on either side of her head and stared deeply into her eyes.

He began the chant that would take him from his body into her mind. The spirits of his ancestors showed him his path and he began to float.

\* \* \* \* \*

Alexi glowered at the door and started to pace. If Chanda hadn't just told him that she considered him a victim of his emotions, he would have shouted curses at that door.

However, he was out to prove his control and settled on pacing and mumbling those same curses.

He wasn't sure he liked the leader being practically alone in the same room as his mate. The fact that Johann was in there with them lessened his fears somewhat, but until he had completed the mating, he didn't want Chanda out of his sight.

Shiye Moonshadow and Johann Detriksson hadn't found their mates, and while Alexi knew them to be honorable, until he could get Chanda into a bed for ... no, he trusted his unmated friend. And as for the leader, as long as he had held the position, he had only done things that were beneficial for the Society. Ticking off his head Enforcer would not be beneficial.

Alexi was still pacing and cursing when the door to the examination room burst open and Shiye stormed out. Alexi, Mykil, and Aileen watched as their -- calm under great duress -- leader walked over to a cement brick wall and punch it five times. Chips of cement went flying in every direction.

Shiye took a deep breath and leaned his forehead on the horribly misshapen wall. Softly, he spoke to Alexi.

"You will take very good care of that woman or I will kill you. You will make her laugh, and you will make her happy. Do you understand? I don't care how long it takes, I want to see a smile on her face." He had delivered this order -- and it could be considered nothing less -- without lifting his head from the battered wall.

No one had ever seen Shiye act out uncontrollably, and they were naturally confused and worried. Alexi asked the question that was on everyone's minds. "What happened in there? What did you learn that has you knocking the shit out of a cement wall? Where's Chanda, is she all right?"

"Alexi."

At the sound of her voice, Alexi whirled around, hurried over to where Chanda stood in the doorway of the exam room, and wrapped his arms around her waist. Picking her up as if she were a small child, he walked to the nearest chair and sat down. He didn't bother replacing the shield. She came out of the room alive so no one in this room would harm her now.

"What happened in there? Why is Shiye so angry?" Alexi had whispered into her hair and his hands tensed into fists and relaxed on her back. He couldn't seem to stop the reflexive motions.

"I don't know. I guess I was in some kind of trance or something. When I could focus, Johann was removing his hands from Moonshadow's head. Once he was clear of Johann, he gave me a strange look and left the room. You saw the rest." She wriggled a little as if to let him know that she was in his lap and uncomfortable under everyone's watchful eyes.

Alexi didn't take the hint. He just tightened his arms around her waist.

Johann stepped out of the exam room. His eyes glowed red and his incisors were fully extended. Looking over Chanda's shoulder, Alexi could see the big, blond, and seemingly very angry vampire, as he stomped in their direction.

Alexi jerked, surprised, when Johann pulled Alexi's hands away from Chanda's waist and pulled up the back of her shirt.

Catching the look in his friends' eyes, Alexi realized something. *As of this moment, Johann knows everything about my mate. Everything. For Johann to get this angry, that "everything" has to be worse than I had thought, and that alone is impossible. I've already seen quite a bit of Chanda's life while we were dreaming. At least I thought I had.*

He glanced down at Chanda. She'd closed her eyes in an attempt to ignore Johann.

"I don't understand what you're so worried about. I'm getting sick and tired of everyone wanting to look at my back. It's just a few scars for goodness sake. But you people act as if you've never seen such a thing."

"We haven't, Chanda. The Society would never abuse a woman or a child as you have been." Alexi still spoke in whispers, but everyone in the room heard him, and they nodded their heads in agreement.

Chanda pulled her shirt down and glanced at the others in the room. "I told you before that I wasn't abused, it was discipline."

Johann shook his head. "I'm under oath and unable to speak about any of the things that I've seen. The things in your mind are private, and I won't break my oath. But I've essentially lived your life, third hand through Shiye. I know every time you've been hurt, and why. *You* don't know why they hurt you as a child, but *I*, seeing it as an adult, know exactly why you were beaten each and every time."

"What ...?"

Johann reached under her chin and pulled the collar of her shirt down so that a necklace was visible to Alexi. Alexi gasped and reached for it. She had spoken of her necklace, but she hadn't shown it to anyone until now.

His voice wobbled just a bit as he stared at the piece of jewelry. "Chanda, honey, where did you get this necklace?"

Chanda reached up and touched the ice-blue stone in the center of the band. "My parents padlocked it on me the day they left on a mission. They died that day and I never saw them again. Why?"

Alexi glanced at Johann, and when his friend nodded his head, he took a deep breath and touched the necklace again.

"This necklace was stolen from me two centuries ago." At Chanda's gasp he slid his finger over the center stone, remembering it on another woman. "It had been in my family for millennia. We considered it a talisman. It had always rested at the throat of the matriarch of the family, and two hundred years ago my mother wore it."

“How ... how did my family get it? I don’t remember much about my parents or what they said about this necklace, other than I couldn’t take it off.”

“My parents were at their French estate in 1792 during the Revolution. The servants had all left but for one family. They waited until they had taken all the valuables out of my parent’s home, then, during the day, dragged my father and mother out into the noonday sun.” Alexi’s eyes began to glow red. “According to witnesses my parents were helpless and could not fight. They turned to ash in moments. The only thing left was my mother’s necklace.” He reached up and lightly touched the one around his mate’s neck. “This one. It disappeared that day with the family who had destroyed my parents. I spent the following years looking for this necklace, knowing it would lead to my parent’s murderers. After decades had passed I knew I wouldn’t be able to get my revenge on the killers, but I still looked for the necklace.”

“So the only thing either of us have of our respective parents is this necklace?”

“Yes.”

Johann spoke up. “I’m not supposed to tell you this, but while I was receiving Chanda’s memories, I witnessed the morning that Chanda’s parents padlocked the necklace onto her neck. The thing is ... they told her the story of the necklace. While Chanda may not remember the story, I do.”

## Chapter Four

Chanda turned in Alexi's arms to look at Johann. Her moan caught his attention and he glanced down at her. She had placed one hand on his chest and called his name softly.

Alexi tightened his arms around her. "What, sweetheart?"

"Something is wrong with me, Alexi." Her voice was barely a whisper. She carefully laid her head on his chest. She looked on the verge of losing consciousness and his assumption was strengthened when she rubbed her cheek on his shirt. "This material feels very soft." In her mind, she seemed to be focused on the texture of the silk, and the strength of his chest.

The ability to know what she was thinking frightened him. He hadn't been able to read her since she had woken up and become aware of her surroundings.

"Chanda, look at me." Alexi wrapped his fingers around her chin and lifted her face so he could look into her eyes. She could barely keep them open. He called her name again and when she didn't respond, he stood and lifted her in his arms. "Stay with me, Chanda. Hang on, I'll take care of you."

She drifted into unconsciousness with his arms holding her tightly to his chest.

Alexi gazed unseeing around the locker room. "Damn." She had lost too much blood during the explosion and he couldn't supply enough for her to recover. He gently laid her down on a nearby table. Closing his eyes, he reached out with his mind and searched for the nearest humans.

Four blocks away he found a grocery store that stayed open all night. There were several people inside or nearby, and he called to them. When he knew the seven people would arrive safely at the stadium, he opened his eyes and glanced at the occupants in the room.

“Johann. Go to the main entrance of the stadium and retrieve the humans I’ve called, please. There are seven, and I need them here as quickly as possible.” Without waiting for a response from his friend, he turned back to where he had laid his mate and tenderly ran his hand over her hair.

The others in the room averted their attention to give Alexi a semblance of privacy. He could hear them though, and while most of his attention was on Chanda, he monitored what they were doing as well. He still hadn’t completed the mating and until he did, he was like a dog guarding a bone.

Aileen asked Mykil what was wrong with Chanda, and Mykil responded. “She needs blood desperately. Alexi was not able to fully replenish the loss she sustained during the explosion.” Mykil smirked. “But he has apparently called enough donors to supply three vampires with an ample supply of blood.”

“Could she possibly need that amount of blood?” Aileen’s voice sounded worried.

Mykil shook his head. “No, dearheart, she doesn’t. Not even a severely depleted, mostly dead vampire could use the blood from more than four humans. And that’s if the vampire only sipped at each one. Calling seven humans is only a mate’s overreaction. I’ve said before, if you needed it, I would call every human within a hundred miles to supply you with blood. This is Alexi’s way of taking care of his own mate.”

Shiye was watching the interactions of the two mated couples. He had regained his typical sober expression and had gotten his unusually volatile emotions under control. The Leader didn’t seem comfortable being alone with them though. Alexi could tell that his shields were still fragile when a quiet thought slipped out of Shiye’s mental blockade. *Where is she and when can I claim her?*

Alexi looked up when Johann entered escorting two human men, four human women, and a male child into the room. Immediately, he deepened the mind lock he had on the humans. Ignoring the child because only rogues would feed from them, he called forth the first of the men. “Chanda, my small warrior, you must feed.” He grasped the man by his arm and sliced his wrist with a quick slash of his teeth. Alexi slid his arm under Chanda’s neck and lifted her high enough that when he placed the human’s wrist to her mouth the blood would flow down her throat.

Chanda didn’t fight him. Having only just regained consciousness, she hadn’t the strength. She knew what Alexi was doing peripherally -- he was feeding her blood -- but was unable and unwilling to stop him. Barely able to swallow the offering, she considered the taste. On the compound the food tasted bland and usually came pre-packaged. Occasionally they had fresh meat, but only if it strayed too close to the encampment. Candy was forbidden, but one time when she was about thirteen, she had stolen a chocolate cookie from the office of the camp’s cook. The velvet flavor of it had curled around her senses and had

caused her to hum just once out of her control. This human's blood gave her the same uncontrollable urge to hum.

Alexi pulled the man's wrist from her mouth and called for another man to approach. She could hear, but not see, as the person approached them. Repeatedly, she tried to open her eyes, but each time she failed. It was as if superglue had sealed them shut. A shuffling sound caught her attention as Alexi pushed the first man away, then reached for the second. A moment later, he placed the human's bleeding wrist to Chanda's mouth and she drew softly on the wound.

Chanda could feel her strength returning and could draw the liquid into her mouth and swallow with less and less strain. When Alexi pulled the second man away from Chanda, she opened her eyes and growled at him. His eyes cut to her and she could see her reflection in his eyes. Her eyes glowed red and her teeth were long and sharp. He simply raised one eyebrow and motioned for the first woman to come forward.

As soon as the woman got close enough, Chanda sat up and reached for her. "Wait, Chanda." Chanda's eyes snapped to him and she growled again. "You must not hurt her. Be gentle." Alexi spoke softly but his voice had an edge to it that warned Chanda to do as he said.

Nodding once, she carefully wrapped her arms around the woman and lowered her mouth to the vein on the side of the human's neck. Concentrating on keeping her hold light, Chanda gently sank her new, extra long incisors through the woman's skin.

Chanda knew she should probably balk at feeding on human blood, but she realized that Alexi wouldn't let her accidentally harm these humans. She needed to get her full strength back if she was going to be of any help to the Society against the Pocatsu.

Touching her shoulder to let her know she had taken enough from this woman, Alexi told her to lick the wound carefully and make sure she left no marks. Chanda did as instructed, and let the woman go. The second woman was walking toward her and just as carefully as she had the first, Chanda fed from her.

Moments after she started, she licked the wound and set the woman away from her. The wound healed almost instantly. Chanda couldn't ingest any more blood. She was sure she'd fully regained her strength. In fact, she felt stronger than she had ever felt.

Glancing over at Alexi, she felt an entirely new sensation blaze through her system. She watched as Alexi fed from one of the remaining two women, all the while keeping his eyes locked onto her own.

Chanda couldn't control the feral growl that erupted from her. "Take your hands off that woman, Alexi. Now!"

Everyone in the room froze. Aileen was immediately incased in a green barrier, and Mykil stood in front of her. Johann and Shiye placed themselves between Chanda and the other humans. Alexi slowly closed the wound on the woman's neck and let her go. She



wandered over to where the humans were and joined them. Alexi never took his eyes from Chanda's.

"I was feeding," Alexi stated calmly. "Earlier I gave you all the blood I could spare, and I was in need. Do you begrudge me the return of my full strength?"

Chanda snarled and showed her teeth. "You will not touch another woman. You belong to me, and I will not have it."

A startled, "Uh-Oh" came from Aileen. "I don't think we want to be here to see this."

Chanda ignored her. She fought unknown feelings. *I need control!* The emotions running through her system were ones she had never had before and were much harder to suppress. Trembling, a strange moisture pooled in her panties, and her breasts tightened and swelled. Chanda didn't know what to make of the rampant loss of bodily control. The harder she tried to stop her body from stiffening up, the harder she shook.

Breathing heavily, she bit her lip and called Alexi's name. "What ... Something's wrong with me. I feel strange, and I can't stop it." Chanda shivered uncontrollably, scared. "Can you make this stop?"

Alexi shook his head. "I can't stop it, just lessen it a bit for now. There's nothing wrong with you, it's a reaction to your first feeding. Your body wants to commence with the mating ritual. However, now isn't the time for it. We're going to have to distract you for a while."

Shiye stepped forward. "Let us free the minds of these humans and continue with this evening's activities."

Johann nodded emphatically, and turned to the leader. "We had more activities planned? I thought it was just take care of the hunters and that was it. How come I don't know about these other plans?"

Shiye put his hand on Johann's shoulder and led him toward the exit. "I made them up just now."

"Great. Will you please try to keep your Guardian informed when you make new plans? It makes my job so much easier," Johann grumbled all the way out the door.

"Where is the challenge in that?" Shiye asked him.

They preceded the humans out of the room, and with one last look, Mykil escorted Aileen out as well.

Alexi went to Chanda and pulled her into his arms. When she growled again he made shushing noises. "I said now is not the time. You can wait until later before you must complete the ritual. Although it's difficult trying to lessen your frustration when mine is being fed by yours, we will manage." She could feel him harden against her abdomen, and the excitement ratcheted up another notch. "No, Chanda. You need to relax."

Chanda tried to do as he said and relax, but his scent and his heat made her itchy. "What's wrong with me? I feel as if ants are crawling all over me." She looked up into his

face. "And it's worse the closer I get to you." She attempted to pull away from him, but he didn't allow it.

Tightening his arms around her, he spoke into her hair. "These feelings are natural in a newly made female vampire. It is a prod for you to consummate the mating. You are not ill, and you are not going to die. Your body is just making sure that consummation is guaranteed."

Chanda had been absently rubbing her cheek on his so soft shirt, but ceased when the meaning of his words penetrated her distracted mind. Tipping her head back she looked him in the eye. "Are you telling me that I'm sexually stimulated so I will copulate with you?"

Alexi smiled and nodded. "Exactly. I couldn't have said it better, or more clinically, myself."

Chanda grunted and pushed away from Alexi. "Now is not a good time to have sex. Nolan is headed toward the Pocatsu to report in. He'll state everything that he saw happening tonight. The Pocatsu will know that they have failed in the attack and will be regrouping for another. Sex will have to wait."

Alexi muttered beneath his breath as he let her go. "At least she didn't rule it out entirely." Then louder, "Let's go to the playing field where the Gathering is recommencing."

Chanda, still fighting the nerve rattling feelings, headed for the exit. Before she touched the door, she noticed a golden glow surrounding her. Glancing behind her, she cocked an eyebrow at him questioningly.

He casually shrugged and opened the door. "For anyone who doesn't know that you're mine."

Chanda fought the need to shake her head in exasperation, and stepped out the door into the hall.

They joined Mykil and Aileen in the first row of the stands. Chanda looked out onto the field and saw a platform with steps leading up to it. In the center, a large chair with arms, thick padding, and upholstery that looked like red velvet, stood alone. The chair had a high back and an emblem at the top portion of it that looked to be a carving of a full moon with only a quarter of it glowing, and a large, red 'S' on the darkened side of the completed circle. Alexi informed her that it was the Society's crest.

Vampires were everywhere. They were standing on the field in front of the platform, in the stands and wandering the halls. Chanda saw children scattered here and there, and guessed that their parents would not want them out of their sight after what had happened earlier.

A quiet voice that sounded like Shiye Moonshadow entered her mind.

*Please be seated and we will begin.*

The milling vampires immediately headed for their seats. While most looked toward Chanda and her group, none seemed inclined to join them.

Johann preceded Shiye onto the field. While Shiye climbed the steps and strode across the platform, Johann stepped in front of the dais centered with the chair, but stayed at ground level. Shiye stood in front of the chair, and waited for everyone to sit down.

When it appeared that everyone had taken their places, Shiye looked out over the crowd. His voice -- when he spoke -- was in no way amplified by a microphone or any other mechanical devices. He talked in his normal soft tone, but Chanda heard him as clearly as if he stood next to her instead of fifty feet in front of her.

"This night we were infiltrated by members of the Pocatsu who are bent on our destruction. I wanted to warn all assembled that one hunter escaped. The knowledge that we live has most likely been passed on to their leaders. You must take precautions." As Shiye spoke, many turned to glare in Chanda's direction. "I wish to publicly commend the one individual who did the most to save the lives of our people."

Shiye looked directly at Chanda and she felt his voice strongly in her head. *Come down here Chanda, join me on the dais.* When she hesitated, she heard his voice again. *Bring Alexi with you. You have nothing to fear.*

Whispering, she asked Alexi, "What do I do?"

He stood, clasped her hand and pulled her to her feet. "We join him on the dais." Still holding her hand, he walked with her toward the stairs that led to the field.

Ignoring the angry, startled gasps of the many vampires in the stands, they approached the platform and climbed the stairs. Alexi stopped when he had brought Chanda within arm's reach of Shiye. Alexi and Shiye looked into each other's eyes and Chanda could only surmise Shiye was speaking to Alexi silently. The shield surrounding Chanda dissipated, and Shiye reached for her hand.

Still fighting the uncontrolled feelings that made her skin tingle, she first glanced at Alexi and, when he nodded, put her hand in Shiye's. Without pulling her any closer, he turned her to face the gathering of Society members.

Chanda was afraid. The only times she had been brought in front of crowds she had been disciplined. She didn't think she had control of her emotions or her body enough to withstand any more pain silently.

Alexi's head jerked around to face her. Turning her face so he could look into her eyes, he shook his head. *Do you really think I would let you be beaten? Never again will anyone hurt you like that. I will destroy them first. Shiye is only trying to honor you for saving the lives of the children. Okay?*

Nodding her head she signaled her understanding, but she was still afraid and trying to not let it show. Some of the people in the stands grumbled their displeasure. She could hear bits and pieces of some of the comments being made about her. "Pocatsu slut" and "murderer" were just two of the least vile things she heard.

Shiye held up the hand that was not holding on to Chanda's, in the universal signal for silence. "I'm honoring the female who saved the lives of all our children. If it were not for this woman, we would be mourning the loss of our young. By removing the explosive device that had been attached to the door of the nursery and taking it to the nearest safe place for detonation, she forfeited her life for theirs. If her mate had not been near, she would have died."

Most of the detractors quieted, but there were still a few who continued spewing their filth. Shiye continued as if he couldn't hear them. "In recognition of her deeds for our people, I'm giving her a position with one of my security forces. The Guardian and The Enforcer will know which position she is better suited for, and will help her decide."

At this announcement, all became silent. One male stood and yelled, "No! Just because she did one little thing for our people does not make her a member of the security forces. She didn't go through any of the testing. While I -- a vampire born, and not Pocatsu scum -- took all the tests and didn't get a position. She doesn't deserve to be given a place instead of me." Shiye dropped Chanda's hand, knowing how his Enforcer would react, and immediately Alexi placed a shield around her.

"What is your name?"

"I'm called Fakir. Of the line Hamad."

Shiye looked at the offended male, and gave him two options. "Fakir Hamad, either keep your complaints to yourself, or prove that she is not the best choice for the job."

The vampire stopped yelling and looked at the leader. "What do you mean by prove it?"

"I mean, if you think that she is not qualified to take a position in my security forces, see if you can take her." Shiye pointed to the grassy area in front of the raised dais. "Right here, right now. If she is unable to best you in a fight, then she is not right for the job."

Chanda looked at the loud vampire who was looking back at her. She knew he was going to challenge her, and she prepared herself mentally. Interestingly enough, while she had been unable to master the emotions that had been besting her ever since she had drank the blood, now that she prepared herself for a battle, she regained complete control of her emotions and shrugged off all pain.

Fakir laughed evilly and nodded. "I *do* challenge the Pocatsu whore, but the Enforcer will have to promise not to raise his shield. It will have to be a fair battle, and he can't interfere."

Shiye nodded his head. "As it should be." He turned to the couple on the platform with him. "Lower the shield, Torkilov. Your mate has to do this herself."

Alexi was not a happy vampire. She could feel anger radiating off him in waves. Scowling furiously, he glared at his leader, and then turned to glare at her. She just looked at him sedately, showing no emotion. "This is what you want?" He practically growled her.

Chanda nodded an affirmative and Alexi dropped the shield. She jumped down off the platform and began stretching exercises. It was good that she had found an outlet for the emotions. She had no thought as to whether she could defeat the vampire or not. It never crossed her mind that she couldn't.

Fakir descended the stands while smiling at the males who gave him encouraging praise and patted him on the back. He strode across the field until he was approximately ten feet in front of her. Forswearing stretching exercises, he watched Chanda warm up with a condescending expression on his face.

With her usual stoic expression and rolling her head on her neck one last time, she took a couple of steps forward and stopped. He would have to make the first move. When he did nothing, she raised one eyebrow, and continued to stare at him. When he still didn't move, she sighed. "I've had a long day and I'm tired, do you mind if we get on with this so I can get some rest?"

Fakir shook his head at her temerity. "The Pocatsu bitch is ready to be beaten. This shouldn't take long, fledgling, and you may then go to your rest." His thoughts flashed across his face in a wicked smile as if he thought it was going to be easy to defeat her. She had as much as told him that she was unprepared for the battle. Tired and having only been changed hours ago, she understood how he might think she was at a distinct disadvantage. He smiled again, looking as if he were about to have fun trying to kick her ass.

Chanda watched the expressions running across his face. Once again, she mulled over the unfortunate habit these vampires showed at not controlling their thoughts. Everything was plastered on their faces for anyone to see. He was up to something and when he laughed then dissolved, she sighed, unsurprised.

*So, it's going to be that kind of fight. What is it with men that they can't fight fair? Oh well, here he comes.* As he began to materialize behind her, she spun on one foot and kicked him in the chest when he would have reached out to rake his nails down her back.

Fakir staggered back, looking stunned that she had known he would appear there. He jumped into the air and came at her with nails extended.

Chanda dropped to the ground on her back, and grabbing him by the lapels of his shirt, kicked her feet into his midsection. He flipped over her head, and into one of the vampires who had crowded close forming a circle around the combatants.

Fakir untangled himself from the hapless spectator and jumped at her again. The remaining watchers backed up several yards, not wanting to become part of the spectacle as the vampire who was hobbling off the field groaning and holding his midsection had been.

The vampire came at her seemingly in slow motion. Stepping to the side at the last second, Chanda caught him in the chest with her fist. He continued on by her, gasping for breath. Turning, she sighed tiredly. Fakir saw the sigh and took it as a blow to his fighting abilities. Screaming in anger, he attacked her again.

Waiting until he was directly in front of her, she stopped him with a punch directed at his face and heard his nose crunch. Following this with three fast punches to the same location, she consciously did further damage to his abused nose.

Fakir screamed and splattered blood all over Chanda. She was momentarily blinded when some of the blood got into her eyes, and she turned her head, blinking rapidly to clear her vision. He took immediate advantage of her loss of sight by wrapping his hands in her cascading hair and bringing her face down to his upraised knee. Laughing uproariously, he repeated the action over and over.

Ignoring the pain in her face, Chanda curled her hand into a fist and nailed Fakir in the groin. She gained her freedom immediately. Fakir let her hair go to grip the offended appendage and double over in agony. Ignoring the stifled groans from most of the males in the stadium, Chanda straightened and jump kicked him in the face, throwing him onto his back several feet away.

Wiping the blood off her face with the hem of her shirt, she approached the vampire who rolled around on the ground moaning, alternately clutching his face and groin. Once she got close enough, she reached down to pick him up. He gripped her arm and used her own move against her. He flipped her over his head with his feet. She landed hard on her back, knocking the air out of her lungs. As she lay there trying to catch her breath, Fakir jumped on her chest feet first. She felt several of her ribs crack.

At the next attempt at caving in her chest, she rolled out of the way, and he landed hard on the ground, feet first. Still on her back trying to breathe, she spun around and kicked his feet out from under him, bringing him down. Before he could regain his feet, she crawled over to him and, doubling up her fists, she pounded on his chest.

He was unfazed by the attack and punched her in the face to get her off him. She fell back again. Both lay on the ground attempting to catch their breaths. From the stands Chanda heard a child ask quietly, "Why does she fight like a human, Father?" The parent responded, "Perhaps she doesn't know any better. She has only been turned this night."

It felt as if a lightning bolt had flashed through her brain. *I'm a vampire. I have powers.* Ignoring the pain in her chest, she started to laugh. It was the first conscious emotion that she had shown in years. It felt good. She wondered what she was capable of. Ignoring Fakir, who had climbed to his feet and was slowly approaching her, she thought about all of the stories she had heard growing up on the compound about the mystical things vampires could accomplish. Fakir was getting closer, but still she ignored him and all the yelling vampires who were encouraging him to finish her off.

The vampire was only a step away from her when she shifted. Alexi almost passed out. Shiye had been holding him back from interfering in the battle. It was his job, his right, his responsibility, his ... well, he was supposed to protect his mate, damn it! And now she just up

and changed. He hadn't had time to teach her anything about being a vampire and now -- on her own no less -- she'd flexed her shape shifting muscle.

Fakir stopped in his tracks, apparently stunned. So far the fight had gone his way. Sure, he had a broken nose and a throbbing groin -- and even Alexi thought that wasn't a fair move -- but he was still kicking her ass. Now she had changed tactics. How had she learned that anyway? Desperately, Alexi looked around for her. She had hit the sky after taking the shape of a small brown finch. Her coloring and size were perfect to get lost in the night sky.

A cloud covered the stadium. Everyone present looked up at the unexpected anomaly. The cloud was low. Strangely low. It was centered *in* the stadium, blocking out even the bright lights that beamed down on the field. Lightning began to crackle in the cloud, flashing from one end to the other.

A lightning bolt rumbled around in the cloud picking up speed. It reached top speed, flashed down, and blasted a deep hole in the very spot Fakir had been standing. He had moved just in time. Two more bolts were rumbling around in the cloud when Chanda touched the ground in her human form next to Fakir. Gripping his arm tightly, she threw him over her shoulder. He quickly transformed into a rattlesnake, wrapped himself around her arm, and slithered his way up to her neck in an attempt to poison her with his venom. Alexi jerked in Shiye's hold, but the leader held firm.

Chanda narrowly avoided the sharp teeth, and shook him off. Collapsing in on herself, she grew feathers, wings and a sharp beak. Taking to the air as a beautiful hawk, she scouted the field for her prey. Sighting the rattler, the hawk dove towards it and missed. The rattler transformed into a large eagle and took to the air after the smaller hawk.

Airborne, the two clashed, raking each other with claws and beaks. Feathers and blood flew. The hawk fell to the earth. Chanda returned to her natural form but didn't rise from her downed position.

"Oh gods. Chanda!" He willed her to rise. He couldn't lose her.

The eagle landed unsteadily, and changed back into Fakir. The male cockily strode toward the fallen woman, already savoring his victory. "With the loss of your mate, Alexi, you will choose to join her and I shall have my chance at the Head Enforcer's position. Head Enforcer Fakir Hamad. I like the sound of that."

"I will kill you myself before I go, Hamad."

"Tisk, tisk. It's my win, Torkilov. You have no say."

Reaching down to get a good hold on Chanda's head to remove it from her shoulders, he did not notice when she reached her own arms up. Wrapping one arm around the back of his neck, and her other arm across the front of his throat, blocking his air passage, she stood and tightened the headlock she had on him. Alexi breathed a sigh of relief. She still lived!

Fakir was furious and it showed plainly on his face. She had bested him. There was no feasible escape from the headlock without losing his head. Literally. From this position, she could destroy him easily.

Alexi heard Chanda speak softly, so that her voice wouldn't carry to the other vampires. He could only hear her himself through the mate bond. "Do you concede the fight? Will you state that I have bested you?"

"Yes!" Fakir ungraciously ground out through clenched teeth.

Slowly she began to rise, but didn't release the tight grip she had on his head. "Say it aloud so that all can hear it." She instructed him.

"I give!" He hollered.

She released him and stepped away. Turning her back on him, she headed for the dais where Alexi impatiently waited for her to join him.

Alexi's relief was short lived. Fakir growled and lurched at Chanda. Nails extended to do as much damage as possible, he attacked. She stepped aside and knocked him to the ground. Placing a knee on his back, she held him down while she grasped his head with both hands.

Chanda looked up at the platform and into Shiye's eyes questioningly. Shiye gazed at the fledgling female and shrugged his shoulders, signifying that it was her decision.

Leaning down to whisper into the ear of the vampire, she murmured softly. "That was your last warning. You will receive no more. Next time you attack, I'll kill you. Do you understand?"

"Yes. I understand." He groaned out.

"Good." Chanda stood and again headed for the dais.

"Bitch, this time you will not get the best of me!" Embarrassed and angry, Fakir sealed his fate.

Chanda turned sideways and waited for his attack. Alexi heard her sigh at what she had to do. She took one step back, and when he was close enough, jumped into the air. As he passed by, she dropped down on him, wrapping her legs around his neck, and tightening them. Placing her hands on the sides of his head, she twisted. With a loud pop and a gurgle from Fakir, she broke his neck. Completing the twist, she pulled, and ripped his head off his shoulders.

Staggering, she dropped the severed head and stumbled toward the dais. Alexi jumped off the platform and caught her when she collapsed. He lifted her into his arms, and noticing she was unconscious, started the long walk off the field.

Those in the stands watched as the body of the defeated vampire smoked and caught fire from the inside. It flared hot and soon turned to ash. The same happened to the head. When there was nothing left of Fakir Hamad, all looked to their leader.



In a quiet but penetrating voice, Alexi heard Shiye inform the Society members of his decision. "That is why I want her on my security forces. In time, she will be unbeatable. I would have her work for the good of the Society, don't you agree? A four hundred year old vampire was defeated by a four hour old fledgling who hasn't completed the mating, and has had no training whatsoever." He laughed lightly and shook his head. "Remarkable."

Leaving the platform and his shocked people, the Leader followed Alexi and his mate. Johann, Mykil, and Aileen followed their leader off the field.

## Chapter Five

Alexi was thoroughly sick of being in this locker room. After making sure exhaustion and not her injuries had caused her to lose consciousness, he took her back into the infirmary and laid her on the padded table.

“Damn sick and tired of your being hurt, too.” He grumbled under his breath as he fetched a clean, damp cloth and proceeded to wipe the blood from her rapidly healing face. “Good thing you fed earlier or you wouldn’t be healing as well as you are.”

Placing a tender, slightly unsteady, hand under her shirt, he felt the progress of her knitting ribs. “Good, they’re doing just fine. They’ll be perfect tomorrow. I’m going to take you home soon and lock you in a tower. Of course I’ll have to build one first, but I’ll think of something.” Once he had cleaned the blood off her face, he waited for her to wake.

He heard talking in the locker room, but ignored it. Alexi wandered around the room gathering clean clothes, a towel and washcloth for Chanda. He also located a bottle of shampoo and an unused bar of soap.

Chanda moaned and opened her eyes. Rolling her head without lifting it, she blinked her eyes and seemed to focus on Alexi. He asked her a question but didn’t think she heard it. She shook her head slowly and closed her eyes. Alexi gently shook her shoulder and pulled her into a sitting position while trying not to cause her further pain.

“Chanda, you need to wake up now. If you go take a shower, I’ll take you home and you can sleep there. All right, now stand up for me and I’ll call Aileen to help you in the shower.”

“Why not you?”

“I’ve decided to have Aileen help you for now because you’re still in the throes of your first feeding, and I’m not going to complete our mating here in this damned locker room.” He pulled her to her feet where she swayed but was able to maintain her balance.

He assisted her to the door and he opened it wide. "Aileen, I would like Chanda to shower and then I'll take her home. Could you help her?"

"Most assuredly." Aileen wrapped one arm around Chanda's waist and, taking the items from Alexi's hand, escorted Chanda to the showers.

Alexi watched the women's progress until they were out of sight. Slowly turning, he ran one distracted hand through his hair causing it to stand on end. His eyes swept the room and settled unseeing on each of the three males that were there.

"I need to take her home. If you're not busy, I would like someone to accompany me. She can't make it on her own and I would like company in case something happens." His ice-crystal blue eyes hardened as he looked at his friends. "I'm not going to lose her to the sun when I've just found her." Looking directly at Shiye, he ground out, "And just so you know, I'll take her on as an Enforcer, but if *you* or anyone else needs to test her ..." He paused and growled deep in his chest. His eyes were glowing red and his teeth and nails were fully extended. "If *anyone* thinks to test her, I will rip their fucking hearts out. Is that understood? I will *not* allow her to be harmed again because some male wants to prove his dick is big. They will have to go through *me* first." By the time he had finished speaking he could barely be understood. Alexi's dominant shifter self was taking over beyond his control in reaction to the perceived threat to his mate. The wolf in him wanted to tear and rend any threat to her.

The men sat perfectly still, not wanting to aggravate the situation. Battling in his mind for possession, Alexi and his wolf-self fought for superiority. Softly, almost unheard, a voice caressed his mind. *Alexi, you must calm down. There are too many things for me to deal with right now, and you must assist me. If you're going to let your emotions rule you, you'll be of no help whatsoever.*

Immediately upon hearing his mate's voice in his mind, his wolf-self was soothed into submission. Alexi closed his eyes and with fists clenched, breathed deeply for a few moments regaining control. When he opened his eyes, Chanda stood in front of him; her hair was still wet and trailing down her back.

Chanda gazed into his eyes placidly. "While I was in the shower I could feel you losing control. It was an interesting sensation, but I would like to know why. Why were you angry this time and how was I feeling your emotions?" Her head tilted to the side. "And there was another being as well."

Alexi put his hands on her hips, lifted her off the ground, and being careful of her ribs, pulled her tightly against him. Ignoring Chanda's shocked gasp, he wrapped his arms fully around her and placed his face into the cleavage of her breasts. Inhaling deeply, he saturated his lungs with her scent. He needed her so badly, had for two years, and he had almost lost her repeatedly tonight.

Chanda was being buffeted by his emotions. They were so powerful she was feeling them as if they were her own, and no matter how hard she tried to repel them, she couldn't.

Realizing that the only way to gain control of her own emotions, she must first help Alexi to get his under control.

With her feet dangling in the air, she wound her arms around his neck. Running her hand soothingly down the back of his head and through his hair, she made soft shushing noises until he began to calm. Her hand stilled when she heard him make a rumbling sound in his throat. The rumbling stopped when her stroking stopped and resumed when she started petting him again.

Pulling back just enough to see his face, she saw that his eyes were closed and there was a small, satisfied smile on his face. *Well, imagine that. He's purring.*

Alexi pulled her close again and buried his face between her breasts. Chanda looked over her shoulder at the other occupants of the room. They were studiously ignoring the clenched couple. Shiye had pulled a book from somewhere and was reading, Johann was staring up at the ceiling and whistling, and Mykil and Aileen had turned their backs and were speaking quietly.

Johann coughed, cleared his throat, and took a step toward Alexi and Chanda. He stopped, then straightened his shoulders and approached cautiously. "Umm, Alexi, you said you wanted to get Chanda home before the sun rises. If you would like, I will ... uhh ... go with you and make sure you get there without having to stop for any reason. Sound good to you?" Raising his voice just a bit, he tried again. "Alexi? I asked, does that sound good to you?"

Mykil turned, and pulling Aileen with him, strode to the door making his excuses. "I'll call you tomorrow, Alexi. I have to get my own mate home. Nice meeting you, Chanda. Say goodbye, Aileen."

Aileen laughed, got her farewells out quickly, and the door shut behind them. Shiye closed his book and stood. "I suppose I must be going as well. There are things I wanted to go over with you all, but it can wait until tomorrow. I must close proceedings for this evening and inform everyone that we will reconvene tomorrow night. If you will excuse me." He turned toward the door and started in that direction. "Johann, I will excuse you for the rest of the evening, and will instruct some of your men to take your place in front of the dais while I end the evening."

Johann nodded, and called his own goodbye to his leader. Stepping closer to the couple, he reached out to touch Alexi's shoulder to get his attention. Alexi growled and Johann quickly pulled his arm back. Exasperated, Johann snapped at him. "Damn it, Alexi, let's take her to your house first, then you can cuddle all you want. But if you don't want us all to fry, we had best leave now."

Chanda looked at Johann, acknowledged that he was right, and placing her hands on Alexi's shoulders pushed back from him. He growled deeply in his chest, but Chanda ignored it, and tilted his face up to hers and stared into his eyes.

“Alexi, stop. Your emotions are out of control and I can’t deal with that. I don’t know *how* to deal with it. Calm down *now* and we’ll go to your house. This has been a trying night and I would like to get some rest. Is this where you want me to sleep or are you willing to do as Johann and I ask and take me somewhere safe?” Chanda considered for a moment, then hit him with the big guns. “Nolan knows this building. If he brings others back and we’re here, I’ll be helpless.”

Alexi shook his head in denial. “No, I won’t allow that. I’ll take you home where you’ll be safe.” As Chanda and Johann watched, Alexi wrested control of his emotions. Closing his eyes, he took slow, deep breaths and centered himself. When he opened his eyes, they were clear of the red glow. The normal ice-crystal blue had filled her thoughts and dreams for so long, but now caused a flutter in Chanda’s stomach that she didn’t understand.

Having regained tentative control of what she could only describe as his feral emotions, Alexi slowly slid Chanda down his body until her feet touched the floor. Groaning softly, he lowered his head and, almost touching her lips with his, whispered, “Do you have any idea how much I need you, my small warrior?”

Johann groaned loudly, rolling his head and eyes up to the ceiling, “Oh, gods! Not now. Please, don’t start this now! I really don’t want to watch. I’ll wait for you in the hall.” Johann stomped for the door griping the whole way. “Don’t keep me waiting until daylight!” He threw that at them just before the door slammed shut behind him.

Chanda pulled back jerkily. Johann had insinuated that she and Alexi were going to have sex! She managed to extricate herself from his arms, and stepped back with eyes wide. Fighting for control, Chanda noticed her heartbeat was rapid. Whether it was from fear or excitement she didn’t know, and was consequently having a hard time reestablishing her equilibrium.

“Don’t run away from me right now, Chanda. I know you aren’t comfortable with me as of yet, but my wolf-self is barely under my control. If you bolt, he will prevail over me and he’ll wish to prove his dominance over you.” Alexi’s eyes were locked onto hers, as if he were trying to stress the importance of what he was telling her. She could see the battle raging inside him for superiority by the flickering colors of his eyes. They kept changing from clear ice blue to glowing red.

It was a disturbing sight, and somehow Chanda was also catching tendrils of his barely contained emotions. She wondered what he meant by his wolf-self and what that had to do with being a vampire. In an attempt to stave off all the confusing feelings that were bombarding her, his and her own, she decided to deal with that question later and took a deep breath. “How far is it to your house, and what mode of transportation will we be utilizing? I can’t drive, I was never taught, but if we go on foot, I can average eight clicks an hour for four hours if I’m at full strength, but I am exhausted at the moment and can only guarantee about half that.”

Breathing deeply, Alexi stared into her face as if he were trying to further calm himself. "The house is about one hundred and fifty miles from here but I didn't bring a car."

Quickly converting the distance to be traveled, Chanda looked into Alexi's eyes and shook her head. "That's much too far for me to make. I don't think I have the strength to change either. I'm a liability. You must leave me and I'll find a place near here to wait out the day."

Alexi smirked and shook his head in what looked like humorous exasperation. "There is much that I need to teach you, my pint-sized pugilist. So much you must learn." He took the two steps that brought her within touching distance. "You are mine -- my mate -- and at this point in our relationship, it's imperative that you stay with me at all times. I may not let you out of my sight even afterward. I'll take you home, but you must trust me in the method I'm going to use."

Gazing into his eyes, Chanda silently deliberated. She understood her options were limited, and it didn't look like Alexi was going to let her out of his sight. She decided to follow her instincts and continue her journey with Alexi. "I'll trust you, for now."

Chuckling at her wording, Alexi took her hand in his and headed for the exit. "I think you are going to like this experience. You haven't had such a good time being my mate as of yet, but I plan to change that."

Johann was waiting for them when they stepped out of the stadium into the night. "Bout time you two got here. Let's get this show on the road." And with that grumbled comment, he floated straight up into the air until he hovered twenty feet over their heads.

Mouth agape, Chanda stared at the soles of the vampire's shoes. She felt Alexi's finger under her chin, and she snapped her mouth closed and looked at him.

Eyes twinkling, Alexi asked softly, "Ready?"

Chanda nodded slightly, and Alexi directed her to wrap her arms around his neck. He pulled her body tightly against his hard, muscular form causing Chanda to gasp.

Not taking her eyes from his, Chanda concentrated on regulating her breathing so Alexi wouldn't know how strongly being so close to him affected her. It was some time before she noticed that they were not on the ground anymore. If it hadn't been for Johann clearing his throat right next to them, she wouldn't have noticed at all.

"I have you and I won't drop you." Alexi whispered into her hair, causing her to shiver. "But you need to hold on tightly because we're going to put on some speed. That's it, just a little tighter." He ignored Johann's snort of derision, and smugly gloated in his friend's direction.

Soon they were streaking through the night, high in the sky. Lights from towns and farms flashed below in a blur. Chanda was fascinated at all that she could see. Her night vision was impeccable, and even as fast as they were traveling, she could pick out individual people if she concentrated.

“So, how far is a click exactly, Chanda?”

She blinked up at him, and answered him automatically. “A kilometer.”

“You could move pretty fast as a human. Imagine how fast you can move now.”

*Not very, right now.* She shook her head and resumed looking at the scenery.

They traveled silently for a time and Chanda soon become accustomed to flight. Eventually, she looked at her companions. “Where exactly are we going?”

Alexi gazed down into her dark face, caressing her with his eyes. “We’re going home, Chanda. It’s one of many homes that we own, but the one we go to now has always been my favorite.”

Johann heard their conversation and laughed. “And I know why it’s your favorite, Your Highness.” Johann continued to laugh loudly, but when Chanda asked him what was so funny, he told her to wait and see.

“Did he just call you Your Highness?” She asked Alexi.

“I will tell you that story later. Right now, just enjoy the ride.” He pulled her deeper into his warm embrace, and all too soon, he informed her that they were almost there.

Chanda looked in the direction they were headed, and stunned, her lower jaw dropped. Blinking once to see if it was an illusion, she was further shocked that it was real. *Gracious, it’s a castle!*

Sitting in a large valley surrounded by mountains was, quite literally, a castle. Not a huge one like Chanda had read about in books where hundreds of people lived and worked, but it was definitely a castle. As they flew closer, it was easier to make out the details. It was made of sparkling white stones and had two tall turrets and a closed portcullis. They cleared the surrounding high wall and landed in the courtyard.

Johann floated above them and asked Alexi if they needed further assistance. Alexi shook his head giving him a negative response, so Johann bid them good day and disappeared. Chanda was so distracted by everything she could see that she nearly missed the conversation and the departure.

“You live in a castle?” She continued to look around, awed despite herself.

“*We* live in a castle. Come, it’ll be dawn soon, and we need to be inside.” Letting her slide down his body until her feet touched the ground, Alexi freed Chanda from his tight embrace. Taking her hand, he pulled her toward the huge wooden doors that marked the entrance.

Chanda stared at everything with wide eyes. The courtyard was deserted except for a few domesticated animals that were wandering around. There was a big wagon filled with hay parked near a large fountain. Outbuildings, whose functions she could only guess at, were scattered along the outer wall.

Climbing a handful of steps, they approached the closed doors. Alexi pushed one open with the palm of his hand, and pulling Chanda behind him, entered the castle and closed the door.

The inside was magnificent. The main hall had towering ceilings, with huge drop chandeliers that glowed dimly in the darkness. There was a fireplace at the far end of the room that Chanda thought she could stand in with another person her size standing on her shoulders, and still not touch the top. Four of her could stand in it touching fingertips and maybe touch the sides.

Furniture that was sturdy but comfortable looking was scattered in a functional but remarkably casual way. A conversation area was centered in front of the fireplace and all around the large room were other groupings of chairs, couches, and tables. On the walls were paintings, shields, swords, flags, and many weapons of destruction from the past. Statues of charging horses, mounted knights, beautiful ladies, and mythical creatures lined the wall.

All in all, the Great Hall -- as Alexi called it -- was almost more than her eyes and mind could process.

"Come, I need to show you where we sleep. I'll introduce you to the staff after we wake, and you'll get to tour the whole place. For now though, you need rest." He led her by the hand to a steep stairway and they headed up to the next floor. At the end of a long hallway was a set of double doors that matched the entrance doors, only smaller.

The rooms she followed him into were vast. She could see a well-appointed sitting room and a beautifully decorated bedroom off to the side. When she turned toward the bedroom, Alexi stopped her.

"This isn't where we sleep. Watch carefully now." Alexi guided her to the foot of the high pedestal bed. Reaching over the footboard, he pointed out the crest that had been engraved into the wood.

"My crest. It's yours now as well, Chanda." The crest was a circle divided into fourths. The top left section had a carving of a fist holding a lightning bolt. Alexi pointed to it. "This is the emblem for my office of the Enforcer." He showed her the top right carving of a wolf. "We are a pack species, and this is my personal dominant shift ability." Bottom left was the full moon. "Our guiding light." And bottom right, an hourglass. "Signifying eternity.

"Each crest has been designed by its owner. These are the guides I live by." He ran his hand caressingly over the crest. "This is also the access panel to the lair. Observe. As I speak the words of the combination, watch which emblem I touch."

Chanda nodded and moved closer for a better view.

"I, the Enforcer," he touched the fist with the lightning bolt, "Will spend all eternity," he touched the hourglass, "Defending the pack," his touch landed on the wolf, "From any threat that may come upon us", he touched the wolf again. "May the moon be my guide," he touched the moon symbol, "for as long as it shines, it will be the confirmation," moon



symbol again, “of our unending,” hourglass, “strength.” He pressed hard on the fist holding the lightning bolt, and the bed rose.

Chanda jumped back, startled. As she watched, the bed on its pedestal, and floor below it, lifted and pivoted to the side. Where the bed had been was a dark, gaping hole. As she leaned forward, she could see that there were stairs leading downward.

“Almost there now. Let’s get you to the lair and you can get some rest.” He held out one long fingered hand and waited for Chanda to take it.

The word “lair” caused innumerable pictures to flash through her mind. She just knew it was going to be a dark, dank, musty smelling, drippy, rat infested cave. Then a horrible thought hit her and she couldn’t move.

“Alexi.”

“What’s wrong? Your face has become paler than before you fainted. Do you need to sit down?” Alexi took a step closer to her as if intending to catch her if she swayed.

“No, I’m fine. But ...” Unable to finish the thought without taking a deep breath for courage, she paused then continued. “Alexi, I don’t think ... I don’t think I can sleep in a coffin.”

“Our bed is a duplicate of this one.” He gestured toward the displaced bed. “I think I’ve only been in a coffin a few times and that was for transportation purposes. Before there were airplanes, we traveled by ship and that took time, so I sealed myself into a coffin and slept. Now that there are much faster ways to travel, I doubt you’ll ever be faced with that prospect.”

Chanda bit her bottom lip indecisively for a moment. “Are you sure? I don’t mean to question your honesty, but the Pocatsu said that vampires always sleep in coffins. We were told that there was a good reason for it too.”

“And what would that reason be, pray tell?”

“I was told in school that vampires slept in coffins so that if they’re attacked, the vampire’s human minions can remove him from the endangered area with as little fuss as possible. The caskets are supposedly impervious to light filtering in and they’re unable to be scanned even by x-rays.” Chanda shrugged her shoulders a little. “At least that’s what we were told.”

Alexi looked thoughtful for a moment. “You know, that’s actually plausible. I’ll have to take it up with Moonshadow and the scientists.” He watched as her eyes rounded. “Really, the lair looks remarkably similar to this suite. I liked the décor, and ordered duplicates for my personal use. Come, let me show you.” Alexi raised his hand and when she placed hers in it, he started down the stairs.

Pausing halfway down the short flight of stairs, Alexi reached over and pulled a lever. Over their heads, the bed glided back into position and plunged them into momentary

darkness. Fluorescent lights blinked a few times then burned brightly, illuminating the path to the bottom of the stairs and into a long hallway.

"I designed this tunnel after I saw the original Batman on the television. I thought it was exquisitely apropos." When he caught her blank look, he elaborated. "The Batcave? Does that ring a bell? No? Didn't you ever watch television?"

"There was only one television set on the compound, and it was used strictly for keeping track of the world news. I wasn't allowed near it. Even if it *had* been available to the troops, I wouldn't have been able to participate because of the ill will that the Pocatsu leaders felt toward me."

"Imagine, a child raised in modern times that has never seen a television. Well, no matter. I have a set in the lair and you may watch it whenever you like." Alexi waived a dismissing hand, and tugged her further into the tunnel.

Chanda could tell that they were going steadily downward at a shallow grade. If her internal compass was correct, they would soon be under one of the mountains that surrounded the castle. The walls of the tunnel were surprisingly dry. She had imagined dampness at least. But there wasn't even the sound of dripping as they continued along the path.

Reaching the end of the tunnel, they emerged into a large room carved into the depths of a mountain. Chanda let her eyes roam around the room and saw that Alexi had been correct about this room being a duplicate of the one upstairs. Right down to the fireplace and pictures on the walls, the room was exact. The sitting room had plush couches and chairs, and a large wooden cabinet.

Alexi told her that the cabinet held a state of the art setup. The one upstairs didn't have the stereo or viewing equipment in it that the one in the lair did. That one had items that better went with the time period portrayed in the rest of the castle.

Everywhere she looked items scattered around the room screamed comfort and relaxation. Wondering if she had ever relaxed, Chanda decided she hadn't. She'd never been able to let down her guard, because if she had, she would be dead now and someone would own her necklace. She strolled around the sitting room touching and examining every little detail. Soft carpet covered the floors and the walls had been painted off-white so that the room looked brighter than a hole in the ground should.

When Chanda asked about the lighting, Alexi pointed out the recessed setup. Mirrors placed around the room in strategic locations added to not only the size of the room, but also the brightness as well. Mirrors that she was mildly stunned to realize she could actually see herself and Alexi in. She'd been told that vampires were unable to cast a reflection in a mirror.

She felt Alexi's eyes on her as she accustomed herself to the room. "I hope you'll be comfortable here, if there's anything you would like to change, just let me know."

“No, it’s beautiful. Who takes care of this room for you? I know you said you had a staff for the upkeep of the castle, but do you clean this room yourself, or is there someone you trust to do it?”

“Very astute. No, I don’t keep the room clean myself. My duties as the Enforcer keep me busy so Terry comes in and takes care of me and my personal items.” Alexi smiled mysteriously. “I’ll enjoy introducing the two of you. He’ll be in this evening and you can meet him then.”

Chanda thought that over for a moment and asked, “He’s trustworthy, this Terry?”

“Completely. Due to circumstances beyond our control, we exchanged blood nine years ago. He’s been with me ever since and I trust him completely.” Alexi glanced at the clock that was sitting on the fireplace mantle and turned back to Chanda. “You must be tired. Let me show you where we’ll be sleeping.”

She took his offered hand, and they headed for the adjoining room. It was a large bedroom that almost matched the other completely. However, there was one item of furniture down here that hadn’t been upstairs. There was an addition of a six foot wide cabinet that had large doors hiding the contents.

Alexi opened the cabinet and showed the contents to her and to her surprise, the items were women’s clothes. Chanda asked whom they belonged to, then blinked when Alexi told her they were hers.

“Because of the dreams, I knew to expect you. There are different sizes in there right now because I could only estimate your height and weight from the dream. You can keep what fits and the things that don’t, we can give to charity. Then you can go shopping to get more in your size and to your taste.”

Chanda nodded, but was only just able to understand. She was so tired, and she had so much information running through her mind that his purchasing clothes for her with just dreams as his guide, didn’t impact her. She did wonder how much of her he had seen in the dream when she had only seen his eyes.

Alexi seemed to realize she was exhausted, so he helped her pick sleeping clothes from the drawers, then showed her to the bathroom so she could wash and change.

By the time Chanda came out of the bathroom, Alexi had found a small wooden chest and placed it on the side of the bed. Chanda looked at it, and the chest high mattress. He had done her a great favor. She didn’t think she could have made the leap to get up there. Thanking him, she climbed into the bed and covered herself up with the blankets.

Alexi stood at the side of the bed and watched her get comfortable in his bed. She heard his heart rate escalate, and it sounded as if he had stopped breathing. He shook his head, and exhaling heavily, leaned over to kiss her on the forehead. “You get some rest. I’m going to shower and then I’ll come to bed.”

Her eyes followed him as he went into the bathroom and closed the door, Chanda wondered what would happen when he came out. She had been feeling strange; what he had called sexual desire, ever since she had drank the blood from those people. Not even the fight made the feeling go away. So now she lay here, in his bed, smelling his scent from the enveloping sheets, and the feeling got worse. Her breasts swelled, and there was tingling in her abdomen, and even lower, in her pussy. She couldn't explain the sensations even to herself. Curious, she reached under the covers and touched herself there. She was hot and moist. She could feel it even with a nightgown and underwear between her hand and where she was touching.

Chanda shivered and wondered what the sexual act consisted of, and whether Alexi would do those things to her. When he had held her in his arms earlier, she had felt as if she were melting. *What would more of his kisses make her feel?* These and other thoughts consumed her completely. So much so, that when the door to the bathroom opened and Alexi came into the room, she jumped. To cover her lapse, she gave him a smile that looked more like a grimace.

"Don't be nervous, Chanda. We won't do anything that you aren't ready for. We have all the time in the world to become intimate. There's no rush. The only thing I expect from you is that you rest and take care of yourself." He climbed into the bed and placed his hands behind his head. "I'll sleep here though. You've been alone for so long now that you must first get used to being around me before we go further. I don't want to scare you, and until you're comfortable with me we will use our time getting used to each other, all right?"

She blinked and tried to answer his question, but couldn't take her eyes off him. He'd come out of the bathroom wearing only a pair of pajama bottoms. His upper body was bare and that's what had caught her attention. Alexi's skin was a golden color and he had a light dusting of dark hair across his chest. His stomach was tight and Chanda had to fight herself not to touch him.

His eyes were closed but he seemed to know what she was thinking. "Chanda, nothing is forbidden. I said we need to get used to each other, and I meant it. Anything you wish to do to me, go ahead and do it."

Turning on her side toward him, Chanda tentatively reached out a hand and with her fingertips, touched his stomach. Glancing up, she saw that his eyes remained closed and she looked down to where she was touching. She could see his abdomen muscles rippling, and placed her hand flat on them, wanting to feel the movement as well. Entranced with the sensation of hot skin and the steel of the muscles underneath, she began running her hand all around his stomach and chest. Chanda liked the tickling of the short hairs on his chest against her palm, and slid her hand across them repeatedly.

She was surprised when she felt his nipples tighten. She'd known her own could do that, but had never imagined that a man's could as well. Curious, she ran her fingers over them, and smiled when they tightened even more.

Alexi's muscles tightened even further as he held himself perfectly still. Chanda looked into his face and noticed the strain and the sweat trickling down his cheek. Without thinking, she pushed up and licked the sweat off his face. Alexi groaned loudly and Chanda froze. He opened his eyes and looked at her. "It's okay. What you're doing feels good and that was just a sound of appreciation."

Chanda relaxed and looked at his lips. Licking her own, she wondered what it would feel like if she kissed him. In the compound, she had seen couples kiss and they looked to be enjoying it. She had enjoyed his previous kiss, and she wanted to try it again, when she could put her full attention into it. Without giving herself time to second guess, she touched her lips to his.

## Chapter Six

Alexi fought his instincts and didn't take over the kiss as he and his wolf-self wanted. Her lips were soft and she tasted of toothpaste and the spicy flavor of curry. He considered that strange since as far as he knew she hadn't eaten anything in over twelve hours that could account for it.

Her palms had calluses on them. He could feel them when she ran her hands over his chest. She had trained for a very long time to acquire that tough skin.

Chanda sighed very softly, so quietly, that if he hadn't been completely tuned to her, he would have missed it. "What is it?"

Her eyes flashed to his and he caught a flash of insecurity. "I want, Alexi. I need. But I don't know how to ..."

He smiled softly. "You don't know how to take what you need."

Slowly, she nodded.

"Do you want me to take over?"

She nodded again.

"Say it, Chanda. I don't want there to be any misunderstanding here. Not with something as important as this."

"I want to have sex with you, Alexi," she stated it clearly and concisely.

"Make love. We are going to make love."

She tilted her head questioningly. "What's the difference?"

Slowly, mysteriously, he grinned. "Tonight I will show you making love. After that, if you still want to have sex, we can do that too."

"All right." She stared at him, face devoid of expression, but her heart beat fast, and her breathing was irregular.

He was learning to read her subtle telltale signs. *Good. I need all the help understanding my mate that I can get.*

Pulling his hands from behind his head, where he had placed them to keep them from grabbing her and dragging her under him, he placed one on her shoulder, and the other behind her head under her hair. He slowly tugged her to him and licked her lips. When she parted them, he took it as encouragement to deepen the kiss.

He couldn't stop the groan that rumbled through him. Sliding his arms around her shoulders, he pulled her down onto him. She wiggled a little, and ended up perfectly aligned atop him. While she might be tiny, she had a perfectly formed body. He could feel every inch of it through her nightclothes. He really wanted her out of her nightgown, but didn't want to rush her.

He would probably spontaneously combust before then though. Slipping his hands down her back, he pressed her upper body into his and rubbed his chest back and forth against hers. He could feel her hard nipples pushing into his sensitive skin, causing a cold shiver of sensation to caress his abdomen.

Tracing her lips with his, he delved inside and ran his tongue across hers. She tasted fabulous. The curry flavor was stronger and went to his senses making him dizzy.

He jerked his head back to catch his breath. Both of them panted for air. Her eyes were glazed, and he couldn't contain the self-satisfied smile at having caused her to lose control. "You taste good, woman."

Ever so slowly, she licked her lips. "Mm, yes."

He chuckled softly and returned his mouth to hers.

She started squirming on top of him and he guessed she needed more. Gladly, he would accommodate her. He slid one arm from around her back to her front and gently cupped her breast. She jumped, but soon relaxed into his hand. Chanda groaned and the sound went through his body like a lightning bolt.

Rolling her nipple between his fingers, he waited until she adjusted to the sensation before he pinched it lightly making her arch into his hand. The movement broke the kiss, and he took advantage of it by sliding his lips over her cheek to the sensitive curve of her neck around her torque. Ah, damn, she tasted so good. He wanted to eat her in one big bite. Alexi took tiny bites of the tender skin on her shoulder, not hurting, only making it tingle.

"Alexi." She was panting heavily, fingers gripping his upper arms tightly. "I feel so ..."

She arched into his hand as he pinched the taut nipple again. "Oh, goddess. That's so good."

He loved the way her eyes stayed securely closed and her fingers clenched and unclenched on his arms as if she didn't know what to do with, or had control of them. Alexi didn't want to blink. He might miss something. The constant wait had taken a toll on him, and he *needed* to keep her within his view.

He moved the hand that was behind her back down to her ass. Pressing her toward him, he ground his cock against her pelvic bone, and damned if he didn't have to stop because he nearly lost it and came.

She didn't help him regain control, either. Chanda continued the movement of her hips, rotating herself against his throbbing cock. It was his turn to call to the gods for help. "Chanda, shit."

Finally, she looked down at him, and her eyes glowed. The red contrasted with the tone of her cinnamon colored skin and black hair so perfectly, he gasped and vowed he would have her painted with just such a look. Hell, he might have to do the painting himself so as not to have to remove the eyes of the artist for seeing her his way. Alexi didn't want her to look like this for any other male. He would kill anyone who looked at her. She was his, and only his.

"Mine."

Alexi thought the word had come from his mouth until Chanda repeated herself.

"Mine. Alexi, you are *mine*."

As he watched, her teeth elongated and her nails grew. He could feel the nails biting into his arms, piercing the flesh but not drawing blood. In her eyes, he could see the intent to claim him in all ways. She would take his blood. He could feel it coming.

Just then, she struck. Her teeth sank deeply into the tender spot where his neck and shoulder came together.

"Holy fucking shit!" His body arched and he thought his heart exploded for a moment before he felt the insistent pounding against his chest. His eyes rolled to the back of his head and he feared he would actually pass out.

Taking great gulps of air in an attempt to calm his raging senses, he wrapped one arm around her waist, and the other he palmed the back of her head. Unable to keep from rubbing his dick against her, he flexed his hips up to her repeatedly.

She licked the wound she made and blinked her eyes at him. When he could tell she had regained her focus she glared down at him, eyes still bright red, and gave him a curt warning. "Don't you come, Alexi. We aren't done yet."

"Oh, thank the gods."

Chanda stared at him, then pressed her hands to his chest and pushed herself up to sit astride his waist.

"You're going to kill me, Chanda." He watched her eyes flickering, red-brown-red. Red prevailed, but he knew she was trying to master her emotions. "Oh, hell no. You will not be in control of yourself any more than I'm in control of myself. Understand? I want you wild and free, not self-contained."

"But, Alexi, I have to be controlled." He could see a sadness taking her over, and vowed to destroy the ones who created this rectitude in her.



“No. Not with me. I will keep you safe. In all things, you will be protected. Don’t fight your feelings, enjoy them, revel in them, let them take over. Making love is supposed to be experienced; emotions and all.”

She sat on top of him, clenching her fingers, raking her nails against his chest, not saying a word. Just when he thought to break the silence himself, she nodded.

Testing her resolve, he ran a hand up her arm. At first, she jumped and became very rigid. Slowly, as if through a conscious effort, she began to relax into his caress. He continued the slow stroke on her arm, before sliding it over her shoulder, and up the side of her neck.

Chanda rubbed her cheek into his hand when he cupped her face. *Good, she’s started to relax again.* With the intent to dispose of her nightclothes, Alexi took his hand from her face and placed both on her calves. Before he had a chance to remove the gown as he had planned, slowly and with a maximum of touching, Chanda reached down, grabbed the end, ripped it over her head, and flung it away.

Alexi lay there panting for a moment, stunned at her beauty. She was so pretty. More so than he had imagined. All cinnamon skin and lean muscle. Her breasts were high, tight, and just the right size for his hands. Her waist narrow, her hips flared, and her ass wonderfully rounded. Her legs were long for her height and were all muscle. He couldn’t wait to have them wrapped around his waist.

Damn! She’s beautiful. Perfect in every way. After examining her from her black hair, to delicate feet, he looked back into her brown eyes. Chanda was gazing steadily back at him. As he stared, wondering where to start, her eyes once more changed from brown to red. His responded to hers and changed as well.

Chanda opened her mouth enough for him to see the elongated teeth, which caused his heart to pound. His ass tightened and he ground his cock into her pussy, wanting in right now.

“Shit, woman. Don’t do that. I want this to last, but you keep rushing me. Stop it.”

When her face split into a small smile, he relaxed slightly. He knew that it was a gift, and he wasn’t going to waste it.

He gripped her by the waist and rolled over, taking her underneath him. With her feet, she started pushing at his pajama bottoms until they slid over his ass and down his legs. Oh, she was limber. He could use that.

As they worked together stripping him out of his only article of clothing, he latched onto her nipple and nipped at it. Sucking it deep into his mouth and laving it with his tongue. She arched up to him and ran her hands over his back and ass, gripping with her nails, causing him to press his straining cock into her moist folds.

*Damn, she’s wet.* He wanted to plunge, to plunder, to take. But no. He could do this slowly. He *had* to. For his own sanity, he had to get this right.

Chanda was hot all over. Liquid fire shot through her veins. Her skin rippled from the waves of heat enveloping her. She needed release.

Turning her hot eyes to the being laying atop her, she let them touch every part of his face. His eyes glowed red and feral, his cheeks -- flushed, his lips -- nearly as red as his eyes. When he pulled his lips back in a semblance of a smile, she could see his teeth had extended. Slowly, she tilted her chin up and to the side, exposing her neck to him. She kept her eyes on him, not breaking contact with him but she wanted -- needed -- him to bite her as she had him. The flavor of him still resided in her mouth and she licked her lips again, savoring.

His eyes followed the movement. Inch by slow inch, he lowered his head to her. Not to her neck, bared for his bite, but to her mouth. Alexi ran his tongue over her lips following where hers had led, then dipped inside. The sensation exploded in her mouth like a Flashbang stun grenade, throwing heat and light then *Bam!* -- a mind numbing sensation. If his kiss would do this to her, what would the rest do?

She wouldn't survive. This was more sensation than her discipline could handle, and she couldn't block this out with thoughts of other things. Alexi had taken control and her entire being centered on him and what he did.

Chanda gripped his arms again and couldn't help but dig her nails into his skin in an attempt to retain some semblance of herself. He licked her tongue, and she shivered. He ran the tip of his tongue across the roof of her mouth and she couldn't contain the grunt.

Her hips started to thrust up at him involuntarily and damned if he didn't thrust back. But he didn't enter her.

Finally, she tore her mouth from his and, to her horrified subconscious, started to plead with him. "Please. Damn it, Alexi. Please!"

"Not yet. You aren't ..." He reached down with one hand and cupped her pussy, causing a startled gurgle to emerge from her throat.

Her hips were jerking madly as he slid a finger past her labia and into the tight, weeping entrance of her body. Breath coming in pants, she arched her back and felt him slip the finger deep within her. It felt so good. "More."

And he gave her more. Pulling his finger from her, he pressed in two. The feeling was fuller, more intense, but still not enough.

Her head rolled back and forth. Unable to beg for what she wanted, she only moaned. He seemed to understand.

Completely removing his hand from her body, he slid his hands around the outside of her thighs to the back of her knees, and lifted them high. Alexi placed his body in alignment with hers and she felt the cool head of his penis touch her heated pussy. She arched, but he shook his head.

"Stay still. I don't want this to hurt more than it will, and if you rush, it will hurt unnecessarily."

“Don’t care. I want ...”

Alexi pressed, and she arched into him. Slowly, at his speed, he entered her resistant body. Incrementally and much, much slower than she would have liked, he pressed the hood of his penis past the tight ring of her vagina. “Ah!” Even that bit of him gave her more sensation than she thought she could take; then he started to push the rest of the way.

“Ah, goddess!” Chanda arched up to him, taking him fully. The slight pinch was so negligible, she barely noticed as he breached her hymen. When she would have moved, he held her still.

“Wait. Become adjusted first.”

Trying to relax, to become accustomed to the extreme fullness of him deeply embedded in her, she breathed through her mouth. It helped to calm her spinning thoughts enough that she could get a semblance of control.

Until he moved.

“Ohh.” It jumped from her mouth before she could contain it.

He had slid nearly out of her body, before pressing inexorably back in. Deep. Chanda could literally feel her mind stuttering.

A pressure built up in her body. The back of her neck tingled. Ripples of lightning shot up her spine causing her back to arch. Alexi pressed into her one last time and she exploded. Higher and higher she flew. She felt his teeth at her neck and she saw lights. Bright, blinding, colorful lights. It lasted forever, and it ended too soon.

Slowly, Chanda’s body began to relax, to come back to the universe. She didn’t want to, but the demands of her body ensured it. She could feel Alexi licking the side of her neck as she rejoined her body.

He pressed kisses along her jaw line and across her cheek until he reached her mouth where he licked her parted lips until she responded. Languorous kisses passed back and forth until she caught her breath and realized that he weighed approximately a ton and was pressed directly upon her chest.

Apparently, realizing that he was squishing her, he rolled to the side. Wrapping his arms tightly around her waist, nearly taking her air again, he pulled her to him, her back to his chest.

“I will clean us up in just a few minutes, but you need to rest.” He spoke into her ear and nibbled it as he did. “Will you try to kill me when you wake, if I assist you to sleep now?”

Chanda considered it carefully, even consciously slipped into his mind to confirm his intentions. “I won’t try to kill you, unless I wake sticky.”

She heard Alexi laughing as she felt the pressure at the back of her skull as he sent a light command to sleep. As she drifted off, she heard him murmur into her ear. “Don’t worry, I’ll take care of everything.”

Chanda trusted him to do that.

Alexi lay on his side, propped up on one elbow, gazing down at his mate. He had rolled her onto her back and had examined her from head to toe. His heart actually pounded whenever he looked at her and thought that she was his, solely his, completely his.

Running his finger across the blue stone in the center of the necklace, he wondered again how her family had gotten it. He remembered his mother wearing it and smiled. She would be glad that no matter how Chanda had come to have it, the necklace had ended up where it belonged; on the Torkilov mate's neck.

The memories were bittersweet, but he let them flash by, wanting to remember them, and when they were done, he sighed and climbed out of the bed. If he didn't want to get staked when his oh so lovely mate woke, he should get her clean.

With a bowl of warm water and soap, he bathed her, thinking it would have probably been easier to just run a bath for them both. It would have been easier on his libido that's for sure. Simply running the soapy cloth over her heated skin, then rinsing her, was giving him a hard on. He maneuvered her over onto her stomach when he finished the front and grit his teeth hard.

"Damned Pocatsu."

So much damage had been wrought that there wasn't a smooth section of skin on her back. Lines of raised scar tissue lined her back, crisscrossing one another in layers. None looked new. That only told him that they had done this to her as a small child. What kind of psychopaths would do something like that to a child? The Society loved their children and would do anything to keep them alive and healthy, but this ...

He silently vowed to keep her from harm the rest of her existence.

After cleaning both of them, he emptied the bowl and joined Chanda in the bed. Finding a nice dry spot wasn't hard, the bed was huge, and he settled down with his mate in his arms for the first time, and took them both into a deep sleep.

Chanda woke afraid she had overslept. She leapt out of bed and tumbled to the floor. The floor had been moved. It was much lower than normal. From her prone position on the floor, she looked around. Strange room, strange furniture. *Where am I?*

*Chanda, are you all right?*

Alexi. That was Alexi's voice. Her mate.

The memories came rushing back to her. Everything.

She laid her forehead on the cool wood of the floor. Her whole life faced change. Complete and total difference. Okay, she could handle this. A well-trained soldier, she could adapt. She only had to find out what she had to adapt *to*.

Taking a deep breath, she looked for Alexi. When she didn't see him, she called his name.

*I'm with Terry. Get dressed, and come on upstairs.*

"Yes, sir." She answered before she thought.

*I like that sir stuff. I won't mind if you continue it.*

Chanda sighed. *I'll be there in a few minutes, Alexi.*

She heard his chuckle in her head. Standing, she looked for her clothes. Reconnaissance time. Systematically, she went through the room. The dresser and closet held men's and women's clothing, and while he had said to wear what she would, the men's clothes suited her better. She took a pair of black cargo pants and a black t-shirt from his wardrobe, and women's underwear into the bathroom.

After washing and dressing she went in search of socks, shoes and a belt. The tabs on the pants had helped the fit a little, but they were still baggy on her. Alexi towered over her and his clothes swamped her. Eventually, she located the items and after rolling up the pant legs several times, they fit relatively comfortably. They wouldn't fall down or trip her at least.

She had to settle for athletic shoes since there weren't a pair of boots. She would have to purchase a pair soon. The gym shoes squeaked, and would give her position away, which she couldn't tolerate.

Chanda made the bed, tied her hair up with a shoestring, and after brushing her teeth, glanced around the room to make sure it was squared away. Nodding, she headed for the stairs.

Remembering how Alexi had closed the bed/trapdoor, she copied his movements backwards, and the door opened.

Slowly, cautiously, she slipped up the stairs and into the bedroom. Quickly, she scouted the space and finding it empty, relaxed a little.

Footsteps approached from the hall and Chanda looked around for cover.

As she stepped near the big wardrobe, a person blew into the room.

Chanda blinked slowly.

She thought it was male but wasn't sure. The person had long blond hair, creamy completion, and a bright pink, flowing blouse, with floofy sleeves. Tight jeans and athletic shoes rounded off the outfit. Never had she seen anyone like this person.

The Pocatsu were all about stealth. This being was anything but stealthy.

He flounced around the room, looking here and there, and finally noticed her.

"Darling! There you are. You must be Chanda. I'm Terry, Alexi's man. I do everything around here. Alexi would simply fall to pieces without me. Oh, but listen to me toot my own horn. Come out here so I can look at you."

Chanda didn't know what to think. She wanted to hide from this person. He had to be the strangest thing she had ever come across. He spoke with rounded vowels, and clipped consonants. His accent was nothing like she had ever heard before and he kept waiving his hands in the air as if swatting flies.

"Well? Are you going to emerge from your cocoon? It's a butterfly joke. Get it?"

Chanda shook her head and he sighed heavily before gliding in her direction. Frantically, she looked for an escape route. Finding none that wouldn't include hurting him, she stood perfectly still and waited to see what he would do. She would only attack if attacked, but she was literally scared out of her wits.

"What's the matter, darling? I'm not going to bite you. Sorry, you aren't my type."

Chanda stared at him, not understanding. "Are you a vampire too?"

His laugh was infectious. It bubbled up from his chest until it came out of his mouth in a musical tone. He reminded her of a story she had read once. "No, you're not a vampire. A fairy perhaps?" If vampires were real, who's to say fairies weren't as well?

His perfectly pitched laugh continued, louder, until he had doubled over holding his stomach. Chanda just stood there staring at him until he regained a semblance of control and straightened, looking at her with twinkling eyes, which made the fairy theory more plausible.

"No, dearie. I'm not a magical fairy. Haven't you ever seen a gay man before?"

"Gay." She paused a moment to decide what he meant. "Homosexual? You're a homosexual?"

"Give the lady a button. Never met one before? No worries, you have now met the best." He ran his hand over his chest to his hip in a seductive manner. Chanda simply stared at him wondering how much of his day he used up while making himself beautiful.

Terry made a clicking noise with his tongue and waved a hand in her direction, regaining her attention. "You are going to give me a complex if you keep zoning out like that. I suppose you were looking for our Alexi?"

"Alexi instructed me to come upstairs. I'm reporting for duty."

Again, the musical trill came from the man as he laughed. "Oh how wonderful. You call it reporting for duty."

"Yes, sir."

His face turned so red from laughing, she thought he would faint. He must have thought the same because he staggered over to a chair and sat down, putting his head between his knees.

"You're trying to kill me. I just know it." He was gasping for air and still laughing intermittently.

"No sir. I don't like to kill." Chanda sighed when he burst into laughter again. This could go on all night. Deciding to find Alexi, she took a step toward the door.

The door filled with a shadow and Chanda retreated to her hidey-hole. *Well, it's comfortable at least. I could get used to spending time right here.*

Alexi strode through the door shaking his head. "You can't get used to staying there. I have other plans for you."

"Oh, Alexi, she's a hoot." Terry informed him from his incongruous position.

"Chanda?" Alexi gave his man a skeptical look. Chanda watched his brow raise then both lower questioning. "Interesting."

When he turned to her, Chanda's heart jumped. He looked so handsome in the light of the lamp. He held his hand out to her and she couldn't ignore it. Slowly she raised her hand and set it in his. Alexi wrapped his fingers around hers and pulled her from her corner. When she came close, he slid one warm arm around her waist and tugged her close.

Her breath caught when he dipped his head and kissed her lightly on the lips.

"Good evening, my mate."

His voice curled through her body, melting her from the inside. Struggling, she returned the greeting. "Hi."

Terry made a sort of choking noise and she glanced at him quickly. She had actually forgotten he was in the room. That had never happened before. Chanda was always aware of her surroundings. Life with the Pocatsu is a dangerous thing and if you lost sight of that, you wind up dead.

Alexi squeezed her waist, then took his arm from her. She felt the loss instantly. She had to fight the urge to grab his arm and put it back around her.

Mentally shaking herself, Chanda glanced around the room, looking for something to say.

"I have something for you, Chanda."

Her eyes turned to him so quickly, she thought her neck would snap. "You got something for *me*?"

"It's something my development team has been working on." He pulled out a bracelet made of yarn, and what looked like plastic beads. It was in a camouflage color.

"Thank you." She held out a hand to take it from him.

"Let me explain it to you, first." He slid it over her hand and up her forearm. "The yarn is actually a high test garroting wire. I suppose you've been trained in the use?" When she nodded, he continued. "The light color beads are mini explosives and the darker beads are tracking devices."

Chanda glanced at the innocuous looking band that now rested near her elbow. It didn't look as lethal as he proclaimed it to be.

"I was looking for something that wouldn't get in the wearers way or infringe on their ability to function. The band is lightweight, flexible, and ..."

"And it looks cheap. Nobody would want to steal it from you." The last was interjected by Terry who was staring at his perfectly buffed fingernails.

"I thought it should be made of at least titanium. It wouldn't look so gaudy then."

"Yes, Terry. I did consider your suggestions, but the titanium would register on metal detectors. We needed something low key."

"And low style."

Alexi sighed. "Not everyone has your flair and style, Terry. We need to think about form and functionality first."

"But that doesn't preclude ..."

Cutting him off, Alexi stated firmly. "Look. You want a special bracelet, give the design team your specifications and they'll make it up for you. All right?"

Terry seemed to pout for a moment, then nodded. "I'll do it, but then your teams will want one just like mine." That said, he turned and flounced out of the room. At the door, he turned and looked at Chanda. "Nice meeting you, Chanda, darling."

"Um, nice to meet you as well, Terry."

"Don't mind him, you'll get used to his idiosyncrasies." Alexi had turned to her and put his arms around her waist.

Laying her head against his chest, she sighed. "I have never met anyone like him. He's exhausting."

Alexi's laugh rumbled through his chest. "That describes him perfectly. He's been a part of my household for most of his life, but only became my personal assistant nine years ago. He had a bit of an argument with a rogue vampire and nearly died. I shared blood with him and took him into my confidence. Now, I wouldn't know how to get along without him. He's simply the best at keeping my schedule straight and the house running like a well-oiled machine. Putting up with a few idiosyncrasies is a small price to pay."

"He is like no one I've ever met before," Chanda admitted quietly.

"Well, he's one of a kind, admittedly, but he is just a well organized, colorful, gay man."

Alexi's hand ran up and down her back in a manner that soothed her. She liked the relaxing motion. "Terry likes men." It was a statement and not a question. She was starting to understand. The males who enjoyed other males in the compound didn't advertise. It was kept quiet. A don't ask, don't tell situation. It did happen, but it was frowned upon. Terry had the freedom to express himself as he wished. "That's nice."

Chuckling, Alexi slid his hand to her bottom and squeezed. "Good thing you're letting me into your mind or I would never have understood those two comments."



Chanda nodded against his chest. She had felt him in her mind, but it was as soothing as the caresses, so let him stay. Being with someone all the time would take getting used to, and there would be times she would need privacy, but right now, it was nice to share.

Eventually Alexi sighed and pulled back. "You need to feed and we need to return to the stadium and the Gathering. With all the excitement yester-evening, none of the regular business was accomplished. Shiye Moonshadow rescheduled it for tonight. Do you feel up to going?"

Chanda considered her body, mind, and stamina. She felt strong and in control of her faculties, such as they were. "I can handle it."

"Good, let's find someone to eat."

Sending him a startled look, Chanda realized belatedly, he was joking. "Everyone here is very strange."

"Perhaps so, but you are now one of us."

That's what worried Chanda the most.

## Chapter Seven

Alexi explained some few basic feeding facts to her. “While bagged blood can keep a vampire alive for a short while, getting it from the source is the only way to stay at peak performance. You can also take it from me, but that’s more of a dessert than a meal.” At this, he waggled his brows suggestively. “But it wouldn’t sustain you for long.”

He took her through the house, introducing her to the staff and promised that she would get to wander around and familiarize herself with everything after the Gathering.

Terry met them at the door, “Do you two have everything you need?” He glared pointedly at the bracelet on Chanda’s arm. “I see that you do. Have a nice night.” And cheerily sent them out the door.

Alexi took Chanda’s hand in his and turned to her. “Do you know how to fly?”

Chanda closed her eyes and floated off the ground.

“Very good. You’re a natural. Now, how fast do you think you can go?”

He lifted off the ground with her and followed as she took off over the wall of the castle. Good, she was fast. Very fast. “We’re going to have to stop in the nearest town, it’s a couple miles east of the house.”

When Chanda turned in the direction he indicated, he put on some speed to test her skills. He didn’t want to tire her out, but he did want to have an estimate of her limitations.

“What about radar?”

The question surprised him, she had been so quiet up to now. “We’re small enough that radar reads us as birds. You’ll have to watch how much you carry with you. Eventually, you will reach a point that the monitors will go off.”

She nodded and flew on. He waited, but it seemed she had no further questions. He really wanted her to open up to him. Getting to know how she thought and felt was becoming imperative.

As they approached the outskirts of the town, Alexi asked her to slow down. "We have to find some humans who are not within a crowd. Then bring them to an isolated area so as not to be observed."

"Understood. Are there any restrictions?"

"Children are completely off limits. Drug users, diseases, mental deficiencies, things like that don't affect us. However, watch out for anemia or other blood problems. It won't harm us, but could potentially hurt the human. The Society is looking for anemics. They could be carriers of the gene, so let me know if you come across one. Their blood will smell weak, thin."

"Roger."

Alexi cast out mental feelers for the nearest humans, and once he had a lock on them, instructed Chanda on how to call them to her.

She was very adept at following instructions and soon had locked sights onto her prey and commanded him to come to them.

"You are a quick study. I'm impressed."

Chanda simply nodded and when the human male came into the empty lot they occupied, wrapped her arms around him and fed.

Alexi called another human male to him, remembering Chanda's warning about females, and soon had taken his fill. He inserted a good memory into the human's mind and sent him on his way.

"Chanda, if you're finished, here's what you must do so the human doesn't remember you. Search in his mind for something he likes to do, and give him a similar memory to replace the time he has been with you."

She accomplished the task easily enough and Alexi wondered if they would find something that she would find difficult. He smiled and shook his head. Probably not. He could feel her taking what she needed directly from his mind and wondered if she realized ...

"Yes, I know that I'm taking the information from you. I thank you for allowing me access." Chanda turned and her eyes smiled into his. "You have a lot of knowledge inside of you, and it does make learning the new skills easier."

Alexi laughed. "It's my job to teach you to be a vampire."

Her head tilted to the side. "But you are teaching me by letting me take it from you. It's simpler and faster this way."

"That may be true, but it's taking away some of the enjoyment of the process. I feel like a book you're reading instead of the instructor."

Chanda stared at him as if he had said something ridiculous. Maybe he had, but it was the truth. Finally, he rolled his eyes. "Never mind. Learn what you can, and if you have any questions, feel free to ask and I can clarify."

"Thank you."

Mentally throwing his hands up in exasperation, Alexi leapt into the air. "Come along, Chanda. We're expected at the Gathering."

A small sound caught his attention. Glaring back at her, he let her know what he thought of her laughter at his expense. When he turned away from her, he let his own happiness show. It wasn't much of a laugh that she had let out, but it had definitely been laughter. Progress had been made.

They were soon striding through the corridors of the stadium. Eyes sweeping side to side, he checked for anyone attempting to come near them. Alexi had protected Chanda by engulfing her in the golden barrier that would keep her safe from any threat. She had poked at it a couple of times, until he told her to stop. "It won't harm you, but anyone who approaches you, discounting myself, will get tossed across the room. Humans, it will probably kill. So, keep your distance from everyone."

"Roger."

"Ah, a woman of few words. My favorite kind." Johann's unwelcome comment came from behind them.

Alexi turned slowly, barely keeping his mate from attacking his friend. "You should know by now, Johann, my mate doesn't like being snuck up on."

"Yeah, I just remembered. Sorry."

Chanda nodded her acceptance, but stayed silent.

Alexi sighed. "Did you need something, Johann?"

"Oh, right. Moonshadow is getting ready to start the Gathering and wanted to make sure the two of you stayed available for him to talk to afterwards."

Laughing, Alexi guessed. "That's practically verbatim, right?"

Johann blinked. "Why wouldn't it be?"

"That damned photographic memory of yours. You always sound like whoever gave you the instructions." Alexi threw his arm around his friend's shoulders and, taking Chanda by the hand, pulled her to his other side and the trio headed for the arena.

Johann soon excused himself to take up his Guardian position in front of the podium.

Chanda kept her hand in Alexi's while they found a seat low in the stands, which reduced Alexi's tension level. He hadn't even realized he was stressed until his muscles relaxed. He pulled Chanda close and placed his other hand on her thigh, turned toward her and kissed her on her forehead. He felt as if he hadn't touched her in days.

"It's only been an hour since you touched me last. You are so overly dramatic." Chanda was whispering into his chest so others couldn't eavesdrop, but he could hear the humor in her voice. Damn, he wanted to make this woman happy. Every fiber of his being *needed* to see her smile and laugh.

"I'm not overly dramatic." He squeezed her thigh as he spoke. "You are under dramatic."

Chanda shook her head at his impressive logic, but before she could comment on his advanced intelligence, Johann strode across the field with Shiye Moonshadow following.

"Thank you all for returning this evening. There is a lot of business we must cover in a short amount of time. First business. Matings and births since the last gathering."

Shiye continued addressing the vampires assembled in the stadium in a quiet but powerful tone of voice. Alexi quietly explained to Chanda the purpose of the Gathering; how it kept the vampires in touch with each other and up to date on all Society business. When Shiye called for any contenders to the leadership, everyone froze. After a few minutes of total silence in the stadium, Shiye nodded, then continued. Alexi exhaled, relieved. He still didn't have a handle on the leader, but he couldn't think of anyone else who could lead the Society as well as Shiye Moonshadow.

Chanda watched the proceedings with interest. Alexi had been explaining everything to her until the request for contenders. She delved into Alexi's mind to find out what that meant. Alexi's mind was full of pictures of a different man on a podium requesting contenders, then Moonshadow standing and answering the call. A battle between the two men ensued, which Shiye won. He had won several other fights as well. Also in Alexi's memory, she found different things the Leader had done for the Society since his appointment. Chanda shrugged. She didn't know any of these vampires and couldn't form an opinion, but Alexi's was ironclad. He liked having Shiye Moonshadow as the Leader.

She also watched the vampires surrounding the podium. Alexi had said that Johann was the Guardian, while Alexi was the Enforcer. She took each job description from Alexi's mind and compared the two. The Enforcers hunted other vampires and submitted them to trial and execution. On the other hand, the Guardians kept the vampires safe from outside, or inside harm. They would fight if the need arose, but they didn't go looking for it. The Enforcers had better combat training though and she wouldn't want to lose her edge. She'd trained all her life and the lack would be noticeable.

Taking a look at the other job descriptions held by vampires, Chanda immediately discounted them. She wasn't qualified for any of them, except maybe Regulator, but she didn't know enough about modern technology not related to warfare to make it a viable position for her. Computers were completely out of her realm of knowledge.

She had a lot to think about. There was only one thing she knew she couldn't do, and that was to be sedentary. She was going to have to have some sort of position.

Shiye Moonshadow called an official end to the Gathering and invited the Society members to stay as long as they liked this evening. The rest of the night was theirs to do as they would.

Chanda stood with Alexi. "Do you think anyone would mind if we checked on the children?"

"I wondered how long it would take you to realize they weren't with the adults." He took her hand and pulled her to him. He slid his lips along hers in a brief kiss, then came back and deepened it. Chanda relaxed into his chest and arms. The excitement rippling up her spine caused her to arch into him and he tightened his arms around her.

The unaccustomed feeling of someone holding her tightly, as if he cared, was hard to get used to. Concentrating on the sensations of comfort and titillation instead of confinement, Chanda found that she actually did like the encompassing feeling of his embrace. She felt safe, as if she had nothing to fear or fight. She no longer felt alone.

"Hey you two love birds, find a room."

Chanda started at Johann's voice sounding from right behind her, but Alexi simply snorted. "Do you know where we can find one?"

"Ugh, that's disgusting. Besides, since we have time to kill before Moonshadow would like to visit with you, I thought I would ferry you around. I heard that Chanda wanted to check on the boys."

Turning in Alexi's arms, Chanda looked at Johann. "The girls, too."

Johann sighed. "I'm afraid to ask what you have been doing instead of teaching your mate, Alexi."

Chanda glanced up at Alexi with questions in her mind. *Well?*

"When the gods graced us with vampirism, perpetual life, and the need for blood, they made our procreation solely male."

She felt like throwing her hands in the air and walking away. "So, vampires only have male children."

"That's what I said."

It was Johann's turn to snort. He had lifted a hand to cover his mouth. Chanda still knew he laughed at them, and raised one inquiring brow. "Alexi's been trying to get into Mensa for years. They've denied him repeatedly, because they claim he cheated on the tests." When the blond vampire burst out laughing, Chanda tried to take the information from his mind. She wasn't sure what Mensa was or why someone would want to get into it.

Johann straightened, then waggled a finger at her. "None of that, now." He tapped one side of his head. "I have secrets in here that aren't allowed to be probed. Ask Alexi your questions."

Alexi tightened his arm around her waist and put his chin on her shoulder. "Leave the man alone, Chanda. You know I'll tell you anything."

"I apologize, Johann. It was inconsiderate of me to try. It won't happen again." Chanda really was sorry. She hadn't thought before she acted, and that was never a safe habit.

She was starting to slip. Her actions and reactions to things had started to slide out of her control and that made her very uncomfortable. As Johann escorted them to the room where the children had been installed, Chanda worked to regain her former emotional containment.

"Why do you escort us, Johann?"

"I'm a Guardian. Head at that, and it'll be easier to get you passage through my people if I'm with you. After yesterday's debacle, the Guardians are on full alert in case the Pocatsu return for a second try. Let me tell you, I chewed a lot of ass today. It tasted like shit, and nobody wants me to single them out for a reaming."

"Johann, must you be so disgusting? My mate may have been trained as a soldier, but ..."

"Alexi, it's all right. I've heard worse." Chanda laid a restraining hand on Alexi's arm. "He hasn't offended me."

"Alexi's right. I shouldn't speak like that in front of anyone, much less my best friend's mate. It's my turn to apologize to you."

Chanda nodded and addressed the question on her mind. "You were telling me why there are only boy children."

Alexi explained. "When the gods gave us long life, they also gave us the ability to only bear boys. We must search our entire lives for a female with the Sumerian gene to take as a mate. *Only* carriers of the Sumerian gene are able to be turned and have children. And if that isn't hard enough, only boys are born." Alexi sighed but continued. "I see the human little girls and my heart aches. I would love to have a little girl of my own, but that will never be. A lot of the Society feel that way, but we don't belittle the wonderful thrill it is to have boys. Boys are great, and I will love ours, but wanting what I can't have is only normal."

Chanda nodded. She could understand that. Wanting without the ability to acquire had been her entire way of life. While she occupied his mind, his emotions flowed into her. It was a deep ache in him, the lack of daughters. "Have you tried checking orphanages for girls with the gene? I don't think mating at young ages would be possible, but mated couples who wish for daughters could try to locate one that would eventually be changed and raise her."

Both men stopped in their tracks and stared at her. Johann got a far away expression in his eyes, and Chanda wondered what he was thinking, but Alexi snatched her up into his arms and swung her around in circles. Startling as this was, he then set her on her feet and kissed the living daylights out of her. Lost in the sensations of his kiss and joy, which she didn't understand, she jumped when Johann cleared his throat.

"I spoke with Moonshadow and he commends you on your wonderful idea. He's already working on a team to research this subject."

Chanda turned her head to gaze blearily at Johann as he spoke, but very little of what he said penetrated her kiss induced haze. "Pardon?"

"Geez, I'm going to have to quit hanging out with you two if you keep going at it like rabbits."

Blinking, Chanda watched Johann throw his hands into the air and stomp off. "I think we embarrassed him."

Alexi laughed and let her go, only to take her hand in his and pull her after Johann. "You just don't understand him yet. He is rather private in his proclivities."

Chanda watched the outgoing, noisy male vampire striding away from them, muttering. "He's private?"

When Alexi waggled his brows at her, she shook her head. "I suppose you mean in his sexual habits."

"Precisely."

"I see." But she didn't. Her sexual experience was so limited, that she couldn't fathom a need for such secrecy or privacy. Everyone does it, why act as if you didn't? "Is he like Terry? I finally realized your man is a homosexual, but I still don't understand why he laughed so hard when I asked if he were a fairy."

"Hm, well, fairy is a derogatory term for homosexuals. Terry tells me he thinks it's funny that a fairy works for a vampire. Says it's sexy or some such nonsense. But as for your question, no, Johann isn't gay."

"I should say not! While I don't have anything against gay men, I don't want to put anything against them either." He was hollering at them from down the hall. Chanda glanced his way. He'd stopped and stood glaring in her direction.

"Perhaps I should stop wondering about the people you know." Chanda was looking between her laughing mate and his frowning friend. "It might be best."

"Yes, I think for now, it would be better to think about me and the children, instead of him." Alexi had finally stopped laughing as hard as he had been and waved his hand toward Johann. "Offending him before you see the children won't make getting in to see them any easier."

"I seem to keep saying the wrong thing. Getting used to being around others is tough. Mostly, I stayed alone and did my job. If I did it well, they left me alone. I liked it that way. Now, I'm compelled to associate with others. It's disturbing." Chanda tried to understand the need to get to know Alexi's friends and acquaintances, and couldn't.

"Maybe it's something you're getting from my mind."

"You're causing this?"

"Not intentionally, but I would like you to get to know everyone and feel comfortable with them."



Thinking this over, she decided that was most likely the truth. He had no actual plans to get her involved with the others, but the hope that she would be happy dealing and interacting with them, fermented in a small portion of his mind.

“Come on, you two. The boys are waiting.”

“Hold your horses, Johann.” Alexi took her hand and tugged her toward his waiting friend. “You are worse than any of the boys when it comes to being patient.”

The two men tossed jibes and insults back and forth until they reached the room the children occupied. Chanda ignored them. She was frankly nervous to be meeting so many children. Adults she barely understood, children were a complete mystery.

When the door slid open with the help of one of the two guards, the noise hit her like a grenade concussion. It literally knocked her back a step, but Alexi’s firm hold on her hand kept her steady. She took a deep breath and braced herself to meet the onslaught of noise and movement she could see beyond the doorway. Making sure that no sign of emotions slipped her noose, she stepped through the doorway, and into chaos.

“Boys, look who I’ve brought you.” Alexi looked around the room at the forty or so boys of various ages, scattered around the room. All were loud and rambunctious. He remembered being that age, oh so long ago, and the excitement that Gatherings created.

His shout caused even more pandemonium to break out. The rush of bodies in their direction made him laugh. He couldn’t understand the questions fired at him, there were so many at one time, he shook his head and waited.

Eventually, the boys got the hint and quieted. It did take several minutes, which he used by trying to get a sense of what Chanda felt. Not a thing. She had a block up a foot thick, euphemistically speaking, and nothing slipped through. Her body stood tall, straight, and stiff as a board, and that was the only clue he had to her emotions. Tension radiated off her, and a calm expression plastered her frozen face. He gripped her hand tighter and pulled her a little bit closer.

Turning back to the children, he raised one eyebrow at them. “Have we taught you no manners? Where is a seat for the lady?”

Instantly, there was a mad dash for chairs. After a scuffle or two, a chair was placed on the edge of a carpeted area. The boys all sat cross-legged on the carpet, waiting quietly for her to take her seat.

He heard her swallow, but she strode directly to the chair and sat. She glanced around only once, with a slightly wild look in her eye, then steeled herself and lost the firing squad expression. Face once again blank, she stared out over the sea of curious, excited faces.

Feeling her trepidation, he stepped behind her chair and laid a soothing hand on her shoulder. “Does anyone have a question for my mate?” Several hands shot up into the air, causing Chanda to flinch. He squeezed her shoulder lightly to calm her and when she relaxed

again, he addressed the boys. "We'll try to answer the questions, but only if you ask them one at a time. Starting at one side of the room, please begin."

A young man, looking no more than five years old, looked adoringly up at Chanda and rubbed his nose with his sleeve. "Where'd ya learn to fight like a man? You're a girl, but you don't fight like one."

"You saw me fight?" Her voice was quiet, but strong.

"Yup. Yesterday. That braying ass called you names and ..."

He broke off when several of the boys interrupted him with, "Oooh! You cussed."

"That's what my dad called him. I heard him telling my momma that 'Lexi's mate was one tough bitch, and then my momma whacked him one."

Alexi tried to hold his laughter in, but Johann -- the braying ass -- howled with glee near the door.

"I don't think your parents would appreciate you listening in on their conversations, or repeating what you do hear." Alexi admonished, wiping his hand over his mouth in an attempt to hide his smile. "However, if Chanda would like to answer your question ..."

Chanda nodded, then took a deep breath. "I have trained with the Pocatsu to fight, all my life."

Several gasps were heard from the boys.

"Pocatsu, murdering bastards!" yelled one boy.

Another shouted, "But they're the bad guys."

Chanda nodded. "Most likely, but they think of themselves as righteous."

"What's that mean?"

Alexi looked toward the boy who asked the question. "Righteous? That means they feel they are doing the right thing for the right reason."

"But how can killing be right?" another asked.

Chanda looked at the little boy. "If your family lived near a monster that eats vampires, would you want it to live?"

At the chorus of "No!", she nodded and continued. "The Pocatsu think the vampires are monsters that will eat their families." She held up a hand when they started to object. "I didn't say that you are, just that the Pocatsu think so."

Alexi watched her as she answered the boys and made them think. She was a natural around them. Not talking down to them, or over their heads, but imparting information in a matter of fact and straight to the point way. The boys were riveted, and didn't notice when their parents and Shiye Moonshadow entered the room.

## Chapter Eight

Chanda watched the interest in the boy's faces and marveled at it. She, who had been nothing, the lowest ranking individual in the compound, had their attention.

"Once when I was a child, I read that in all things, information is paramount. That means, everything you do, everything you see, everything you try, you need the knowledge to understand it. The Pocatsu have had the same beliefs for more than a thousand years, and nobody in the communities questioned these beliefs. Not that I ever heard about anyway."

Chanda paused and looked up at the children's parents. Shiye Moonshadow nodded his head in a signal for her to continue. Turning back to the boys, she did just that. "I was four years old when my parents died, leaving me with strangers. Strangers who didn't want me, didn't love me, and didn't care if I lived or died. I had to follow their rules to survive, but that didn't mean I had to believe everything they said."

Her hand twitched and Alexi tightened his hand on her shoulder for a second. That simple gesture was as soothing as a hug, more so, since she still hadn't gotten comfortable with being restrained in any way.

An older boy cleared his throat and raised his hand.

"Yes? Do you have a question?"

"Um, yeah, I do. Did you ... I mean, have you ever ..." He stopped and looked around the room worriedly, then blurt out his question, machine gun fast. "Have you ever killed a vampire?"

Chanda looked him in the eye. "Yesterday. I killed the male who wished to fight me. I didn't want to kill him, but he wouldn't let it be a fair fight."

The boy shook his head. "Not him. I mean other vampires."

It was Chanda's turn to shake her head. "I don't believe in killing anyone or anything unless my life or the lives of whomever I'm protecting is in danger."

“But to kill, you have to like it.”

“Untrue. I’ve trained all my life to kill. Yesterday was the first time I used that information and I hated every second of the vampire’s death. I would have happily shaken his hand at the end and gone about my business if he hadn’t attacked me over and over after I had pinned him fairly. Do you understand the difference between fair fighting and dirty fighting?” She looked at each boy, gauging their responses.

Each boy nodded except the littlest ones. One simply put his thumb in his mouth and stared at her. She couldn’t interpret that response but took it as an affirmative anyway. “The vampire had conceded the fight after I had pinned him.”

“What does conceded mean?”

Chanda didn’t know how to answer that. *How do I put it in a way he can understand?*

“It means to cry uncle.” Alexi’s explanation caused young heads to nod in understanding.

*Thank you.* She felt Alexi’s answering caress in her mind.

“He ‘cried uncle’, then when I let him go, he attacked me again. Is that a fair move do you think?”

A chorus of ‘No’s’ followed, and she shook her head. “No, it wasn’t fair. He would have killed me if I hadn’t fought back. I tried and tried to give him an out, but he wouldn’t take it. I had no choice. It was his life or mine.”

She waited a moment to let that idea sink into the boy’s minds. “I don’t like killing anyone or anything. It makes me feel sick inside. Not a very good feeling at all. While I slept, I had nightmares about it. It was scary, and I never want to do it again, but I will if I have to. Knowing how to defend yourself isn’t the same as being a hunter. The Pocatsu taught me to fight, defend myself if I had to, but some of the teachers are fanatics -- people who believe so strongly in what they think, that they won’t allow anyone else to have a different opinion -- they insisted everyone get a killer attitude. I never took to that idea. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“It’s okay to learn to fight to protect yourself, but killing someone makes you hurt inside?” The answer came from an older boy, but all the other boys nodded their heads in agreement.

“Yes. That’s a very good answer.”

She sighed softly. Her chest barely moved with the action. “Do you wish to know anything else about me?”

“What’s it like to be human? Do you feel different now that you are changed?”

Chanda looked down at her clenched hands, then back up to the young questioner. “I don’t feel very different than before, but I can do things now that weren’t possible as a human.”

“Yeah, the superhero stuff,” stated one smug child.

“Superhero stuff?”

“Yup, flying, jumping, misting, stuff like that.”

“Hmm, yes. I suppose those are easier to do since I changed, although, I haven’t tried mist yet. But what I like best is the mind sharing thing.”

Lots of groans were heard around the room. Chanda realized that maybe a boy wouldn’t want adults knowing what he thought, but she continued undaunted. “Do you know how long it took me to learn to fight like a human? All my life. Do you know how long it took to learn to fight like a vampire? Five minutes. Learning is faster when Alexi lets me *see* what I need to know instead of the time it takes to explain to someone how it’s done. Take this for example. I could sit here all night telling you about my life with the Pocatsu, or I could do this ...”

In her mind, she built a picture of the Pocatsu camp she grew up in, her room, her training during a day, the people she had seen. Then she added details, nuances, textures, and sent the scenes to everyone in the room. The boys gasped, and she nearly smiled. “Isn’t that much easier than if I told you how it was for me? Seeing is much better than hearing.”

Shiye Moonshadow shifted subtly, but Chanda noticed it. “How did you learn to do that?”

Chanda froze. “Have I committed a crime?”

“No.” He assured her. “But you sent the thought to a central location for anyone in the room to access it. Where did you learn to do that?”

“I don’t understand.”

Shiye stepped closer to her, but in a non-threatening manner, so Chanda only stiffened and didn’t retreat.

“We have acquaintances and friends we send thoughts to on certain paths that have been forged over time. I, through time, have forged paths to all of my people so I could speak to them as I did in the stadium. I force my words into the minds of my people. You didn’t do that. What you sent felt like a ball of information which we could tap into or not at our discretion. That is what was different. *We* had the choice to accept it. It wasn’t thrust upon us.” He had squatted down near her chair, just out of reach of the golden barrier, and resting his elbows on his knees, had dropped his hands between his legs in a relaxed manner.

“Yes, sir. I didn’t want to be intrusive.” Watching his face, she looked for any sign of anger, but saw only curiosity.

Shiye dropped his head and shook it. “I don’t think you understand. We as a people are, I suppose, stagnant in our thinking. New, modern thinkers are teaching us things about ourselves every day, and this ... Information ball, I guess you could call it, is something new. Like the weather formation you created yesterday. I would like to know what made you think of those things. I have already figured out *how* you did them, but the reasons why are important, too.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll tell you what you want to know.”

Shiye stood, then addressed the young ones. “You’ve had her long enough and I need to talk with her about several things.” The boys began protesting, but Shiye hushed them efficiently, in Chanda’s opinion. He hadn’t raised his voice or threatened them, but they had quieted. “I’m sure you will see her again sometime.”

With a multitude of, “Bye, Chanda, Bye, Alexi!” the parents of the boys came in and collected their own, while Johann, Shiye, Alexi, and Chanda left the room. The corridor was quiet after the energy charged room. Although there were couples milling around, and the females were encased in barriers, nobody said much. They were watching her, she realized after a few moments. Some were hostile, some simply curious, but all watched her every move.

She marched behind Moonshadow, shoulders back, eyes front. She would not let them see any sign of nervousness or concern. She was a soldier and prepared for anything. Running the gauntlet was nothing new, and since the change, she would be harder to kill.

All this flashed through her mind as she passed through the hallways of the stadium to a conference room. When the doors closed behind Johann, who had entered last, Chanda allowed herself to relax marginally.

“Please take a seat.” Shiye Moonshadow sat comfortably in the chair at one end of the table.

Alexi directed her to a chair a few seats down from Shiye, then sat next to her. Johann stayed near the doors.

Sitting at attention, back straight, palms on thighs, she waited for the questioning to begin. She hoped she comported herself well. It was the unknown that made her anxious to be finished with this. The need for physical exertion was overwhelming her. She needed to expend some energy, and the best way to do that, in her opinion, was hand to hand combat drills. Perhaps, when this was complete, she would ask Alexi to show her where he trains.

“Chanda.”

“Yes, sir!”

Johann snickered from his position near the door.

Alexi glared at him, she saw him turn his head and felt the repressed anger he sent his friend.

Chanda said nothing, only waited for the questioning to begin.

Shiye sighed. “Pocatsu conditioning?”

“Sir?”

“We don’t run the Society as a military establishment like the Pocatsu do. You may relax if you are able.”

"I'm quite relaxed, sir. I'm ready and willing to answer any questions you may have, sir." She just wanted it to be over.

The leader shook his head, but began the questioning. "Yesterday, I probed your mind to see what threat if any, you are to the Society. I know from that you aren't a threat at all, and welcome you. Acceptance from the others may take time, but you have it in spades from me now."

"Yes, sir." It was all she could think to say. It was a relief to know he didn't consider her a threat, though.

"I would like to know about the Pocatsu. What can you tell me about them?" He had leaned back in his chair and propped an elbow on the armrest. His chin was resting on his fist. Relaxed and interested is how he came across, but she knew he was tense, ready for action at a moments notice. How she knew, she wasn't sure, but she did. It kept her answers curt and on track.

"Sir, the Pocatsu stands for People of Canaan against the Sumer Undead. The ..."

"Whoa! What the hell did you just say?" This came from Johann who hadn't moved from his position by the door.

"People of Canaan against the Sumer Undead, sir."

Shiye stared at her for a moment, then asked for clarification. "So, the Pocatsu think they are from Canaan? That region is no longer called that."

"Sir, the Pocatsu came into existence the same time the Society did. When the Sumerians became vampires, the Amorites joined with certain sects of the other nations to form the Pocatsu. It has been in existence for centuries, is in all countries, and claim they are fighting for the good of humankind."

"No wonder they've been a thorn in our side forever. Always popping up, killing vampires who'd done nothing to anyone." She could see Johann's face out of the corner of her eye, and he was seething. His eyes glowed red, his face was a mask of fury. Chanda decided to keep him in her sights. Like a grenade, he might go off at any second, and she didn't want to be hit by shrapnel.

"Already, you've been a font of knowledge for us, Chanda. I thank you. We knew the Pocatsu had it in for us, but not why. With the acronym being said outright, that explains a lot."

She stayed silent, not knowing how to answer, but she was glad she could be of some help to them.

"What made you think of tossing the information ball into the room and not at the individuals?"

"I don't know how to do much more than what I've taken from Alexi. The need to pass on the pictures to the children was there, but the intrusion of putting it *in* their minds might be misconstrued as an attack of some sort, and I didn't want that to happen. I remembered a

bulletin board at the camp, on which the officers posted notices and changes to the schedule. I simply pictured the bulletin board and posted the things I wanted to share to that then positioned it in a centralized location.”

“Interesting. When I gathered the pictures, it was not on a board, but on a table. It’s a fascinating way of sharing information. Is it less tiring?” Shiye had leaned forward to put his elbows on the table.

“Less tiring than what, sir?”

“Good question. Did it strain you in any way to send like that?”

“No, sir.” It hadn’t. Not like when she flew or called prey to her. She actually felt a bit of a drain on her strength when she did those things, but the passing of information hadn’t caused a bit of drain.

“And the weather? How was that done?”

“I heard stories that vampires could control the weather. The Pocatsu tell the children that there are vampires nearby when there’s bad weather. I simply gathered water, wind, and electricity to me from the air.”

“Show me exactly how you did it.”

Immediately, Chanda opened her mind to Shiye. Showing him the process she followed to achieve the information ball was easy. Having him actually in there was hard. He felt uncomfortable. Alexi, on the other hand, was soothing, calming, relaxing.

*It’s a mate thing, Chanda. I’m sorry we must do this, but the information is vital to the Society. This way is the quickest way.* His voice didn’t exactly grate, but she felt herself leaning back, away from him.

Then she felt Alexi surrounding her. She could feel his touch, smell his skin, hear his voice; it took away some of the wrongness of Shiye Moonshadow’s probe.

*You’re doing fine, little soldier. I’m proud of you.*

He spoke in her mind until she felt Shiye pulling back from her. When his mind was completely free of hers, she slumped, breathing deeply for a moment, before resuming her prior pose of back straight, hands on thighs.

“I see how it can be done. Thank you for allowing me access.”

She nodded and waited for the next volley of questions.

“So, what would you like to do for the Society?”

“Sir?”

“A job. What would you like to do? I know from being in your mind that you won’t take inactivity well, so I’m offering you your choice of positions. Would you like to be an Enforcer with Alexi? Manage money with Midas? There are an infinite number of positions that are available to you now that you’re a member of the Society.” He had leaned back in the chair again and watched her.



Chanda considered her options. "If I may, sir, I would like to train with the Enforcers ..."

"I don't have a problem with that, Chanda." Alexi smiled at her approvingly.

"But ..." She hesitated.

"But?" Shiye patiently waited for her to continue.

"I would like to work for the Guardians." Quickly, she explained. "The Enforcers have the training I'm used to. From what I saw in Alexi's mind, they're the more highly trained, and practice their combat techniques daily, whereas the Guardians only occasionally. However, I couldn't hunt the way the Enforcers do. I won't kill unless I or someone else is threatened, and then only if there are no other options. I can't. I won't." She finished fiercely. "The Pocatsu couldn't make me into a killer, and I won't become one now."

"Is that how you see me?" Alexi asked it quietly, as if her comments had hurt him somehow.

"No, Alexi. I don't see you as a killer. You are doing your job and should be commended for it. You save lives by doing what you do, but I can't bring myself to do it." She allowed him into her mind so he could see the difference between what he did and what she had been trained to do. The way she had been taught to kill would negate all the good he and his position strived to uphold. "You work hard to keep the members of the Society safe from evil, and you save humans as well. The way I learned is diametrically opposed to that. My instincts, I'm afraid, would kick in and I'd become what you hunt. A merciless killer. I know that it's programmed into me, and until I can eliminate, or reprogram myself, I'd prefer not to be put into that position."

She laid her hand on his arm in an attempt to get him to understand. "But if I become a Guardian, I wouldn't be searching out someone that needs to be tried. I would be a front guard saving lives, and nine times out of ten, a good thrashing will dissuade the attacker."

Johann laughed. "Very true. As you put it, a thrashing *does* usually quell any uprisings. I wouldn't mind having you on my team."

His smile dropped. "That is, if nobody has any objections. Alexi?"

Alexi shook his head. "I can feel and see her sincerity. So strongly does she feel about this, that I can't argue. She *has* been programmed in a way I don't understand yet, and she's smart to not want to test it." He glared at Johann. "Although, she did say she wanted to train with me, because your people are pansies."

Johann growled teasingly. "I'm most definitely going to take her onto my team. She could probably help me whip my people into shape. You're absolutely right when you say we don't train enough. We should." He got a wicked grin creeping across his face. "And we will."

Alexi laughed. "So, what kind of job do you have for her? Will it put her in contact with Society members who'll hassle her all the time?" He turned to Chanda. "I'm sorry, but you have a long road ahead, getting past the stigma of being an enemy."

"I do understand that, Alexi. I knew it when I started dreaming of you." She let a small smile move her face, to let him know she appreciated his concern. "It's just something to overcome."

"Good attitude." Shiye spoke for the first time in minutes. "So, Johann, what job do you have for her?"

"The children."

Chanda stared at him. "What about them?"

"The children attend school. At night of course, while their parents go to their jobs or whatever. They have teachers, but they don't have guards. The attack last night, specifically targeting them, has caused me to realize how vulnerable they are. I want to put a team on them. They know you, their parents know you care about their children's welfare, and you would be filling a spot that has become necessary to the whole of the Society."

"Splendid idea, Johann. Will you accept, Chanda?"

She looked at Shiye when he spoke, seeing the honest good will shining from his eyes. "If the parents have no arguments ..."

"I shall speak to them individually tomorrow. Tonight, you do as you will, and tomorrow, before dawn, I'll give you their verdict."

"Sir?"

"Yes, Chanda?"

"Please, sir, don't try to influence them, or try to change their minds if they're opposed." She knew she wouldn't do this if any of the parents disagreed. Children are the most important thing to a parent and she didn't want to cause any more friction within the Society.

"I appreciate your sentiment, but I'm not that kind of leader. The previous leader was one for that, and it's one of the reasons I opted to take the position. Free will is important and I won't try to influence them in any way. I will however, give them the facts and let them draw their own conclusions."

Chanda nodded her consent and the three of them stood and headed for the exit.

"I'd like you to come meet my people as soon as the verdict's in. So, I can count on you night after tomorrow?"

"Relax, Johann. I'll have her there as soon as it's feasible. Tomorrow, I'm going to introduce her to *my* people and she can show them her moves."

Shiye just laughed and shook his head. "I think she's already met my people, so I'll be about my business. Have a good evening." As he finished speaking, he dissolved into a mist and disappeared around a corner.

Chanda watched him and wondered how he did that. The children had mentioned turning into a mist, but she couldn't figure out how they did it. Not even with the databanks of information from Alexi could she glean the proper movements to make it happen. He could do it, she could see him changing into the pearly drops and traveling that way, and she tried, but couldn't transform.

"Well, you're a real vampire after all." Alexi jolted her out of her thoughts.

"Pardon?"

"There is something you can't do. It makes you ... It makes it easier for me to live with. Sure, it's superficial and childish, but I can do something you can't, and maybe some day, I can teach you how I do it." He wrapped his arm around her waist and gave it a squeeze.

"So, because I can't turn into a mist, you feel superior?" She raised an eyebrow at him. She knew how he felt, but decided now was a great time to practice her teasing. He seemed to need it from her as much as he needed her touch and love.

"That's it! I can't take it any more." Johann threw his hands in the air. "I'll see you two lust crazed fiends night after tomorrow."

He too turned to mist and floated off down the corridor. Chanda thought she could hear him grumbling until he was out of sight.

"Ah, alone at last."

Chanda looked up and down the corridor at the vampires who filled it. Not to capacity, but there were pockets of them scattered here and there. "You call this alone?"

He too glanced around, but nodded. "Alone enough."

"For what?"

When he turned to her with a grin wider than his face, and his eyes sparkling mischievously, Chanda felt a spurt of excitement in her stomach.

Slowly, he took her hand into his, tugged her toward him, and slid his free hand up her side. "Let's find somewhere a little less populated."

Unable to form actual words, Chanda nodded. She continued to stare into his glowing eyes as he turned her and they began to walk. The entire Pocatsu force could invade right now, and she felt unable to do anything but follow his lead.

When they stopped, he opened a door and ushered her inside, closing the door firmly behind them. Chanda finally pulled her eyes from his and looked at where he'd brought her. From what she could gather, it was some sort of storage room. It seemed neat, clean, and everything was in its place.

Alexi pressed against her back, wrapping his arms around her waist. She could feel his erection nudging the small of her back. He was so tall, his chin rested on the top of her head as he ran his hands over the waistband of her pants. She stood still, shivering in his embrace, waiting to see what would happen next.

She felt a tug at her waist and glanced down. He'd pulled her shirt from her pants and slid his calloused hand against her chilled skin. Goose bumps erupted where he touched and her back arched just a little, pressing her abdomen into his roving hand.

The feel of him pressing against her back caused her breath to catch. His muscles rippled as he moved and she could feel each breath he took. It expanded his chest against her shoulder blades, pushing her forward just a little. She leaned farther back into him. He was her stabilization, her only focus.

His hand slid up and over her ribs to just below her breast causing her to gasp quietly in anticipation. Need flashed through her and she closed her eyes. "Please."

A chuckle rumbled through her back from his chest. Her nipples tightened, and rubbed against the cloth of her bra. "Please what?" His breath whispered across her ear as he leaned down to kiss it.

She took his wrist and pulled it away from her body. Opening her eyes to enjoy the sensation, she made sure there was room for what she planned. He let her move his hand up so that his arm draped over her shoulder and across her chest.

Waiting until he reached for her again, she bent at the waist, tugged his arm, and flipped his unsuspecting body over her back and onto the floor in front of her. As the air whooshed out of his lungs, she spun around and straddled him, sitting on his stomach, pinning both his wrists above his head with her hands.

Placidly, she stared down at him as he wheezed a couple of times to catch his breath, then he began to laugh. The movement of his stomach caused her to bounce up and down on him, and the heat that he had caused to begin in her abdomen, moved down to the apex of her thighs. She could feel herself softening, moistening, waiting for his hard cock to join with her, make them one.

She wanted to tear his clothes off and force him to have sex -- *make love* her mind cried -- with her.

Releasing his wrists, she smoothed her hands down his arms, slowly. Lifting her hands to his head, she ran her fingers over his soft dark hair, and down his cheeks to the collar of his shirt. When she tightened her grip on the offending shirt, Alexi's hands clamped around her wrists. He had struck lightning fast, like a snake.

"Don't tear it. I'll take it off if you want me to, but don't mess it up."

"Mine."

"Yes, and I'll let you at it, but you have to control yourself for a moment. Wandering around the stadium with shredded clothing will not endear you to the parents."

He made sense. She didn't want him to; she wanted to get at his hot, silky skin, but the thought of the children stopped her, and brought her back to her senses enough to think.

Chanda clenched her fingers, then let his shirt go. "Off, now."

Unable to form complete sentences, she didn't even try. Her mind was a jumble of want, need, and possession. Nothing and no one had ever belonged to her, but Alexi did. He was hers and only hers. No other would ever touch him as long as she lived. She would fight anyone who tried to take him away.

"Mine."

His eyes lit with an internal flame as he gazed at her. He let go of her wrists to push himself into a sitting position, sliding her down his abdomen, and onto the bulge of his cock. Chanda wiggled to press it against her aching clit, and when he groaned, she smiled.

When she reached for his shirt again, he pushed her hands away and began unbuttoning it. Slowly, one by one, he pushed the small buttons through their holes. The gap widened and exposed his chest in increments too small for Chanda. She wanted it all, and she wanted it now.

He laughed sexily drawing her attention to his face. "You could take your clothes off if you're in a hurry."

*Good idea.* Chanda stood, feet planted on either side of his hips, and ripped her shirt over her head. Her bra followed with a tug and a shrug. Training alone kept her from throwing them across the room. She folded both articles of clothing neatly before setting them on a shelf that held rolls and rolls of paper towels.

Watching Alexi as he slowly finished unbuttoning his shirt, she reached for her sneakers. Faster than she could ever remember, and not taking her heated gaze off her mate, she stripped the rest of the clothing from her body, folded them and set them with the rest of her clothes. Completely naked, she stood straight and waited impatiently for him to catch up.

Alexi was pushing his pants down over his slim hips and past his thighs. His eyes never left her as she stepped over him, and resumed her straddled position on his lap.

"Are you in charge of this?" He had posed it as a question, but the look in his eyes was more anticipatory than peeved. He seemed to relish that she might want control.

She let her scrutiny run over his body, slowly, hotly, then returned with smug satisfaction to his face. "Yes."

## Chapter Nine

He couldn't get enough of her. Never would. The gleam in her eyes excited him as nothing ever had. She may be subdued in everything else, but in this, she was a bombshell waiting to explode. He could see the flames in her eyes leaping with excitement. It made him so fucking hard, he thought he would explode just looking at her. Her skin was a beautiful caramel color in this light, a luscious, creamy hue that he just wanted to lick until she screamed. The dark curls covering her mound glistened with the dew of her excitement and he licked his lips, wanting to taste.

Unfortunately for him, he had just handed the reigns of this trip over to his mate. Maybe she would want him to lick her tasty looking pussy. She could very well order him to do it. His hips jerked uncontrollably at the thought. *Damn, I'm starting to sound like Johann.*

Alexi smiled. He finally understood the appeal of his friend's lifestyle.

"What can I do for you, Chanda?"

Her head tilted considering his question. "I don't know. I'm fairly new to this. Maybe some suggestions?"

Erotic pictures of all the things he wanted to try with Chanda flashed in his head before he could stop them. He knew she was absorbing all the hidden sexual situations he could imagine -- and there were quite a few he would like to experience with his mate. When her eyes crinkled in the corners, and her lips curved up seductively, he knew he was in trouble.

"Very good ideas." She looked around the room, and her smile grew when she saw what she was looking for.

"Ah, crap."

She laughed softly as she leapt to her feet to snatch up a fancy feather duster and shake it to make sure it was clean. No dust came from it and she slid the long brown feathers through her cupped hand and stared at his reclined, mostly naked body.

“Remove your shoes and the rest of your clothes.”

Alexi jumped to do her bidding. To hell with being suave and in control, he wanted her to touch him and to touch her back.

The floor was going to be hard, but he didn’t care. He tossed a couple of towels he found on a shelf onto the floor, then plopped himself down on them, ready and willing for what might come next.

If she ran that damned duster through her hand one more time, he might scream. She kept petting it, cupping it, fondling it; like it was a cock. He groaned and kept his eyes on her hands. “You’re trying to kill me, aren’t you?”

He felt her laughter in his mind. Her face only showed a little of what she felt, but being a part of her, of her mind, he knew she was enjoying herself thoroughly.

“Augghh!” He dropped back onto the towels and stared at the ceiling. “Do your worst.”

Shaking her head, she came into his view. “I won’t do my worst to you. But I will try to do my best with the things from your mind. Is that agreeable?”

“Sounds like torture.”

“Only a little. Feel like talking yet?” She laughed out loud and squatted down next to him.

“Uhh.”

The sight of her open labia caught his attention and wouldn’t let go. Slightly darker than her skin color, moist, and -- the heat of her body caused her scent to surround him in a perfumed haze. It was an intoxicating, thought shattering, cock hardening sight. He was already hard enough to pound stakes, and the damned woman insisted on prolonging his agony. He could see it in her eyes, in the split second he took to look before he had to return his eyes to her glistening cunt.

“I’ll take that as a, not ready to talk yet. Remember, there are vampires present. You must keep your voice down or they’ll know what we’re doing.”

“kay.” He probably didn’t sound as confident as he should under the circumstances, but that might be because he was afraid he wouldn’t be able to contain himself if she did half the things he imagined was possible with that feather duster in her hand.

She simply shook her head. He saw it out of the corner of his eye. She moved the feather duster toward him and that caught his full attention. Letting him feel the texture of the feathers, she ran it down his cheek. It was soft, and left a little, tickling tingle behind. This was going to be bad.

As it left his face to skim his chest, he took a deep breath and held it to keep from groaning. He would rather have her hands on him, but he was so attuned to her, he knew

she was taking a lot of pleasure from his reactions. Not repressing them, letting them show, was made harder by the need to keep it quiet. He would have to keep one part of his mind on control, while the rest was simply feeling.

She was going to kill him, or drive him mad.

Either way, he was going to be happy while it happened.

The tips of the feathers circled a nipple that tightened in response. He sucked in a cooling breath, but that didn't cool the heat of his body at all. It simply brought the feathers into closer contact with his aching nipple. She continued the skimming abrasions on the one nipple, then reached over him and pinched the other lightly. The contrast was phenomenal. His back arched, the air left his lungs in a burst, and his cock leaked a drop of pre-cum down his shaft.

When he caught his breath again, and could peel his eyes from the back of his head, he looked up into her pleased face. "Torture."

"Yes. But good torture." She punctuated that statement with another pinch to his nipple. This time it was a little harder, as if she were trying to find his limit.

"If you make me come, I swear I will fall asleep just to spite you. I want to be in you when it happens and not before."

Again, she laughed. "I don't want that to happen, so I will be very careful."

She leaned down and pressed her lips to his, running her tongue along the seam until he opened. She took full advantage and slid her tongue into his mouth. Sight, sound, everything left him and he focused only on where she touched him. His chest and mouth sizzled. Chanda continued the dual tortures to his nipples while she kissed him, then switched the feather duster into the other hand, and began the tortures again. His chest arched, the different sensations on his overly sensitive nipples was catastrophic. Lifting his hand, he reached down and grabbed his cock in a firm grip at the base to keep himself from exploding.

She must have felt him move, because she lifted her head and looked down at where his hand was doing its damndest to stem the tide. When she looked back into his eyes, he flinched. This was going to hurt. Her expression had slowly changed to a wily grin and her eyes twinkled mischievously.

The hand with the feather duster moved down his stomach. "Oh, shit."

"Shh. Remember the hearing of the others."

Her eyes followed the feathers as they skimmed his abdomen. He couldn't help the muscle contractions that followed in the sensation's wake. She seemed to enjoy the show, though, because she reversed the direction of the duster and did it again.

"Damn it, woman!"

The evil thing only laughed softly at his misery.



Again, the feather duster headed for his groin. He was going to hyperventilate the second she touched him with it if she kept up her agonizingly slow pace.

He held his breath as she meandered the tips of the feathers across the width of his abdomen and moved farther downward. As his fingers and cock were enveloped in the soft, cool, tickling depths of the long feathers, the air rushed out of his lungs in a long, loud whoosh. It was as if he'd stuck his cock in a cloud. "Fuck, oh shit, fuck." Erupted from his mouth at irregular intervals.

Chanda only chuckled and pinched his nipple.

"That's it." He grabbed her by the arms and pushed her onto her back. Following her over, he pressed her down onto the floor with his body weight. "You've had your fun. It's my turn now."

"Certainly, sir."

"Oh yeah, I like that."

She shook her head and laughed softly, but lifted her arms to wrap around his neck and pull him down for a kiss.

He let her have her wish, kissing the breath right out of her. When he lifted his head, he surveyed his accomplishment with a smug-laced joy. Her eyes were closed, her mouth open and panting. This was his mate and he had just kissed hell out of her.

Glancing down her body, he decided to do a whole lot more before he was done.

Starting at the side of her mouth, he kissed down to her neck, giving a nip with his sharp teeth to the soft skin at the curve of her collar bone, then across to her shoulder. From there, he angled inward to her breast. He kissed across the top, little sucking kisses, which left an interesting design. He admired it for just a moment, before he slid to the other breast and decorated it to match. He was quite the artist, if he did say so himself.

When he could no longer keep himself from it, he licked around her nipple with his tongue, causing both buds to tighten even more than they already were. She slid her fingers into his hair and clenched, pulling his hair just enough to draw some of his concentration away from what he was doing.

"Can't have that. You have to keep your hands off me." He gently disentangled her hands and pressed her wrists to the floor near her head. "Keep them there."

"Or what?"

"Or I'll stop."

She took a deep breath, which expanded her chest and caught his full attention. "All right, if that's your orders, I can follow them."

"Those are my orders."

With her arms up, her breasts rose higher and he wasted no time taking advantage of the position. He licked his tongue along the underside of each creamy breast, and savored the

slightly salty flavor of her sweat. He groaned his appreciation then ran his tongue up the curve of one breast and latched tightly onto the beaded nipple.

Sucking her nipple deeply, Alexi rolled it along the roof of his mouth with his tongue, then leaned his head back, letting it pull from his mouth with a pop. As he critiqued the depth of color flushing her breast, he nodded. "Nice and red. Perfect."

He went about making the other nipple and areola match the first. By this time, Chanda was panting and moving restlessly. Her hands clenched and unclenched in anticipation, but stayed where he put them, and he intermittently praised her and rubbed her arms. "You are such a good soldier, very good."

Letting his hands slide down her side, he pressed one finger between the silky folds of her pussy. When he touched the protruding bud of her clitoris, she arched hard as if he had struck her with lightning. "Getting close, are we?"

"Alexi, don't make me hurt you."

He laughed and kissed her dry lips. "We can't have that, now can we?"

Slowly he slid down her body, pressing kisses and nips along the way, until he reached the triangle patch of pubic hair. Taking a long, slow, deep breath, he surrounded himself in her spicy scent. His mouth began to water and he licked his lips.

"Ah, baby, you smell so good."

Panting, Chanda wiggled and lifted her bottom. "I'm not a baby ... Ah! Do something, Alexi."

Chuckling, he gently parted her lower lips and blew cool air across her clitoris. "Like that?"

Her entire body arched and when he looked up at her, her face was scrunched tightly as if in pain, hands closed into fists. "I'll take that as a yes."

She glared down at him, eyes glowing a feral red. "Do something, now!"

Ignoring her demand, he inhaled her scent again, and had to taste her. Running his flat tongue up her slit, he moaned. "Damn, baby. You're spicy."

This time, she didn't correct his use of baby because her body was clenched so tightly her back arched, and she grunted several times as if to get air into her lungs. "Alexi!"

He groaned and repeated the long, slow lick, gathering the moisture and rolling it on his tongue. "Mm." He had to have more. Diving in with great gusto, he latched onto her protruding clit. The squeal she emitted, gratified him to his soul. He had to have more.

Pressing one finger into her drenched, rippling passage, he groaned at how tight she felt. It wasn't enough, he needed her ready to take him soon. His cock was so hard, he was rubbing it into the towel underneath Chanda. Rivulets of pre-cum coated him in a fine layer, he was ready, but was she?

He slid a second finger into her and twisted, spreading them, widening her passage to take him.

“Alexi, fuck me or kill me, but don’t do both.”

Her outburst startled him into a laugh, and calmed him enough to slide up her body, pressing light kisses here and there on his way. When he felt the heat of her pussy wrap around the head of his cock, he stopped and caught her eyes with his.

When he had her full, undivided attention, he pressed into her, slowly, inexorably. “Chanda, shit, you’re so hot. So damned tight.”

When his balls pressed up against her body, he stopped. Letting her adjust, letting himself feel.

“Alexi. Please.”

She had begun moving her hips erratically, as if there was no way she could stay still.

He planned on taking his time, though. Sliding back, until only the very tip of him remained inside, he paused, then pressed back in deeply.

“Yes. So good.” He watched the expressions fighting for supremacy on her face. They changed rapidly from ecstasy to agony and back. “More!”

Unable to answer her, he did as she demanded. Faster, he repeated the in and out motions, sliding along her silky portal. Hot, wet flames, caressed his cock each time he pressed into her. “Need you.” He would forever.

The rapid pace they kept, her pressing up, and he pushing in, brought them to a head quickly. Faster than he wanted, but he was unable to slow them down. “Damn it.”

He could feel his balls tightening, preparing to unload within her depths. The electric jolt in his lower back, signaling the nearness of the end, had him reaching between them, finding and circling her clit. “Come on, Chanda, come for me.”

Her breath caught in her lungs, then rushed out between her gritted teeth. Alexi placed his mouth over hers and took the scream that she couldn’t contain when she exploded. His mouth muffled her cry enough, that the sound didn’t go beyond him, and let his own wave of completion roll over him. Ripping his mouth from hers, his back arched, his ass tightened, and he pounded into her three more times. The surge of flame that shot from him into her caused them both to gasp. He fought to contain the roar that tried to emerge, only succeeding because Chanda covered his mouth with her hand as he lost control. He pumped everything he had into her -- heart, soul, being -- and caught himself growling over and over the same phrase. “My woman, my warrior. Mine.”

When he came back to himself, Chanda lay beneath him, breathing heavily, and smiling. “We seem to have survived.”

He could only raise a brow. He didn’t have the energy to speak.

“I wasn’t sure we would.”

Alexi couldn't help but chuckle breathlessly at her statement. His arms collapsed and he dropped onto her, chest to chest, until he could feel the rumbles of her quiet laughter, and the aftershocks rippling around his sensitive, depleted cock.

"I'm still not sure we did."

Chanda hummed in a considering manner. "No, I do think we survived. Granted, it was close."

"Oh sure, the joking side comes out when I'm unable to spar with you. That's not fair, woman." He poked her in the side with his finger.

Her retaliation was much more forceful. She wrapped her arms around him and rolled, taking him with her. Lying underneath her, staring into her smiling face, he tried to unscramble his brains. The sexy sight of her naked breasts, marked with his design of love bites, in no way helped his cause. It only made him grin stupidly.

"What is that look for, it makes me nervous." He watched as she looked down to where his eyes directed, and gasped. "When did you do this?"

"Early on. I think it's pretty."

She sighed, causing him to laugh. "How am I supposed to cover this up?"

"You want to hide my artwork? That took time and effort on my part to get just right."

Chanda glared at him, then turned her gaze back to her chest. "Well, it is pretty, but I think it will show when I'm working out, don't you think?"

"Not if you're covered properly."

"What do you consider proper?"

"No skin showing."

Chanda rolled her eyes. "Can't work out that way." She rolled off him, lying snugly against his side. "I would feel confined, and unable to ..."

When she trailed off, Alexi turned to her. "What?"

"When you fight, what do you wear? I know vampires are tough, but in your mind, I see that you and your people take a lot of damage."

He nodded. "Just before I started dreaming of you, I was in a battle, and was scratched so badly that I nearly died from the poisons a rogue placed in me. If it weren't for Mykil realizing that the sulfur spring could heal, I would be dust now."

Chanda stayed quiet for a few minutes. When Alexi glanced at her, he wondered if she had fallen asleep.

"I'm awake. Tell me something. Does the Society have an R&D department?" She lifted her head and propped it on a hand to be able to see him.

"Sure, I think that would be under Archimedes' realm. Why?"

"I had an idea and wondered who I could run it by to tell me if it might work."

The excitement in her eyes, made him very curious. "Tell me."

She sighed. "I need to know several things first about vampires, the poison, and materials, but ..." She took a deep breath and her forehead wrinkled in concentration. "I have an idea for a uniform of sorts, and I need research and development to tell me if it's feasible or not."

She placed her calloused hand on his chest and started tracing circles in his chest hairs.

"A uniform?"

"It's probably stupid, but theoretically, it might protect the soldiers from a lot of the damage they sustain."

Alexi tried to see what she was thinking, but he couldn't decipher the pictures. "I suppose I can take you to Archimedes first thing tomorrow night, before we have to do our training. I can send her a message now, if that works for you."

"Please."

*Archimedes.*

He heard a delicate sigh from far away. *Yes? I'm sure I asked everyone to call me Angela. Never mind. What can I do for you?*

*My mate would like to speak with R&D early tomorrow, and I would like to make an appointment, please.*

*Oh sure, not a problem. I didn't think she was a scientist.*

*She isn't. She is a highly trained soldier though.*

*All right, cool. Do you know what she wants to discuss?*

"Tell her, a synthetic uniform."

*Hey, awesome. I haven't gotten around to thinking about one of those yet, but I'm sure the troops would love one. Gotta make it real cool looking though.*

Chanda turned her confused expression toward him. "Why would the uniform have to be cool looking? I think functional and impenetrable would be better."

Alexi laughed softly and shook his head. "You would have to get to know Angela to understand that while she is a genius, she is a little twisted."

*I heard that.*

*I didn't hear you deny it.*

*Well, no. I'm not a liar.*

Alexi laughed loudly. *No, I don't suppose you are.*

"Hey! Is there someone in there? I gotta get to work." The yell was followed by rapid knocks at the door.

*Gotta go, Angela. We'll see you tomorrow after dusk.*

*You got it.*

The connection was severed, and Alexi called to the impatient worker. "Give us a minute and we'll be right out."

Quickly, they gathered their clothing and dressed, then straightened up the area, leaving it as clean as when they had entered the closet.

Alexi ran his gaze over Chanda, making sure she was ready, then opened the door and escorted his pink cheeked mate past the glowering janitor, and into the passageway.

"So, what do you want to do now? The night still has several hours left."

"I don't know."

He glanced down at her and peeked into her mind, then wrapped his arm around her soothingly. "You don't know what's available, do you?"

"I'd never been away from the Pocatsu compound before coming here."

"Never?"

"No. I think they didn't want the necklace out of their sight."

Alexi ran his eyes over the mate collar for his family and sighed. "I can see how that would be possible. Your mind shows me the degradation they inflicted upon you because you wouldn't let them remove it. But they never tried to take it by force. That's what I don't get."

"I can't say for certain, but I gathered that the lack of trust between the leaders allowed me to keep it. It was safe where it was, and no one leader could own it as long as I still possessed the treasure. None trusted the others with it." Chanda unconsciously reached up and ran her fingers over the large center stone as if she had done it a million times before. "I don't think I was supposed to survive the maneuver."

"Probably not, and you nearly didn't."

"Understood. The thing that worries me is that Nolan escaped. By now, he has informed the leaders of the outcome of the raid, and they may be planning another. All places the Society gathers in large groups must be protected. You spoke to Angela, the scientist. She works in a building with other vampires?" She looked up at him with the question in her eyes.

"Yes, and you're right. Everyplace there are vampires will have to be guarded. Male mates can protect their own, but in some work environments the security is a bit lax. Damned woman, you think of everything" He hugged her tightly to his side, and rubbed his chin on the top of her head. "I'm feeling inferior again."

When her gaze flickered to him, he saw the amusement in them, but her face showed none of it.

He sighed dramatically. "Now you're laughing at me."

"I didn't make a sound."

"You didn't have to." When he poked her in her side with a tickling finger, she jerked, trying to get away. She settled on planting a vicious elbow in his abdomen.

"Stop that. It seems I'm ticklish and don't want to have to beat you into submission this early in our relationship. That would be a terrible blow to your ego."

Alexi burst out laughing. "We're going to have to have it out some day, babe. I'm pretty tough, I think I can take you."

The wench simply snorted softly and continued walking in the direction he had been casually steering her. "You don't sound as if you believe me."

"Perhaps because I don't."

He clutched his chest with his free hand and gasped. "I'm hurt."

The corner of her eyebrow rose, and her lips pursed just a little. "If I can hurt you with the truth, what makes you think you can take a sound beating?"

"I suppose you will only believe that I'm the best if you see it with your own two skeptical eyes."

"Yes."

Inwardly, he smiled brightly. His mate was getting the hang of teasing and banter. Mentally, he patted himself on the back, proud of his accomplishment.

"So what we've decided, is that you'll supply guards for the vampires when they congregate?"

Alexi shook his head. "Johann's department is in charge of that, and it won't take a moment to catch him up on our revelations."

*Hey buddy. Got a minute?*

Johann replied distracted. *Gimme a minute. I've got to finish this.*

Since he didn't elaborate as to what he had to finish, Alexi didn't ask. While he waited, he hummed the theme song to a popular television game show and made eyes at his mate. Sliding a hand across her butt he groped her, and in retaliation, Chanda surprised him with a grope of her own. Alexi laughed and hugged her tight.

*All right, what do you need?*

*We were thinking ...*

*You took the time to think? What's the world coming to?*

*Shaddup and listen. The Pocatsu know the raid was a wash and Chanda feels that they'll target any grouping of vampires they can find. The children, the scientists, the office workers ... They're all in danger.*

*Gotcha. Good thinking to your mate. I'm sending teams out to the unsecured locations now. Anything else?*

*That's it for now.*

*Let me know if she comes up with anything else. I swear, your mate is enough to make any strong man feel like a total wimp.*

Alexi laughed. *I told her the same thing. She offered to kick my ass for me.*

Snorting, Johann broke the link between them.

Turning to his mate, Alexi glared at her. "See? Now my friends don't even respect me."

"I'm not sure he respected you before."

"I'm crushed."

Chanda only shook her head and laughed in disbelief.

"So, what did you decide you wanted to do?"

"We established that I didn't know what's available."

"Right. Let's see. The bars will still be open, but we don't drink." He thought about it for several minutes, tossing aside several ideas, as most things couples do are closed this late at night. "Well, we can always go home and watch television or maybe a DVD."

"All right. Maybe I can get a clearer understanding of how people live who haven't been in a military camp all their lives." She sounded so grim, he couldn't help but feel for her.

"I think a comedy is in order. You don't laugh nearly enough."

She glared up at him. "Am I supposed to be laughing like a hyena all the time, like you do? Would that make you happy?"

"Absolutely."

"I don't understand you. I think you're slightly insane."

"Probably so. Let's go watch a movie. I'll let you choose it."

They had emerged from the stadium and into the dark parking lot. Once he was assured they wouldn't be seen by camera or human, they floated off the ground and rocketed through the air.

The lateness ensured that all was quiet. The night creatures went about their business looking for food and shelter, and the humans slept peacefully in their houses. There were no cars or planes moving in their path, and they could hear the cicadas and wolves calling for mates. Alexi loved this time of the evening. The smog had settled and he could taste the moisture in the air.

In an effort to share the enjoyment with his mate, he detoured so they could pass over a lovely lake area that he knew of.

"This is a nice place, Alexi." Chanda had been very quiet up to that point, but he was glad that she liked one of his favorite spots.

"Would you like to go down and explore?"

"What about the movie?"



"If you wish to do that, I don't mind, we have forever to do all the things you would like."

"Let's walk. I don't feel as if I've had enough exercise lately."

"You really are trying to kill my fragile ego, aren't you?"

"What? Oh, you mean the sex. That's wonderful and you know it. I meant beyond that. I spent hours each day training and exercising and the limited activity is making me uncomfortable."

They landed in a small clearing between the trees and the lake. Gentle waves crested the little beach then washed back into the depths of the dark water. Fish leapt out of the water after bugs, bats and owls dove for their meals, and night mammals skittered in the underbrush. The area was alive with night creatures and the sound of the water.

"It's pretty here. Calm."

"Yes. It's one of my favorite places to relax." Alexi draped an arm around her shoulders and steered her in the direction he wanted her to go.

A park bench under an old oak tree, beckoned. After sitting on the table, they looked up into the dark night sky at the stars. It exuded tranquility and peace. He wanted to offer that to Chanda. A simple moment, a respite from everything.

"Thank you."

Alexi slowly turned to look at her. "You've been listening to my thoughts again, haven't you?"

"Yes." Chanda didn't turn her gaze away from the sky. "I need to know. To learn. You already know so many things that I have never even imagined, and I hunger for the knowledge."

He ran a hand over her arm in a soothing caress. "I'm not faulting you. Really, I don't mind that you poke around in there. It's just that my duties, on occasion, required me to kill. I don't want to subject you to that side of me."

"It's what you do, not who you are. I have seen your memories of the times you've had to rid the world of a vampire who'd been breaking the law, but you remember each face, each battle, each instance. That shows me that you take it very seriously and in no way dismiss any act you have had to make in the line of duty. It shows your character." She slid closer to him, pushed him onto his back, and laid her head on his shoulder. "You are a strong man, Alexi. Stronger than anyone I've ever known."

"Thank you." It was all he could think to say to her praise. As he slid an arm around her waist and pulled her in tightly to his side, he flipped through the pages of his memory, and she was right. He did remember each and every vampire and human that he'd had to judge and carry out sentencing. Sadly, the list was long. He'd been at the job a long time. Centuries. And in that great span of history, many vampires had broken the laws of the Society.

“You came here to relax, remember?” Her soft observation knocked him out of his memories and onto her.

“I am relax...”

“Well, well, well. What do we have here? The Enforcer and his slut.”

## Chapter Ten

Chanda leapt off the table and assumed a fighting stance. *Who is this guy, and how did he sneak up on us?*

Alexi had moved at the same time she had, and stood slightly in front of her. A glowing golden bubble surrounded her, so she knew he had protected her. But he had no protection himself. Stupid, macho men. She was going to have to watch his back.

Instead of answering her, Alexi called attention to himself. "What are you doing here, vampire? Your words and actions are a call to battle. Is that your intention?"

"My intention is to remove you and your whore." The vampire strode arrogantly into the clearing of the beach, and Chanda could finally see him.

He was well dressed and sounded like the tapes she'd had to listen to as a child. The British history lectures.

"You know who I am, although you malign my mate, but I haven't got a clue who you are." Alexi looked outwardly calm, but she knew he was prepared for anything.

"I'm hurt. Midas didn't tell you about me?" The vampire looked at his nails casually, then back at them. "I was sure he would have mentioned me, at least in passing, after the thrashing I dealt him."

"Now that I think on it, I suppose I do know who you are, and Midas kicked your ass, is how I heard it. Are you prepared to have the job finished now?"

That did it. The vampire's eyes glowed a fiery red and his teeth elongated. "You have no right to speak to me with such disrespect."

"Blah, blah, blah. All talk. Midas did mention that part. So, I'm to assume you are Gideon Farthangale? The psycho vamp who thinks he can take the Society by force? Seems to me you just missed your chance. The Gathering is just ending, and the Leader already did the call for replacements. I don't remember you offering."

“That’s *Lord Farthangale*, and why should I fight the usurper when I should already be the leader?”

Chanda wondered idly if the vampire was about to spit. He looked that angry, especially in the face of Alexi’s apparent calm.

“Who gave you the appellation? I don’t remember any Lords in the Society. I think I would know if any titles had been handed out.”

Glancing quickly at Alexi out of the corner of her eye, she saw that he had started moving away from her. He was getting into position to fight. She recognized the movements. Preparing herself to help if necessary, she rolled her head to loosen her neck and shoulders. *Sure wish I had more time to stretch. If this gets ugly, I want to be able to assist.*

*Yeah right. I want you in the middle of a battle. Not on your life. You stay over there and out of the way and I’ll take care of this bonehead.*

*You didn’t just pat me on my head, did you?*

*Maybe. What are you going to do about it with bigmouth here?* He slanted her a teasing look, then turned back toward Farthangale.

“I am going to dispose of you, then take control of the Society. It needs to be brought together under one ruler.” The vampire paced back and forth, hands behind his back, each word choreographed as if he had repeated it a thousand times.

*I guess you know who he is?*

*Sort of. I’ve never met him myself, but Mykil has. This guy has been a thorn in our sides for over a decade now. Not long in our terms, but every time he shows up, bad things happen. Frankly, I’m tired of it. If he would just go to Shiye, the whole situation would be resolved, expediently. However, this one is subversive and sneaky. I don’t like his kind.*

*Power monger. I’ve met his type.* She looked at him closely. *As a matter of fact, I think I’ve seen him before.*

“What?” Alexi’s eyes jerked to her.

“What?” Farthangale blinked a couple of times, as if to bring the world back into focus.

“I said, I think I’ve seen him before. He was at the camp.” Chanda was sure of it. He’d been walking through a building with a couple of the higher ranking officers one night while she had guard duty.

Farthangale laughed loudly. “Ah, the Pocatsu. They are such wonderful sheep. I leak them information, and they carry out my wishes without my having to dirty my hands. Such a wonderfully mindless group of trained killers. I utilize them to their fullest potential, I assure you.”

“You leaked the location and time of the Gathering, didn’t you?” Alexi’s eyes glowed now, as well. “Did you also tell them where the children were to be kept? My mate nearly died while removing a bomb from the door of the nursery. All the children were nearly killed by your so called sheep.”

Farthangale flinched. "The children weren't supposed to be there! They are no longer allowed to attend!"

"With the fears of attack, everyone was there for protection."

"The children were *not* to be harmed, I tell you. Killing the children would be stupid. If I let the children die, the parents would not follow me."

*Watch him. He's getting ready.* Chanda took a sidling step away from the table so she wouldn't be hampered by it.

*I know, love. Just stay out of the way, please. For me?*

*I will, just as long as you remain uninjured.*

"At least you're smart enough to realize that. I've already informed Moonshadow that you were behind it, and I don't think the parents are going to be pleased with you. Not that it's going to matter after I behead you."

*Why do men have to talk so much? This would be over already if it were up to me.* Chanda sighed softly to herself. *I'm ready to go home.*

*Ha! You called my house, home. I'm getting to you, I can tell.* He didn't have time for anything more, because the vampire had launched himself at Alexi.

Chanda had fought all her life, in some fashion or another, even as a vampire, but the fighting she witnessed was unlike anything she had ever seen or imagined. The movements were lightning fast, and the hits so hard they could take out walls.

She found herself watching with her mouth open, stunned for several moments. In that time, Alexi had already scored first blood. The vampire had taken Alexi's nails across his arm and it seeped blood. Chanda felt her teeth growing in response to the scent.

Her mind contradicted the natural reactions to the odor of the blood, so she concentrated instead on the battle. Alexi flipped backwards to keep from getting hit and barely missed the kick that came at him. The vampire was fast, but Alexi stayed half a step ahead of him.

They fought in the air, without changing shape although Chanda thought it was a waste of perfectly good skills, Alexi's mind revealed that it was considered unsporting.

Unsporting or not, Chanda wasn't going to allow her mate to be harmed. She pictured mist in her mind, but when nothing happened, she shook her head and shifted into a hawk. Her body condensed into the smaller form of the bird. She shook all over, vigorously, and her feathers sprouted. Taking a running leap, she used the updraft coming off the water to get airborne. Once she reached speed and altitude, she banked and checked the progression of the fight.

Alexi bled from a chest wound, but it didn't look life threatening. *He should take better care. Who knows if this vampire is capable of hurting him with the poison or something similar.* She wondered again if the material in the protective suit would help.

The hawk form she was in afforded her an unbelievable view, and she wanted to continue to experience the joy of flying, but her mate needed her, no matter what he said. She shrieked, then tucked her wings into her sides, shooting toward the vampire like a bullet. At the last possible moment, she reached her sharp claws out to rake them across the vampire's face.

He screamed and flew back much farther than she had expected. Thirty feet, if not more, and she hadn't touched him.

*The barrier, Chanda. You hit him with the protective barrier.* Alexi jumped into the air after his nemesis. He caught up with him as the vampire tried to stand. Pulling him up by the lapels, Alexi stared into his eyes.

"You have attacked with the intent to destroy us to further your aims to take over the Society. You have forfeited your life."

Alexi drew one hand back, and pressed forward to the vampire's chest.

The vampire spit at Alexi, and disappeared.

"Shit." Alexi tried to follow him, but he'd dispersed in several directions.

Alexi finally gave up and sat down on the table beside her. She had changed back while he had looked for Farthangale, and she placed her hand on his shoulder.

"We'll get him next time."

Alexi looked at her with his lips pursed. "I almost had him this time. I should have just ripped his heart out instead of listing his crime first. No matter. I'll get him next time. Thanks for trying to help."

"Fat lot of good it did." Chanda was so disgusted with herself, it showed in her tone of voice. "I had completely forgotten about the barrier. Sorry."

"Don't worry about it. I should have known you would be unable to resist joining the fracas." Alexi leaned over and kissed her lightly on the lips, making them tingle.

*Darned man, affects me every time.*

"Good." Alexi wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to him, then yelped. "Damn, that burns."

Chanda pushed back and looked at the wound. "Let me see it." It was two long gashes diagonally across his chest, and they bled lightly. "Come with me to the water. We'll wash it off and see how bad it is."

"I don't think it's bad. I'm just pissed he scored a hit."

Tearing a strip off her shirt, she dipped it into the cool, clear water of the lake, and dabbed at his wounds. He was right, it didn't look deep, just painful, so she tore another strip from her shirt, wrapped it around him, and tied it.

When she looked at Alexi, he was staring at her bare mid-drift. "I'm sure I have other wounds that will need bandages."

“Right. Where?”

He laughed and put his hand on hers to stop her from tearing off more of her depleted shirt. “I was joking.”

She arched a brow at him. “Joking? The last person who played a joke on me spent four days in the infirmary.”

Eyes wide, Alexi leaned back to look into her eyes. “Really?”

“No, not really. Let’s go home. I’m getting tired, and you need to clean up.”

She picked up the cloth she had used to clean his chest, and floated off the ground.

Alexi only laughed and followed her into the air. “You got me, Chanda. Good one.”

“I’m not completely humorless, no matter what you and the leader might think. It seemed safer to keep the emotions to myself.”

He wrapped his arms around her waist from behind, carefully so that he didn’t knock them out of the sky, and put his chin on her shoulder. “That time is over, love. You don’t have to hide your emotions any more.”

Chanda sighed and relaxed into his chest, softly, so as not to cause him to bleed again. They had slowed their speed enough to talk easily, and her being in his arms didn’t alter their trajectory. “I know, but it’s hard to change an entire lifetime of habits.”

“Entire lifetime? Nonsense. You’ve barely begun your life. What has gone on in the first quarter of a century will be completely forgotten by the time you hit your fourth. Wait and see.”

“Perhaps.” Turning her head, she looked up at him. “I’ve noticed something. All of you talk strangely. One moment, you’re calling your friend a pansy, the next you are saying words like ‘nonsense’. It’s as if you can’t decide to speak in an old fashioned way, or in a contemporary way.”

“I’ve lived a long time, and in a lot of places. I don’t even notice when I switch anymore. Good thing I keep it all to one language, though. Just think, I could ask you if you want to shoot some tubes in old Norman.”

She heard what he was saying, but he might as well have said it in old Norman. “What’s shoot some tubes?”

Alexi laughed and picked up speed, but didn’t answer her.

They reached his home, and Terry met them at the door with a PDA in his hand.

“I need a secretary. Preferably twenty-four, muscular, and oh, about six foot two. And he has to be able to type.”

“Why would a secretary need a secretary?”

Alexi laughed at his assistant’s fake gasp. “I’m not a secretary, and you know it. Just for that, I’m not giving you your messages.”

Terry flamboyantly turned and flounced away from them. “Oh, and Johann Spankypants is here. He’s mad because I refused him again.”

Chanda turned to Alexi. “I thought you said Johann didn’t like men.”

Having heard the question, Terry chortled. “No, dearest, you misunderstand. He wants me to be his assistant, but I wouldn’t be caught dead in that dungeon of his.”

“I heard that awful appellation you call me. I came here to deliver the report Chanda asked for, and I’m defamed. One of these days I will make you pay.” Johann strode confidently out of the den and intercepted Terry. Gripping the colorful lapels of Terry’s jacket, Johann pulled him to his toes and stared into his eyes. “And I’ll make sure it hurts, a lot.”

“I’m sure you would know how, if anyone would.” As usual, Terry had no fear. It would get him into trouble one day.

Alexi stepped forward and peeled Johann’s hands off Terry’s jacket. “The two of you are always fighting. Makes me think it might be a lover’s spat.”

He laughed when both of them glared daggers at him. “I’m joking. Nobody can take a joke anymore. Back into the den, children.”

As everyone filed back into the comfortable room, Alexi rubbed his chest. It hurt, but not nearly as badly as when he had been poisoned. That was one worry that continued to nag him. The vampire whom they suspected actually controlled Owen McNeely until his trial and execution had never surfaced. McNeely had somehow made an entire table from the one mineral that could kill vampires, Palladodamite. The Society now had the table in their possession, but that didn’t mean someone didn’t have access to more.

“Johann.” He turned to his friend as they settled into the den. He seated Chanda on a love seat, then sat beside her. Johann had flopped into a chair, and Terry had perched in the matching one on the opposite side of an end table that had a lamp and a packet of papers “Do you remember Gideon Farthangale? Have you ever met him?”

“Farthangale. I don’t think I’ve met him, but isn’t that the name of the pain in the ass vampire we’ve been tracking the last decade or so?” Johann had slumped slightly in his chair and was running a fingernail along the ridge of the chair arm. “Why do you ask?”

“Chanda and I had a bit of a run in with him this evening. It seems he has resurfaced. He still wants the leadership, but isn’t willing to face Shiye just yet. The way he talked though, sounded like he might be gearing up for it.” Alexi pictured the wild look in the vampire’s eyes. “I think he’s slightly obsessed.”

Johann snorted from his slouched position in his chair. “You don’t say. This vamp has been a thorn in our sides for too long. He keeps popping up, attacking someone, then going back into hiding.”

“He’s up to something big, I think. Apparently, he’s the one who’s been telling the Pocatsu how to hurt us. Although I don’t think he knew the children would be at the



Gathering. The Pocatsu came up with the idea to murder the kids on their own, and I think it pissed him off that they would think for themselves.” He ran a hand over his aching chest.

“You fought this vampire?” Terry stood and went to the wall, pressed against one section of it, and when it popped open, took out a wine glass and filled it with blood.

Alexi had installed the cooler after admiring Mykil’s decades ago, and only Terry and the vampires knew about it. “I fought him, but didn’t finish the job.”

“I compromised the battle.” Chanda had no inflection in her voice, but the anger at herself, and pain of failure, radiated off her in waves.

“Chanda, you didn’t compromise anything. You were doing what you’re trained to do. Not remembering the barrier is a minor thing.” Alexi reached for the glass as Terry handed it to him, took a sip, then handed it to Chanda. “Drink this, it’s very good.”

Terry nodded, turned, and shot a condescending look at Johann. “Do you want a drink, too?”

“Are you going to poison it?”

“Not tonight. Apparently, Alexi needs you for a little longer. Although what you can contribute is questionable, he seems to rely on you during crises.”

“Are they always like this?” Chanda had been watching the two go at it with a rapt expression on her face.

“Yes. You’ll get used to it after awhile.” Alexi draped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his side. “Drink, you’ve had a rough night.”

“I’m not the one bleeding.” She tipped her head at his chest, but did as he asked and emptied the glass.

Terry shifted his gaze to Alexi. “Bleeding? Do tell. And why haven’t you mentioned it before now?”

“Didn’t think it is bad enough to worry about. It’s just a scratch.” Alexi caught himself rubbing his hand over the wound and quickly dropped the tell-tale appendage to his side.

Terry quirked a brow and huffed. “Yeah, as if I believe you. Let’s see it. Take off your shirt.”

Johann laughed. “There you go again. You’re always trying to get some poor, unassuming male out of his clothes.”

“Shut up, Johann, before I decide to stake you. Oh wait! You do that to yourself regularly. Maybe, I’ll subject you to vanilla sex. That will fix you.”

Alexi laughed at his friends, but it turned into a groan when the cuts pulled and ached.

Chanda turned to him and laid a hand on his shoulder. “Let me help.” She tugged his shirt out of his pants and slowly unbuttoned it to expose the make-shift bandage she had put on him. “We need to get this cleaned properly. Is there a vampire doctor that we can consult?”

“Not really. We’re such fast healers, that nobody has thought it a necessary skill.” Alexi took a deep breath, then slowly exhaled.

Terry untied the ends of the bandage and pulled it free. The wadded up shirt end that Chanda had used as a compression bandage, stuck to the wound. “Ah crap, this is going to hurt isn’t it?”

After glancing at the bandage, Terry slid his eyes up to Alexi’s. Wincing, he nodded. “Oh yeah, sweetie. This is probably going to hurt very badly.”

Alexi grimaced and glanced up at Johann’s snort. “What?”

“And you had the nerve to call my people pansies? You can’t even take a little pain.”

“I’m not the one into whips and ... *Oh. Fucking shit!*”

Chanda had taken advantage of his distraction and ripped the bandage off. Quickly and cleanly, but holy shit, painfully.

“Sorry, but I thought it would be easier if I did it fast.”

Glaring at his mate, wishing her assessment weren’t true, he tried to get past the agony and fire of the newly opened wound. “You could have warned me.”

“That would have defeated the purpose.” Chanda ignored his pain to examine the deep scratches.

“Has it healed any?” Terry also stared at the wound, but asked Chanda the question. “It should be healing.”

“I know that it freaking hurts.”

His mate and assistant ignored him. “It doesn’t look as if it’s healing yet. Do you have anything we can put on it?”

“Let me think.” Terry touched his chin with his index finger a couple of times, then pointed it in the air. “Yes. There is some goopy stuff that Archimedes has been passing out to all the assistants, mates, and any vampire who doesn’t have either. It’s supposed to help.” He gave Chanda a sly look. “I don’t think it will make it worse, at any rate.”

“No. I don’t want that stuff on me. It smells bad.”

Naturally, they ignored him. Terry shot out of the den in search of the horse liniment that Angela had sent around. “I don’t want to be a guinea pig. Try it on someone else first.”

He cursed when Terry continued on his way, then turned his head and glared down at Chanda.

She stared up at him innocently, looking for all the world as if she didn’t plan on putting anything on him. The illusion was shattered, when she put a cool hand on his side, near the wound. “It’s hot. You might have already gotten an infection. You’re not going to be a sissy about this, are you?”

From his chair across the room, Johann burst out laughing. “He probably will. As tough as he is, he doesn’t handle pain well.”

"You can go home now, Johann. Come back tomorrow, or never. I won't mind." Alexi could feel his face heating with a touch of embarrassment. It wasn't his fault that pain hurt.

Terry popped back into the room carrying a large glass jar in his hands. The sight of it caused Alexi to cringe. This was going to hurt, he just knew it.

"Here we go, darling. Slather this stuff on the wound and we'll see what happens."

Chanda took the jar and twisted off the lid. The odor that saturated the room caused everyone to jerk back.

"Oh yuck. Hell no, you aren't putting that on me." He leaned forward to get leverage to stand, but Chanda held him down.

"You can't leave. Terry, bandages? Quickly please. I don't think we have much time before he truly rebels."

"You got that right. I'm out of here." He struggled, but didn't want to hurt Chanda, so consequently lost the battle.

Terry ran out of the room and returned with a first aid kit. "Here. Use what's in here. It was the closest bandages I could get my hands on."

"No, no, no. This isn't going to happen." Feeling the sensation of doom hovering over his head, Alexi didn't think he was going to win this one.

Johann approached and went around to the back of the loveseat and put his hands on Alexi's shoulders, holding him down. "You too, Johann? This is going to suck."

"Most likely, but it needs to be done."

Chanda scooped her fingers into the creamy concoction and drew out a large dollop. "Are you ready?"

Alexi took a deep breath. "Absolutely not."

Without saying anything more, Chanda smoothed the foul smelling creation across his chest. The fire that seared the wound shot flames to every nerve ending. As the world went dark, he heard the three torturers curse.

Chanda hadn't expected Alexi to faint. The medicine smelled bad, but felt cool on her fingers. The way he had flushed, then passed out, signaled that it felt different to him. "I hope we haven't made it worse."

Terry stared at the wound. "No, it's helping. Look."

Sure enough, the wound had started to close. Whatever this stuff had been made of really seemed to be working.

She heard the men heave a relieved breath. Johann leaned Alexi on his side, laying his head on the arm of the loveseat. Chanda then took his feet and propped them on the other arm. Hoping he was comfortable, she watched him breathe. It sounded clear and even. She decided to take that as a good sign.

“What do we do now?” She looked down at her hand, still smeared with the medicine. “I’m really no good at doctoring.”

Terry put his hand on her shoulder. “You did a great job, Chanda. I’m sure he’ll be proud of you when he wakes up.”

“I agree. You did a good job, he’s healing already. Don’t worry about anything else.” Johann put his hand on her other shoulder and turned her toward the door. “Go wash your hands. We’ll watch over him until you get back.”

Nodding, Chanda left the room, still staring at her hand. She tried three doors in the passageway before she found a bathroom. After closing the door behind her, she went to the sink and turned on the hot water.

It took several lathers to wash the mixture off her hand, but she kept at it, wanting all traces of her deed gone. She turned off the water and her shoulders slumped dejectedly. Time after time tonight, she had screwed up. First with the fight. Damn, she’d never made those kinds of careless mistakes. She was a trained soldier and knew better than to jump into a fight without having all the facts.

“Aurgh! I could have gotten him killed.” Her head dropped forward. And on top of that screw up, she had plastered him with some strange crap that could have poisoned him. “Total fuck up.”

She shook her head, dried her hands, and left the bathroom. The least she could do is make sure he didn’t die due to her tender mercies.

When she entered the room, she breathed a silent sigh of relief. Alexi had his eyes open, they looked clear, and he was sitting up on his own. “How do you feel?” She crossed the room and sat beside him, checking his progress.

“I feel fine now. It doesn’t hurt at all.”

The wound did look considerably better than when she had left. No longer red and irritated looking, it had sealed and left a series of small white scars. “Will the scars heal, or will they stay?”

Alexi ran his hand over the healed wounds and shrugged. “Honestly, I don’t know. I do know that the cream worked fast, but damn, it sure did hurt for a minute there.”

“Sorry.”

Chanda dropped her eyes again, but Alexi put his hand under her chin and nudged until she lifted her gaze to his. “What do you have to be sorry about? You did a great job.”

“I seem to be screwing up regularly.”

“How so?”

Standing, Chanda paced the room. She ignored Terry and Johann who sat in the chairs, and addressed Alexi. “Every time I turn around, I’ve made mistakes.”

“Chanda, you’re doing fine.”

"No, I'm not. I need to train. I can only be of help if I can fight properly."

"All right. You want to train, we'll train." Alexi got to his feet and stood in front of her. "First thing when you wake. There isn't anything you can do now, it's nearly morning. You can prepare by getting a good night's rest. I will work you hard, so sleep well now."

"Fine. I'll go to bed now." She nodded to Terry and Johann. "Goodnight."

Turning, she left the room, practically fled, but maintained her composure long enough to get to the bedchamber over the lair. Once the floor closed above her, she let her feelings show.

As she changed clothes into a comfortable, loose T-shirt, tears trickled from her eyes and down her cheeks. Ignoring them since they were only a stress relief, she climbed into the large bed and pulled the covers over her shoulders. "I have to do better tomorrow."

"Chanda."

Alexi had entered the room quietly, and when she looked, he stood over the bed, smiling down at her. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, Alexi, I'm fine. How do you feel?" Her eyes ran over his naked torso. There were only thin white lines across his chest to show where the wounds had been.

When he didn't answer her, she rolled over and sat up. The covers pooled at her waist and his eyes heated.

Not saying a word, she lifted her arms and invited him to her. She needed him as much or more than he needed her. She ached to feel needed, wanted, loved.

"Shh. There's no need for you to feel as if you aren't loved. I love you with everything that I am." He slid into her arms and held her tight.

Rubbing her cheek against his bare shoulder, she inhaled his warm, masculine scent and sighed. "I do feel loved when you hold me."

His chuckle rumbled against her cheek. "I suppose I'll just have to keep you here all the time then."

She sniffed and smiled. "That suits me just fine."

He groaned and pulled back. "Let me clean up and I'll be right back." He kissed her lightly on the forehead then sped toward the bathroom. Chanda heard the water run, some splashing, then he was on his way back. He had a towel in his hand and was drying himself off as he approached, and he was completely naked.

Chanda couldn't help that her eyes roamed every centimeter of his body. He was so beautiful with his smooth, soft skin over hard, defined muscle. Her mouth watered to taste him, all of him. As he approached the edge of the bed, she stopped him from climbing in beside her by putting her hands on his hips and holding him still.

"What?" He ran a hand over her hair and had a small, questioning smile on his face.

"I need you, Alexi."

His hand tightened in her hair, then pulled the band out of it, freeing the strands to settle around her shoulders and back. "Take what you need, Chanda."

She did. Taking a deep breath saturated with his scent, she took the head of his hardening cock into her mouth.

## Chapter Eleven

Alexi's breath hissed out of him from between clenched teeth. He couldn't help it, Chanda had licked the head of his cock twice then sucked it deeply into the darkness of her mouth. It was an inferno. So hot, but at the same time, wet. It felt as if he had been engulfed by a sauna. Damn, he might just lose his mind. *Hang on, I can do it. This has to be for her.*

She slid her hand up the inside of his thigh and cupped his aching balls. His breath caught in his throat when she tugged them lightly and rolled them in her palm. "Shit, Chanda. You're killing me."

The sensation of her chuckle rippled up his cock into his sensitive balls and shot right out the top of his head. He had to clench his entire body to keep his knees from folding and simply falling to the floor.

The hand wrapped around his shaft tightened and slid to meet her stretched, glistening lips. The pull of her hand and mouth working in conjunction with the tug of her other hand on his aching testicles, sent a searing bolt of lightning up his spine. Chanda moved slowly, deliberately, drawing him in deeply and retreating. When she gazed up at him, eyes drowsy, mouth stretched tight over his throbbing cock, he thrust his hand into her hair and gripped it tight. He couldn't fight the urge to thrust into her hot, wet mouth.

The feel of his shaft running along the top of her tongue and the roof of her mouth -- "Ah, fuck, baby, I love the way you feel." He didn't press in far enough to cause her to choke, only giving her as much as she could comfortably take. Her eyes let him know when she'd reached her limit. Her eyes widened imperceptibly, and her hand tightened around the base of his cock.

"That's it. Take what you can. That's perfect." Watching her take him, love him with her mouth, was too much.

“I need you now.” He pulled her off him and with his hand still buried in her hair, lowered her onto the bed, climbed on top of her, and thrust deep.

Chanda moaned, wrapped her arms around his neck and drew him into her kiss. Her hips shoved against him hard, as if she needed him as much as he had to have her.

“Faster, harder.” Her voice, only a whisper, blew against his ear, followed by a lick and nip. He couldn’t fight the need to retaliate. He ran his lips across her cheek, down the long column of her throat, to the soft spot where her shoulder met her neck. Licking, tasting, scenting her skin and needing more, he felt his teeth elongate.

Hips and shaft pounding into her accommodating body, he sank his teeth into her. The essence of all she was, flowed over his tongue sluggishly. Spicy, dark, sensual. The taste of her washed over him like a wave. When she arched into him, he wrapped his arms around her back and pulled her into him.

Chanda’s breath hissed past his ear. “Yes! I’m going to come.”

He felt the hard rippling and the tugging on his cock, signaling her orgasm. The sensation brought on his own end. Drawing his teeth from her neck, he pounded into her, eyes closed, senses screaming. Once, twice more, then the fire ripped up his spine and he spurted his essence into her to mingle with her juices.

Chanda relaxed under his still tense body. He couldn’t seem to stop shaking. “I think I’m having a heart attack.”

The quaking that erupted from the body beneath him manifested itself in an explosion of laughter.

While the knowledge that he had gifted his mate with happiness excited him, the mortification that his own woman laughed at his imminent death gave him pause.

He drew back enough to see her twinkling eyes and curved lips. “You think it’s funny that you’ll soon be mateless?”

“What I think is funny is that a vampire thinks he can have a heart attack over a good orgasm.”

Indignant, he scoffed at her. “I’ll have you know, that wasn’t just a good orgasm, that was a phenomenal orgasm.”

Her laughter flowed around him like a warm bath. Comfortable and relaxing, it soothed his blown nerve endings.

Eventually, she ran out of steam and settled into the bed. “I’m ready to sleep now. Thank you for taking the loneliness away.”

He eased onto his side and brushed a tender kiss across her brow. “My pleasure, mate. I won’t mind you exploiting my needs each and every time you feel the slightest bit alone.”

Again her laughter engulfed him, and as he dropped off to sleep, he had a smile on his face.



Waking at dusk, they left the house and fled quickly. Chanda felt excitement wash through her system.

They headed at Chanda's top speed to where Alexi's people practiced. Rolling her head on her neck, she tried to dissipate some of the tension. She wanted to go faster, get there quicker, get to work that much sooner.

She exhaled, then flicked a glancing leer over Alexi. He looked good tonight. He had dressed in tight blue jeans and a black t-shirt. Military style boots covered his feet, while a black bandanna covered his hair. He looked tough, and very, very sexy. She had dressed similarly, without the bandana. A pinned up braid had taken care of her hair, so she hadn't bothered with one.

"We're almost there."

Alexi's comment broke into her salacious thoughts and focused her attention to their surroundings.

There wasn't much around. They had crested the top of a large hilly range, and dropped into a valley of nothing but desert. In the center of the valley, a huge, one story building dominated.

"Why only one story? Wouldn't it take up less ground space if it went up?"

Alexi shook his head. "A one story building is defensively easier than multiple stories. It's also less dangerous if, say, the roof caved in. Only one section would be taken out instead of the entire structure."

"That makes sense. So, this is your headquarters?"

"Yes, and intel informed me that there are quite a few of my troops here to practice with."

Chanda glanced at Alexi. "You have intelligence?"

He sent her a disparaging glare. "I refuse to take that as it sounds. But yes. We have a specially trained unit whose job is to keep tabs on known threats to the Society. They also know where all of my people are, or how to get in contact with them."

"That's what I asked." Chanda peeked into his mind and realized how similar what she had learned with the Pocatsu, and how the Enforcers ran their operation actually were.

Chanda wondered if most well run units were the same, whether they were military or civilian.

They approached the main doors of the building and Alexi placed his hand on a scanner.

A computer generated voice prompted him. "Please state your name and position."

"Alexi Torkilov, Head Enforcer. One guest."

“Understood, Alexi Torkilov and guest, you have been scanned, proceed.” The metallic looking door slid open to one side, allowing Chanda to see inside.

“Scanned?”

“There are sensors that can read our heart rate, breathing and carbon dioxide output. Vampires read much slower than a human, and when we exhale, a trace of the coagulant we use to heal bite wounds registers. It’s an easy way to keep this a vampire preserve.”

“No humans allowed?”

Alexi shot her a sour look. “Only vampires past the door. We have been gulled into unknowingly bringing a human spy into our midst. The toll became too much, and we decided a complete lockdown had to be enforced.”

Chanda recalled a lesson on undercover work, and she could see how easily it could be done. “Understood. I heard stories of suicide bombers.”

He turned bleak eyes to her. “They took a lot of our people in the different fields during the nineteen fifties. Here the humans were worried about the cold war, and we were dealing with murderers.”

Chanda set her hand on his back. “The measures you’ve taken have helped, haven’t they?”

He swallowed and nodded. “Yes, but not until after we’d lost a lot of good people.”

He gathered her to him, wrapping both arms around her back in a fierce hug. She clung to him, knowing he needed her support now as she had needed his the night before.

Alexi turned with her under one arm as if he were loathe to break contact with her, and moved down the hallway.

Keeping stride with him, she perused the building. Judging from what she could see and comparing it to the size of the outside, the hallway looked like it spanned the length of the building. The well lit corridor, white walls and waxed tile floor gave a very clean impression. Doors lined the walls, each with a plaque centered near the top. After trying to read several and failing, she shifted in Alexi’s hold. “What do the labels on the doors say?”

“Hmm?” He turned to her, distracted, seemingly lost in his thoughts. “Oh. Let’s see. This door says, Storage – Office Supplies. Looking to go another round in a closet?” He smirked and waggled his eyebrows at her.

Tilting her head and grinning, she shook her head. “Just my luck, I’ve hooked up with a sex fiend. I asked because I’ve never seen this language before, and can’t read it.”

Alexi scrutinized the plaque on the next door they approached. “It’s Sumerian. It’s the original language of my parents, and the first one we learned. Well, the majority of us did. Most of the vampires here are second generation. First generation, well they have their own interests.”

“Sumerian, fascinating. I thought the language had been lost.” She eyed the symbols with more interest.

“It has been lost by humans, but it’s how a lot of the older vampires still talk to each other, so it can’t really be lost to us. If you like, I can teach it to you.”

Chanda leaned against him, smiled, and nodded. “I think it would come in handy.”

Near what she assumed was the middle of the building, they came upon a set of double doors. Alexi turned toward them, pushed one open, then guided her inside the room beyond the doors.

Alexi’s golden bubble surrounded her and when she glanced at him curiously, he only shrugged. She shook her head, and looked around. An enormous room met her curious gaze. Here and there, small groups watched and encouraged others who stood in the center, sparring. One section of the room had the standard gym fighting equipment; punching bags, fighting dummies, medicine balls. From what she could tell, it had everything she could possibly need. Vampires worked on their reflexes and speed by climbing the walls, running an obstacle course, and dealing with sneak attacks by their cohorts.

Chanda took a deep breath, finally in a comfortable situation. This is how she grew up. Some of the methods were different, but in general, hand to hand fighting seemed the same.

The walls were all protected with mats, from floor to ceiling, and the floor had pads in several large sections. There were walking paths of tile separating the covered areas.

“What do you want to do first?”

Chanda shifted her attention to Alexi and pursed her lips. “Stretching.”

He nodded and guided her to a corner of the room. “You should find everything you need. Let me know if you require any special equipment.”

“It looks like everything I need is here. Thanks.” Chanda walked across the mat and began her stretching exercises. After a short argument about the bubble, that is. He didn’t want to drop it, and she insisted that she couldn’t train properly with it. She won the argument. The activity felt good, and for the next several hours, she took herself through her paces.

First stretching, she then sparred with several of the Enforcers. The vampires were good, and she learned a lot from them. Vampire fighting encompassed flight, speed, and agility, in equal measures. Where she fell short, they assisted her in acquiring the skill, and as she got the hang of it, they praised her.

That alone differed from Pocatsu ways, in that the humans didn’t encourage or praise, but if you failed at your endeavors, punishment would be quick.

They took turns teaching her moves, and taking the lessons seriously, Chanda learned fast.

Deep into the night, Alexi called a halt.

“Chanda. It’s time to go.”

She dropped her hands to her sides. Tired, sweaty, and smiling, she went to her mate.

“That was fun. Can I come back tomorrow?”

Alexi shook his head. “Tomorrow, you go to meet the children.”

“You’ve been contacted?” She felt her heart rate accelerate and holding her breath, she waited for his answer.

“Shiye mentioned that he’d spoken to the parents. They agreed to have you protect them. Actually, they thought it was a wonderful idea.”

The second he stopped speaking, she launched herself into his arms. “That’s the best news. Oh, I’m so excited.” She hugged him tightly, and he in turn wrapped his arms around her in an air stealing hold.

“I’m happy for you, love. I think you’ll enjoy being with the young ones.”

Slowly, she slipped down his body until her feet touched the floor. With a grin she couldn’t control, she gave him one last hug. “I sure hope so. It’ll be my first real responsibility, and I don’t want to mess up.”

“That won’t be a problem. You and the youngsters already get along. Come on, let’s go celebrate. Tomorrow, you will be joining Johann’s troops and then to the children.” He took her arm and steered her toward the door,

“I’ll be allowed to come back here to train, though?”

“Yes, I’ve already programmed your information into the computer, all you have to do is come into the command center and give them your hand and voice print.”

“We’ll do that before we leave?” When he nodded, she relaxed into his side, enjoying the feel of his muscled body against hers.

“Oh, sorry.” Self consciously, she jerked away from him.

“What?” He looked around the corridor, then back at her. “Why did you pull away? I was enjoying myself.”

Without initiating eye contact, she muttered an explanation. “I’m sweaty and I smell.”

Hooting with laughter, Alexi dragged her into his arms and buried his nose against her neck. “You smell all right. It’s turning me on.”

Chanda shook her head and leaned back. “My stink is sexy to you?”

“Everything about you is sexy to me.”

“Have you had a psych evaluation lately? I hear that living forever can warp the mind.” He only ignored her observation, and licked the sweat from her neck. Chanda fought the smile that wanted to break free across her face. Being with Alexi seemed to be slowly changing her very makeup, mentally as well as physically. She became more comfortable each hour, enough to express her emotions. Knowing that doing so wouldn’t mean punishment, left her more free than she had ever been.

Alexi did this for her. Freedom and happiness were all due to him wanting her as his mate.

The repeated lavng of his tongue on her neck below her necklace caused her nipples to tighten. "Ah Alexi? I do feel more liberated, but not enough to make love here in the hallway."

His laughter rumbled up from his chest, wracking his whole body. Pulling away, he shook his head and brushed her lips with his in a fleeting caress. "Come on, let's get the business done so we can find a more private spot."

Smirking, Chanda placed her hand in his. "Good idea."

He took her to a door down the hall and rapped on it. When it slid open, they stepped into a cool, dark room, filled with computers. Chanda scanned the space, her gaze touching on all the unrecognizable equipment then moved to the people in the room. Two males and a female sat in front of monitors with numbers and letters streaming down the screen.

The woman glanced up and gestured them over. "Welcome, I only need a few minutes of your time to get you logged into the system."

Cautiously, Chanda approached the woman, once again out of her element. "What do you need?"

"I've already typed in all the pertinent information, all I need you to do is speak clearly into this microphone and place your right hand flat on this scanner. That's it. Pretty simple. Won't take but a couple of seconds." The woman muttered something under her breath Chanda didn't understand and pressed a few keys.

Chanda took a deep breath, then placed her hand on the lighted square. A bright beam of white light flashed from one end of the square to the other, slowly.

The woman pressed a few more keys and handed her a microphone. Staring at it, Chanda didn't know what to do.

"What's the matter, Chanda?" Alexi approached her and laid his hand on her back.

"I don't know which name I should use."

"What would you feel the most comfortable with?" Alexi's hand moved up to the back of her neck and rubbed. "The good thing about these computers, adjustments are easily made if you decide to change something later. Isn't that right, Marly?"

The woman at the keyboard nodded vigorously. "You bet. Just a few parameter alterations and speaking into the microphone again, and there you go. It won't be a problem."

Chanda felt a weight lift from her shoulders. No one, it seemed, expected anything more than she could give. It eased several fears she hadn't known she harbored.

Lifting the microphone to her face, Chanda glanced at Marly. When the woman nodded, Chanda took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Chanda Petruse."

Quickly she looked at Alexi to judge his reaction to her choice. He only smiled at her, relaxing her even more.

She handed the microphone back to Marly, who took it with a smile. "That's great. I think I have everything I need."

"In that case, I'll take my mate and get out of your hair." Alexi slid the hand that was at her neck, around her waist and pulled her close into his side.

"Thank you, Marly, for your assistance." Chanda held her hand out to the woman, who took it and shook it vigorously.

"It was my extreme pleasure, let me assure you. Alexi has been needing someone in his life."

Not knowing what to say, Chanda only nodded agreeably.

Alexi chuckled and turned her toward the exit. "Have a good evening, Marly. Bye everyone." He gave the men, who barely acknowledged them, a wave and Chanda breathed a sigh of relief when they reentered the hallway.

Compared to the computer room, it felt calm. The corridor didn't have the electronically charged feel of excitement that hummed from the computers and their operators.

Exiting the building turned out to be much easier than entering. As soon as they stepped through the door, Alexi pulled her into the sky.

"Let's go home." He slid his arms around her waist from behind, nuzzling his face into her neck. "I need you."

Chanda enjoyed the feeling of flames licking her skin. He did it to her every time. He touched her and she went up like an inferno. Nothing in her life had prepared her for him, but she couldn't help but enjoy every second of learning. "I need you, too. But don't we have an appointment?"

"I postponed it until tomorrow before we go to the children."

Relieved she wouldn't have to face any more strangers in her unkempt state, Chanda relaxed into Alexi.

The wind rushed through Chanda's hair, whipping it behind her and over Alexi's shoulder. He pushed them so fast through the sky, breathing became hard. Chanda didn't mind, it would get them home faster. The clenching of the muscles in her channel and the growing moisture in her panties, screamed at her to hurry. Her nipples hardened to fine points that begged for Alexi's touch.

Arching her back, Chanda moaned. "Alexi. Please."

She didn't have to vocalize her need, he somehow knew. Without letting her go, or slowing their speed, he slid his hand under her shirt and up to her aching breast. His grip firm, he cupped her and pushed under her bra. Her breath came out on a sob. "Do it, Alexi."

His amusement rang through loud and clear, his body rippled with it. But he did as she had begged and gripped her nipple between finger and thumb, squeezing lightly, tugging gently, until she lost all longing to hurt him.

Adrift in the sensations detonating in her body, she cried out when they landed outside the house, and he pulled his hands from her shirt.

“No.”

“Honey, let’s go inside.”

Rioting emotions burst in her mind. She couldn’t think, could barely breathe. Nothing came out of her open mouth.

His eyes flared with heat when he looked at her. Hers widened as he stepped up to her, pressing his chest to hers. She could see the tips of his fangs peeking from between his lips until he swooped and took possession of her mouth in a devastating kiss.

Her mind spun, her heart lurched, her body craved his in a way she had never imagined. A long drawn out groan escaped her throat.

When he pulled his lips from her clinging ones, Chanda stood there, head tilted up, mouth agape, breathing heavily. Slowly, she peeled her eyes open. “It gets stronger every time, Alexi.”

“I know. It will eventually level off, but I wonder how high we can take it before it does.” He stepped back, took her by the hand, and walking backwards, entered the house.

They looked neither left nor right, ignoring anyone who approached. They didn’t even take notice of the attempts at conversation from those they passed. Eyes only for each other, they entered the lower bedroom and locked the entrance tight.

The second Alexi dropped her hand, in opposition of everything she had been taught about neatness, Chanda reached for her shirt, and with one good yank the offending article of clothing was off her body and across the room. Her bra soon followed. Reaching for her jeans, her eyes widened as she watched Alexi disrobe.

In contrast to her rapid disrobing, he stripped slowly. Chanda stared, mouth watering for a taste, perspiration coating her entire body, panties soaking with her craving for him. His torso emerged one inch at a time. Hard abs, ripped with muscles, dark tanned skin, and a bellybutton she wanted to stick her tongue in, came into view.

He arched a brow and smirked. “Don’t stop now, Chanda.”

She jumped, startled to find she had frozen in the act of unbuckling her belt as she watched him. Quickly, she untied the laces of her boots and tugged them off. Socks followed. Straightening, she stared at the chest that glistened in the overhead lights as he completely removed his shirt. Without taking her eyes off him, she pulled the belt from the loops and tossed it to the floor, then reached for the fastenings on the pants she wore. In no time she had removed everything and stood before him naked and wanting. Every muscle in her body tensed, anticipating his touch.

He still had his lower half covered, and Chanda wanted to rip the clothes from his body, but his look forestalled her forward movement. “Damn it, Alexi.” She couldn’t put her frustration into words, they just wouldn’t come.

"I do understand, darling. The build up of excitement is the object of this lesson. Rushing through it isn't going to happen. Nice and slow is how it's going to be."

Chanda felt a scream building, but she held it in. Control. She had practiced it all her life, she could maintain for a while longer. Maybe.

If he sent her that knowing smirk one more time, she would surely lose it, though. "Alexi, don't test me."

"Testing you is precisely my plan."

"What do you mean?"

Crossing in front of her, he let his eyes roam over her nakedness. It made her skin tingle and her breath raspy. As he rounded her to walk behind her, she stared straight ahead.

"I mean, I'm going to find your limit. I want to know how much you can take before you ... crack."

"Will it hurt? I can take pain, but I would like to be prepared." And she could. If he wanted to find out how much she could take, she would let him. He needed to know her thresholds in case something happened.

"What are you thinking, Chanda?" He came around in front of her and stopped, facing her, and tilted her head so her eyes looked into his.

"You need to know how much I can take. I understand." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, shifted her eyes to the ground, trying to prepare for what would come next.

"Chanda, what in the world are you talking about? You're acting as if I'm about to beat you."

Chanda's eyes shot to his. He looked confused and frustrated. "I don't understand."

"Gods, Chanda, I didn't say I was going to hurt you, I meant we were going to play." He sighed and kissed her on the forehead. "When I said test you, I meant to see how long it took to make you orgasm. Not that I would hit you."

Chanda could see she had hurt him. Unintentional as it was, nonetheless, she could see the sadness in his eyes. "Alexi. I'm still new to this relationship stuff. I will make mistakes. I only know what I've lived and nothing has prepared me for ..." She tried to think of the most accurate word, but settled on the only one she could think of. "For happiness. I don't know how to deal with it. I'm trying my best, but ..."

Alexi took her into his arms in a gentle hug. Pulling her to him, resting his cheek on top of her head, he pulled the pins free that held her braid in a bun, and rubbed her back in a soothing manner. "It's all right. I understand and you're doing great. No relationship runs smoothly in the beginning. Misunderstandings are bound to happen. I simply need to be clearer, and watch the teasing. What do you think?"

He pulled back enough for her to see the earnestness in his eyes and the small smile on his lips. "We can do this, Chanda."



Sadly Chanda lifted her hand and cupped his cheek. "I keep messing up, Alexi. I don't know what I'm doing most of the time, and every time I turn around, I'm making mistakes."

"You're too hard on yourself." He kissed her on the forehead again, and ran his hand up her side. "Nothing you do, no perceived mistake, will make me want to leave you."

"But ..."

"No buts." He gave her a mock glare and tilted her hips to press against his erection. "You are sexy, smart, tough, and everything I ever wanted in a mate. No one is a more perfect match for me than you are. There couldn't be one, not in a million years. You were born to be my mate, do you understand? You alone, in all of time, were made for me."

Chanda knew he told the truth, she could feel it deep within her soul. But recognizing it and actually living it turned out to be two entirely separate things. No matter how she tried, she couldn't get past the ideas and lessons she had learned with the Pocatsu. "I'm trying. I know you won't hurt me, but it's instinctual. I feel as if I'm on a night drop, and my parachute failed to deploy. I'm falling out of control." She ran her fingers across the large jewel in her necklace. The motion relaxed her as words did not. "It'll take time, I think, for me to stop expecting the worst to happen."

"We have nothing but time, darling. All the time in the world." He lowered his head to her and rubbed his lips across hers.

The caress whispered across her senses, bringing her instant heat and need. Chanda moaned, dropped her head back to give him fuller access, and opened her mouth to his. He took full advantage, delving deeply with his tongue, saturating hers with the taste of him. Dark and hot, his essence swept her senses making her burn.

Chanda gripped his upper arms, holding him to her. He wasn't close enough to suit her. Wedging her arms between his arms and his body, she slid her hands behind his back and yanked him tightly to her. He grunted, then chuckled into her mouth.

"No need to bruise me. Tell me what you want, and I'll give it to you."

"I have to have you inside me, in any way possible. I need you to be a part of me, for all time." Chanda felt nearly frantic with the rioting emotions crashing through her. She wanted to climb inside him and stay there, hidden, knowing she was loved and love in return. She was tired of hurting, even now, knowing Nolan and the Pocatsu searched for them, wanting to destroy them, for no other reason than that they were different.

"Shh." He drew one strong hand down her braided hair and tugged the band at the bottom loose. Slowly, gently, he pulled her hair free from its confined state and spread it across her shoulders and back. "It'll be all right, love."

"I know I'm being whiney, but I'm not crying." Laying her head on his shoulder, she accepted his embrace. His arms felt so good wrapped around her, as if protecting her from the world.

“You’re screaming uncontrollably in your mind. Remember, I’m part of you, inside the darkest, most harsh memories. I’ve seen almost everything that’s transpired since you were little. Everything you’ve put up with from others. Chanda, you survived. You’ll never know how much awe I feel at your strength.”

A strange sensation pressed against her chest. Analyzing it, her brow furrowed. “Are you doing something, Alexi?”

“Something, like what?” His hands continued to brush down her hair and back, not altering his speed.

“My heart feels -- I don’t know, strange. Lighter.” Tilting her head back, she glanced at him. “You must be doing something.”

“Perhaps.” He looked down at her and waggled his brows. “I know what I would like to be doing.”

A laugh burbled out of her. “Really? And what would that be?” She couldn’t help it, he brought out every bit of happiness within her.

“I would rather be doing naughty things to your body. And if you wish to reciprocate, I won’t complain.”

“Sounds like a wonderful idea.”

## Chapter Twelve

Tasting her mouth with his, he pressed her lips open with his and delved deeply with his tongue. Damn, she tasted good. His mate had gotten through her bad moment and he breathed a silent sigh of relief. Her sadness had scared the shit out of him. Never had he had to deal with bone deep hurt, and his mate carried it in spades. Her emotions were the same as a soldier diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Up and down, fear and self recriminations, all rolled into one. He could only be there for her each and every time it hit her until she became comfortable enough in their relationship to not get them anymore.

In the meantime, he could try to give her a little bit of joy and personalized attention. With that in mind, he lifted her with his arms around her waist, and carried her to the bed without breaking the kiss.

His healing wound pulled a little, but he ignored it. It wasn't nearly as important as the raging erection he hadn't been able to lose while Chanda had her mini breakdown. Damned thing had a mind of its own and it wanted Chanda all the time.

Alexi laid her on the bed and followed her down, pressing against her, chest to chest, tasting her lips, loving her. His hands slipped from beneath her and up to her breast. "Lovely."

His thumb raked against the nipple causing it to grow rigid. Her responses to him were always honest, instant, and hot. "You are so beautiful."

Her eyes flashed open and the dark brown depths flashed. "I'm not."

Alexi chuckled. "To me you are the most beautiful woman in the world. Ever." With the tip of his tongue, he traced her wine colored areola, wetting it, making it shine in the dim light of the room.

"I have scars. Lot's of them." Lightly she thread her fingers into his hair, arched into him, and gasped.

He couldn't contain the derisive snort. "Scars. Who cares about scars? We all have them, and yours do not detract from your astounding beauty."

They didn't. While they were terrible and most likely a permanent reminder of her childhood, they in no way diminished what made her perfect. It was something from inside as well as the outside trappings that attracted him to her. "To me, you're perfect."

"You have a strange idea of perfect then."

"Not really. You simply don't see what's inside." Alexi decided to end this discussion since it seemed to be going around and around and not getting anywhere. Perhaps if he showed her how beautiful he found her, how much he loved her ...

He took her nipple and sucked hard on it, bringing the hard point deep into his mouth. Gods she tasted good.

Little needy noises were escaping Chanda. They shot right to his balls, the tightening nearly his undoing. Rubbing his cock into the coverlet of the bed in an attempt to give himself some relief, he ran his free hand down his mate's side and across her hips. He had to bring her to his level. His body always seemed to be in a hurry around her, and he really needed to work on that.

Chanda parted her legs farther when he reached his hand between them. He had to touch her, and by her actions, it seemed she needed to be touched. "That's it, open for me."

"Alexi." Her eyes flashed at him when he looked up her body and met her gaze. "Hurry."

"Always so demanding." As if he minded. She could ask him for the world and he would do his damndest to give it to her. Luckily, she only asked for gratification. It was something he could, would, and happily give to her.

He parted the soft folds at the apex of her thighs. The hot, humid scent of her wrapped him in its grasp, making his mouth water. Tasting her became his only goal.

He kept his hand where it was, and slid down her body pressing kisses along the way. Leisurely, he ran his tongue along the crease where her leg attached to her body.

"I'm still sweaty from my workout." She complained.

"Perfect timing then. I'll taste you and not soap."

She groaned and her head dropped back on the pillow. "I give up. Nothing I say makes any difference to you."

"Nope. Glad you figured that out finally." He chuckled when she snorted. "Now relax and enjoy."

He looked down to where his hand played. Beautiful. Soft dark hair covered her mons, and he nipped the labial lips to get a taste of her. She always tasted so spicy, he couldn't get enough. Tired of messing around, he parted her folds and ran his flat tongue from the sensitive perineum to her swollen clit. She lifted her hips to him and cried out when he took the nerve bundle into his mouth and manipulated it with his tongue.

“Yes! Oh, goddess, Alexi!” Her hands came down to where he held her open for him and pushed his hands out of the way. Holding herself wide, she pressed her pussy into his face. “More!”

He liked her idea. It freed up his hands to do as he wished with them. Inserting two fingers into her wet portal, he pressed deep, curving the tips to find the ... “Ahh, there it is.”

She arched into him and cried out when he found it, and without taking her hands from herself, demanded he continue.

Obligingly, he moved his fingers in and out, making sure to hit the sweet spot each time. The thumb of his other hand rubbed her perineum, gathering her juices. Her legs tensed when he put pressure on the ring of tight muscles around her anus.

Alexi lifted his head and caught her eyes. “Push out. I won’t hurt you.”

She nodded and took a deep breath. He felt her muscles contract as she pushed and his thumb slipped in, pretty as you please.

Chanda’s breath whooshed out and she moaned loudly. Rolling her hips, getting the feel for the new invasion, she gasped. “Oh, shit Alexi. That’s good. I’m so full.”

“I plan on filling you with my cock, Chanda. Do you think you can take it?”

He watched the expressions cross her face. First shock, then interest. “Yes. Please. I need you, Alexi.”

“Soon.”

Gently, he stretched her with his thumb, then replaced it with two fingers. Spreading, stretching her for his cock. Never stopping the finger fucking in her pussy, he latched back onto her clit.

Higher and higher he took her, wanting her ready for him. She had to come. He needed her moisture. When her legs started to shake in preparation of her climax, he leaned up, removed the fingers fucking her, and pressed his throbbing cock into her cunt. Gods she was hot. He took her cum onto him, readying himself while she exploded around him.

“Shit. Gods baby, you feel good creaming on me.”

She crested and began to return to herself. “I thought you were going to fuck my ass.”

Grinning menacingly, he nodded. “I am.”

She tilted her head and raised a brow. “When?”

He laughed. “Damned woman. Always in a hurry. Fine, force me into it.”

Slipping his cock from her body, he lifted her knees toward her chest one handed. “Hold them here.”

Chanda grabbed her knees, pressing them tightly into her chest. It opened her ass cheeks wide to his gaze. He could see the tight pucker of her hole stretched around his still moving fingers. “Oh, that’s hot.”

“Alexi, I want you to fuck me now. I need you.” Her breathing was erratic. Surprisingly, even after she just came for him, she was already on the rise again.

Rubbing her clit, he stared into her eyes. “You need to push out when I push in, understand? I’ll go slow.”

He needed this. The last of her virginity had to go to him. The beast raging inside him had to have it. Roared for it.

Placing the head of his aching cock in the entrance to her body, he used one hand to guide it, the other to balance himself. He didn’t need lube, her own natural juices would aid his entry. Her hole against the tip of his cock tightened and released over and over, caressing him. Needing more, he pushed with his hips. “Push out, Chanda.”

As she pushed, the crown of his dick slid into her ass. Tight, she was so fucking tight. “More, Chanda.”

“Yes, more.”

The more she pushed, the farther he went in. Little by little, he slid into the fiery, crushing depths of her body.

When his balls rested against the cheeks of her ass, he froze, eyes closed, savoring the moment. Chanda wiggled under him, bringing his attention back to her.

“Move, Alexi. Please.”

Her eyes pleaded with him, she was close to completion again. Carefully, he pulled back from her, sliding nearly free. Her gasp let him know she enjoyed the feeling, encouraged him to continue. In, all the way, deep, he returned to her. Both panted heavily. Chanda tried to rush him, lifting her hips to his, but he held her down with one hand.

“Easy. Take it slow.”

“I thought it would hurt. It’s so good, Alexi. I want more.”

Her words caused him to snap. Faster, but still being careful of her newness to the act, he moved in her body, reaching for the end. She wouldn’t be able to take much more, so he concentrated on bringing her over, and joining her.

Touching her clit with his thumb, he rubbed it in time with his hips. His balls tightened and a flare of heat hit the small of his back. “Oh, shit.”

Flying, pumping his hips into her hard, the heat of his cum jettisoned from his body, deeply into the hot, vibrating walls of her anus. Her cry signaled her own explosion and he grunted, glad. It had been a close one.

Eventually, he blinked, back among the living. Chanda lay beneath him, breathing heavily, eyes closed, legs dropped to his sides. He lifted his hips to pull from her and her arms crept up to capture him.

Slowly, her eyes opened and she caught his gaze. “We have to do that again.”

“Now?” He blinked, startled.

She shook her head. "Not now, soon though."

The humor of the situation gave him the energy to pull from her grasping body, get up, and go into the bathroom.

Quickly, he cleaned himself up, careful of his sensitive cock. When he returned to his mate, he carried a warm, wet cloth. Her eyes were closed and she looked as if she had fallen asleep waiting for him. Gliding the cloth over her, he made sure nothing of their lovemaking remained on her body. He had to concentrate not to get another hard-on. His woman needed her rest and his dick could wait. She would be sore, anyway. Maybe tomorrow.

He chuckled to himself quietly at his absurdity.

"What?"

His eyes shot up to hers at her question. "Nothing, love. Just thinking naughty thoughts."

"Oh." A jaw cracking yawn escaped her, and she apologized. "Sorry, I don't think I'm up for another round. It must be close to dawn."

"Yes. Nearly so. You go to sleep. I'll be joining you as soon as I get rid of this." Indicating the soiled washcloth.

"All right." Curling on her side, she placed her hands under her check and drew her knees toward her stomach. As he watched, she drifted off into sleep.

Alexi shook his head and returned the washcloth to the bathroom. Soon, he had climbed into the bed and arranged Chanda under the covers, pulling the sweet smelling sheet up to his chest. Chanda moaned and wrapped an arm around his waist and scooted as close to him as she could, laid her head on his chest, kissed it, and fell back to sleep.

He ran his hand over her hair and taking her with him, exhaled into sleep.

The science complex seemed vast. Tall buildings, glass windows, clear skies. It lay smack in the middle of a desert, which Chanda figured was good for security.

A redhead woman met them at the entrance.

"I've been looking forward to meeting you, Chanda. Come on in, and we'll discuss your idea."

Alexi shook his head. "Chanda, this is Angela. She's Archimedes, head scientist. Her mate is an old friend of mine and he would have done the introductions since Angela usually forgets."

Angela laughed and took Chanda's arm. "Come on. Let's go to my office."

"Is it still that rainbow explosion it was the last time I was here?"

"Be quiet, Alexi. I like my office. It's relaxing."

Chanda blinked when she saw the 'relaxing office'. It was anything but. Alexi had been closer to the point when he called it a rainbow explosion. Bright colors were everywhere. It actually hurt Chanda's eyes, but she didn't say anything.

Instead, she took a seat and began to outline her theory.

"As I said, I don't know if it's feasible, but I have an idea for a material."

Angela took up a notebook and pencil and began taking notes. "Go ahead."

"There are synthetic materials such as olefin which I think can be adapted for Society soldiers. It's lightweight and durable, and it has a hollow center to the strand. It might be possible to fill those centers with silk which has a better ability to deflect weaponry. And Alexi tells me that there is this poison being used to kill vampires. Maybe soak the silk in sulfur water before covering it with the olefin."

Angela took notes and Chanda outlined her ideas on the material for the uniforms. Angela tossed out her own ideas and before she knew it, two hours had passed.

Alexi caught her attention. "Chanda, the children await."

"I'll get right to work on this. If not exactly as you outlined it, then something similar. Oh, the ideas I have ..."

Angela shook their hands and ran off with her notes.

Chanda stared after the woman, but Alexi only laughed. "You get used to her after awhile."

"Hmm."

Alexi escorted Chanda out of the building and into the air. Nerves kicked in. She was going to see the children again.

The moment they arrived, Johann joined them, and they strode through a quiet building to the school room. Chanda could hear the children through the closed door. They sounded excited, and the teacher was trying to get them to calm down and follow orders.

Alexi squeezed her hand, reassuringly. "You've already met the children, so don't be afraid."

"They don't bite. Much." Johann winked at her, showing he was joking.

She nodded and took a deep breath. "I'm ready." Grasping the doorknob, she pulled the door toward her, and entered into chaos.

Standing just inside the door, she watched the children run around in circles, yelling, fighting, throwing things. "What's all this then?"

Although she had asked it softly, everyone heard it and froze. Besides the children, three women were in the room. One wore dark clothes similar to Johann's, and Chanda decided she was the other Guardian assigned to the children's safety. She looked capable, strong, and unperturbed by the boys' antics.



The other two women approached her, but for the moment she ignored their welcomes. "One moment, please."

When the ladies nodded and stepped aside, Chanda strode forward, hands behind her back. "What's going on?"

Several voices answered, but she couldn't tell what was said. "Quiet!"

Instant silence.

"Take your seats!"

The shuffling, scraping noise of many butts hitting chairs, then silence.

"Is this the way you respect your instructors? By creating pandemonium?"

She passed her eyes over each of the boys. None would meet her eyes.

Chanda sighed. "I'm not here to keep you from your studies, only to keep you alive. Understand? The teachers are in charge here, and if you don't listen to them, you are not only undermining their efforts, you are also sabotaging yourselves. You may have hundreds of years to learn everything, but there are some things you need to know now. Only your teachers can prepare you for the world at large. Is any of this getting through to you?"

Mumbles of, "Yes," and, "Sorry," came from the boys.

"Fine. I'm going to introduce myself to your other Guardian, and to your teachers. What will you be doing?"

The boys reached into their desks, pulled out books and paper, placed them neatly on their tables and looked at her anxiously.

"Very good. Carry on."

The teachers sighed in relief, and Johann hid a snicker. The female Guardian approached her and held her hand out. "Very nicely done. I'm Denise."

"I'm Chanda, Denise." She took Denise's hand and shook it companionably. "I'm looking forward to working with you."

"Me too, now that you got the little buggers to quiet down. I was getting a headache." She laughed to show she was kidding, but her eyes thanked Chanda nonetheless.

Nodding, Chanda turned to the teachers. "I apologize for usurping your authority. I don't want them to think that they can misbehave simply because they were expecting me."

The teachers smiled. "We appreciate the help. They can be ... well, they can be rambunctious." They laughed then introduced themselves.

The pretty blond took Chanda's hand and shook it. "I'm Anna."

"And I'm Paulette." Chanda shook the hand of the small brunette.

"Thank you for allowing me to be here." Chanda tried a smile, but it came out too nervously, so she let it drop. "I will do everything I can to protect you and your charges."

"You already have, and we thank you." Paulette smiled, then clapped her hands. "Well. Perhaps we should just get down to business."

“Good idea.” Anna turned to the class and all eyes turned to her. “Boys, let’s begin.”

More shuffling as the boys prepared to get down to business and the teachers went right to the lesson plan.

Denise touched Chanda on the arm, garnering her attention. “If you’re ready, we can go over the safety precautions that have been set up.”

“I’m ready.”

Alexi turned to Johann. “I guess we’re extraneous. She didn’t need us here after all. Let’s go do something productive.”

“Alexi. I thank you for being here. I’d have been very nervous without you.”

“I know, babe. I’m teasing.” He gave her a kiss on the lips, to which the boys all made “euww” sounds.

Johann laughed. “Just you wait boys. Your turn will come when you find your own mate.”

The men waved good-bye to the boys and the women, and left the room. Denise checked the hall, then locked the door.

“This room is enclosed. No way in, except this door.” She patted the door with her hand, then moved away from it. Circling the room, Chanda followed her and looked around.

“No windows, I see. Good.” She looked up. “The ceiling?”

“Is solid, no vents or crawlspaces. I have the blueprints to this zone if you want to see them.”

“I would, please.”

The women looked over the fortifications and the floor plans until Chanda felt comfortable with their safety.

“What’s the head count?”

Denise handed her a roster, which she looked over quickly. Including the two teachers and themselves, there were forty-five individuals. That left one individual without a buddy. Crap.

She discussed her thoughts with Denise. “With the two teachers buddying up, and two boys in a team, there will be an odd man out. Any ideas?”

“The buddy system. Great idea. Everyone will keep an eye on their partner, and nobody goes anywhere alone. I like it. But you’re right about an odd man. Shit.” She looked around quickly to make sure she hadn’t been heard. “Sorry, didn’t mean to curse.”

Chanda nodded. “Who is the youngest boy?”

“That would be little Micha. He’s four and cute as a button.” Denise pointed the youngster out to Chanda.

He quietly played with some colorful blocks, building a tall tower of some sort. “We should team him up with the oldest boys.”

“Yes. Good idea. The next youngest are a pair of six year olds. They hang out together a lot anyway, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

They discussed who should be in what team, then they drew up a chart and posted it on the wall.

Denise spoke to the teachers quietly, then turned to the boys. “Chanda and I have made up a list. On it we have put everyone’s names. Here’s the deal. From now on, everyone is going to have a buddy. That means you won’t do anything without taking your buddy with you. Not to the bathroom, not to get a drink, not to meet your parents. You don’t leave the premises without making sure your buddy has his parents there as well. Go nowhere without your buddy. You will know where each other are at all times. Mostly, because you will be with them at all times. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Denise.” The boys didn’t look happy, but they nodded that they would follow the orders.

Paulette stood. “Good. Now, I want everyone by rows to go to the list and find out who your buddy is. Keep it orderly now, please.”

Following instructions, each row of boys came to the chart and searched for their name and the name of their buddy. Eventually, all the boys but one had gone through, and were chatting quietly with their buddy. Chanda noticed the littlest one, Micha still played with his blocks.

“Micha?”

He didn’t answer, so she went over to him and squatted beside him. “Micha.”

He lifted his eyes to hers. “Hmm?”

Goodness, he was the prettiest child she had ever seen. Black hair curling around the cocoa skin of his chubby face. Large, dark brown eyes stared up at her questioningly. Chanda blinked, trying to regain her train of thought. “Don’t you want to find out who your buddies are?”

He looked down, embarrassed. “No.”

She stared at him, wondering why he didn’t want to ... “Oh. Um, Micha?”

“Yeah?”

“Would you like me to help you read the chart?”

His eyes shot up to hers. “Would you?”

Smiling, Chanda stood and held out her hand. “You bet. I’d be honored.”

Hand in hand, they went to the list. “Do you see your name?” Chanda asked it softly, so the others wouldn’t hear.

“M-I-C-H-A. Yes! There it is.” He pointed to where his name had been written low on the list.

“That’s right. Can you read the names beside your name?”

He looked down, his enthusiasm over finding his name gone. “No.”

“Hmm. Let’s see. The first name starts with a P. How does that sound again?”

“It goes, puh.”

Chanda looked at him, pleased. “That’s right. Very good. Let’s see what the next letter is. It’s an E.”

Slowly, he sounded out the name, with one mishap of a short “e” sound instead of a long “e”, but when he sounded out the whole name and there was no “Pet” in the class, he guessed and said, “Pete.”

“Absolutely right. He’s your first buddy. Let’s see who your other is.”

The whole process started over, and eventually the second name had been deciphered.

“Carl is the other buddy.” Micha looked at her for confirmation and approval.

She delivered in spades. “Perfect. Now you know who your buddies are. Do you know what you have to do?”

“Um, always be with them, let them know where I am, and ...” His face scrunched up in concentration. “And don’t go anywhere without them.”

“You got it.” She ran her hand down his soft hair, smiling at him. “I think you should go over and introduce yourself as their new buddy. Can you do that?”

“Sure!” He was grinning widely as he ran over to the oldest boys in the room and skidded to a halt in front of them. Holding out his hand, he did as she instructed. “I’m Micha and I’m your new buddy.”

The boys laughed good naturedly and shook his hand. “I’m Pete, and this is Carl. We feel lucky to have you in our group. It means we’re the biggest group of all.”

Chanda nodded, glad that putting him with the boys had turned out well. They didn’t whine or groan at being stuck with the youngest of the group, they welcomed him and made him feel important.

Carl glanced up at her and winked. *He’s a good kid. Even if he is little.*

Chanda’s mouth dropped open just a little, then she shook her head. *Vampires. Even the boys can read my mind. Gonna have to work on that.* She laughed at herself and turned away, distracted by Anna approaching her.

“This is a great idea. The buddy system you’re implementing will allow us to move around the building without fear of misplacing anyone. There have always been one or two that would wander off and get left behind, but this should keep that from happening. Twenty groups are easier to keep track of than forty-one individuals. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Chanda didn’t know what else to say. The woman’s praise made her uncomfortable. She wasn’t used to it, so she didn’t know how to properly respond to it.

Anna didn't seem to notice, and kept right on speaking. "Paulette and I were thinking of a trial run. What do you think?"

"You're in charge. I'm just here to make sure the Pocatsu don't harm these boys."

"Ananunaki forbid. Everything I've heard about the Pocatsu tells me they won't hesitate to kill a ... Oh! I'm sorry. I forgot."

"That I grew up with the Pocatsu? Don't be sorry. I know better than anyone what they're capable of. I may have spent my life with them, but that doesn't mean I believe in their practices. As a matter of fact, I never wanted to be with them. I simply couldn't get away until I was summoned."

"It's been our gain since Alexi called you to him." Anna patted Chanda on the arm, then excused herself. "All right, class. We're going to test out the new buddy system. It's break time, anyway, and we're going for a walk."

The boys cheered, then lined up with their partners. Little Micha had been firmly installed between his two buddies and was smiling ear to ear.

Denise took the head of the cavalcade and Chanda the rear. The teachers each took a side of the rows and they were off.

The building they were in proved to be a repository for Society artifacts. A library and sort of museum housed the school. Chanda decided it was a fitting place to hold classes, since access to the knowledge base would be easier here than anywhere else. They took a tour of the main rooms, probably to acquaint Chanda with them, which she appreciated.

They stopped at a small cafeteria, which the teachers informed her had been set up specifically for the boys, since they still ate and drank human food until they reached their majority. The Society had gone all out for their children. The food looked and smelled better than any she had ever eaten, and the choices boggled her mind. Most of it, she couldn't figure out, but the items she recognized -- steak, chicken, potatoes, rice, various vegetables and fruits -- smelled delicious and she wished she still had an appetite for it.

Oh well, she may not need food anymore, but she had gained so much. Alexi for one. A small satisfied smile crossed her face. When Denise strode up to her with a mug filled with a dark red liquid, and gave her a knowing look, Chanda blushed.

Denise laughed, handed her the mug of blood, and told her to drink up. "Don't worry about it. I remember when my man and I first hooked up. Whew!"

"It isn't the same now? The ... um, the intense need?"

"Oh it's there all right. It'll never go away, but you get used to it, expect it. It's fabulous, but still not the same as when you first mate."

Blushing, Chanda nodded. She had never had anyone she could discuss private things with and Denise hadn't been offended by her question. She was glad, but still embarrassed.

Movement by the door caught her attention. Several of the boys, in pairs, were leaving the cafeteria. When she started to stand, Denise put her hand on her arm. "They're crossing the hall to the restroom. One more thing the boys can do that we can't anymore."

Nodding, uncomfortable with the boys being out of sight, Chanda sat. "Are you sure they're safe?"

"We're in the middle of the complex. The bathroom has no windows. Never have we had a breach of security here. I imagine they should be safe going such a short distance."

"Right." She agreed, but still something nagged at her. "Denise. Something's wrong. I can feel it."

She got to her feet and Denise stood too. "All right. We'll go stand in the hall until they all return."

The hall looked empty. Boys came and went out of the bathroom across from the cafeteria unharmed.

Relaxing, she began to feel stupid. "Sorry, Denise. I guess I was wrong about the feeling."

"No problem. That's what we're here ..."

"Chanda!"

Chanda spun at the shout. From the end of the hall, a boy staggered out of the shadows. He called her name again, then fell.

"Oh no, it's Carl." Denise ran over to where the boy lay, bleeding.

Chanda scanned the area looking for the two boys that should have been with him. Nothing. Quickly, she joined Denise after calling for the teachers. "Carl. Wake up."

He pried his eyes open and turned his glassy gaze to Chanda. "Micha. He got Micha and hurt Pete."

"Shit." Chanda jumped up and ran in the direction she had seen Carl emerge.

The teachers had gone to Carl, and she could hear Denise following her into the dark hallway.

"Go back, Denise."

"The boys are secure."

Now wasn't the time to argue. They didn't have time. The hall remained dark except for a glowing light at the end. Chanda ran toward it. The closer she got, the stronger the smell of blood became. Someone was hurt.

Bursting into the small room at the end of the hall, she practically tripped over Pete who lay in front of a snack machine. He was bleeding from a cut on his head, but his breathing was strong and even. Looking around, she saw a candy bar on the floor, and no Micha.

She looked around but saw nothing to give her a clue as to where the little boy might be, so she turned to Pete. Crouching, she touched his shoulder and called his name.

He came to, fighting. Chanda held his arms to keep from getting hit. He yelled and kicked.

“Pete! Stop. It’s Chanda.”

“Chanda?” His eyes cleared and his head jerked in her direction. “He got Micha!”

“Who got Micha? Pete? Who got him?”

Pete took a deep breath and a sob escaped. “I tried to protect him. But he hit me in the head. I just wasn’t strong enough. Oh Gods, they have Micha.”

“Pete, I can’t go after Micha if I don’t know who has him. Tell me.” Chanda had never been so scared in her life. She had a feeling she knew exactly who had Micha and nothing could be worse.

“He said he was Pocatsu.” He looked up at her with watery eyes. “They want you to come get him.”

“Don’t worry about Micha. If they said they want me, then they won’t hurt him.” Chanda stood. “And don’t worry about me, either. One thing I’ve learned about the Pocatsu is that nothing changes for them. They won’t expect me to have changed as much as I have.” In her anger, she let her elongated teeth glimmer in the light of the snack machine. “When I get my hands on them ... They won’t know what hit them.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Chanda leapt into the air and took off. She knew where she was going. No need to ask. Once she got clear of Pete's blood smell, she scented Nolan. The son of a bitch had that beautiful little boy, and she was going to get him back. He better not have a hair on his head harmed when she did, or it would be worse for the Pocatsu. She felt the rage swell and take over her entire being. The need to kill Nolan and any who might harm such a precious child encompassed everything within her.

Denise caught up with her and tugged on her arm. "Chanda, stop! You have to think about this, get reinforcements."

"You go for reinforcements. I'm going after Micha."

She jerked her arm away from Denise's grasp and took off.

"Fine. But I'm going with you."

"Fine."

Silently, they followed the trail of the Pocatsu team. Chanda knew each and every one of the infiltrators and kidnappers. And she didn't even have to guess as to where they were headed. Back to the compound, where they felt safe, invincible.

Not for long.

Chanda flew faster than she even knew she could, and just before dawn, dropped out of the sky, out of sight of the Pocatsu sentries.

"Be careful, Denise. They're apt to shoot first and ask questions later." She reached up her arm and pulled the beaded bracelet from her elbow. Yanking one bead loose, she crushed it and tossed it onto the ground. A very faint humming came from it, and she knew the homing beacon had started working. Good. Carefully, she replaced the bracelet on her arm.



"I've heard that about the Pocatsu." Denise sent Chanda a sour look. "Have you even told Alexi and Johann where we are?"

"No, I started a homing beacon though, and you'll have to tell them to activate their system to find it, after we get Micha back. I know what they are going to ask for, and you're going to let them have it."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see."

Chanda stepped into the clearing in sight of the lookout tower. Immediately, alarms rang throughout the camp.

Denise stepped behind and to the side of her. Letting Chanda take the lead, she followed her example, stood rock still, and waited. Chanda appreciated her confidence.

"What do you want, vampire slut?"

"I want the boy." Chanda made sure her voice was loud and clear so no mistakes would be made.

Laughter came from behind the fence. "Trade."

"Done."

"You're willing to give yourself up for this worthless one?" Nolan actually sounded confused.

Chanda sighed. "It's a fair trade. Send him out. My companion will take him."

Nolan shook his head, but signaled to someone behind him.

"You can't do this, Chanda." Denise grabbed her arm. "Alexi will have a fit."

Turning, Chanda speared Denise with flaming red eyes. "I'm counting on it. He has to get me out of here. As soon as you're clear with Micha, you yell for help as loud as you can. Since they'll want to interrogate me, I'll make it through the day. After that, I'll hold on as long as I can."

Denise dropped her arm and nodded.

"Here comes the boy. You head this way. Remember, we have the little monster in our sights and won't hesitate to blow his head off."

"I know. I'm coming."

Taking a step toward the gate as it swung open, she got her first glimpse of little Micha. He looked unharmed physically, but he looked scared nearly to death. She didn't blame him, so was she.

As she passed the boy, he reached out and hugged her around the waist. "Don't go, Chanda. They wanna kill you."

She squatted down to his level and looked him in the eye. "They might want to kill me, but remember who my mate is. He will come for me."

Micha nodded. "And Alexi's a good fighter. He'll kick these bad guy's butts."

"All over the place. They didn't hurt you?"

"No, just yelled a lot and pushed me around."

"Good. You go over to Denise and she'll get you back to your parents. I'm going to go in there so Alexi can come kick some butt."

Micha smiled, then ran over to Denise who disappeared with him.

Chanda stood slowly, strode casually away from the spot the pair had been, then entered the compound. The doors slammed closed behind her.

She was the only thing that had changed in the camp. Gaze running over everything, processing, pinpointing, she realized she hated this place. Always had. It was time for it to go. By now, Alexi would be gathering troops and implementing a plan of action.

She didn't flinch when Nolan stalked over to her and backhanded her.

"Welcome back, slut."

Chanda licked her bleeding lip and smiled a toothy grin.

"Shit, she's vamp."

Several men jumped her and tied her up. Chanda only laughed while they cussed and got in each other's way out of fright.

"Not scared of me, are you Nolan?"

"No. I'm not scared of you."

Chanda laughed loudly. "Yeah, I can tell. That's why a whole squad subdued me. Seems like misuse of manpower for someone you aren't scared of."

"Shut up, bitch."

She staggered with the second backhand. Being trussed up like a turkey made it difficult to maintain her balance. Luckily, she stayed on her feet. They would kick her if she fell, and losing consciousness now ... She didn't want to contemplate it. She needed to stay aware of her surroundings as long as she could. Or at least until she was in a safe place for the day.

*Baby, I'm pissed at you right now.*

Alexi's voice caressed her entire body, and she sighed inwardly with relief.

*So, come get me and you can punish me.*

*Believe me, I will.*

Chanda felt a ghostly hand slide over her face where she'd been hit, then nothing.

He was on his way. She only had to stay alive until then. The sun was starting to come up and a wave of drowsiness washed over her. Chanda stumbled and nearly fell.

"Nolan."

"What?" He turned from giving orders to the men who'd tied her, glaring.

"Sun's coming up. If you want to get anything out of me about the Society, you'd best find me a nice dark place to while away the daylight hours."

His glare dropped to confusion. He glanced at the sky, then to the fangs protruding from between her lips. As her eyes closed the final time for the day, she heard him curse.

"Bring her."

Chanda woke in a very small, very cramped space.

"Shit, they put me in a coffin." With her foot, she kicked the side of the box, signaling her state of consciousness.

Scraping sounds and the lid above her was removed. Still tied, Chanda lay there helplessly until someone reached in, grabbed her, dragged her out, and set her on her feet. The same assholes from before were in the guard shack. She and a coffin were inside of a cell. Nolan stood outside the cage smirking at her.

"Nice accommodations. The coffin is a nice touch."

Shoved from behind, Chanda jerked forward a step before she caught herself. Glaring back at the one who pushed her, she showed her teeth. "Do that again, and I'll eat your fucking heart out."

She grinned evilly when the soldier stepped back, shocked.

"Don't listen to her, dammit. We have her contained."

Nolan grabbed her by the hair and dragged her out of the cell and along with him. The others followed at a safe distance.

"Oh boy, the disciplinary huts. My favorite. Not even a last meal before it starts, either."

Her sarcasm was ignored. Too bad. She would rather face a beating outside, than have to face those four bloodstained walls again.

She didn't fight as they dragged her into the disciplinary chamber and locked cuffs around her wrists. They stung her skin. She stared at them, because the burn had never happened before, but since it didn't hurt as badly as what was to come, she ignored it. She let her eyes pass over the bracelet without acknowledging it. She might need it later. Yanking on the chains embedded into the ceiling, she was actually dismayed to find that even with her new strengths she still couldn't break them free. She really should have put more effort into learning that mist thing. Too late now.

Nolan stepped across the room, a whip lashing in front of him.

"This is going to be fun. I've never gotten a shot at a vamp before."

"I think you take too much pleasure in abusing people." The voice came from the darkness.

She hadn't known anyone was there, but out of the shadows strode the vampire that Alexi had fought.

"Hanging out with the riff-raff I see." She let her voice drip all the sarcasm she could muster.

The crack of the whip reached her ears seconds before the sting registered across her back. Chanda sucked in a breath through her teeth. Shit, that stung.

"They have their uses. You shouldn't be so snide. It will only make what's about to happen even worse. How do you like my restraints? I made them especially for our kind."

The vampire's accent was really starting to get on her nerves. The clipped British vowels and consonants grated on her newly sensitive membranes. As for the cuffs, they stung a little, but not enough to worry about. "We were wondering if you were scared to face the Leader. I'm guessing you are."

The whip cracked again, and fire spread across her back. She had expected it, though, and didn't so much as flinch. The scars actually kept the abuse from hurting as badly as it could have, and she was able to dredge up a derisive smile.

It didn't go over very well. The whip rained blow after blow on her back until she staggered and fell to one knee. The cuffs around her wrists pulled her arms above her head. Resting her head on her arm, she glared up at Nolan.

He cackled with glee, clearly enjoying himself.

"What's your name again? I forget." Chanda closed her eyes and rubbed the sweat on her forehead against the sleeve of her shirt. "I want to make sure we get your name right for your epitaph."

She took several more lashes as the vampire screamed at her, before he stormed out of the room. She didn't pay attention to him, the fire in her back took all her concentration. Damn, it hurt.

*Your ass is going to hurt you for several days when I get through spanking you.*

"I'd rather you fucked me."

"Good idea. Been wanting a piece of you, bitch."

"Damn, didn't mean to say that out loud."

Nolan dropped his whip and came toward her. "That's all right. I'll grant your wish anyway."

He came around to face her and began to unbuckle his belt.

Disinterested, Chanda didn't even open her eyes. "What do you think you're going to do to me?"

"First, I'm going to fuck your mouth, then I'm going to fuck you everywhere else."

Slowly her eyes opened and she let him see them. She knew from his expression, they glowed red. Showing a little teeth, she smiled at him through the pain. "I dare you to stick that diseased little prick anywhere near my mouth. I'll bite the damned thing off."

His pause made her laugh. "Still a chicken shit, aren't you Nolan?"

As she ran her forehead across her arm to get the sweat out of her eyes, she bit a beacon bead off the bracelet, crunched it with her teeth and spit it out. As Nolan reached for her, she bit another bead off.

"Damned woman. I'm going to beat her ass blue when I get her safe." Alexi's mind spun with all the things he imagined were happening to his mate. She'd been in there all day, and he hadn't a clue what had happened to her during that time. He could hear her speaking, but nothing else. She was blocking him from knowing the extent of ... of anything. Damn it.

"She's still talking, right?" Johann sped along at his side, trying to reassure him. "As long as she's talking, she's alive."

"You're right. But what shape will she be in when we get there?"

"She's tough. If she survived her entire life with these people, and the day, she can last a little while longer." Johann put his hand on Alexi's shoulder. "Chanda is stronger than anyone I know, Alexi. She'll heal."

He'd been frantic since Denise had contacted him and quickly explained the situation. If it weren't for Johann, he might have lost his mind and gone after her by himself. In the daylight. Johann and common sense had prevailed.

Around them, the night skies were filled with vampires. When Alexi put out the call for warriors, every male within a thousand miles responded. Each had a reason to hate the Pocatsu, and now the time for revenge had come. They were all prepared to die for the Society and their families. No way would this cell of the Pocatsu survive the night.

That was fine with Alexi. There would be no love lost between the humans who had abused his mate while she grew up and himself. He would dearly love to pay them back for each scar on her body and mind.

The only way he could do that would be to rid her of their threat. Permanently.

First, he had to get her out and make sure she survived the night.

*Then* he would spank her until she couldn't sit down.

*Damned woman.*

*Damned man. Aren't you here yet?*

*Almost. You hanging on?*

*Yes. Just hurry or I'm going to have to touch Nolan's dick.*

That gave him pause. *Pardon.*

Chanda sighed in his head. *I'm going to have to touch it if I'm going to rip it from his body.*

Both Alexi and Johann, who had been monitoring the communication, winced.

"I mentioned she was tough, didn't I?" Johann shook his head at Alexi. "I envy you her."

"Your mate is coming. Count on it."

"Oh crap. Is that more of your voodoo mysticism stuff? 'Cause if it is ..." He tilted his head to the side. "All right. I'm ready."

Alexi turned to him and grinned. "No, you aren't." Then he laughed.

"That doesn't sound good."

Alexi didn't answer him and Johann sighed. "What will be, will be. Between you and Shiye Moonshadow, nothing is ever a surprise. Let's go get your mate out of the jam she got into."

"Good idea."

Alexi wanted to storm the encampment the moment they arrived, but cooler heads prevailed. It was a scary thought that Johann's head was the cool one.

The vampires gathered a couple of miles away from the Pocatsu camp, and stood quietly awaiting instructions.

Alexi kept them short and to the point. "Circle the camp, kill everyone with a weapon."

Johann laughed and clapped Alexi on the back. "Let's amend that to; Circle the camp, kill anyone with a weapon, find any information on the Society that they might have, find Alexi's mate, and stay alive."

Alexi nodded, the vampires signaled their acknowledgment of their orders, and Johann wished them luck.

Taking to the sky, the vampires disappeared. Alexi could scent the blood of the humans in the camp, and his eyes glowed with barely suppressed fury.

The humans went about their evening chores, cautious, but jovial. They had caught the traitor and they weren't worried about an attack. Alexi couldn't understand it, but didn't care about their misconception. He wanted his mate back. Now.

A momentary silence settled over the camp, night birds chirruped, crickets peeped, then the yard was filled with vampires. One second of shock, then pandemonium. A shrill alarm went off alerting everyone to the invasion. Humans yelled, fired their weapons, and ran.

Explosions rocked the ground creating deep pock marks which caused the humans to stumble and fall. The vampires flew over the holes, undeterred from their goals. They ripped off doors in their search for information the Pocatsu might have, and after a thorough search,

the buildings imploded. Vehicles were dismantled, the armory destroyed. Any human who came after them with a weapon died. The children were rounded up and placed outside the camp in a safe place and left with a few unarmed, cowering humans.

Johann led a force to round up the leaders of this cell of the Pocatsu. Few were found. The rest had deserted as soon as the alarm had sounded through secret tunnels the vampires located, searched, then destroyed.

Alexi paid no attention to anything going on around him. He knew the destruction of the camp was happening but he had other priorities. He went from one building to another, kicking in doors to release some of his anger, searching for his woman.

Johann spoke in his head constantly. *Alexi. Check the small buildings on the south edge of the camp.*

Immediately, he turned and flew to the location. Four cinder block buildings with bars on the windows and steel doors, occupied the corner. Alexi approached the first one and kicked the door inward. It collapsed with a clang on the brick floor, and he strode inside.

Empty.

His fingernails grew and his teeth elongated in his fury.

“Chanda!”

*Third building from the left.*

Her calm voice soothed him, kept him from tearing the building down, stone by stone.

Before he could blink, he stood in front of the steel door of the third hut. One good kick and it hit the floor. He rushed in to save his mate, mind full of fear and worry.

Dangling by her wrists from a chain hooked into the ceiling, Chanda pulled her teeth from the neck of the human she held with her legs and looked up at him. “It’s about time you got here.”

“What’s going on here?” He looked around, but there were no threats in the room.

His mate casually relaxed her legs and dropped the human male, and stood on her feet. “I got hungry, and grabbed a bite to eat.”

He walked over to the human, laying on the brick floor, and nudged him with his boot. “Who is this?”

Chanda blinked then gazed down at the male. “That’s Nolan. He isn’t dead, more’s the pity, but I’m going to remedy that situation in just a moment. How’s the battle going?” Carefully, he noticed, she spit a small, brown, round thing into her cupped hand and closed her fingers around it.

Alexi glared at her. She had put him through nine levels of misery and she stood there as calm as a cucumber. “Fine. Are you all right?”

“I’ll live.” She lifted her empty hand to push a strand of hair out of her face and he saw the chains.

"Can I get those for you?" Her attitude was freaking him out. Not knowing how to react, he followed her example.

She lifted her arm to get a good look at the cuffs. "I can't do that mist thing. Couldn't pull them out of the ceiling. I couldn't even change into something small." Slowly, she turned her glazed eyes to him. "I'm kind of stuck here."

Mindful of her fragile mental state, he approached her and grabbed a chain. The pain in his hand jerked his attention to it. "Fuck."

*Johann. I need help. Bolt cutters or something. Fast.*

*Give me two minutes.*

*Hurry. It's Palladodamite.*

Johann cursed and cut the communication. Alexi took Chanda's chin in his palm and tilted her face to his.

"Stay with me, Chanda."

"You didn't take the chains off. Why not?" His eyes must have held some of the fear he felt, because her eyes lost a little of the dazed look and she focused on him. "Sit rep."

"Situation report. Right. Okay, here's the deal. These chains are made of Palladodamite. It's poison to vampires. I can't get them off by myself, but Johann's coming with bolt cutters. I don't know where the nearest sulfur spring is."

"You can't get it off? I know I'm weak, but you're strong, you can pull them ..."

"No, Chanda. I touch it and my skin fries." His heart pumped the blood through his body so fast, he thought he might pass out. There wasn't a damned thing he could do to help his mate.

"It doesn't hurt that bad, just stings a little and I'm feeling pretty weak."

Her comment made him pause. "What do you mean?"

"It doesn't feel like it's killing me. My back hurts worse."

Her flinch when she tried to look over her shoulder startled him. "Shit. What?"

He spun her around by the shoulders and had to hold her up when she lost her balance. Her back was a mess of bleeding cuts. "What the fuck caused this?"

"The whip."

Slowly this time, so as not to disorient her more, he turned her back around and against his chest. She sighed, relaxing into him. "I expected the whip, but I'm confused. They never asked me any questions. I think Nolan got distracted before he could start. It's the only explanation."

"You said they. Who are they?" Alexi ran his hand over Chanda's hair soothingly. *Damn it, Johann, where the fuck are you?*

*Coming.*

"That vampire was here too." She laughed tiredly. "I pissed him off and he left."



"I can see how you can do that to a man. So, he was here?"

"Yes."

"What happened to the human?" Alexi glanced at him and saw he was starting to come around so put a mental lock on his body so he wouldn't escape.

"Nolan got whip happy, then got too close when I felt peckish."

"He did this to you and he's still alive?" He wouldn't be for long if Alexi had his way.

"In your mind, I saw the rules. No killing prey. I don't want to become rogue when I'm still figuring out how this works. When I get the energy, I'll finish him." She took a deep breath as if she were about to try, but he didn't let her pull away.

"I'll take care of it. You rest."

Johann ran through the door, a large set of bolt cutters in one hand. "Shit, fuck, damn."

"Took you long enough." Alexi reached for the bolt cutters, but his friend pulled them away and used them himself.

"Sorry, got delayed every time I turned around."

Snap!

The chain pulled free of the roof, and Chanda sighed, dropping her arms. "Oh, that feels good."

She held her arms out to Johann and he carefully cut the two locks on the cuffs, freeing her completely.

Alexi grabbed her arms and stared at her wrists.

"I don't understand."

Johann looked as well. "Shit."

"You seem to say that a lot, Johann. What's wrong?" Chanda looked at her wrists too. "I don't see anything."

"That's what's wrong." Alexi continued to stare at the pristine wrists. There were no burns, no peeled skin, only a thin bruise where her weight had pulled against the cuffs and red marks that were quickly fading.

"Cool. Say, can we get out of here?" Johann threw the bolt cutters down and headed for the door.

"We'll figure this out at home." Alexi wanted to lift her into his arms, but didn't want to inflict further damage to her back. He settled on calling for a stretcher since she couldn't make it home on her own steam.

"What about Nolan? We can't let him escape." Her voice was thready, as if she were about to fall asleep.

Alexi checked her heart rate and breathing. She seemed fine, only tired. That would probably be best. Sleep and heal. As for Nolan ...

His eyes glowed and his teeth extended. Pouncing on his mate's awake but paralyzed tormentor, he looked into the human's frightened eyes. Seeing no remorse, only fear for himself, Alexi let his beast have its way and ripped the human's throat out.

Snarling, he dropped the body and with one last kick, he left the hut and strode over to his woman.

Casually, she raised her arm over her head, and tossed the item in her hand into the open door of the brick building. Alexi looked back when the building exploded. "What was that?"

"Bead bomb. Just testing the equipment."

Johann, who had ducked a flying brick, nodded. "It works fine."

"Effective. I'm tired, Alexi. Can we go home now?" She lay on her stomach on the stretcher, and closed her eyes.

"Yes. And when we get there, I'm not letting you out of my sight for a millennia."

"Okay."

## Chapter Fourteen

Alexi and Chanda were watching a movie and laughing at the antics of the actors, when Johann strode in, followed by a complaining Terry.

“Really! You act like you own this place.” Terry was fanning his hand at his face in a graceful manner.

“That makes two of us.” He shot a mischievous glance at the couple ensconced on the couch. “Hey, you two. What’s up?”

Chanda looked at the huge blond vampire. He was actually a nice guy, strange, but nice once you got past his idiosyncrasies. She’d gotten to know him well over the nights she’d been laid up. Her body was healing fine, but tests were still being run on why the Palladodamite hadn’t affected her. The closest guess so far was that she had something in her genetic makeup that was immune to it. Angela was in her element trying to figure it out. “We’re watching a movie. Would you like to join us?”

He glanced at the television. “I’ve seen it, thanks. I came by to see if you were ready for the story yet?”

“Story?”

“Yeah, about how you got your necklace.” Johann, in his customary manner, flopped into a chair and scrunched down.

Chanda sat up. “I’ve been wondering all my life how my family got this necklace. I would appreciate hearing the story.”

“It’s all there, buried in your mind. Your ancestors were farming people in India. One day, while tending the field, they came across an old white man, dead, clutching the necklace. They took it home and hid it. For a century, it stayed in the family, known, but hidden from everyone. A seer came through the village one year and for a meal told them that the necklace would be returned to its rightful owner in time. The family, in an attempt

to keep it for themselves, wore the necklace, padlocked, in hopes that the rightful owner wouldn't take it. Your mother, Chanda, didn't know when she padlocked it to you, that you were the mate of the rightful owner."

Alexi shook his head. "Strange how fate works."

"Thank you, Johann. I'm glad my ancestors weren't the killers of Alexi's parents. It eases my heart some."

"Good, I'm glad." Johann took a sip of the drink Terry had begrudgingly handed him while he told Chanda's story. "So, Alexi. Did you tell her about your parents?"

"Your parents, Alexi?" Chanda watched the sadness cross his face. "I'm sure you miss them very much."

"Yes. I do, but that isn't what he's talking about. He's trying to make trouble. As usual. He means I'm not the typical vampire. My father found my mother in the usual way, by scenting the Sumerian gene. However, my mother wasn't simply a human carrier. Oh no, she was also a werewolf."

Chanda blinked. "There are werewolves in the world as well?"

"You bet. There are lots of them." Johann waved his hand somewhat similar to the way Terry did on occasion. "Thousands of them. Baying at the moon, peeing on trees, scratching themselves."

"Johann, if you don't shut up, I'm going to kill you." Alexi glowered at his friend, clenching and unclenching his fingers as if he wanted to wrap them around Johann's neck.

Terry only laughed. "You two. I swear. I can't wait to see Johann with his own mate. I hope she's a real bitch."

"Close," Alexi said it softly, slyly, which made everyone in the room stare at him. "But I'm not saying a word. Anyway, back to my story. My mother was a werewolf, my father a vampire. When he brought her over to vampirism, she retained most of her werewolf ways. I, while my vampire genes dominate, am still partially werewolf. It's the 'other' that you have occasionally commented on."

Chanda nodded. "I've felt the barely under control beast and wondered at it. I thought maybe it was part of being a vampire, but this explains it. So, how do werewolves find their mate?"

"Similar to the way vampires do. They scent something in the blood of a human. Vampires look for the Sumerian gene, werewolves search out an alien gene. Lucky for me, you have both."

Her eyebrow rose. "You don't say."

Alexi laughed and threw his arm around her shoulders. Pulling her into his body, he kissed her hard. "I do say. And I'm the luckiest guy in the world."

Terry oohed and ahhed.

Johann groaned and stared at the ceiling. "I'm going to be sick over here."

A coaster flew across the room and hit him in the chest. Terry glared at him. "Look mister, you can always go home to that pervert palace you own. You don't have to stay here."

"I'll leave when my business here is done, and not a moment before. Geez, not getting any, Terry?" Johann sat back in his chair and laughed when Terry screeched and threw another coaster at him.

Alexi growled. "I'm going to throw you both out if you don't behave."

Chanda only shook her head. She was becoming accustomed to the emotions that erupted when least expected. From everyone, including herself. Every night, she became more and more comfortable letting her feelings show, and she could sense the happiness it brought Alexi.

"Johann." Chanda had to shout to be heard over the ongoing argument. "What happened to that vampire, Farthangale?"

"That bastard. I'm going to kill him one day." Johann had turned to her at the mention of the name, and his eyes glowed. "I can't wait until he shows up again. And he will, I can feel it."

"So, no one knows where he's disappeared to?"

"No. He escaped with the leaders of the Pocatsu. We will have to be especially on our guard since they know we aren't playing games anymore. Freaking Pocatsu probably went to another sect. They'll be back too."

Alexi sighed. "Most likely. Neither the Pocatsu or Farthangale will let us live in peace."

"The Pocatsu won't, I know that for a fact." Chanda knew each member would die to rid the earth of the blood sucking horde, as they referred to the Society.

Pounding at the front door caused Chanda to shoot to her feet. The conversation had made her jumpy.

Terry clucked his tongue and pressed his hand to his ear. "It's Archimedes and the Regulator."

"How do you know?" Chanda stared at the door into the room, wondering if they were about to be attacked.

"Security told me, darling." He reached up to his ear again and pulled out an earpiece she hadn't noticed before. "Alexi outfitted us with these really cool secret service type devices. Isn't it great?"

"Wonderful." She glared at Alexi.

"Sweetheart, if you want one, I'll give you one."

"You need to keep me updated about the security of the house. Otherwise, I'll have to find out myself."

Alexi only laughed. "Sorry. I did mean to tell you ..."

Angela came flying into the room, well, walking really fast, and skidded to a stop directly in front of Chanda.

"Hi."

"Hello, Angela. You seem ... excited." It was the only word Chanda could think of to describe the effervescent redhead.

"I did it!"

"Darlin', you have to tell her *what* you did, not just that you did it."

Chanda looked up and a rugged, cowboy type sauntered into the room.

"Stephen, you're always following a step or two behind your mate. Is it intentional?" Johann was snickering from his chair, then yelped when another coaster hit him. "Damn it, Terry, cut it out!"

Everyone laughed, but Chanda was more interested in what Angela had pulled out of her slow talking mate's hands.

Her heart skipped a beat. "The uniform?"

"Got it in one. It's finished! And it looks freaking, flaming hot if you ask me." Angela flipped it and spread it open.

Her mate, Stephen, nodded. "I'd say. It's sexy as all get out." He kissed his mate on the cheek, then went to join the men and plopped into a chair.

"Sexy is a requirement? I thought functional and impenetrable were the important features." Chanda reached her hand out to touch the garment, and Angela tossed it to her.

"It's all those things, but everyone feels better and stronger if they look sexy. Studies have proven this." Winking at her mate, Angela gave him a little wave and ran her hand over her side.

Johann groaned. "I'm surrounded by sex fiends."

Terry only snorted at the unmated vampire. "Look who's talking, pervert. I bet you get all you can handle."

Johann shook his head. "My proclivities do not include sex. Not in centuries. Not that it's any of *your* business. And look who's talking now. You've seen more action this year than I have in my lifetime. So shut up."

"My apologies, blue-balled one." Terry stood and headed for the door. "I have business to conduct, so if you will excuse me. Oh, Angela, darling. Would you mind making me one of those outfits? I have the perfect shoes to go with it. Spiked, thigh high pirate boots. I'll look scrumptious."

Angela laughed, but promised to make him one. "It can comfortably be worn under regular clothes if necessary."

"I'm sure I won't find it necessary where I'll wear it." Terry blew kisses all around and breezed out the door.

"He's such a character." Angela smiled, then pointed to the uniform. "Functionality: It has pockets and niches for all sorts of fighting goodies. Nothing you put into the pockets will hinder your movements, unless you try to cram a bazooka in one. Sturdiness: This material, which is very nearly exactly as you imagined, Chanda, will not tear up to five hundred pounds per inch pressure. You might bruise badly, or even break bones, but you won't be cut, shot, stabbed, or staked. Your hands, feet and head will still be vulnerable, but I'm working on a hood with a facemask. It's still in R&D since we have to work out the density so wearers can breathe."

Angela's face glowed as she explained the outfit. Chanda was suitably impressed and checked it over thoroughly. "This is great, Angela. You've done a wonderful job. How quickly can these be made? And can it be done affordably?"

Waving her hand, Angela made a tisking noise. "Money isn't an obstacle. Midas said that we can use whatever we need to so the troops can be outfitted. The leader said that we have his backing as well. Everyone is willing to pitch in to save lives. Heck, the males who have mates and children are already starting to send in orders for their non-fighting family members."

The suit; a one piece, flat black, wrist to ankle, high necked, creation, caught Chanda's full attention. None of the pockets seemed to have fastenings, but they stayed shut. Nothing would catch or snag during a fight, and the dark material would keep any light from shining on it and giving away positions. It was fabulous.

Chanda looked up at Angela slyly. "Is this one mine?"

"You betcha. All yours."

"I can try it on now?"

Angela laughed and waved her hand. "Go, knock yourself out." She practically skipped across the room and flung herself at her mate. He caught her around the waist and pulled her onto his lap. "We'll wait here for you to return."

Johann only sighed at being stuck with love birds.

Alexi smiled sexily and followed Chanda out of the room. "Going to play fashion show?"

"What's that?"

Sighing, Alexi put his arm around her waist and tugged her to him. "I see I *do* have a lot to teach you. And while I'm sorry your childhood didn't have the usual playacting that most children have, I'm just thankful that you need me around for something constructive. You obviously don't need me to save your life."

"Alexi, you *are* my life. I'll always need you around." She started walking toward the lair. "You are the only real happiness I've ever known."

Her words seemed to soothe something in him and he kissed her softly. “You’re my happiness too.”

They resumed walking and the second they reached the lair, Chanda ripped her clothes off and practically jumped into the suit. As she figured out the fastenings, Alexi sat on the edge of the bed.

When she finished adjusting the suit to fit comfortably, she looked up at her mate.

“Oh Gods. You are *not* going outside with that suit showing.”

“Why not?”

“It’s a second skin. Only I’m allowed to see you nearly naked.” Alexi’s eyes glowed.

Chanda laughed. “Aileen was right. You are a Neanderthal. Get over it. I need this suit to keep me safe from injury. You don’t want me to get hurt do you?”

His eyes glowed for a moment longer, then turned to their beautiful ice blue. “No. I don’t want you to get hurt. But could you at least wear clothes over it?”

She laughed again. “No.”

“Argh! Again with the *no* stuff. I’m going to have to remove that word from your vocabulary.” He stood and reached for her.

She let him slide his arms around her, then pulled him close to her uniform clad body. It almost felt as if she were naked. Rubbing herself against his fully clothed body, she purred softly. “You can try to remove the word, or we can throw down for it.”

“Throw down?”

“Yes, two out of three throws wins.”

“Ah, fighting to get rid of the word. We could do that, or we could change it up a bit.”

His smile was sexy and sly. She fleetingly wondered where he could possibly be going with this. She arched an inquiring brow.

“We could save the fight over the word for another time, and throw down for something else.” He skimmed his hands over her sides and hips and damned if it didn’t make her blood heat.

“What would the winner get for besting the other?”

“The winner would get to be on top.”

Chanda laughed and kicked his legs out from under him. “You’re on.”

 THE END 



## **Brenda Bryce**

Brenda Bryce has been married to the same wonderful man for half her life. He gave her three children during that time.

As time passed and the children grew, Brenda took up writing to give her a little “me” time. She also loves crochet and knitting and reads to the dismay of her husband, who is tired of tripping over piles of books and yarn.

She spent four years in the U.S. Army when she was young and is very proud to have served her country.

As a transplant to Southern California she has learned to love the desert and 100+ degree heat - it is a “dry” heat, you know - and the sunsets are worth it.