



THE PRAETORIANS:
INFILTRATION

By
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Prologue

Deep under the Sonoran Desert, the leader of The Foundation sat behind his spacious mahogany desk. Victor Bedrosian read the latest reports on what promised to be catastrophic changes to the environment. Other than the light on his desk and the glare from the large plasma screen on the wall to his right, the room was in darkness.

The words 'global warming' from a reporter's voice caught his attention, and he glanced at the vidscreen. With a frown, he picked up the remote and turned up the volume.

"Rain continues to fall throughout the desert southwest," the reporter said. The damned idiot looked entirely too cheerful to be imparting such dire news. "With the amount of rain we've seen so far--at this point nearly fifty centimeters above normal for the year--crops in Arizona, New Mexico and Nevada are in danger of failing."

Victor scowled and looked down at the paper in his hand. His scientists had said the same thing. Many of the storms had been severe, with hail the size of grapefruits pounding crops into the muddy earth.

The reporter chattered on. "Already the Sonoran Desert is changing to a more tropical environment, putting in jeopardy the well-being of the rare and beautiful saguaro cacti, which only grow in this part of the world. And, with all the excess water, the mosquito population is exploding, which could bring pandemics of outbreaks of West Nile virus, malaria, and other mosquito-born maladies."

The environmental scientists at the Foundation had been warning of this for decades, and Victor and his people had worked tirelessly to put Chosen Ones--people with strong telepathic abilities and unquestioned loyalty to The Foundation--in the right places to affect change. The goal was to severely curtail greenhouse gases and thereby ensure the inevitable changes were gradual instead of happening with the fierceness that was feared. But he was afraid the damage had already been done.

In the last half-century alone, the Asian Federation had caught up with the North American Federation as the leading producers of carbon dioxide, the primary cause behind global warming. With only thirty years until the end of the twenty-first century, predictions from scientists a hundred years ago seemed to be coming true.

Polar icecaps had shrunk at an alarming rate. Sea levels were up by half a meter, which already threatened to turn cities along the eastern seaboard into swampland. Summers in the Arctic were nearly ice-free. Areas that had been dry were becoming tropical, and tropical forests were strangling under drought.

"This is most unwelcome news," Victor said.

"Yes, sir, it is." Hatcher's voice came from the shadowy recesses of the room. The leather of the sofa creaked, suggesting the man had shifted his position. Victor

peered into the darkness, but was unable to see his versatile ... troubleshooter. Hatchet was something of a chameleon, able to blend into his surroundings, becoming everyman so effectively he went unnoticed by all but the most observant. He was efficiently ruthless and completely dedicated to the cause.

The newscast moved on to other items of no particular interest to Victor, so he muted the volume. "We might need to move up the timetable for the replacement of the Prime Minister of the Asian Federation," he mused aloud. "The manufacturing companies in his jurisdiction are the biggest contributors of greenhouse gases."

Glass clinked against glass. Even though Hatchet sat in complete darkness, with his telepathic ability Victor had a clear picture in his mind of the other man. He'd just taken a swallow of his brandy and set the snifter back down on the glass-topped coffee table.

"Give the word, sir. We'll get the ball rolling."

Victor stood and walked to the bar. He poured himself a straight bourbon. Staring down at the amber-colored liquid, he swirled it around in the glass and contemplated his next move.

The next move of The Foundation, he corrected himself.

He was the sixth man to sit as Chairman of the Board of this ultra-secretive organization. In the eighteen years he'd worked here, he'd seen many public officials deposed and replaced by a Chosen One--someone working for The Foundation who had natural telepathic and, sometimes, telekinetic abilities.

Small and large governments around the world had been realigned in this way in order for the business of The Foundation to be carried out.

To take over the world, make it a better place. Ensure there was a world left to hand down to their children and their children's children.

It sounded clichéd until he thought about the depths of their success. Of course, no one but a privileged few knew what that meant, knew just how far-reaching The Foundation's influence was.

How far-reaching *his* influence was.

Oh, the mysterious members of the Triumvirate were the powerhouse behind The Foundation to be sure, but Victor was the one who made things happen. It was largely due to *his* efforts that plans had progressed as rapidly as they had.

He took a gulp of bourbon and enjoyed the burn of it going down his throat. He walked back to his desk and tapped the report. "We'll need to move on this soon," he said. Looking out into the darkness of the room, he added in a soft voice, "I was impressed with the way you handled our problem with Dr. Harris. Had she been successful in making The Foundation known to the world, our effectiveness would have been severely curtailed. Her rather timely and quiet death prevented any number of difficulties we didn't need. However," he added, just to be sure Hatchet remembered who was in charge, "I was *not* pleased that Captain Didion found her. To be honest, I'm still not sure why he hid the body instead of coming forward."

"You weren't able to divine his thoughts?"

There was absolutely no inflection in the man's voice that would give away what he was feeling. Victor frowned. He'd never been able to read Hatchet's thoughts or

indeed even pick up a sense of his emotional state. He didn't like it, but he was willing to put up with it. There would come a time when Hatchet was no longer necessary, and he'd be taken care of.

For now, though, he was needed. And he belonged to Victor.

"My Praetorians are all Sensitives, to a certain degree. Some are more adept than others. Captain Didion and his team are some of the strongest." Victor leaned one hip against his desk and crossed his arms. "Now, why do *you* think Didion didn't report Harris's death?"

"I completed the ... assignment in such a way that the blame could easily have been laid on Sean Devane's doorstep." Hatchet's voice remained calm and cool.

"Perhaps Captain Didion thought to protect him for some reason."

"Perhaps." Victor forced his thoughts away from that puzzle and went back to his earlier discussion. "Before we move forward on replacing Mr. Singh in the Asian Federation," he said, "I have something else for you to do first. Something somewhat more ... personal in nature."

"Anything you say, sir." Leather creaked and then footsteps sounded as Hatchet walked closer. He stopped a few feet away, still mostly in shadow. With his black clothing and hair and swarthy skin, he somehow managed to stay cloaked in darkness. "Just give the good word."

Victor reached over to another file and picked it up. Flipping it open, he studied the picture of a young African American woman. He stroked one finger over her cream-and-coffee colored face. "I'll have you yet, my dark-skinned enchantress. You can run, but you can't hide."

He sighed. One last look at the picture, then he closed the file and handed it to Hatchet. "Consider the word given," he murmured. "Take whatever manpower you need. Bring her to me. Alive and unhurt."

"And if someone's with her?"

"Anyone gets in your way ... kill them."

Chapter One

Quinn O'Rourke paced the confines between the sofa and security monitors in the living room of the cave house in which he and his friends currently lived. While it might be a cave, it had all the modern amenities one could want. Right now, hearing moans, then curses, from one of the bedrooms, he wished they'd thought to soundproof the damned thing.

He clenched his jaw. Goddamned Foundation. They'd screwed with everyone here, from his friend Max Didion, the captain of their team, to the man currently being deprogrammed.

Sean Devane. Max's brother-in-law.

They were all Praetorians, men who were human/animal hybrids, results of secret DNA splicing that had been going on for at least twenty-five years. Max had been one of the first soldiers to volunteer, believing that having such warriors would help maintain the peace in an ever-increasingly volatile world.

Quinn, on the other hand, hadn't been fortunate enough to be a volunteer. He'd been forcibly changed, his DNA spliced with that of a wolf. He clenched his jaw against the memories and pushed them aside. There wasn't time for this maudlin shit.

He looked at Max, who sat on the sofa, one leg crossed over the other, ankle resting on the opposite knee. His friend had a beer bottle in one hand and a folded newspaper in the other.

More cursing came from the bedroom, and Quinn parroted the phrase he heard. "Goddamned son of a bitch. What the fuck is Shepherd doing to him?"

Max looked up and calmly took a chug of beer. "He's helping."

"Yeah, sounds like it to me. Fuck." Quinn prowled the space in front of the monitors, one hand raking through his hair. When several thick strands fell over his forehead, he cursed again. He needed a damned haircut. With a glance at Max, he scowled and continued to pace. "How the hell can you wear your hair that long, letting it flop around in your face? It impedes your vision."

For Quinn, anything that affected his ability to see or hear or smell clearly had to go. All he had were his enhanced senses. Without them, he was just plain old Quinn O'Rourke, boy born on the wrong sides of the tracks, man who had nothing to offer.

"My wife likes it longer." Max turned the paper over in his hand. Setting down the bottle of beer, he picked up a pencil from the side table and began working on the crossword puzzle.

"And you always do what she wants?" Quinn snorted. "Didn't take long for you to be pussy-whipped." If having a woman made a man soft in the brain, well, count him out. *Besides, they always wanted to change you, make you ... civilized.* He wasn't civilized, had no desire to be civilized.

It wasn't that he didn't like women. He liked them just fine wrapped around his

cock. He just wasn't interested in forming a lasting relationship with one. Well, not anymore. He'd had his chance, and he'd blown it.

Max shot him a look, one eyebrow raised. "Since when do you have a problem with my wife?"

Quinn grimaced and scrubbed the back of his neck with one hand. Dammit. Having Tynan Shepherd here was working on his nerves and turning him into an idiot. "I don't. It's just.... Shepherd's been here for three goddamned weeks," Quinn muttered, throwing a glare at Max. This sudden soul-searching was Max's fault, anyway. If the good captain hadn't gone and fallen in love with Sean's sister

Fuck. Who the hell was he kidding? It was his own goddamned fault. He was the one who'd brought her into this mess in the first place.

"Deprogramming someone who's been brainwashed takes time, O'Rourke. You know that." Looking up from his paper, Max frowned. "What kind of bee's crawled up your butt, anyway?"

Quinn tightened his jaw but didn't say anything. What could he say? That seeing Tynan made him think of Tynan's sister, Kendra? That the last time Quinn had seen her she'd been sprawled out on his bed, naked, her breasts soft and full, her sweet pussy still swollen and smeared with his come?

Yet something else he'd fucked up. He'd never have touched her if he'd known she was a virgin. Virgins always expected way too much from a man as far as he was concerned. The white picket fence, two point three kids and happily ever after.

He didn't do happily ever after. It wasn't in him. The bitch scientist who'd created him had seen to that. Even if every instinct had screamed at him that Kendra was his mate, he hadn't acted on it. She deserved better than a wolf masquerading as a man.

"You're starting to brood." Max's voice was matter-of-fact as he buried his nose back into his puzzle. "You know how you get when you brood."

"Fuck off." Quinn paced back to the monitors and stared, not really seeing them. The skin around the piercing in his perineum tingled and he knew the feeling was psychosomatic, but it still triggered the bundle of nerves there between his scrotum and anus, and he started to get a hard-on.

This was just fucking perfect. Just what he needed to round out his day. A randy prick with nowhere to go.

A noise from behind alerted him to another's presence, and he turned to see Tynan Shepherd walk in from the back rooms. He looked tired and discouraged. Not a good sign.

Max stood, dropping the paper onto the sofa. "Well?" he asked.

"Yeah. Well?" Quinn walked forward until he stood a few feet from Tynan. "How is he?"

The man sighed. With a weary gesture, he bent his head, rubbing the back of his neck. When he looked back up, his dark eyes appeared drained. "The brainwashing goes deep, guys. This isn't something that I can reverse with just a few sessions."

"You've had more than a few sessions," Quinn snarled. He clenched his fists against the urge to wrap his hands around the man's throat. It wasn't Tynan's fault that Sean had been indoctrinated to begin with.

And he sure as hell couldn't help that he was Kendra's brother. Quinn ground his jaw as his cock twitched at the thought of her.

"And it'll take a few sessions more," Tynan responded in a hard tone. A slash of color rode high on the dusky skin of his cheekbones. He threw up one hand and muttered, "Sorry. This is a difficult one."

"How so?" Max walked around the sofa and headed toward the kitchen. "Sean and his men were all indoctrinated at the same time five years ago, right? You've already been able to successfully deprogram--what?--two of his men? Why is Sean different?"

"It's his brain chemistry." Tynan sighed and sat down on the sofa, stretching his legs out in front of him. "Plus, since he's the captain of the squad, I think they spent more time on him. The conditioning went deeper."

Max walked back into the living room with another bottle of beer in his hand. He handed it to Tynan, who immediately tilted it to his lips and took a large gulp.

"So, what now?" Quinn scowled at Max for making him fetch his own beer. He walked to the refrigerator for a bottle.

"I'm definitely getting closer," Tynan responded. He rolled the beer bottle over his forehead. After taking another swig, he leaned forward and set it on the coffee table. "But it still may be several weeks before I make a significant breakthrough. He's very angry."

"He has the right to be," Max replied. His back was to them as he stared at the security monitors nestled in the wall opposite the sofa. His hands clasped behind his back and legs slightly spread in a typical military pose, the set of his shoulders suggested he, too, was angry.

Out of habit, Quinn glanced at the monitors. They showed various areas of the cave compound. No activity, which was a good thing.

"How do you mean?" Tynan asked.

"Sean's entire unit, including him, didn't volunteer to be Praetorians." Max turned toward them. His face was set in hard lines. "At some point, the powers that be decided things weren't progressing fast enough to suit them. Where there are Chosen Ones, there are Praetorians. And a need for trackers. So military people from all around the world were forcibly enhanced." He paused, muttering a curse. "Because it wasn't voluntary, they were also brainwashed to believe in the doctrines of The Foundation. They were, for all intents and purposes, raped."

Quinn's jaw flexed. He would not think of the first six months following his own forced enhancement. Caged, drugged, used.... He dragged his attention back to Max and Tynan. It did no good to dwell on the past--he would *not* go there.

Tynan nodded a response to Max's statement. Sitting forward, his elbows braced on his knees, he stared at the floor.

"There's something else, isn't there?" Max asked.

Tynan sighed. With another sigh, he pushed to his feet. "It's Kendra."

Quinn stiffened. Having the man here was bad enough. To have him want to talk about his sister.... God.

"A few days ago, I inadvertently told Victor Bedrosian about Kendra's abilities."

What the hell? Quinn stared down at Tynan, felt the man's fingers scrabbling at

his hands, heard Max's voice as a muted rumble over the roar of blood in his ears. He didn't remember getting up, much less attacking the other man.

"Quinn, let him go." Max's arms came around his chest as he tried to pull Quinn off Tynan. "Let go."

Releasing his fingers from around the other man's neck, Quinn jerked away from Tynan and threw his hands up. "I'm okay." When Max didn't immediately let him go, he muttered, "Get off. I'm okay."

Tynan coughed and held his throat. Max touched him on the shoulder. Going into the kitchen, he turned on the tap and ran a glass of water, which he handed to the dark-skinned man.

After he took a few gulps, the deprogrammer wiped his hand over his mouth and dropped down onto the sofa again. Closing his eyes, he leaned his head against the back of the sofa. He grimaced. "I didn't mean to tell him. He tricked me."

"Bullshit." Quinn took a step forward, and Max moved in front of him, putting one hand on his chest. Quinn glared at him.

"Stand down, O'Rourke." Max gave him a little shove, his face hard and implacable. "Now."

Quinn scowled, but backed up a few steps. He thrust his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. Leaning his shoulder against the wall, he stared toward Tynan with rage churning in his gut. If his little lamb was in trouble because her fucking brother couldn't keep his fucking mouth shut

"Go on, Ty," Max said and sat on the sofa beside the dead-man-walking.

Tynan let out a long sigh. He sat forward and stared at his hands clasped between his knees. "I still don't know how the bastard did it. One minute he was asking me for an update on the mental stability of the latest round of recruits, the next thing I knew, I heard my voice telling him Kendra had telepathic abilities." He surged to his feet with a curse. "God damned son of a bitch." He looked at Max, then Quinn, bewildered fury in his eyes. "How the hell did he do it?"

Max shook his head.

Quinn wasn't as sedate with his response. "Does it matter, Shepherd? Bottom line is you betrayed your sister to the enemy. Your *sister*."

My woman. Mine.

The fear of her being in danger, the rage at his own stupidity, the fire of wanting to claim his mate roared through him, obliterating any other thought from his mind.

Find her.

Claim her.

"Well, I don't think there's any question about how you still feel about her."

Max's voice came to him through the haze clouding his mind.

When he looked at his friend, the slight grin on Max's face made him narrow his eyes. "You wanna keep that handsome face of yours, pretty boy?" Quinn asked in a growl.

The grin widened. Quinn clenched his fists against the urge to throw a punch at Max. Since they'd left The Foundation and become fugitives, there was no real chain of command anymore. They acted more as a democracy, but habit was hard to break, and

Max had been his commanding officer for almost twenty years. Quinn just couldn't go around punching his C.O. in the nose.

As much as he might want to.

"Where's Kendra now?" Max asked, turning back to Tynan.

The deprogrammer rubbed his forehead with one hand and held the other one up in a gesture of confusion. "I'm not sure."

Quinn trapped another growl in his throat and took a step forward. "You've lost her?"

"No. Yes. Maybe." Tynan scrubbed his hand over his jaw. "I think she's camping up in Oak Creek Canyon somewhere. That's where our folks used to take us when we were kids. She'd probably head up there and try to get lost in the wilderness."

Quinn clenched his fists. The thought of Kendra out there, afraid and alone, made him crazy. He turned a cutting gaze on her brother. "And you just let her go?"

"You know Kendra," Tynan responded. "What was I supposed to do, tie her to her bed?"

Heat spread through Quinn. He'd had Kendra tied to his bed before. If he had to do it again to keep her safe, he would.

He just had to find her first.

Without another word, he turned and headed toward his room.

"Where're you going?" Max called out after him.

To get my mate. "To find Shepherd's damned sister," he snarled.

Chapter Two

Kendra Shepherd fastened the last clip of the waterproof shell over her tent and crawled inside, pulling the zip closed behind her. And just in time, too.

The skies opened up and rain began sheeting down. From the sound of it, hailstones were mixed with the rain. Lightning flashed and, within only a couple of seconds, a crash of thunder followed that was deafening. She shivered at the ferocity of the storm. When she was a kid, she and her family would come up here and camp out for weeks during the summer. They'd spent many a monsoon season huddled in tents while storms raged all around them.

Now, though, she was here alone. Hiding. And hoping no one else was crazy enough to come up here and brave the elements. With all this rain, there was a very real danger of mudslides from ground scorched in recent wildfires.

Reaching for her solar-powered lantern, she hung it from one of the D-rings above her head. With economical motions honed from years of practice, she pulled her sleeping mat out of her pack and unfolded it. After she flipped open the valve at one end, she watched the pad fill with air. When it reached capacity, she snapped the valve shut and spread her sleeping bag on top of the mat.

Kendra rested her hands on her knees and stared down at her makeshift bed. She'd been away from the whole 'roughing it' aspect--she'd much rather be hiding out in a comfy hotel room than on hard-packed dirt. No matter how buoyant the air mattress was, she was still sleeping on the ground.

"You'd think in the last fifty years someone would've updated camping equipment," she muttered. When a drop of water dripped down her neck, she looked up, glaring at the top of her tent. As much as she loved hearing storms, she didn't particularly like *feeling* them. "This is great. Just absofuckinglutely perfect."

She pushed her sleeping mat over to the right edge of the tent. Though she'd prefer to sleep in the middle--even after years of camping she wasn't thrilled with having just a thin polyurethane barrier between her and the wilderness--she wasn't going to sleep under dripping water.

Reaching under her blouse, Kendra unclipped the back closure of her bra and pulled the straps down her arms. With a sigh of relief, she pulled the bra free and tucked it under her pillow. Climbing inside the down-filled sleeping bag, she crossed her arms under her head. A long, deep sigh left her, and she closed her eyes. She was so damned tired. All she wanted to do was sleep.

But her mind wouldn't settle down.

She kept seeing Ty's face, his features drawn as he told her how he'd 'let it slip' that she was a telepath—to Victor Bedrosian of all people.

A shiver iced up her spine. She'd never met Bedrosian, had only seen his picture once on a news report. But that had been several years ago and even then she'd sensed

the enormous power of the man's mind and his equally large ego. For thirty-two years, her parents had tried to keep her--and her powerful telepathic abilities--hidden from him and his Foundation.

In two seconds her brother had destroyed her safety.

So, here she was, camping as deep into Oak Creek Canyon as she could get. Perhaps she would have been better off to hide in plain sight in the middle of Sedona, but she couldn't bring herself to be around so many people, not when her emotions were so volatile. She was having a hard enough time controlling her thoughts, let alone having to try to deal with--and keep out--everyone else's.

No, isolating herself in the wilderness had been her only choice, at least until she got herself under control. Then ... well, she'd see.

She opened her eyes. Staring at the roof of her tent, she listened to the pounding of the storm. This change in the weather pattern was worrisome. Arizona didn't usually get rain in May. But the wet stuff had been coming down off and on for an entire week. It was as if the monsoon season had come two months early.

According to meteorologists and other experts, they were in for a major environmental shift. Some even spoke of the entire Southwest becoming a tropical zone.

She scowled. That meant humidity and mosquitoes. If she'd wanted to live with that, she would've stayed in the Midwest where she'd moved after her parents' deaths.

But Ty had needed her, and her abilities. So she'd come home.

Back to Arizona. To Quinn O'Rourke.

But he hadn't wanted her. The fact that she'd been a virgin the first time they'd made love had somehow scared him, something she still didn't understand.

She hadn't thought anyone--or anything--could frighten the Big Bad Wolf, least of all someone half his size.

Not that that first time had been their last. He'd spent the entire night playing her body like a master musician. He'd strummed her, making her come time and time again.

And she'd done the same for him.

But when the morning light had filtered into the room, she'd seen his gaze become shuttered, and he'd withdrawn somewhere inside himself, cutting off his emotions. And her.

He was convinced that he wasn't worthy of being happy, of having someone to spend the rest of his life with. A belief he'd made abundantly clear to her when he'd told her goodbye.

Kendra stirred restlessly on the bag. As always, thoughts of Quinn got her hot and bothered. Her core tightened, her breath quickened. She rubbed her palms over her breasts, imagining it was Quinn touching her.

She needed more. She needed skin on skin.

Sliding her hands under her shirt, she began tugging on her nipples, trying to do it the way she remembered Quinn doing it. A firm squeeze, then a hard tug. She pictured his square-tipped fingers against her skin.

She moved her hands to her pants long enough to unfasten them and shove them to her knees. Then one hand went back to her breasts while the other slid over the thin strip of hair above her sex.

She slipped two fingers between the plump folds of flesh. Guiding them on either side of her clit, she clamped them together and tugged and rolled the swelling nubbin.

Her belly tightened as her need spiraled ever upward, and she stroked herself faster, harder. Moving her other hand from one nipple to the other, she rubbed across the hardened tips, biting her lower lip against a moan as the touch sparked a response in her creaming pussy.

Kendra closed her eyes. Her mouth fell open, and she panted. Her hips started to pump, slowly at first, then faster. She clenched her inner muscles.

God, she felt so empty. So alone.

She wished Quinn were here.

With that thought planted firmly, she built a picture of him in her mind, starting from the bottom. Big feet melded into strong, muscled calves. Proportioned knees supported by strong thighs, topped by slim hips. His cock, long and thick even at rest, was surrounded by a dark nest of springy hair.

She continued building the picture in her mind's eye. Six-pack abs led up to a wide, hair-roughened chest and broad shoulders. Arms bulging with muscles led down to long-fingered hands. The strong column of his throat was topped by a stubborn chin and rugged jaw.

Eyes the color of stormy skies under the slash of thick, dark eyebrows rode above high cheekbones that attested to his Native American heritage. His nose was straight and narrow, and his lips....

Oy! He had the most sinful, inviting mouth she'd ever seen. And he used it with carnal skill.

She pretended his lips closed over one of her nipples, suckling her with strong pulls of his tongue. In her mind, she drew his face back to hers and kissed him, twining her fingers in his short hair with its military-style cut.

Kendra imagined running her hands over his lips, could almost feel the rasp of his tongue as he drew one of her fingers into the wet heat of his mouth. She shivered and, unable to hold back anymore, thrust two fingers into her pussy.

It was Quinn's hand between her legs, his long, thick fingers reaching up into her. His thumb swept over her clit in ever increasing speed and hardness. Eyes dark with passion glittered as he braced himself over her and gauged her response to his touch.

Her mind directed the image of his face between her thighs. His mouth closed over her swollen pleasure pearl, his fingers plunged into her sheath hard, fast. Deep.

Her orgasm hit her with devastating ecstasy. She arched, her body taut, her cries of pleasure trapped in her throat. As she came down from her climax, she kept the picture of Quinn firmly in her mind.

His face was tight with lust, nostrils flared as he stared down her. She sat up and reached out, imagining she was taking his cock in her hands. It was like holding satin-covered iron in her fingers. Hot, hard, pulsing with life.

Kendra kept her eyes squeezed shut, holding on to the image in her head. She tightened her fingers, giving him the pressure the way she knew he liked it, and stroked down the length of his shaft to his balls. She slid her hand back up to just under his cock head. Her thumb rubbed across the slitted tip and swept through the drop of fluid

gathered there. Then, pressing his cock against his belly, she licked across his lightly furred sac, drawing the salty taste of his skin into her mouth. She drew in a breath and, in her imagination, closed her mouth over the silken tip of his cock.

She'd loved doing this for him, giving him pleasure with her fingers, with her lips and tongue. He tasted like nothing else, slightly salty, slightly tart.

All hot male.

Chapter Three

Quinn stumbled and fell to one knee in the mud. Rain dripped down his face, slid under his collar, but he was nearly oblivious to it. For the last several minutes, he'd had a sensation of fingers ghosting over his face, his lips, and now.... Now it felt like a hot, wet mouth had closed over his cock head and was slowly sucking him.

Son of a bitch. It was Kendra, he knew it. When he caught up with her, he'd teach her a thing or two about messing with a man's mind. She had no right to manipulate him this way.

Even if she wasn't aware of it, which is what he suspected. She was one of the strongest telepaths he knew. According to her brother, she was up here to hide from the Chosen Ones. She wouldn't knowingly risk using her telepathy and take the chance they'd be able to track her. No, she was up here fantasizing and, apparently, he was the main attraction.

Part of him was flattered. Hell, not flattered. Exhilarated.

She was his, whether he wanted to admit it or not. And he was hers.

Whether he wanted to admit it or not.

Goddamn. Could his life get any more complicated?

Unseen fingers dusted over his balls. He gritted his teeth. With hands that shook with need, he reached down and unzipped his camouflage pants. He yanked out his cock. The damned thing was fully erect, the slitted tip weeping pre-cum.

That hot, wet mouth surrounded his balls, drawing one in and suckling gently. Quinn muttered another curse and braced himself with one hand on the ground. A tongue whispered up the underside of his shaft, flicking gently against the bundle of sensitive nerves just under the crown.

His hips bucked, and he groaned. God. She was doing this all in his head, and it felt like she was actually touching him, pleasing him.

Her mouth closed over him again, and she sucked him deep. He growled, clenching his fists as the tip of his cock hit the back of her throat. She swallowed, and the sensation echoed along his rock-hard dick.

He put his other knee on the ground and stared at his cock with burning eyes. The foreskin moved along his shaft as if manipulated by an unseen mouth. Unbidden, he reached out, fingers curling as if he held her head in his hands, directing her movements to give him the most pleasure. His hips began to pump, and he closed his eyes as her mouth seemed to cover more and more of his cock.

Her fingers wrapped around the base of his shaft, and she stroked up to meet her lips on each downward plunge. The wet heat of her mouth surrounded him. His heart thundered in his ears as his pleasure built. It only took a few minutes before his climax roared through him. His hips bucked, he thrust into her mouth, then held himself still as his cock spurted with heavy jets of cum.

Finally spent, Quinn lowered his head and tried to get control over his breathing. Pulling a canteen of water from his utility belt, he poured it over his hands, washing mud off the hand he'd placed on the ground when this whole fucked-up encounter started. He tucked his softened cock back into his pants and zipped up. Getting to his feet, he adjusted the strap of his rifle on his shoulder and started back up the path.

"Swear to God, Kendra," he muttered. "When I get to you, I'm gonna spank your sweet little butt 'til it glows. Then we're gonna do this properly."

* * * *

Two hours before dawn, Quinn made his way over the rocks of a dry wash, keeping his ears tuned for the sound of rushing water that would alert him to a flash flood. He made it across the wash without incident and stopped for a moment to get his bearings.

Lifting his face, he sniffed the air. Last night's rain made it difficult to follow Kendra's scent. But not impossible. He was close.

Very close.

He turned north and followed the wash, watching for snakes as he went. After another mile and a half, he saw her tent, situated under a stand of pine trees. Carefully placing his feet, he walked soundlessly closer, stopping at the flap of the tent.

The inside of the enclosure was dark, though he was still able to see the faint outline of a lamp hanging from a D-ring. Soft, slow breathing told him she was asleep.

Probably dropped off right after she'd projected that blow-job to him. He scowled. Reaching out, he quietly slid the tab of the tent closure down until the flaps parted. A splat of rain hit his cheek, and he glanced up at the sky. The clouds that had hovered all night apparently weren't finished. Another large drop fell, then another. Before he could get drenched, he ducked under the small stiff overhang. Bending, he unlaced his boots and drew them off, then ducked inside the tent and closed the flaps behind him.

He stayed on his knees, letting his eyes adjust to the darkness inside the enclosure. Rain spattered against the tent in a soothing, rhythmic downpour. Drawing in a deep breath, he held it, letting her scent sear into his lungs. She smelled like flowers and sweet, hot woman.

Quinn quietly shrugged out of his backpack. With slow movements, he placed it on the far side of the tent, then laid his rifle within reach beside Kendra's air mattress. The soft *clack* of the weapon against the plastic-covered ground woke her. When her eyes flew open and her lips parted on a gasp, he moved his hand to cover her mouth. "Sshh," he whispered. "It's just me."

He removed his hand, and her big brown eyes blinked up at him. "Quinn?" Her voice was soft and wondering. She lifted one hand and touched his lips with her fingertips.

With his enhanced wolf vision he saw the blush that flooded under her mocha cream skin. Reaching out, he ran his fingers over one of her high cheekbones.

She jerked her hand away. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, originally I was coming to find you at the request of your brother." He slid the zipper of her sleeping bag open, easily pushing away her hands as she fought to keep

it closed. Giving up, she fisted her hands around the top of the sleeping bag.

Leaning over, he gently pried her fingers away. He pushed the bulky material aside and studied her at his leisure, his gaze drifting down over full breasts covered by a soft button-down shirt, narrow waist and full, womanly hips. Long, jean-clad legs ended with feet clad in thick white socks. By the time he made his way back up to her face, her eyes were snapping with indignation.

"You done?" she demanded, her tone arch, brows drawn down.

He had only himself to blame for her frosty attitude now that she was alert and aware. "Not by a long shot," he drawled, putting just enough arrogant confidence in his voice to keep her off-balance.

A thinking Kendra was a dangerous Kendra. It was better for him right now if she operated on emotions.

"What do you want?"

"Told you." He paused and ran one finger across her collarbone, tripping across the neckline of her shirt. "Tynan asked me to find you."

She scowled. "You said that was your original reason. What's your other reason?"

His lips tilted in a slow smile. "I'm gonna spank your sweet little ass for that mindgasm you gave me a few hours ago." When she gasped, he grinned, making sure he kept it slightly predatory. "Then, you and me, we've got a lot of ... catching up to do."

"I ... I didn't know you were here. Near," she amended and started to roll away from him.

He stretched one leg over her hips and anchored her in place. "Uh-uh, sweetheart," he murmured. "You're not going anywhere."

One slender eyebrow arched, then Kendra scowled again. God damn, even when this woman frowned she was gorgeous. "So you're into rape now, are you, O'Rourke?"

Quinn raised his hands in surrender and moved away from her, sitting cross-legged beside the air mattress. Though he sat on plastic sheeting, the ground was cold underneath him, and he tried to ignore the chill seeping into his buttocks. With both brows raised, he said, "You want to tell yourself it'd be rape, you go right ahead, little lamb. After that mind-bending blowjob you gave me, we both know different."

She bit her lip. "I didn't mean to ... you know. Project it."

"Yet, you did." He leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees, and clasped his hands loosely together. Her nipples were hard little nubs pressing against her shirt. She wasn't as disinterested as she wanted him to believe. "And I got the best damned blowjob I've had in a long time."

Kendra struggled to a sitting position, crossing her legs like him. "I don't suppose you'd be willing to forget about that?" She didn't look at him. Instead, she kept her eyes on her jeans and plucked at the whitened threads of a small tear at one knee.

"Not likely," he retorted, enjoying himself immensely. Leaning to the side, he snagged his backpack and pulled it closer. He dragged out a thermal pad. Making sure he didn't look at her, he set about making up his bed, spreading his own sleeping bag out over the pad.

Not that he planned on sleeping and, if he did sleep, it sure as hell wouldn't be

alone. When a drop of water fell on his cheek, he looked up only to have another drop hit him on the eye.

"There's a leak," his little lamb volunteered. "I think there must be a hole in the protective shell." She shrugged and held up her hands in a *what-can-I-do* gesture.

He gave her a mock scowl. "Ya think?" Quinn reached into his pack and pulled out a can of plasti-seal. Rising up on his knees, he sprayed the seam where the leak was and replaced the can in his pack. He unhooked his utility belt and put it next to his rifle. Then he sat again, unbuckled his belt and slid down the zipper of his fatigues. Lifting his hips, he started to take off his pants.

"What are you doing?" Her voice was little more than a squeak, and her eyes grew round.

"Getting comfortable." He hung his fatigues on a D-ring, then stripped off his t-shirt and hooked it over the pants. Clad only in gray cotton briefs, he stretched out on the thermal pad. "I've been hiking all night. I'm gonna take advantage of the couple of hours of darkness still left." Crossing his arms under his head, he closed his eyes and waited. How would his little lamb react to this?

Kendra was silent for a few moments, then she said, "I thought you were mad about ... you know."

He cracked open one eye and turned his head to look at her. "You want me to paddle you, is that it?"

She shook her head. Even in the darkness of the tent, his wolf senses picked up the increased blood flow to her face. The thought of him spanking her excited her. "No! But ... I didn't think you'd just turn over and go to sleep."

Quinn bit back a grin at the disgruntled tone in her voice and turned his face back toward the top of the tent. "Well, don't think you're off the hook. When I turn that little ass of yours red, it's gonna be in the comfort of a warm, dry house. But if you still feel horny, feel free to use me again. Only this time..." He wriggled against the pad and closed his eyes. "Make sure it's physical, not mental."

Chapter Four

Kendra stared at Quinn, unable to believe the man actually planned to just lie there and go to sleep. All that talk about spanking her was just so much hot air. Knowing him, he'd only meant to get her hot and bothered. If he was really mad, he'd have been all over her from the second he hit the tent.

He wasn't serious. Trying to ignore the throbbing in her pussy, the slide of her juices along her nether lips, she lay down and turned on her side away from him. Quinn didn't want her, not really. Oh, he'd use her for sex, all right--he was a virile man with a highly active sex drive--but he didn't want to *keep* her.

He'd made that abundantly clear a year ago. Their lovemaking had started out raw and wild, but when he'd discovered she was a virgin, he'd been gentler than she'd dreamed possible. And he'd taken her again and again during the long hours of the night.

And walked away from her the next morning. She'd never understood why.

Now he was here, and he still didn't want her.

Tears rolled down her cheeks. She brought one hand up slowly to wipe them away. She didn't want to alert wolf-boy that she was crying. Dammit. Her nose started to clog up, and she resisted the urge to sniff.

She'd given him her virginity, her passion, and her love. All she had left now was her pride. She wasn't going to give that away, too.

The longer she lay there, the angrier she got. Angry at herself for being such a crybaby, and angry at Quinn for being such an arrogant jerk. Enough was enough. If he thought she was just going to lie here and take whatever he dished out ... well, he'd soon find out differently.

She rolled to her other side and stared through the gloom, trying to see him. He was only two feet away from her, almost close enough to touch. His slow, even breathing suggested he was already asleep, but she knew at the slightest sound he'd be awake and instantly alert. How much of that was from his wolf DNA and how much of it was his military training she didn't know.

Honestly, she wasn't sure she wanted to know. Quinn's background was a mystery. Something he didn't like to talk about. She'd heard whispers about his beginnings as a Praetorian, hushed suggestions that he hadn't volunteered but had been forcibly altered. He wouldn't talk about it, and she wasn't going to pry.

As a Praetorian, he was also a Sensitive--someone who had limited psychic ability as far as being able to block their thoughts from others. Kendra knew her abilities were strong enough that, should she push it, she could break through any mental barriers he might throw up.

But she wouldn't do that. Not to Quinn. Not to anyone. It went against everything she believed in--the inherent free will to which people were entitled, not to mention being able to keep private thoughts private.

What to do, then? As long as he was with her, he was in danger. And as much as he'd hurt her, she still loved him. She had full confidence he could take care of himself under ordinary circumstances, but these were not ordinary circumstances. In all likelihood she had a squad of Hyena trackers after her, and one lone man, no matter how good he was, didn't have a chance.

She carefully sat up and then got on her knees. As quietly as she could, she crawled to the tent opening and slowly pulled the zipper down, parting the flaps. She had her head and one hand outside when Quinn grabbed her ankle and dragged her back inside. Hard arms and legs wrapped around her, trapping her before she could fight him off.

"You goin' somewhere, little lamb?" His deep voice had its usual lazy drawl, but she wasn't fooled. His muscles were taut, ready for action.

"I have to use the bathroom," she muttered, making sure she maintained eye contact with him. With their noses a few inches apart, she had no trouble seeing the skepticism in his gray-blue gaze.

"Uh-uh." He shifted and rolled her underneath him. Pushing her legs apart, he settled between her thighs and propped the weight of his upper body on his elbows. "You were being awfully sneaky for somebody who just had to pee."

She didn't respond.

He raised one eyebrow. "And your heart rate spiked when you lied, little lamb. Not to mention the way your pupils dilated. Wanna try again?"

Damned wolf senses. Her eyes drifted closed, and she rolled her head back and forth across his sleeping mat. "It's not safe for you to be with me."

His sigh wafted across her skin. "That's what I thought. The lamb trying to protect the wolf." He reached up and stroked his fingers across her cheek. "Kendra, I'm taking you back to Tucson. Don't try to get away from me again."

"But--"

He slanted his mouth over hers. His kiss was rough, brutal, a clear sign of possession. But not love.

She kissed him back just as hard.

Teeth clicked together and tongues dueled for supremacy. Kendra sucked on his tongue and, when he started to pull away, she wrapped her hands around the back of his head and held him to her. She wasn't done, not by a long shot.

Quinn reached up and pulled her hands away, holding her wrists in one big hand. "Sweetheart, slow down."

"No," she muttered, trying to reach his mouth again. "I don't need slow with you, O'Rourke. I need fast and hard and deep." When he kept jerking his head out of reach, she rested against the mat and raised one eyebrow in challenge. "Or is that more than you can handle?"

In the increasing light of dawn, she saw his eyes darken to a stormy gray. "Oh-ho, honey. You're gonna take that back."

Her breath caught. *This* was what she wanted--what she *needed*--from him. Raw passion, earthy, and without regard to what came after. Going into it without expectations of any kind other than two people finding pleasure in each others' bodies

should help when she had to leave him. This time, she'd be the one to walk away, for his good. But for now.... Now, it was time to stoke the fire. "If you think so.... Make me."

His eyes glittered. Reaching out, Quinn grabbed his camouflage pants and jerked them off the ring they were hanging from. He pulled the belt from the loops, and she shivered at the rasp of leather sliding over cotton. Before she really understood what he was up to, he looped the buckle end around her wrists, effectively binding her. "If you insist," he replied at last.

Kendra wiggled her fingers. Anticipation built within her, tightening her core. Her heart fluttered behind her ribs. "This the best you can do?"

"Oh, just wait." Reaching over, he pulled a large knife from his utility belt. His broad chest covered with dark hair filled her vision as he leaned over her head. With a swift downward slash, he shoved the blade through the leather of his belt and drove it into the ground, all the way to the hilt.

"Hey!" she protested. It wasn't the greatest tent in the world, but he didn't have to go poking holes in it.

"I'll buy you a new one," he muttered. After tugging on the belt a few times to make sure it was secure, he scooted back down until his face was level with hers. "What do you think now?"

She wrapped the fingers of one hand around the leather and yanked. There wasn't an inch of give. Meeting his gaze, she murmured, "Well, you know how to make a tether, I'll give you that much."

He grinned, a predatory slash of white teeth in his tanned face. "You'll give me a lot more than that by the time I'm through with you, little lamb."

She swallowed, shivering as his eyes tracked the movement of her throat. His big hands reached forward, and he began unbuttoning her blouse. Her gaze followed his fingers as they separated the flaps of her shirt, slowly baring her skin.

Even with his tan, his fingers were pale against her darker skin. Quinn cupped her breasts and plumped them together. "I love your nipples," he said, and swiped across one and then the other with a rough tongue. Her areola puckered and her nipples tightened to diamond-hard points. "They're like chocolate kisses." He glanced up at her, and her breath hitched at the heat in his gaze. "And I love chocolate."

Kendra shivered and helplessly arched for more of his touch. His head bent over her again, and his tongue flicked out, back and forth, tasting her. She moaned, each stroke of his tongue tightening her womb, ramping her arousal higher and higher. When he kissed a path to her other breast, fire trailed in his wake, bringing up gooseflesh all over her torso.

Her hands fisted. "Quinn, let me loose. I want to touch you."

"Ah-ah-ah, little lamb. You can't back out now." He bit down gently on her taut nipple, then laved the slight hurt away with his tongue. "You wanted me this way, you've got me." He reared up. His face was tight, his eyes dark. "And that reminds me...."

With economical movements, he took off her socks, then stripped her jeans down and off. He stared for a moment at her lying there, clad only in an opened blouse and lacy red panties. His eyes narrowed and he placed one palm on the slight rise of her

tummy. Heat from his big hand permeated her skin, fired her blood.

He drew in a deep breath through his nose and groaned. "God, I'd forgotten how good you smell when you're aroused." A frown crossed his face. "How could I have forgotten?"

He pulled her panties off, and his callused hands slid from her ankles up to her knees, parting her legs. His thumbs spread her slick folds apart. With a rough sound very much like a growl, he dipped his head and swiped the flat of his tongue along the length of her slit.

Kendra moaned and jerked, tilting her hips and letting her thighs fall apart even more. Quinn's hands slid under her and lifted her further. His low groan vibrated against her clit just before he sucked it into the wet warmth of his mouth.

She helplessly thrust her hips against his face. As he suckled her swollen bud, his fingers kneaded her buttocks. He brushed against the puckered rosebud of her ass, and she shuddered as her climax spiraled.

One last suckle, and she fell over the edge with a loud cry. His tongue swept through her folds and fucked into her sheath, thrusting in and out while she moaned and quaked around him. When she finally collapsed onto the sleeping mat, he moved to her side and flipped her onto her stomach. Large hands ran over her buttocks, kneading, rubbing, pulling her cheeks apart so fingers could stroke through the cleft of her ass.

"You know, I was gonna wait for this until we could both be a bit more comfortable, but...." He stroked his palms across her rear again, then leaned down and pressed a kiss to first one cheek, then the other. "But now, with this luscious booty on display, I think I'm just gonna have to take advantage of the opportunity and spank you like I promised."

He maneuvered her until she lay draped over his lap. Placing his hands on the inside of her knees, he pressed against her legs, making sure they were spread wide, then slipped one long finger through her slit and up between her cheeks, ending with a slow swirl over her anal opening. Both big hands stroked over her flesh again and, without warning, one lifted and fell with hard force.

Kendra jumped and squealed, more from the shock of the slap than any pain. Another hard smack to the other ass cheek, then he smoothed his hand over her stinging skin. When he dipped his fingers between her legs again, swirling them through her swollen, slick folds, she cried out and bucked against his hand. He alternated spanking and smoothing until her rear felt like it was on fire, and she was sobbing with renewed arousal deeper than she'd ever felt before.

"You're going to stay out of my mind, aren't you, little lamb?"

She nodded her head, willing to agree to almost anything if he'd just get on with it. She was so ready for him, she thought she might shrivel up and die if he didn't put his big, thick cock where she wanted it. In her hungry, empty pussy.

"All right, then." He slid out from underneath her and positioned himself between her legs. Putting his hands on her hips, he pulled her lower body up to meet his erection. He stroked through her folds, lubricating himself in her cream. Then the fat tip of his cock poised at the entrance to her body.

Chapter Five

Quinn held himself still with just the head of his cock inside Kendra's pussy. He closed his eyes, fighting for control. He wanted to do nothing more than fuck inside her with brutal force, possessing her, claiming her.

Making her his mate.

But he didn't want to hurt her. Ramming into her like an animal wouldn't do.

Mixed in with the lust and the mating instinct of the wolf was a deep-seated affection that he didn't want to look at too closely. *Emotions cloud your judgment, make you act instead of think.*

Emotions could get you killed.

And he couldn't protect his little lamb if he was dead.

Looking at her on her knees, round, creamy mocha buttocks raised and reddened from his hand, had him gritting his teeth against spurting all over her ass. He needed to keep his control. He stroked his fingers over her smooth skin, slipping them in the shadowed cleft of her rump, lingering at her rear passage.

God, he'd love to fuck her here, but he needed more control than he had at present. Only when he was sure he wouldn't hurt her with the rough fucking he needed to give her right now would he take her in the ass. He'd spend a lot of time preparing her, stretching her, working her, making sure she was ready for him.

And when he finally got his dick in her rear passage, he wanted to stay as long as he could.

"Stop playing around, O'Rourke," Kendra muttered with a wiggle of her ass, trying to push back against him. "Fuck me."

He put his hands on her hips and held her still. "You're askin' for it, you know that?"

"God, of course I am!" She jerked her hips, and he tightened his grip. "Get on with it already!"

With a deep breath and a short prayer for mercy, he bunched his hips and speared his cock into her, one long, steady stroke, until his balls slapped against her clit. Fuck, but she was wet and tight and so hot she might just burn him alive.

What a way to go.

He held himself still, letting her body adjust to his invasion. She shivered and moaned, and tilted her ass even further into the air. Quinn felt her cunt ripple around his cock and, with a low growl, pulled almost all the way out of her, then slammed back in.

At this angle, it was like fucking his way into the firm, succulent flesh of a peach. She was tight, so tight it was a battle wedging his cock into the snug clasp of her body. "Am I hurting you?"

"Yes. More." Kendra thrust her hips back against him, her panting moans filling the confines of the tent. "Quinn...!"

He dragged air into his lungs, having a hard time breathing as her sleek wetness surrounded him. Thrusting faster, he reached around and slid his fingers into her slick folds and found her swollen clit. She groaned and pumped against him, meeting the hard, quick lunge of his hips with equal demand of her own.

His fingers tightened on her hips, the other hand moved faster against her clit. She screamed out her climax, the muscles of her cunt rippling around his cock and drawing out his own release.

Unable to deny his nature any longer, he bent over her and sank his teeth into the thick muscle where her shoulder met her slender neck. He rammed into her once, twice, three times, then stiffened against her, teeth biting deeply as his orgasm roared through him.

The base of his cock swelled, the canine mating knot forming to lock him in place as he continued to spasm in climax.

Kendra cried out again, thrusting back against him, milking his turgid cock while it spurted into her. Finally spent, he let go of her shoulder and collapsed against her, rolling to the side so he wouldn't crush her with his greater bulk.

"I don't think I'll ever get used to this," she murmured. One hand reached back and stroked down his arm. "Your penis knotting up like that."

"Yeah, well, that's the wolf DNA." It wasn't something he particularly liked to think about, much less talk about. It was just another reminder of how he'd been changed, a reminder of how control had been taken away from him.

His heart still slammed against his ribs. Quinn tried to catch his breath, tried to make this ... this feeling of affection make sense. But he couldn't. It was more than just affection. It was more than just the primal urge of a male to mark his mate.

But until the damned knot in his cock went away, he was stuck, literally, inside Kendra. And so he held her, trying not to savor the feel of her soft fingers against his skin.

Twenty minutes later, the knot dissipated. Irritated with himself, he growled and pulled out of the sweet trap of her pussy. Now wasn't the time to get all maudlin and sappy. He had a job to do, and that was to bring Kendra back to Tucson, to the compound where she'd be safe.

With a grunt, he reached up and jerked the knife out of the ground. He unwrapped his belt from around her wrists, not meeting her eyes. What could he say? *Thanks for the quick lay, but we gotta go?*

When he sat up and reached for his underwear and pants, she put a hand on his knee. "Whoa, there, cowboy." She leaned up on one elbow, completely at ease with her nudity. "Where do you think you're going?"

His eyes drifted to her breasts, plumped together by her position, the chocolate-drop tips hard and pointed. "It's time to go." Jaw clenched against the urge to grab her and fuck her again, Quinn slid his briefs over his legs and shimmied them over his hips. "Get dressed."

Kendra narrowed her eyes. Son of a bitch. Damned if the man hadn't pulled another *wham-bam-thank-you-ma'am* ... and she'd let him. Even though she thought she'd be satisfied to have sex with him and walk away, she'd been wrong. She was as

stupid as he was arrogant.

She should never have let him touch her. It would be that much harder to let him go.

Without a word, she reached for her backpack and pulled out a roll of soluble toilet paper. After wiping herself--glaring at him the entire time--she put the soiled tissue aside and replaced the roll in her bag. By the stiff set of his shoulders as he continued to dress, she knew Quinn was aware of her irritated regard.

She yanked on her panties, so frustrated and angry with herself--and with him--she was ready to cry. After she pulled on her pants, she went to reach for her bra only to find Quinn's big body in her way. She gripped the front edges of her blouse together and tried to scoot around him. He didn't budge. "Move," she finally muttered, shoving against his shoulder. All scrunched over because of the smallness of the tent, she couldn't get enough strength behind her push, and he stayed where he was.

"Kendra ...," he began.

"Save it, O'Rourke." She rocked back on her heels, clenching her teeth so hard her jaw hurt. Holding out her hand, she snapped, "Just hand me my bra."

Quinn sighed and handed it to her. "This shouldn't ...,"

"If you apologize to me, so help me God, I'm gonna deck you." Turning her back on him, she took off her blouse, draping it over her lap while she put on her bra.

"You can try, little lamb," he murmured, but that was all he said.

Kendra could feel his gaze on her like a firebrand and scowled. He'd lost his right to watch her when he acted like such an ass. She shrugged into her blouse and buttoned it with shaking fingers. The rustle of Quinn's clothing told her he was finishing getting dressed just as fast as she was.

She unfastened the stopper on her air mattress. When all the air was depleted, she folded and rolled it up and stuffed it into her backpack. She repeated the process with her pillow, then sat on her sleeping bag and drew on her socks and shoes. With a soft sigh, she moved off the bag to roll it up and tie it off.

Once she'd gathered her things together, she bent and crawled out of the tent. She straightened and stretched, looking up at a sky that had cleared except for large, fluffy clouds. Quinn maneuvered his big body through the small enclosure. As soon as he was out of the tent, she went to one corner to start breaking it down.

"Leave it," he said.

"I can't just leave it here." She looked over at him and went still. He was staring off into the distance, his head slightly tilted to one side in an attitude of watchful listening. "What is it?" she asked.

His nostrils flared as he sniffed. He shook his head. "It's nothing. Other hikers." He looked over at her. "But we need to go now. Forget the tent."

She'd seen that look in his eyes before and knew when to back off. As much as she didn't want to leave the tent behind--it was brand new--she didn't want to fight Quinn over it. She'd retreat this time, well aware she had other battles with him coming up, primarily when she tried to leave him before he got into trouble because of her.

As much as he appeared to believe what he'd said, that whoever he smelled was hikers, Kendra couldn't take that chance. It could be the Hyenas from The Foundation,

tracking her. Tracking *him*.

But she'd play along for now. She tied her sleeping bag to the bottom of her backpack, then slipped the bulky pack over her shoulders. She looked up to meet Quinn's stare and noticed he had his backpack on, as well, and his rifle slung over one shoulder. "Well?" she asked, putting one hand on her hip. "What are you waiting for?"

A muscle flexed in his jaw. "I've got a vehicle waiting at the trailhead. We'll get cleaned up and grab something to eat. Then we'll get on the road. We should be in Tucson by noon." He turned and started off along the wash, heading out of the canyon. "Follow me."

Knowing he'd just toss her over his shoulder if she didn't, Kendra traipsed obediently behind him, her gaze honed in on his muscular ass hidden under camouflage pants. He had the best pair of glutes this side of the Mississippi, maybe even in the entire Federation. She'd say one thing for him--he was easy on the eyes.

"And stop staring at my ass," he muttered, letting go of a branch.

If she hadn't ducked, it would've smacked her in the face.

She scowled. He might be good to look at, but his manners needed some work. She just might be the woman for the job if there was time. But she couldn't shake the feeling that The Foundation was closing in on her.

Which meant her time with Quinn O'Rourke was limited.

Chapter Six

Two hours later, Kendra shrugged out of her backpack and stowed it beside Quinn's in the rear of the small utility vehicle. She swiped her hand across her brow, then fanned herself with her shirt and blew down her cleavage, trying to cool off. Seeing his quickly stifled grin, she rolled her eyes. Then she walked around to the passenger side and climbed in the front seat.

As she was fastening her safety harness, Quinn got in behind the wheel and started the vehicle. "We're not going far," he said, clipping his own harness into place and pulling away from the roadside parking area. "Yankee's folks have a summer cabin up here."

"Who's Yankee?" she asked. She gazed out the window at the majestic rock formations, rusty red against the robin's egg blue sky. Within a few minutes he'd turned onto the main interstate and headed west.

"He's in my squad." His eyes kept checking the rearview mirror, but his relaxed attitude told her they weren't being followed. "He's also a pain in the ass."

Kendra nodded. "Like you, eh?" She continued to look out the window but heard his snort.

"Yeah. He's a pain in the ass like me."

They lapsed into silence. Kendra kept her eyes on the scenery, as always awed at the majestic beauty of the red rock formations that made Sedona famous. Quinn turned off the highway and onto a residential street. The farther they traveled, the sparser the houses became. The pavement ended and he slowed, guiding the heavy utility vehicle onto a dirt road.

"Not government maintained," Kendra read from a roadside sign.

Quinn grunted. "It's all the rage," he muttered, steering them around a large pot hole. "A return to nature." His big hand gestured toward the road. "Ten years ago, this section of the road *was* paved. Then President Ingram passed his Natural Initiative and large chunks of populated land--including paved streets--were reconstituted."

Hearing the irritation in his voice, she looked at him. "I take it you had a problem with the President's plans." She gazed out the windshield, entranced by the scenery. "Personally, I think it's beautiful here."

"It wasn't the plan I disagreed with necessarily." He turned the vehicle onto another dirt road. "It was the way it was implemented that gave me the problem."

She shifted in her seat to more fully face him. Trying to remember how the plan had been put in place, she shook her head when no memories surfaced. "How was it done? I don't remember."

"*That's* the problem." Quinn pulled up in front of dilapidated wooden structure and brought the vehicle to a stop. "No one remembers. Well, almost no one."

"But you do?"

“Most of the elite squad was involved in providing security for the scientists who worked on the project.” He opened his door and jumped out. Kendra fumbled with her security harness, finally getting it undone, and got out of the vehicle. When she walked around to the back, Quinn had already pulled both of their packs out. “And, as you know,” he went on, “while all Praetorians are Sensitives to one degree or another, the elite squad’s mental abilities were enhanced along with our DNA splicing.”

She looked at him, hearing a tone to his voice that was always present when he talked about his conversion. Without thinking, she put her hand on his arm. “What happened to you, Quinn? What else did they do to you?”

“Stay out of my head, Kendra,” he warned, pulling away from her.

She frowned. So much for that. Showing affection and concern for him was like trying to pet a wounded animal. It wasn’t hard to see where the wolf DNA was prominent. “I wasn’t in your head, you ass.”

He glanced at her, but turned away without response. With long strides, he walked around the large shed. Kendra’s brows rose. “I guess I’m supposed to follow you, then?” she called out as she trailed after him.

“Only if you want a shower and something to eat.”

“Damned frickin’ stubborn macho asshole,” she muttered under her breath.

“I heard that.”

Kendra stuck out her tongue at his broad back. “Damned frickin’ wolf ears.”

“Heard that, too.” Quinn turned a corner on the small dirt path they were following, this time holding aside a branch for her. He nodded toward the house in front of them. “We’re here.”

Kendra stared at the two story ultra-modern glass and log structure. “You call this a cabin?” she murmured, following him up the steps and onto the front portion of the wrap around porch.

He shrugged. “It’s made of rough hewn logs and mortar, ergo a log cabin. What would you call it?”

Her lips quirked. “I didn’t know you knew there was such a word as ‘ergo,’” she quipped, grinning when he scowled. Seeing the answering sparkle of humor in his eyes, she knew the scowl was more for show than anything.

“There’s a lot about me you don’t know, little lamb,” he said, and unlocked the front door. He pushed it open and ushered her inside.

“Not for lack of trying.”

Quinn pushed the door closed with his foot and turned the lock. She was right. He’d always kept a part of himself back from others, holding onto the darkest part of his soul. Afraid others would be as frightened of it as he was.

There was no way in hell he wanted his sweet Kendra to see it, which was why he’d taken control of their lovemaking from the start. What she couldn’t see, she couldn’t touch.

What she couldn’t touch, she couldn’t ask about. What she didn’t ask about, he didn’t have to talk about.

It wasn’t perfect, but it worked for him.

Or, at least, it had. Now, looking at her as she walked around the first floor of the

cabin, taking in the layout and décor, he wasn't so sure. Kendra had a sweetness of spirit that was very appealing to the wounded wolf in him, a gentleness that soothed him merely by its presence.

Unlike another woman in his past, one who had used him, who had hurt him when she wanted, then soothed him with soft strokes, seductive words, and calming sedatives. He clamped his mind down, refusing to go to those bleak memories.

He blew out a breath and dropped his pack by the door. "Kendra...." He trailed off. What the hell could he say?

When he remained silent, she grimaced and shook her head. "What is it about me that scares you so much, O'Rourke?" she asked. She walked over and stood in front of him. "Why won't you let me in?"

He touched her lightly on one silken cheek. "Because I'm afraid you might not like what you find."

Dark eyes searched his. "We all have secrets, Quinn. And I promise you, I'll only see what you want me to. I won't intrude."

Her expression was so earnest, he couldn't resist. What she saw in him, God only knew. But there must have been something that kept bringing her back. He cupped her face and brought his mouth down to hers.

Her lips immediately parted. Quinn speared his tongue inside, drawing her taste back into his mouth, groaning as her tongue followed his. He sucked on it, and she leaned into him with a moan of her own. His cock sprang to attention, hardening behind the placket of his fatigues.

Kendra worked her hands under his shirt and spread her fingers over his pectorals. She rubbed her thumbs against his nipples. Pulling her mouth away from his, she kissed a path across his jaw. "You said something about getting cleaned up?" Her breath puffed near his ear, sending a spike of desire straight to his straining shaft.

He gave in. Some things he was strong enough to fight--wanting Kendra wasn't one of them. With a soft oath, he swung her into his arms and strode down the hallway to the master bedroom. He deposited her on her feet in the bathroom and had her clothes stripped in record time. Reaching into the shower stall, he turned on the water and adjusted the temperature, then took off his own clothing.

When he straightened from removing his pants, Kendra had already gotten into the shower. Water sluiced over the cream-coffee skin of her back and buttocks, drawing his eye. And his hands.

Squirting a glob of cleansing gel into his palms, he lathered up and kneaded her shoulders, feeling the hardness of muscles held too tightly, and frowned to know he'd contributed to her stress. Here she was, trying to stay off The Foundation's radar, and he was acting like an ass. When she moaned and her head drooped forward, he rubbed his thumbs up the column of her neck and into the short hair at her nape.

"God, that feels so good." She sighed and leaned forward even farther, hands braced against the wall. The motion thrust her rounded buttocks out and he was

Done. Stick a fork in him, he was ready.

This time, when he took her, he wanted to be in a soft bed with her supple body under him. But there was nothing written anywhere that he couldn't drive her wild first.

Quinn lathered his hands again and ran them down her back and around her hips, pulling her against his aroused body. He stroked up to her breasts, circling but not touching her nipples. She moaned and thrust her bottom against him, riding his cock in the cleft of her ass.

"You want somethin', little lamb?" he asked, moving one hand to her sex and strumming through her soft folds.

"You're such a damned tease, O'Rourke," she muttered. Her fingers went to the hand he had resting beneath one of her breasts and tried to bring it up. "I want you to touch me."

"I am touching you." He slid his middle finger into her snug sheath and rubbed his thumb back and forth over her clit. She gasped and wriggled her hips against him. Moisture coated his palm. Keeping a slow, steady rhythm, he stroked in and out of her channel with short, hard jabs.

"Touch my breasts." Her hand continued to yank at his.

"I am, darlin'." Quinn added another finger and thrust deeply into her. Kendra moaned, her head falling back onto his shoulder. He looked down at her to see her chocolate-brown eyes staring into his. He dropped one eyelid in a slow wink. "You're gonna have to be more specific."

A rough sound that was very much like a snarl left her. He grinned at the look of disgruntled passion on her face.

"My nipples," she muttered. Her eyes closed, and her head lolled against his shoulder. "Tug on my nipples."

With a low chuckle, he obliged. He took one hard nub between his fingers and thumb and lightly twisted, then pulled on it in a strong, milking motion.

"Laugh it up, wolf-boy," she grouched, even as she gasped and thrust her breast deeper into his hand. "Just remember one thing."

He rolled her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, then gave it a hard pinch. She gasped at the erotic pain. Bending his head, he kissed a path down her neck and lingered on the sweet spot where her throat met her collarbone. "What's that?"

She twisted in his arms. Soft breasts with stiff nipples pressed against his chest. One slender hand wrapped around his erection and squeezed. "Payback's a bitch, and her name's Kendra."

Chapter Seven

As Kendra swept her thumb over the slitted head of his cock, Quinn's eyes darkened and a muscle flexed in his jaw. In all their couplings, he'd never let her go down on him. Every time she'd tried, wanting to return the same loving attention he'd given her, he'd stopped her, pulling her underneath him and fucking her senseless.

Not that she minded being fucked into oblivion, but she ordinarily tried to be an unselfish lover. And she wanted to know what he tasted like. Keeping her eyes on his, she reached around the shower curtain and took down a fluffy towel from the rack. Folding it, she dropped it on the floor in front of his big feet.

With his body blocking most of the water from her, she knelt on the towel and held his throbbing erection in her hands. He was thick and long, wide veins running the length of his shaft. A clear drop of liquid hovered at the tip and she leaned forward, swiping it with her tongue.

His hands came up and fisted in her hair. She glanced up from under her wet lashes and held his gaze as she flicked the tip of her tongue into the slit and lapped more of his pre-cum. His eyes narrowed, but he didn't stop her.

Kendra took the head of his cock into her mouth and sucked lightly. She stroked one hand down his length and cupped his balls, rocking them in her fingers.

He groaned and bucked against her. "God, honey. Take more."

She opened her mouth wide and took as much of him as she could. He was so thick she couldn't take all of him, so she stroked her hand from her mouth down to his base. When he grunted and thrust against her, she remembered her promise of payback and drew slowly away until he left her mouth with a soft *pop*.

"Kendra"

She pressed his cock up against his belly and licked a path on the underside from the crown to the base. He tipped his hips toward her and she smiled in feminine triumph. Then she swiped the flat of her tongue over his sac and pulled one of his balls into the wet heat of her mouth.

Beginning a slow, steady stroke along his shaft, she continued to suckle his testicles, switching from one to the other. She slipped her fingers from his sac to the sensitive skin behind and fumbled against warm metal.

He was pierced there, between his scrotum and anus, and wore a small ring with a ball. This was the first time she'd felt it--always before he'd stopped her when she'd tried to touch him here.

She blinked and looked up at him. "Quinn?"

He shook his head. "Later, honey. I'll tell you all about it later, okay? Just" He closed his eyes for a moment and, when he opened them and looked down at her, heat blazed in their depths. "Just take me in your mouth again. Please."

Kendra licked her way back up the length of his cock, then slurped him into her

mouth. But she kept one hand at his sac and flicked the ring behind it. He pumped his hips, thrusting more of his cock into her mouth, and she hummed, knowing the vibration would shoot straight to his balls.

And still she flicked the ring back and forth. Back and forth.

“Christ.” His hips bucked and surged forward, driving more of his thick length into her mouth. The head of his cock hit the back of her throat, triggering her gag reflex. She pulled back slightly to catch her breath, then went back down.

He tried to draw away from her, but she put her hands around the back of his thighs and held him where he was.

“I’m gonna come, honey,” he muttered, his muscles tensing beneath her hands.

She hummed again and brought his cock deeper, to the back of her throat, and swallowed.

Quinn growled and took over the rhythm, fucking into her mouth with short, hard thrusts. Kendra opened her mouth as wide as she could and sucked him on each outward stroke. She reached one hand between his legs and took the metal ring between her fingers and lightly tugged on it.

His roar reverberated in the small room. The base of his cock swelled, the knot bumping her chin. Hands tightening in her hair, he held himself still while his release jetted into her mouth. He tasted salty and tart, and her throat kept moving until she’d swallowed every last drop.

Hard hands around her arms hoisted her to her feet, and his mouth clamped over hers in a possessive, demanding kiss. He drew back and rested his forehead against hers. “Damn, sweetheart. I think you’ve about killed me.”

She smiled and moved her face until she could kiss him. Then she picked up the shower gel and squeezed a dollop in her palm. Rubbing her hands together, she worked up a lather and started scrubbing over the wide expanse of his chest. “That was the idea, O’Rourke.”

As tempted as she was to turn their shower play into a full-blown lovemaking session, she knew they couldn’t take the time. He must’ve agreed, because he grabbed a cloth and took over his own cleansing.

To make room for elbows as they washed, Kendra put a little space between them.

Ten minutes later, they were both dressed in clean clothes they’d pulled from their packs. She looked up from drawing on her socks to see Quinn staring at her.

“I promised I’d tell you about the ring.” His voice was rough. He began to pace the bedroom, his bare feet making no noise on the plush carpet. It was obvious he was uncomfortable, but this was something that had stood between them somehow and, as much as she needed to hear it, she had a feeling he needed to tell it even more.

“Go ahead,” she murmured and perched on the edge of the bed.

He took a deep breath and held it a moment, then huffed it out through his nose. “Twenty years ago, I was brought to The Foundation by one of the scientists under the guise of a security detail. But that wasn’t what Dr. Harris wanted at all.”

Quinn rubbed two fingers between his eyes. “The rest of my squad was sequestered while I was taken to her lab. She performed the splicing procedure, gave me wolf DNA and made me a Praetorian, then kept me chained in a private lab.”

“Chained.” Kendra tilted her head, studying him. It was so tempting to dive into his mind, to take the thoughts he was having so much trouble articulating, but she restrained herself. It wasn’t her style, and it would alienate him. “Why?”

He spun toward the window. His back was taut, but she could see the material of his t-shirt quivering as if his muscles held a faint tremor. “To be her sex slave.”

She felt the shock of his statement down to her toenails. For such a strong man to have been held against his will, used sexually.... Hell, call it what it was.

He’d been raped.

Her stomach churned with acid. She stood and approached him, stopping when she was still a few feet away. “And?”

“And what?”

“Well, obviously you’re no longer her sex slave. What happened?”

Quinn sighed and turned to face her. “She kept me docile with drugs and used me as her personal fuck-toy for six months.” His voice was harsh with memories, and she curled a hand around one of his biceps and squeezed, then stroked him softly. He looked down at her with storm-gray eyes. “Until Max found out.”

Maxwell Didion, the captain of the Alpha squad, the most elite of the Praetorian squadrons. She’d never met him, but her brother Ty had talked about him. A lot.

“I keep the piercing as a reminder of how far I’ve come since those days.”

“What happened to the scientist?”

He snorted. “She got a slap on the wrist and her private lab taken away from her.”

“That’s all?” Kendra was indignant. The woman had stolen Quinn’s life, turned him into something he probably wouldn’t have chosen for himself, and all that happened was that her private little sandbox was taken away?

His broad shoulders lifted in a shrug. “Someone killed her a little over a month ago.”

“Well, at least she won’t be able to hurt you again.”

His eyes darkened, and he snagged her by the back of the neck, dragging her against him for a long, leisurely kiss. When he let her go, they both were breathing raggedly, and his pants looked to be a bit tighter than they had been.

Considering her panties were getting wet, again, she figured it was only fair.

Quinn brushed his lips over hers, letting her go with a sigh. “Come on. Let’s get to the kitchen and see what’s available. We’ll pack something up and take it with us.”

She picked up her shoes and padded down the hallway, Quinn right behind her. Just as she walked into the kitchen, a sensation of dark intent hit her so strongly it was like a sharp dagger to her mind. There was a very strong telepath near. And completely focused on her. Kendra dropped her shoes and clutched her head, moaning.

Quinn’s big hands came down on her shoulders. “Sweetheart, what is it?”

“Someone’s coming for me,” she gasped and straightened with effort. The pain had lessened, but it was still there like the dull throb of sinus pressure behind her eyes. “God, he’s so strong”

Taking her hand, Quinn pulled her behind him as he strode into the living room and grabbed his shotgun. Letting go of her, he primed the barrel, then knelt beside his

pack and pulled out a box of ammunition. Once he'd filled his pockets with shells, he replaced the box in the pack.

As Kendra slid into her boots and knelt to lace them, he slipped on a long-sleeved shirt, then slid his arms through the straps of the pack and settled it on his back. He sat down to put on his socks and boots. "Can you tell where he is? Or if he has people with him?"

She shook her head. "I can't tell. But he probably has people with him, wouldn't you think?"

Quinn nodded, his face grim.

"But I can only sense *him*. And he's still a couple of miles away. I think they're coming in from the south, but I can't be sure."

When she reached for her pack, he stayed her hand. "Leave it."

"Look, I know you think you know best in this situation.... Well, hell, you probably do," she acknowledged, "but I can't just keep leaving my worldly belongings everywhere. At this rate I won't have anything left by the time we get to Tucson."

Quinn bit back a sharp retort. He could see the fear in her eyes and knew she was only trying to deal with it the best way she could. Unfortunately, that meant she turned into a smartass, which made him crazy. "The main point being that we get to Tucson. Is there anything in there that can't be replaced?"

She pursed her lips, but finally shook her head.

"Fine. Then let's go."

She started toward the door, but paused and turned to look at him with a troubled expression. "Quinn"

When she trailed off, he cupped her cheek. "We need to go, sweetheart. Whatever it is, it'll keep."

Her curls bounced with the vehement shake of her head. "It won't wait." She drew in a deep breath. Her words, when they came, were fast and strung together. "It's-too-dangerous-I'll-stay-you-get-out-of-here-before-they-come."

"*What?*" His hand dropped from her face. He blinked, sure he'd misheard her.

"They want *me*, Quinn. Only me. They'll leave you alone. If you're not with me, you'll be safe."

God dammit to hell. His little lamb thought to sacrifice herself in order to protect him, the big bad wolf. He didn't know whether to be proud or angry.

He felt a lot of both. "No way in hell I'm leaving you to fend for yourself," he muttered. Grasping her shoulders, he gave her a little shake. "You can't ask me to."

"But I am." Her slender hands closed over his with a light squeeze. Tears made her dark eyes look like liquid pools of misery. "I couldn't bear it if something happened to you because of me."

"I'd do anything for you, try to be anything you want me to be, little lamb." He cupped her face, his thumbs stroking over her lips. "But don't ask me to be a coward for you. That I won't do. I can't. Not even for you."

A fat tear rolled down her cheek. She sniffed. "Fine." She turned back to the door and opened it. "Just don't come bitching to me when you get your ass kicked."

He grinned. There was no real heat in her words, just a high level of bravado.

She was scared but was trying her best not to show it. He'd always known there was a bit of wolf in his little lamb.

Chapter Eight

Quinn steered the utility vehicle onto the main highway leading out of Sedona. Heading south to I-10 would be too obvious and, if he knew how the trackers worked--and he did--they'd have ambushes set up along the way. So, he decided to head north toward Flagstaff to try to bluff those who hunted them.

Kendra had been quiet since they'd gotten on the road, which was fine by him. He wasn't one for idle chit-chat in ordinary circumstances, let alone when he needed to concentrate. And while the scenery around him was some of the finest, with the tall trees growing on the banks of the Oak Creek and the red rock formations rising against the blue sky, he couldn't take the time to appreciate it.

He glanced in the rearview mirror. No other vehicles were on the road with them, which was rather unusual for the time of day. The muscles in his shoulders were rigid with tension. Quinn frowned. Something about this wasn't right.

"Something's wrong," Kendra murmured, her gaze scanning the surrounding area as he drove along the curving road. When they passed a group of vacation rental cabins alongside the creek, she stared down at them. "It seems like" She shook her head. "I can sense someone, and he's near. But I can't tell where."

Quinn rounded a curve and saw the bridge spanning Oak Creek just ahead. There were a few cars on the other side of the bridge, parked in the scenic pullout that had been restored as part of the environmental initiative. Non-descript vehicles, ordinary.

Too ordinary.

Quinn slammed on the brakes, putting one arm in front of Kendra to brace her.

"What is it?" she asked, her voice breathless. From his peripheral vision, he saw her look straight forward. Her gaze darted to him, then back to the front. With narrowed eyes, she studied the cars. "Oh, God," she finally muttered. "It's them."

She looked bewildered, her brow puckered.

"What is it?"

She shook her head. "I don't understand." Her gaze darted around, and she twisted to look behind them. "*He's* not with them." She pointed toward the gathered cars on the other side of the bridge.

"Shit." Quinn shoved the gear lever into reverse. Putting his right arm along the back of her seat, he twisted to look over his shoulder and jammed the accelerator to the floor. As the military vehicle began going backward, he asked, "What's happening up front?"

"Nothing... Wait!" Kendra sucked in her breath, the sound like a small explosion in the tense confines of the vehicle. "They're coming."

They'd reached a straight section of the road. "Hang on!" Quinn slammed one foot onto the clutch and the other onto the brake pedal. Twisting the steering wheel, he turned the vehicle into a one-hundred and eighty degree turn with a screech of rubber on

the asphalt.

As the vehicle lifted up onto its two right tires, he heard Kendra scream. "You okay?" he yelled.

"Great. Oh, I'm just great," she trilled. "Just don't tip us over."

Quinn flashed a grin. He quickly depressed the clutch and knocked the gearshift into first and got up to fifth as fast as he could. He picked up as much speed as he felt was safe, slowing when he reached the downtown area. A quick glance in his rearview mirror showed the cars following barely slowing, which meant they were gaining on him, and gaining fast.

Once he passed through the tourist-populated area, he floored the accelerator and went from a careful forty kilometers an hour to a hundred and twenty in about five seconds.

Reaching the first of a series of stoplights, he slowed, checking for traffic. Seeing he had time to make it, he blew through the intersection. He swerved to avoid a disabled vehicle parked alongside the road. Quinn checked the rearview mirror again and, when he saw the lead car plow into the side of a parked vehicle he had just missed, he barked out a laugh. "One down."

Kendra twisted in her seat to look behind them. When she faced forward again, it was just in time to see Quinn jerk the wheel and go into the middle lane of incoming traffic to avoid rear-ending another vehicle. "You're on the wrong side!" she screeched, making panicked motions with her hands as if to move the vehicle into the correct lane by her will alone. "Move over. Move over!"

"I'm trying," he muttered, dodging around an oncoming car, ignoring the other driver's blaring horn. Seeing an opening, he guided the vehicle back into the correct lane.

Deciding it would be easier to lose them in their sedate sedans by taking it off-road, he zigzagged through the slower moving traffic until he was away from the primary part of town. Then, with another screech of tires, he swung the heavy military vehicle onto a paved road he knew would soon become a potholed dirt lane.

"Let me guess." Kendra sounded amazingly calm considering the jouncing ride and the multiple bogeys after them. "Another 'not government maintained' road."

"Hmm." He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw the first sedan turn in behind them. "And one that won't bode well for their undercarriages."

The paved road came to a T and Quinn made a quick left. Within a matter of meters the paving ended and they were traveling on a rough dirt road. Keeping his eyes straight ahead, he concentrated on avoiding as many of the large potholes and imbedded rocks as possible. One particular one he couldn't miss, and the tires dropped into it and back out again, throwing him and Kendra into the air until their safety harnesses constricted, holding them onto their seats.

Kendra yelled, "Can't you watch out for those?"

"I am watching," he muttered.

"Try harder," she said, quickly followed by a loud, "Ow!"

He glanced her way. "You all right?"

"I just bit my tongue." She glared at him accusingly.

"Hey, I'm the good guy here," he reminded her.

"I know." She sighed. Another bump jarred her in her seat.

Quinn risked looking in the rearview mirror again. There were only two cars behind them now and, as he watched, the car in the rear slowed down and stopped, steam pouring out from under the hood.

"Just one more to go," he told Kendra. He put his gaze back on the road. "Time for some off-roading," he said. "Hang on."

"You mean *this* isn't off-roading?"

"Not by a long shot." Quinn slowed the vehicle and guided it to the side, over a ridge of dirt, then down through a ditch and up the other side. He pressed down a little too forcefully on the accelerator, and sand spit out from under the tires.

Easing up, he still managed to outdistance the vehicle that wasn't equipped to travel this kind of terrain. Within a few seconds, he'd left the final car behind. "That's it," he said. "We've lost 'em."

She was looking out the passenger window. "Um, not all of them we haven't." Her voice was thin and reedy, full of fear, fraught with the return of pain.

Quinn ducked his head to look out her window. Flying toward them was a Vontesque H-60, the newest and best military helicopter in the world. The VH-60 could carry a compliment of twenty-five, including two pilots.

"They're coming in fast," he muttered. From what he could tell, they were flying at the chopper's top speed of two hundred knots.

"Fuck!" Kendra looked at him with huge eyes.

"You can say that again, little lamb." Quinn twisted the wheel, steering the vehicle in a wide circle, heading back toward the road.

"What are you doing?"

"We'll have a better chance against that thing on the road, not jouncing around in the desert." He guided the vehicle back onto the dirt road and accelerated, dodging the holes as much as possible.

The sound of the chopper's rotors grew louder. Quinn muttered a curse and drove faster.

"Qui-i-i-nn!"

"Just hang on!" He cursed again as, with a roar of whirling blades, the chopper rushed past them and then turned, hovering on the roadway in front of them.

As Quinn slammed on the brakes, Kendra was jerked forward and stopped by the safety belt. "Shit!"

"Yeah. Deep shit."

Kendra stared at the military style helicopter hovering less than fifty meters away. Menacing gun barrels pointed straight at their vehicle. "What do we do now?"

A muscle flexed in his beard-shadowed jaw. "There's not much we can do, sweetheart." He slammed his palms against the steering wheel. "Fuck!"

They watched in silence as the helicopter began to lower. Even before its wheels came to rest on the ground, half a dozen men dressed in camouflage fatigues jumped out, automatic rifles raised to their shoulders as they advanced on their vehicle.

Quinn started to reach for his gun, holstered at his side.

“Hands where we can see them!” one of the camouflaged men shouted.

With a low growl, Quinn put his hands on the steering wheel, long fingers curling around until his knuckles shone white. His gaze darted from one man to the next, and on to the waiting helicopter. “Be ready to follow my lead, Kendra.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked, her voice low, her eyes on the men approaching them with carefully placed steps.

“I think I can distract them long enough for you to make a run for it.”

“No.”

He looked at her with a sharp gaze.

“They’ll just shoot you and chase me down. There’s a time to give up, Quinn.” She ignored his scowl and looked back out at the men. “And this is it.”

“That’s not part of the Code,” he muttered. “Praetorians never give up. Never give in.”

“To hell with the Code,” she shot back. “I’m not having your death on my conscience.”

“And when they get us back to The Foundation, just what do you think they’re gonna do to me, little lamb? Tickle my feet?”

One of the men reached the vehicle and tapped the tip of his rifle on the passenger window.

Kendra stared at him. Sweat rolled down her forehead. She brought up one hand to swipe it away.

“Open up,” the man ordered, his voice muffled by the closed door.

“Don’t.” Quinn’s voice was as harsh as the other man’s, but Quinn’s was tight with fury, as well. “This vehicle’s bullet proof--they won’t get in unless we let them in.”

“We can’t just sit here,” she whispered, keeping her gaze on the man by the car. He made another threatening motion, and she couldn’t resist making a gesture she knew he wouldn’t appreciate.

The man’s gaze went to her saluting finger, and his jaw tightened. He slammed the butt of his rifle against the glass.

“Kendra...” Still with his hands on the steering wheel, Quinn partially leaned toward her. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” she muttered, adding a ‘much’ under her breath.

“I heard that.”

Damned wolf hearing. Damned Praetorians. Since these men were Sensitives, like Quinn and his squad, she couldn’t manipulate their minds, make them think what she wanted them to.

Or could she? She’d never tried, had always accepted what she’d been told.

Now was an excellent time to find out.

Staring into the eyes of the man standing by her window, she began inserting her will, layer by layer, like sliced apples in a baking dish. His eyelids twitched, then he shook his head, and she knew she had him.

“Ken--”

“Sshh!” She waved one hand at Quinn, not taking her gaze off the soldier outside the vehicle. Just a little deeper, a little more and ... there! “This is the wrong vehicle,”

she murmured, inserting the belief that they'd stopped her and Quinn by mistake. When she saw his eyes flicker, she added, "You need to turn around and get back in the chopper now."

He stood there a moment, eyes glazed and unfocused. He took a step back and stopped.

"You need to go now." Kendra pushed deeper into the man's mind, deeper than she'd ever gone before.

He winced. Just when she thought she'd failed, he turned on his heel and began striding back to the helicopter.

"Wrong vehicle," he called out. Raising one hand, he made a circular motion in the air. "Move out."

The men obediently turned and hopped back into the helicopter. The leader paused, turning back to look at them with a troubled look on his face. Then he shook his head and climbed up next to his men.

As soon as the machine lifted up and flew off in the direction it had come, Quinn pushed the gearshift into first and started back down the road. "God damn," he muttered with a quick glance her way. "How the hell did you do that?"

There was a new note in his voice, a new reserve in his hooded gaze. She'd seen that look before from people after she'd done something unexpected with her telepathy.

He was afraid she'd pull something like that on him.

"Quinn, I will never go into your mind without your permission, I promise." She twisted in her seat to face him, laying one hand on his muscled forearm. "I wouldn't do that to you."

He glanced at her again, but didn't say anything.

Kendra sighed and faced forward again. There wasn't anything she could say to convince him, and she wasn't going to try. He would either trust her, or he wouldn't.

She saw several SUVs traveling toward them and sat up straighter. "Quinn?"

"I see 'em." His hands flexed on the steering wheel. "Looks like we're not out of the woods yet."

She saw someone lean out of the passenger window of the lead car. He was holding something to his shoulder, but she couldn't make out what it was.

"Son of a bitch has a hand-held rocket launcher!" Quinn slammed down the clutch and downshifted, then hit the brakes and turned the wheel.

Then everything went topsy-turvy. As they turned, there was a loud explosion and they were lifted into the air. The heavy military vehicle rotated and slammed back down on the driver's side then, with a loud groan, settled onto all four tires.

Metal and glass crumpled from the impact. Kendra brought one shaking hand to her forehead. She glanced over at Quinn and saw him slumped in his seat. His left arm hung at his side, the sleeve bloodied. Squinting, she saw bone protruding from his forearm. She gasped and called out, "Quinn!"

No response.

Just as she reached over to touch his shoulder, she heard the loud whine of hydraulics and the grinding of metal. Turning toward the door, she saw several men in military dress standing there, some with rifles, some with pistols, all pointing them her

way. Another man stood by the door, forcing it open with a hydraulic spreader.

She tried to reach into his mind, to touch his thoughts the way she had the other man. A mental barrier as effective as a concrete wall slammed in front of her, blocking her efforts.

“Don’t even bother with your mojo, sweetheart,” he called over the sound of the spreader. “Won’t work on me.” Within only a few minutes, he had the door open and reached inside for her.

She fought him, screaming, kicking. Drawing back her right hand, she fisted it and let it fly toward his jaw. She managed to connect and pain exploded through her hand. She gasped and drew her hand back, tucking it in her armpit.

“Hurts, don’t it?” he smirked. His hand came up, and he jabbed a needle in her arm.

Kendra swayed as the drug rushed through her system. The man bent and slung her over his shoulder. Shaking her head, she tried to fight the drug that made the brown and green of his fatigues lurch and kaleidoscope together. She braced her hands on his lower back and partially lifted up, looking at Quinn.

His big body was being dragged out through the passenger side. The left side of his face and his left arm were covered in blood, and he was out cold. The men taking him out of the vehicle dumped him onto the ground, and one brought his weapon around to bear on the unconscious man.

“Bring him,” her captor snapped.

“But, sir. Our orders are to kill anyone with her.”

The man carrying her stopped and turned. “You questioning me, soldier?”

Kendra’s head swirled. She blinked, trying to stay awake. Her arms felt so heavy. She could no longer hold herself upright and slumped against her captor’s back.

“No, sir.”

“Then bring him.”

He started walking again, and Kendra couldn’t fight the drug any more. She sighed and slipped into sleep.

Chapter Nine

Three hours later, Kendra watched with dread as Quinn's still unconscious body was dragged down a hallway. Two men held him under his arms, and the broken bone of his left arm reflected obscenely in the glare of the overhead lights.

"You'd do better to worry 'bout yourself, little lady." The man who'd forced open her door and drugged her, this man whose mind she could not penetrate, kept a tight grip on her. She looked at him, at his thin, swarthy face, his emotionless gaze. His brown eyes were so dark they looked black.

One edge of his mouth curled up in a mirthless smile. "Mr. Bedrosian's waiting."

He ushered her down the corridor in the opposite direction in which Quinn had been taken. At the end of the hallway was a wide door, guarded on either side by fatigue-clad Praetorians. Stopping in front of them, he nodded and pressed a button on the intercom panel by the door.

"Yes?"

"We're here."

When the door swung open, her captor pulled her into the room. From the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that lined the wall behind the desk to the plush leather sofa and large plasma screen, she had a definite impression of wealth.

They stopped in front of an ornate mahogany desk. "Mr. Bedrosian." He motioned toward Kendra with his free hand. "Kendra Shepherd."

A man with dark hair with graying temples rose from his chair and came around from behind the desk to stand in front of her. "Ah, Kendra. Finally you're here."

This man was tall, distinguished in his charcoal suit. His face was angular, handsome, with penetrating blue eyes. Power emanated from him, a power that had a strong overlay of oily menace.

As her captor released her, Bedrosian took her hands, refusing to let go when she tried to jerk away. When he tightened his fingers on her injured hand, she yelped. He brought the hand to his mouth and pressed a kiss against her knuckles, then studied the swelling. His gaze came up to meet the other man's. "What happened, Hatchet? She was to be unharmed."

Kendra swallowed at the hard tone in his voice. He didn't sound happy, and an unhappy leader of The Foundation was not a good thing. *Especially if you were the one he was unhappy with.*

The other man shrugged one shoulder, looking completely unconcerned about Bedrosian's temper. He took a couple of steps back and leaned one hip against the desk. "Hey, *she* slugged *me*."

"After you tried to blow up our car," she muttered, glaring at him. It was because of him that Quinn was injured and God-knew-where in this facility. When she turned her head to look back at Bedrosian, a wave of dizziness assailed her. There must still be some

of the drug in her system, reasserting itself when she turned her head too quickly.

"You did *what*?" Bedrosian slipped one arm around her as if he knew she was light-headed.

"Relax, sir," Hatchet soothed. "I knew what I was doing. The only injury she sustained was a self-inflicted one."

"Get some ice for her hand." Bedrosian drew Kendra over to a leather sofa and she sank down on it, grateful to be off her feet for the moment.

"Now, my dear. Let's talk about you and me, and the things I can teach you." His intense gaze slid over her, lingering on the thrust of her breasts. When he looked back up at her, she swallowed down the surge of nausea the blazing lust in his eyes caused. "Then you can do something for me."

"What?" she asked, trying unsuccessfully to keep a quaver out of her voice.

"All in good time, my dear. All in good time." He reached up and took the towel-wrapped ice that Hatchet held. "Here, let's put this on your hand."

Kendra let him turn her hand over in his, and he gently settled the ice onto her knuckles. She hissed in a breath at the quick pain that flared.

"Easy," Bedrosian murmured. "It will ease soon."

Hatchet cleared his throat. "There is another matter we need to discuss," he said in a low voice. With a quick jerk of his head, he motioned to his left.

Bedrosian slipped one hand along Kendra's jaw, then leaned forward and placed a kiss on her forehead. "Stay put," he told her, warning clear in his soft tone. He stood and walked over to the other side of the room, Hatchet at his heels.

Like the good little dog he was.

The swarthy-skinned man shot a sharp glance her way. She frowned. Surely he hadn't picked up on that thought? While he might be able to block her from his mind, he didn't feel like a high enough level telepath to be able to eavesdrop on *her* thoughts. But, if he was the man she'd sensed earlier, the one who'd been looking for her ... he was damned strong.

She watched the two men. When it looked as if their attention was completely off her, she gently eased into Bedrosian's mind.

And was promptly and painfully kicked out.

It was as if sharp needles jabbed into her temples. She winced and brought her hands to her head, rubbing her fingers at the pained areas.

"Don't try that again," Bedrosian warned, shooting a hard glance her way. "I won't be as gentle next time." Without missing a beat, he turned back to his muted conversation with Hatchet.

She caught Quinn's name a few times, and at one point Bedrosian's hands fisted, his face hardening in anger. "I don't pay you to think," he muttered fiercely, jabbing a finger in Hatchet's chest.

The other man's expression didn't change. He murmured something too low for Kendra to hear. Both men glanced at her, then partially turned their backs and continued their conversation.

Obviously they were unconcerned she'd try to make a break for it. With the two big guards on the other side of the door, they were right not to worry. She wouldn't make

it two steps before being hauled back.

So she used the time to look around. The room she was in was a large office on one side, and set up like a living room on the other. There was another door, which she assumed led to a bedroom. She hoped she didn't find out for sure--the very last place she wanted to be with Bedrosian was his bedroom.

"Now, that's a rather uncharitable thought," he said, walking over to her with easy strides. "I assure you, you wouldn't be disappointed. I am, if I do say so myself, a gifted and generous lover."

Kendra drew in a breath. God, he was powerful, to be able to read her thoughts so easily. She'd have to keep her surface thoughts as inane as possible while she built thicker, higher walls to keep him out.

"And in time you will, my dear. I will be as happy as you on that day, for I grow tired of the unguarded thoughts around me day in and day out."

Hatchet made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a laugh cut short.

Kendra immediately began forming a picture in her mind of a brick wall, building it high and thick, brick by brick. Doing it slowly, hoping against hope he wouldn't notice.

Bedrosian ignored Hatchet and sat beside Kendra. His expression was calm, which made her think he was unaware of her putting up the barrier in her mind.

"You have so much potential, Kendra," he said. "At my side, you could help make our world a better place." He leaned forward. "Let me show you."

She opened a hole in her mental barrier. Images flooded her mind, pictures of a planet free of pollution, people with enough food, healthy and happy

Utopia.

When he drew away, she stared at him. It was too fantastic to think all that could be accomplished in her lifetime. "It's not possible," she breathed, against her will seduced by the idea of the eradication of poverty, hunger, and war.

His chiseled lips curved in a smile. "It's very possible." He stood and held out one hand. "Come. I'm sure you'd like to freshen up."

He gazed into her eyes, and she felt an eerie hypnotic pull. Realizing he was trying to see if he could control her--and determine just how easily he could do it--she decided to play along. She deliberately forced her mind to go numb, fuzzy as if her thoughts were slogging through molasses. Blinking at him, she slowly placed her hand in his, allowing him to help her to her feet.

"You're part of The Foundation now, my Kendra." His *whether you like it or not* remained unspoken, but she felt it with every fiber of her being. "You will soon see how far-reaching our control is, how high up our operatives are, here in the North American Federation as well as other governments and big businesses around the world."

"Sir--"

"I know what I'm doing, Hatchet," he told the other man, keeping his voice calm and serene, and not releasing his hold on Kendra's cold fingers. "Kendra may very well be the strongest telepath I've ever encountered. When her brother told me of her abilities, I knew I had to have her." He paused and stroked one finger across his eyebrow. "Well, she's the strongest except for me, of course. And she's quite intelligent,

aren't you, my dear? You'll soon see the wisdom of bowing to the inevitable and using your abilities for the betterment of mankind." He leaned closer and stared into her eyes. "Listen to me, my dear. You're destined for such great things."

He was so full of himself, he didn't seem to be aware she was only pretending to fall under his control. Just like a man--so focused on what *he* wanted that he couldn't tell when a woman was faking it.

This could work to her advantage. She might be able to affect change from the inside, undo some of what this amoral man was putting in motion. If she could maintain the façade long enough, she might just be able to pull off being a Fifth Column--a clandestine, subversive one-woman saboteur.

He bent and brought his mouth to hers, kissing her more gently than she expected. It was over before she could even think about pushing him away. He glanced toward the bedroom door.

She tried to keep her mind blank, but the thought of going into a bedroom with him sent an icy shiver across her shoulders.

"Don't worry," he said, bringing her hand under his arm to curl her fingers in the crook of his elbow. His eyes--and his thoughts--bored into her. She caught an impression of such amorality it left her cold.

Bedrosian's thoughts drifted to the concept of brainwashing, or 'reprogramming' as he liked to call it. Knowing she had to be careful--slamming barriers up would clue him into what she was doing--Kendra slowly put another mental wall in place to keep him from realizing *she* had tapped into *his* thoughts.

"Until I know I can trust you, you'll have your own quarters. For now."

It was the *for now* part that bothered her. She was sure that what he left unspoken was, once he felt he could trust her, she'd move into his room.

* * * *

Quinn lifted his head and scowled, recognizing his surroundings. He was back in the lab. *Her* lab. Lexy Harris, the dead bitch who'd created him.

It looked the same. Silver, sterile, and as close to hell as he ever hoped he'd come. There was a small metal cart near the exam table upon which he lay. Several medical instruments were on its shiny surface, and a square of linen rested over something else on the cart, something he knew in his gut he wasn't going to like.

Wrist restraints held his arms in place. More straps went across his chest and hips, and still more immobilized his thighs and ankles. The only thing missing was the strap around his forehead, holding his head in place.

His arm hurt like hell, pain shooting into his fingers and up into his shoulder. Glancing down, he saw a fresh cast and figured that was a good sign. If someone had set the broken bone, at least they were planning on keeping him alive.

But he had a bad feeling about it, anyway. Strapped down to a metal table had never been a good experience for him. The last time it had happened, his cock had been strapped into a metal cage, the tip brought under his balls to be clipped onto the ring that pierced his perineum. Then the bitch scientist proceeded to arouse him. But with his cock strapped up the way it was, it had been excruciatingly painful rather than pleasurable.

God, he hated this place. For a long time after Max had rescued him he'd been able to suppress the memories, had been able to fool himself into believing the work the Praetorians did was noble and just. That they allowed the Chosen Ones to work for the betterment of mankind.

Until there had been one too many assassinations. The Foundation forcing change instead of merely being an agent of change. When Harris had created him, made him part animal, he'd been ashamed of what he was. Max had made him feel better about himself, about the work they did.

Now

Hell, if he could make the world a safer place by removing even a single Chosen One, as far as he was concerned it was a job well done. Having wolf DNA carved into his very being wasn't something he'd been able to control, and he was through beating himself up over it.

He dropped his head back onto the reclining table and flexed his arms. Although his boots and socks were gone, he was still fully clothed. He could only hope he'd continue in that state. The last time he'd been here, naked and strapped down, hadn't been pleasant.

The door to the lab creaked open. Quinn looked over to see a wiry, dark-haired man enter the room. He was dressed all in black. His beady eyes were black, as well.

"Ah, Mr. O'Rourke," he drawled, coming closer. "We've never had the opportunity to meet before now. I've read reports of your missions--you're very good." He raised an eyebrow. "Obviously, I'm better."

"And you are...?"

"You may call me Hatchet."

Hatchet. Quinn had heard of the infamous assassin. The man had never been seen by anyone Quinn knew, though, and so had gained an almost legendary accounting. The less pragmatic of the Praetorians had come to believe the man was a figment of Bedrosian's imagination, a story told to keep them in line.

Quinn had always believed the hatchet-man was real. And if Hatchet was real, Hatchet could die.

"What do you want?" Quinn turned his head to follow Hatchet's progress as he strolled around the room, picking up various medical instruments and fondling them, then setting them down for the next one. He ground his jaw against the complete feeling of impotence.

"Bedrosian's orders were for you to be killed, did you know that? Oh, not you specifically," Hatchet went on without waiting for a response, "but whoever was with Ms. Shepherd."

He picked up a pair of scissors and made his way back to Quinn. "I recognized you immediately, of course, and recognized, too, the value you presented alive." As he took the hem of Quinn's t-shirt in one hand and began cutting up toward the neckline, he mused, "I just don't understand why Bedrosian allows himself to have such a hard-on for the woman. Oh, she's beautiful, to be sure, and as I understand these things quite gifted telepathically. But not worth becoming vulnerable over."

He snipped up through the sleeves of the t-shirt and brushed the ruined material

aside. With the torn shirt draping over the sides of the table, it left Quinn bare from the waist up.

"Of course, you seem to have developed an attachment to the woman, as well. Perhaps you can tell me what the attraction is." Hatchet's hands went to Quinn's belt and a grim smile crossed his face as Quinn tried to buck against his touch. "Oh, settle down, Mr. O'Rourke. You're too old and tough for me. My predilections run toward something much younger and much more ... tender."

He withdrew the belt from the loops and laid it on a nearby metal table. Then, picking up the scissors, he began cutting a trail up the length of Quinn's pant legs, first one and then the other. Once again, ruined material was brushed aside and Quinn lay there, clad only in his briefs.

Hatchet's eyebrows shot up. "Well, I can see what Ms. Shepherd sees in you, certainly."

The scissors came toward his groin, and Quinn muttered a curse and tried to move his hips out of the way. Fresh agony shot through his injured arm and a low groan forced its way past his tight lips.

Hatchet *tsk-tsked* him. "Take care you don't damage your newly set arm. Besides, you don't want anything valuable snipped, do you, Mr. O'Rourke? Lie still and let me finish this."

Recognizing the futility of it, Quinn stilled, his eyes burning with hatred as he stared at his foe. Air wafted over him as the briefs were cut away.

Hatchet gazed at his cock. He made a clicking noise with his tongue and said, "Yes, indeed. If I were into men--" he brought his gaze up to Quinn's face--"you and I would be getting much better acquainted right now."

"Fuck you." Quinn clamped his jaw so tight his teeth began to ache.

Those dark eyebrows raised again, the black eyes glittering with humor. "Is that an invitation?"

Quinn knew when to keep his mouth shut, and this was definitely one of those times. Hatchet was just perverse enough to take him up on the *offer*.

The other man shook his head and sighed. "It's just as well, for you'd be disappointed. As I've said, I like younger. Once their voices begin to change ... well, they're just too old."

Quinn's nostrils flared with his indrawn breath. Fucking bastard did kids. There weren't very many things in Quinn's book that were worse than someone who preyed on children. If it was the last thing he did, he'd deal with Hatchet, make sure the son of a bitch caused no harm to any more children.

"I can see you disapprove," Hatchet murmured. He shrugged. "Love takes many forms, my friend."

"I ain't your friend, and you can try to justify your depravity any way you'd like. But raping children isn't love. It's just rape, pure and simple." Rage churned in Quinn's gut. He clenched the hand on his good arm. He wanted to rip the smug smile off the bastard's face. God damn! He hated being helpless like this.

"I don't expect you to comprehend the depths of that kind of love, nor do I require your understanding." Hatchet stepped back and put the scissors on the side table.

Reaching to a box on the table, he pulled out a pair of latex gloves and donned them. Then he pulled off a cloth, revealing what had been hidden underneath.

It was a metal Gates of Hell. Quinn's stomach churned. God, he couldn't go through this again. Not again!

"Settle down, cowboy." Hatchet picked up the cock-ring apparatus and turned back to Quinn. "You're in for a treat. You may as well lie back and enjoy it."

As his hands went for Quinn's flaccid cock, Quinn couldn't hold back a growl of warning.

"Snarl at me all you want, Wolfie." Hatchet's gloved fingers were cool as he began pulling Quinn's scrotal skin through the first and largest of the rings. Gentler than Quinn expected, he fed first one and then the other testicle through the hoop. Bending Quinn's cock down, Hatchet pulled it through the rings until it was enclosed, the last ring resting just under his cock head.

Then he picked up a long metal chain. Quinn saw the two clips attached to each end and a long chain dangling from the middle. He sucked in a breath, preparing himself. He'd been here before, too.

With a minimum of fuss, Hatchet rubbed across Quinn's nipples, bringing them erect, and clamped on the clips. Then the dangling chain was attached to the lead ring at the top of the Gates of Hell.

"There. Now you're ready." Hatchet gave Quinn's cock a light slap. "And, since I know how strong of mind you Praetorians are" He turned back to the table. When he faced Quinn again, he held a syringe in his right hand. "Here's a little something to help you get in the mood."

A quick swab of alcohol in his inner elbow, then the needle slid into his vein and the contents released into his bloodstream. "Fucking bastard!" Quinn struggled uselessly in his bonds.

"You have no idea," Hatchet murmured. "As much as I'd like to stay and watch, I have work to do. Besides, this is as much a test for your girl as it is to remind you of your place. Perhaps, later, I'll be allowed to have some fun with you." He walked away, opened the door and exited the room, pulling the door closed behind him.

Quinn's brain started getting a little fuzzy, and he became minutely aware of the pressure around his balls, around his cock. The pressure exerted on his nipples.

His cock began to grow erect. He clenched his jaws and tried to will it to softness. He started quoting the American Presidents in reverse order, starting with the last one before the North American Federation was formed that unified Canada, Mexico and the United States into one large entity.

When that didn't work, he moved on to baseball statistics. Still his cock continued to engorge with blood, pressing against the metal rings with increasing painfulness.

"Shit!" Quinn struggled against the restraints, cursing as he jarred his injured arm, cursing again when the straps didn't budge.

The door opened, and he turned his head to see Kendra and two Praetorians walk in. The taller of the two, a man named Sullivan, scowled at him. "O'Rourke. Good to see you back where you belong."

"I don't belong here," Quinn rasped. His gaze returned to Kendra. Something about her wasn't right. She looked unharmed, but her face was slack, her eyes vacant, looking right through him.

"What have you bastards done to her?" he demanded.

"Not a thing," the second man responded. "Bedrosian had a little ... chat with her, is all."

Quinn stared at her, willing her to *see* him. "Kendra, honey. Talk to me."

Her eyes met his, though she showed no recognition. "I must help the cause," she murmured and walked forward.

Without another word, she bent and licked across the head of his cock.

Quinn jumped and shouted, jerking against his restraints. God, this was too much like before. Tied down and unable to defend himself against another's touch ... he couldn't--he *wouldn't*--go through this again. Especially with Kendra doing it and those bastards watching.

But as hard as he tried to loosen them through sheer brute force, the restraints were solid. And Kendra's warm mouth and wet tongue on his dick was a sensation he couldn't ignore.

She stared up at him with huge brown eyes and he thought, for a moment, a flicker of pain shot through her. But then her lashes fell, shuttering her emotions from him. When her fingers began gently tugging on the ring in the piercing behind his scrotum, he bellowed with rage even as his cock engorged further.

He vaguely heard the other men snickering, then Sullivan muttered, "God damn. With his dick constrained like that, when he blows his load it ain't gonna have anywhere to go. It'll just stay inside his cock and burn like hell."

"Better him than me," the second man said.

Quinn struggled to hold back his orgasm, knowing the other Praetorians were right. When he came, it was gonna hurt like a bitch.

Kendra just kept on. Then he felt the touch of her mind on his, forcing past any blocks he tried to throw up. *I will never go into your mind without your permission*, she'd told him. Guess that had been a lie, like everything else.

He threw back his head as his orgasm broke free. His cock felt like it was on fire from the inside out as the seminal fluid became trapped within his urethra. He glared at Kendra, part of him still not willing to believe she had done this to him.

Chapter Ten

Kendra walked on shaky legs to the door of the lab. She kept swallowing, trying to keep back the bile that threatened to climb up her throat. "I'd like to go to my quarters now," she said, her voice tinny, as hollow as she felt. What she'd just done to Quinn was reprehensible and, she hoped, enough to save his life.

Only time would tell--time that was in too short a supply, as far as she was concerned.

Her guards nodded and fell into step behind her. "Yes, ma'am," Sullivan said. "That's what the boss ordered anyway."

As they walked down the corridor, she gently probed the men's minds. Sullivan was definitely the stronger of the two, and the harder. He was a soldier's soldier, following orders without question, no matter how immoral or even illegal those orders might be.

She didn't think she'd get anywhere trying to influence his thoughts.

When she reached the door to her new 'home', she opened it. Sullivan started to follow her inside. Pasting an icy, disdainful look on her face, she asked, "You're kidding, right? All I'm going to do is lie down."

"Yes, ma'am," he responded just as coolly. "As soon as I make sure your quarters are secure."

Without another word, she stood to the side and let the men search the room. When they were satisfied, they walked back to the door.

"We'll be just outside if you need anything," Sullivan said.

"Of course you will," she muttered.

The door closed behind the men, and she ran into the bathroom. Dropping to her knees, she wrapped her arms around the bowl and lost the contents of her stomach.

God, Quinn had looked so enraged, so betrayed. It was all she could do to keep her face blank and keep going on. But she had to make the others, especially Bedrosian and that soulless Hatchet, believe she had successfully been put through the first stage of her reprogramming.

She only hoped the message she'd implanted in Quinn--a message to enhance his own deep-seated desire to escape--had been deep enough for it to go unnoticed by Bedrosian. And by Quinn, until it was too late for him to do anything about it. She had to get him away from The Foundation, get him out of danger, before she could move forward with her plan to act as a saboteur within the organization.

Getting up, she rinsed her mouth out with water. Belatedly glancing around the small room, she looked for cameras. Not seeing any, she breathed a sigh of relief. Thank God the bedrooms with their private bathrooms weren't equipped with security cameras. Her plan would be over before it started if they were watching how disgusted she was.

Rooting around in the cabinet beneath the sink, she found a bottle of mouthwash.

She poured some into the cap and tipped it to her lips. Once she had the stale, grimy taste of vomit out of her mouth, Kendra replaced the bottle and went back into the bedroom. She'd just collapsed on the bed when a knock sounded on the door.

She sat up but, before she had a chance to take a breath to tell whoever it was to go away, she sensed Bedrosian's power. The door swung open and he walked into the room.

Kendra immediately schooled her face to impassivity and slipped more mental bricks into place in her psychic barrier. She watched him with eyes she kept slightly unfocused, knowing for this to work she must appear vacuous, waiting for his next instruction.

He sat beside her and cupped her face in his hands. "If that hadn't been a necessary start to breaking O'Rourke's will, I would never have let you touch him."

It wasn't just an endeavor to break Quinn's willpower. Kendra knew it had also been a test for her to pass.

He touched his mouth to hers, slipping his tongue along the seam of her lips before drawing away. "What I wanted accomplished has been done. You betrayed his trust, and he hates you."

She bit the inside of her cheek. Her heart was breaking at the thought that Quinn would hate her. But she couldn't show it. She had to stay the course, find out exactly what Bedrosian had in mind for her and turn it to her advantage. She was stronger than even he knew.

And it was because of Quinn. The need to have him safe, the desire to be as courageous as him made all the difference.

Bedrosian bore her down onto the bed, resting one heavy thigh across her legs, one hand kneading her breast through her clothing. He mouthed a path along her jaw and back to her mouth, his lips open, tongue seeking.

Suppressing a shudder, Kendra opened her mouth and let him in.

He groaned and pressed against her, letting her feel the strength of his erection through their clothing. *Ohgodohgodohgod*. She couldn't do this. *She couldn't...!*

Just as she moved her hands to his chest to push him away, someone cleared his throat from the doorway, and Bedrosian jerked up.

"Sorry, sir," Sullivan said, not meeting his boss's eyes. Instead, he kept his gaze fixed on the wall, away from the bed. "Hatchet's asking for you. He needs you up top."

Up top meaning on the surface, outside of the building? If that were the case, Bedrosian might just be far enough away that she could implant some suggestions in a few people to hasten Quinn's escape.

She'd just have to take that chance.

Bedrosian let loose a low growl. Looking back down at Kendra, he traced the line of her jaw with one finger. "Keep my place, will you, darling?" he whispered. "We can pick up where we left off later."

He pushed off the bed and left the room.

Kendra slowly sat up. She wanted to run into the bathroom and grab the mouthwash again, but she couldn't. She couldn't give anyone here any indication that she wasn't completely enthralled by Bedrosian.

Sullivan stood by the doorway, his keen gaze on her. A muscle flexed in his jaw, and he motioned toward the bathroom with a short nod of his head. "If he'd been kissin' me, darlin', I'd want to rinse my mouth out."

He turned and left the room, closing the door behind him.

She ran into the bathroom and yanked the bottle of mouthwash from under the sink. This time, she sucked in a mouthful directly from the bottle, so much so that some dribbled from the corner of her lips. She swished and swished and swished, and still couldn't wash away the oily taste and slimy feel of him.

By the time she'd used half of the mouthwash, her eyes watered from the strength of the solution. She put the bottle under the sink once again and closed the cabinet doors. It was time to move on with her plan to get Quinn out of here.

Going back into the bedroom, she settled into a cross-legged position on the bed. Closing her eyes, she focused on her breathing and let her mind float free. Then she began gently probing, looking for just one person who would be sympathetic enough to Quinn for her to plant a suggestion.

After several minutes, she found him. It was a young lab technician. He would have access to the lab and would be less likely to be questioned on being there than anyone else in the facility.

Perfect.

Gently, ever so gently, she eased into his mind. Wading through surface thoughts, she heard his memory of the latest vid he'd watched, the taste of the peanut butter and bologna sandwich--yuck!--he'd had for lunch, and some fairly lascivious thoughts he had about a co-worker. Deeper down, she sensed a basic core of decency that was appalled at Quinn's imprisonment.

She inserted a strong urge to do something about it, to help the prisoner in some way. Loosening his bonds to make him more comfortable wouldn't be a bad thing.

Once she was sure the technician was committed to *his* idea, she moved on, looking for someone else to take care of the surveillance system. The man on duty was a former colleague of Quinn's, and his thoughts were full of anger and frustration at not being able to do anything to prevent what was happening.

"Not quite true," Kendra murmured and directed his thoughts toward turning off the security cameras at--she glanced at the bedside clock--twenty-thirty hours. Half an hour. Then she planted the notion that it would be a good idea to leave the compound after that. She didn't want to put this man's life in danger.

She knew Quinn would seize the opportunity to escape, knew, too, that he would never leave her behind, even believing she had betrayed him. So there was one last thought she needed to implant, one more breach of trust she had to enact before she was done.

She directed her thoughts once again to Quinn. He was just as alert as ever, and that would make it harder for her to remain undetected. Carefully, she eased into his mind. Rage coiled tightly inside him, like an angry snake ready to strike at the next thing that moved. And it was all directed toward her.

In his drug-muddled mind, she and Dr. Lexy Harris were one and the same--one woman who had taken him against his will. He planned to make Kendra pay, first chance

he got.

"Not this time, O'Rourke," she muttered, blinking back tears. "This time, you're going to let it go. Count yourself lucky to have escaped yet another amoral bitch."

She went deeper into his subconscious and planted the final thought. "I'm here of my own free will. I've decided that what The Foundation is doing is just and right, and my abilities are best served here." Kendra swiped at the tears in her eyes. "When you see the opportunity to run, you'll take it without looking back."

Voices sounded from outside her door, and she recognized one of them as Bedrosian. She was out of time. With a slow breath, she backed out of Quinn's mind and left him with a sense of anticipation that something was about to happen. She wanted him to be ready.

Stretching her legs out in front of her, she leaned back against the headboard and opened her eyes. She pushed everything she'd just been doing as deep into her mind as she could. She'd just reached over for an extra pillow to put beneath her back when the door opened and Bedrosian walked in.

His face bore the remnants of his displeasure with whatever Hatchet had wanted to discuss with him, though he spoke pleasantly enough to her. "Did you have a good rest, darling?"

Keeping her face as impassive as possible, Kendra responded with a soft, "Yes, thank you."

He nodded. Sitting beside her, he said, "I was going to invite you to tour the facility, but you look tired." He cocked his head to one side. "Perhaps you should get an early night."

She opened her mouth to respond and felt him slip in the idea that she was more tired than she really was. It seemed the more often he ventured into her mind, the easier it was to sense him, to softly block what he was trying to do without letting him realize it.

Playing the game, she yawned.

A small smile played over his mouth, and his triumph was so strong she almost winced. Obviously he was up to something he didn't want her to be aware of, something he felt might impede his reprogramming of her.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I have another assignment for you, my dear. While I would love to be your mentor--and I *will* be involved in your training to a certain extent--I cannot leave The Foundation for some of the field work you'll need to do."

"Field work?" she questioned, keeping her voice soft and on the high side.

"Mmm. Part of what the Chosen Ones do is find children with telepathic abilities and ... plant the seed, so to speak. You locate, enter the child's mind to assess his level of telepathy, and impart a message that will bring him to us at the appropriate time."

"Appropriate time?" She sounded like a vacuous imbecile, but he seemed oblivious. Maybe it was what he expected. And wanted.

"All telepaths we're able to locate are given subconscious instructions to find us when they enter puberty. Their minds are much easier to mold when their hormones are in flux." Bedrosian studied her, placing one finger under her chin to tilt her face up to his. "I wish we had gotten you sooner, my lovely. But you're coming along nicely. Nicely, indeed."

Kendra blinked slowly.

His smile crinkled the corner of eyes that were dead of emotion. “Your mentor will fetch you in the morning at oh-seven-hundred. So....” He leaned forward and placed another kiss on her forehead, then stood. “I’ll have the cook send up a light supper for you, Kendra. Eat every bite, then get some sleep.”

At the doorway he turned and blew her a kiss. When the door closed behind him, she jumped up and ran over to it, putting her ear against the cool metal.

“I only needed O’Rourke long enough to test my hold over her,” he told the guards outside her door. “And she performed beautifully.”

The men laughed.

“I wouldn’t have minded being O’Rourke,” one man said. She didn’t recognize his voice, so she supposed it was the second guard.

“Yeah, except when he blew his load it stayed inside his cock because of the rings. And you know it had to burn like the devil.” *That* was Sullivan. His tone, when he laughed, was sadistic. “Guess that’s why it’s called the Gates of Hell.”

“From now on,” Bedrosian said, warning clear in his hard voice, “my cock will be the only one that pretty little mouth sucks.”

Oh, God.

“Yes, sir,” the one man said.

“Of course, sir.” Sullivan’s voice was even.

“Sullivan, when you’re relieved at twenty-one hundred,” Bedrosian added, “go take care of O’Rourke. His usefulness is at an end.”

“Yes, sir.”

Kendra went back to the bed and sat down. The bedside clock’s green readout read 8:25. Five more minutes, and Quinn’s avenue for freedom would be revealed. He had to go, because at nine o’clock, Sullivan would try to kill him.

Chapter Eleven

Quinn watched the lab technician approach him. He wished his hands were free--he'd wrap them around the man's throat and squeeze until his eyes popped. Someone was gonna pay for this, and if it couldn't be Bedrosian or Hatchet--or that traitorous, deceitful Kendra--it could be this guy.

The technician's eyes slid away from Quinn's nude body and captive cock while his hands went to the straps at Quinn's wrists. "I, uh, just want to loosen these up a bit, to make you more comfortable," the young man said in a soft, somewhat high-pitched voice that sounded vaguely familiar.

Well, surprise, surprise. Quinn stayed silent as the fair-haired man loosened first one restraint and then the other. Not by much but, twisting his wrist to test how much maneuvering room he had, he saw it was enough.

Quinn noticed the lab tech kept his body in front of the camera to disguise his movements. Quinn knew that only eight cameras were monitored at any one time. Not that it would matter. It wouldn't take a rocket scientist--and The Foundation had plenty of those--to figure out just who had made Quinn's escape possible.

"I'd like to do more," the technician whispered with a furtive glance toward the door. "But if they find out..." He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. He sighed. "Shit. They'll probably find out anyway. I might as well go for broke."

With another muttered curse, he completely unfastened Quinn's wrist restraints. First thing Quinn did was to pinch open the nipple clamps, sucking in his breath as blood returned to his tortured nipples. He scrubbed his palms across them, trying to relieve the sensation, and dropped the clamps onto the floor. As he sat up and began loosening the straps around his thighs, the lab technician went to his ankles and unfastened those straps.

Quinn glanced at the camera. One brow went up as he saw the red indicator light wasn't lit. Which meant the camera was off.

Interesting.

He swung his legs around, cursing as his still-erect cock in its cage of metal protested the movement. "God, what the hell did he give me?"

"It's a male enhancement drug that creates an erection that can last for up to eight hours." The technician glanced at Quinn's groin and then looked quickly away. "Ah, I can help you with that," he said, his voice reedy.

Quinn shot him a narrow-eyed glare.

The man held up his hands and backed away a few steps. "I was just going to suggest a cold compress, man. That's all."

There wasn't time for a cold compress. He had to get the hell out of here. His thoughts went to Kendra, and his jaw hardened. She'd made her fucking bed, now she could lie in it. After what she'd done to him, she deserved whatever came to her. Besides, it was apparent she was where she wanted to be.

"Just get me something to wear," he muttered.

"Right." The technician scuttled away and rooted through a cabinet. Coming back to Quinn, he handed him a set of scrubs. "Those are XXL," he said. "They should fit a guy your size."

"They're pink." Quinn looked up from the material in his hand to the nervous face of the lab tech. "With flowers."

The tech shrugged. He cleared his throat. "They, ah, I think they belong to Doctor Marin."

"And he likes flowers, I take it?"

Another throat clearing. "Ah, I guess she does."

Quinn stared at him. "She?" he finally sputtered. "You want me to wear a *woman's* scrubs?"

"They're unisex, man. You-nee-sex. Either men or women can wear 'em." He looked toward the doorway, then up at the camera. "Just put 'em on. There's no time to worry about whether you're being fashionable or not. I'm surprised this party hasn't been crashed yet as it is."

"Camera's not on," Quinn responded, though he scowled. The guy was right. They needed to get a move on. He jumped down from the exam table and put on the loose trousers, pulling the elastic waist up over his caged dick very carefully. Then he shrugged into the v-necked shirt. Moving to the smaller table with the tray of instruments, he picked up two scalpels. "Let's go."

"Let's...." The technician scrabbled after him, grabbing him by the arm at the door. "What do you mean, let's go? Let's, as in let *us*?"

"You think they'll let you live after this?" Quinn cocked an eyebrow at him.

"You got a point." The tech motioned to the door. "Well? What're you waiting for, an engraved invitation?"

Quinn huffed a sigh and opened the door. "We probably won't get very far until someone sees us on camera," he muttered, motioning toward the one facing the door. "So be ready."

"Oh. Right. If I can get my hands to stop shaking long enough, I'll karate chop the guys who have guns." Sarcasm was thick in the tech's voice.

Quinn bit back an acid retort, knowing the guy was just mouthing off in fear. He tried to keep his mind off his cock, which was in agony, and focused on getting the hell out of the complex. Keeping one shoulder to the wall, he asked, "What's your name?"

"What? Oh, I'm Ernest. Ernest Simmington. But everyone calls me Keebler."

Quinn shot a look over his shoulder. "Keebler?"

"Yeah. You know, the old television commercials from early in the century that showed the elf baking cookies?" He shrugged. "They say I sound like him."

Quinn bit back a laugh. That's what he got for his predilection for watching that station that played only shows and commercials from the first twenty-five years of this new century. He knew exactly what character the tech was talking about. "Yeah, you kinda do sound like him." Coming to a juncture, he paused to peer cautiously around the corner. His gaze immediately went to the two cameras pointing toward the juncture.

Both cameras were inoperable.

“Come on, then.” This time he couldn’t keep back a low snort of laughter. “Keebler.”

They made it down another corridor without being seen. Only when they came to the juncture of the hallway that led to the way out did they come upon two Praetorians.

Both men were unarmed, off-duty and not expecting the swiftness with which Quinn swooped down on them. He had one knocked out cold and was grappling with the other one, cursing at the pain shooting up his injured arm, when Keebler hissed, “Someone else is coming!”

With a minimum of fuss, Quinn pulled one of the scalpels out of his pocket and held it to the Praetorian’s throat. The man immediately stopped cold. Quinn drew back his left arm and slammed the guy on the chin with his cast, knocking him out. As he eased the unconscious man onto the floor, he cursed steadily under his breath as pain careened through his injured arm. Knowing they didn’t have time to waste, he motioned for the lab tech to follow him.

Footsteps from the other hallway were getting louder. He and Keebler needed to get to the hatch and out of here *now*.

Keebler stepped over one body, then the other, and tripped over the man’s leg.

Quinn grabbed him by the arm and hauled him after him. “Quit messin’ around,” he muttered.

The technician frowned and glanced over his shoulder. “They’re getting closer.”

They reached the hidden hatch that only Quinn, Max, and Yankee knew about. It was situated in a corner that none of the security cameras had the range of movement to monitor. It was, in effect, a blind spot.

Quinn motioned Keebler to wait. Hugging the wall, Quinn went to the hatch. He felt around the edge until he found the catch. Once he released it, he eased the small door open. “Get in,” he told the tech. “Stay against the wall,” he muttered as Keebler started walking down the middle of the corridor.

The tech blushed and slid up against the wall, then bent and stepped through the small opening.

Following him through, Quinn secured the door quietly behind them. He and Keebler stayed still until they heard the clump of footsteps pass by.

Quinn had a nagging feeling that something was wrong, that he shouldn’t be leaving Kendra behind. But immediately the thought came that she was where she had chosen to be and, if he wanted to stay alive, he needed to move on.

* * * *

Several hours later, he and Keebler entered the cave house. Quinn’s arm was throbbing like the devil, though his dick had finally calmed down. First thing he was going to do was get it out of the fucking cage that bastard Hatchet had strapped him into.

Max came from the back rooms, a frown darkening his face. His eyes were gold with irritation. “It’s about damned time,” he exclaimed, his deep voice taut. “Where the hell have you been?” He peered over Quinn’s shoulder. “Where’s Kendra? Who the hell is this?” His eyes narrowed on Quinn. “And what the fuck are you wearing?”

Not answering, Quinn went toward the bathroom. He was going to get this fucking Gates of Hell off before he did anything else. Slamming the door in Max’s

scowling face, he yanked his cotton pants down to his thighs and carefully worked his cock and balls out of the contraption. His hand clenched and a muscle flexed in his jaw as he stared down at the leather harness with its metal rings.

His skin still bore the impressions of a few of the rings where his cock had burgeoned with blood between the metal. He had a sudden image of Kendra, bent over him, her tongue licking around the head of his cock while she held his caged flesh in one hand.

Goddammit. She'd had no right. She was no better than that bitch doctor.

"O'Rourke!" Max pounded on the door.

With a scowl, Quinn tossed the sadistic piece of shit into the garbage can. He pulled the pants back up and opened the door. Shouldering his way past Max, he went into the kitchen and pulled out two beers. Holding out his hand, he asked Keebler, "Want one?"

The tech shook his head, his gaze riveted on Max.

"He won't bite," Quinn said. After replacing one of the beers in the fridge, he lifted his chin, motioning toward the sofa as he walked back into the living room. His arm hurt like hell--he hoped the beer would help blunt the edge of it just a little. He'd take a painkiller only if he had to.

"O'Rourke, where's Kendra? How'd you break your arm? And would you please tell me where you got your cute new outfit? I think my wife might like one." His voice rife with sarcasm, Max crossed his arms, planting his feet wide apart.

Quinn skirted around him and collapsed onto the sofa. Putting his feet on the coffee table, he popped the cap from the beer and took a long swallow.

"Quinn!"

"We got grabbed by Hatchet and some Hyenas. That's how this--" he lifted his injured arm--"happened. They took us to Bedrosian," he continued tersely. "Keebler here helped me get away." A muscle ticked in his jaw. "Kendra elected to stay."

"What the.... *And you just left her there?*"

Quinn stood and paced to the bank of monitors against one wall, then turned and faced Max. That niggling feeling that something wasn't right picked away at the back of his brain again. He frowned. "Yeah, I left her there." He stared at Max and his frown deepened. It wasn't like him to leave someone he knew and cared about in the clutches of The Foundation.

It didn't make sense.

He rolled the cold bottle against his forehead. "Why would I leave her there?"

Tynan Shepherd walked in from the bedroom area. "Probably because she planted the thought that you should."

"She can do that?" Max asked. "To a Sensitive?"

"Oh, yeah. And more." Tynan scrubbed the back of his neck wearily and plopped down on the sofa beside Keebler.

Max scowled. "Why would she do that?"

"Because she must have thought it would save O'Rourke." Tynan hunched his shoulders. "And apparently, she was right." His dark gaze met Quinn's. "She loves you. You know that, don't you?"

Quinn set the bottle of beer down on the end table. “No, she doesn’t.” She couldn’t love him and have done what she’d done to him.

Closing his eyes, he made himself review those few moments in the lab. At one point, just before she’d forced his orgasm on him, he’d seen deep pain in her eyes. He hadn’t recognized it for what it was at the time--he’d been too consumed with fury to notice anything except her actions.

She had not been a willing participant in his sensual torture. He had to believe she’d done it to try to fool Bedrosian. Otherwise, everything that came before that, everything they had shared, meant nothing.

Goddamn. He felt like throwing up. Lifting his gaze to Max’s unwavering glare, he said in a throat raw with suppressed fury and anguish, “She did it to save me.”

Not that he deserved saving. If he’d had a chance back in the lab, he would’ve wrapped his hands around her throat. He hadn’t even hesitated in his certainty that she’d betrayed him. Oh, there had been that couple of seconds where he hadn’t felt right about leaving her behind, but it had been fleeting.

And he had, after all, left her behind.

The first test of her loyalty, and he’d been ready to go for her jugular. He didn’t deserve her, but he’d be damned if he was going to give her up. “I am gonna paddle her ass ’til she can’t sit for a week,” he muttered, sending a hard glance toward her brother. “She can’t possibly think she can fool Bedrosian.”

Tynan grimaced. “Kendra’s a strong telepath. Really strong. She might be able to.”

“It didn’t look that way to me,” Quinn muttered, remembering how vacant she had looked when she came to the lab, when she had made him come.

Had it been an act?

With the way she’d planted thoughts in his mind, he had to believe it was. She’d been faking being under Bedrosian’s control. But she didn’t know the man like *he* did--there was no way in hell Quinn was going to leave her there.

He drew in a deep breath and expelled it in a short burst through his nose. “We have to go get her.”

“Damn straight.” Max turned toward the bedrooms. “Let me get the weapons, and we’ll make our plans.” Over his shoulder, he added, “Call Yankee. We’ll need him on this one.”

Chapter Twelve

Kendra stood at the corner of the large picture window and looked inside at the family within the modest house. Her new mentor, Zayna Elvestad, stood behind her, so close Kendra could feel the woman's breath against the back of her neck.

It irritated the hell out of her. But she bit back the desire to snarl at the other woman to back off. She had to concentrate on the sweet little girl inside, the young telepath that Bedrosian wanted her to 'recruit'.

"You must be careful," Zayna whispered in her ear. "Don't go too deep too fast, or she'll sense your presence."

"I know." Kendra edged away from her and stared in at the little girl. Dark hair and big dark eyes, she appeared to be about six years old. She looked like a little Spanish princess. Just beautiful.

And cursed with telepathy.

She'd be damned before she was part of taking children away from their families.

If she couldn't fool her mentor, make her believe she'd successfully planted the 'come to Papa' message Bedrosian wanted her to, her plan to derail as many new telepaths as possible might be over before it got started. She had to get this right--the first time.

Throwing up a mental block to keep Zayna out of both her mind and the little girl's, Kendra cautiously delved into the girl's mind. A small smile curved her lips as she caught the little one's thoughts of dolls and tea parties. Pushing slowly deeper, she placed the instruction.

Never use your gift.

With care, Kendra also planted a vague impression of the message she was supposed to have placed--just enough of a hint that Zayna would believe she had completed her task, but not enough for the girl to actually pick up on it. Then she backed out of the little girl's mind and turned her attention to the girl's father.

Wading through his worry over bills and the remaining stress from his day at work, she made her way to his deepest thoughts. They were filled with love for his family, especially his little *mija*. Perfect. That would expedite Kendra's attempt to plant a warning in his mind.

Take good care of mija. When she reaches her tenth birthday, go as far away from here as you can, and make sure she never uses her telepathy.

The man paused in his clearing of the dinner table, a frown crossing his brow. He stared at his little girl and immediately his expression softened. His love for her was so evident it brought tears to Kendra's eyes.

She repeated the message, tucking it away in the man's subconscious for it to be brought out tonight as he slept. Then she slowly left his mind and took a few steps back from the window.

"Is it done?" Zayna asked.

"It's done." Kendra held her breath and waited while her mentor closed her eyes. It was obvious the other woman was probing the little girl's mind. God, she hoped this worked.

It *had* to work.

Zayna turned her head and stared at Kendra. She grimaced and shook her head. "You know," she said softly, "when Victor told me you had embraced our cause so readily, I didn't believe him. You were caught with that traitor, O'Rourke, and it was obvious to anyone with any degree of sensitivity that you and he were ... *involved*."

Her nose wrinkled with distaste. She backed away from the house, motioning for Kendra to follow her. When Zayna deemed they were far enough away, she turned and strode to the car.

Kendra followed, her heart thumping in her chest. Her mind blocks were fully in place, but she worried that, somehow, her mentor had discovered her subterfuge.

Once they were in the vehicle and Zayna had started it up, she turned to Kendra and said, "Frankly, I understand how you could be seduced by O'Rourke. He's strong, handsome, very much a man's man." Zayna's gaze cut into Kendra, and she felt the corresponding push at her mind. Because she was trying to hide just how strong a telepath she really was, Kendra held the barrier for a few seconds more and then relaxed it, allowing Zayna in.

But only where she wanted her.

"I see now Victor was right," Zayna said. "The message you planted in that girl's subconscious was there, waiting to be delivered when she hits puberty." She flicked on the headlights and put the car in drive, pulling away from the curb. "You did an excellent job."

"Thanks." Kendra drew in a slow breath and let it out just as slowly. This was a fine line upon which she balanced, and one false step would prove to be deadly. She had to proceed carefully--it was one thing to pander to Victor Bedrosian's enormous ego and let him think he was much more powerful than her, but it was an entirely different matter to try to fool Zayna Elvestad. The woman had nothing invested in Kendra. Too much too soon would raise her suspicions, but to fight too hard wouldn't let her accomplish her goal of sabotage.

"So, Victor says you and he hit it off right from the start."

Ah, now Zayna was fishing. Kendra hid a smile and let the emotions of awe and a hint of a girlish crush invade her thoughts. "I think Victor is an amazing man." Not a lie. "He's very handsome." Also not a lie.

She just didn't add that she thought he was slimy, too.

"Yes, he is."

There was a note in Zayna's voice that gave Kendra pause. She glanced at the other woman and saw the tautness of her jaw, the white-knuckled grip on the steering wheel. Like a wisp of smoke, she slipped into Zayna's mind, searching for

Yes. There it was. Ten years ago, when Zayna had been new to The Foundation, Bedrosian had turned his charms on her, winning her to his side, to his bed. But once the newness wore off, he moved on to another, more promising telepath.

The bitterness was like a cancer eating away at Zayna's soul. While Kendra wasn't ordinarily a cruel person, where Quinn's safety--and her own--was concerned, she was willing to do almost anything. And if that meant using Bedrosian's attraction to her to keep his ex-girlfriend distracted, she'd do it.

Kendra eased out of Zayna's mind, leaving no trace of her visit. "I admit I wasn't sure at first," Kendra said, looking down at her lap and playing shy-but-eager-to-confide for all she was worth. "I mean, he's so distinguished and ... powerful. Much more powerful than me." She sighed. Biting her lip, she glanced at Zayna. "I mean, what does he see in *me*? I'm nothing compared to him."

You've got big tits and a round ass. Zayna's angry thoughts were broadcast loud and clear. But your telepathic abilities aren't any better than mine. You're right. You are nothing. "Don't be so modest," she said aloud, her expression frozen somewhere between forced cheerfulness and outright hostility. "There must be something there for Victor to be so interested."

She blew her horn at a car that changed lanes abruptly and muttered a curse under her breath. Then she brushed the blonde fringe of bangs out of her eyes and said musingly, "At least you were cleared of any wrongdoing in Quinn's escape. The vid recordings clearly show that flabby technician Simmington setting him free. Plus it appears one of the Praetorians turned off all the security feeds." She shook her head and sped up through a yellow light. "I don't understand how their sympathies for Quinn escaped our radar."

Kendra shrugged and concentrated on keeping her heart rate steady. Any increase in tension would be picked up by Zayna and, while she could come up with an excuse to explain it, she didn't want to if she didn't have to. "Maybe they have telepathic abilities, too?"

Zayna threw a quick glance at Kendra. "What makes you say that?"

Kendra widened her eyes and spread her hands in a gesture of confusion. "Well, they would've had to, right? For their thoughts not to be detected by any of the Chosen Ones on the premises?"

"Hmm. I suppose you could be right." The other woman glanced at her again. "But we should have realized we weren't able to read their thoughts, too." She sighed and returned her gaze to the road. "I just don't understand it."

And let's hope you never do. Out loud, Kendra said, "It's possible they're just adept at blocking others from reading their minds." She stared through the windshield as the unassuming one-story façade of The Foundation came into view. The building had the typical adobe-style architecture that was prevalent throughout the Southwest. Driving by, no one would dream that there were multiple levels beneath the surface, with one of the most powerful men in the world living five stories below the ground.

"I suppose you must be right," Zayna said.

For a moment Kendra panicked, thinking the other woman was responding to her thoughts about The Foundation. Then she realized Zayna was merely commenting on what she'd said about the technician and the Praetorian being able to block their thoughts.

God, she had to be careful. But at least now she didn't have to worry about Quinn.

As Zayna pulled the car into the covered parking area, Kendra turned her face toward the side window and blinked back tears. With what she'd done to him, Quinn had to hate her. She knew he would--but to keep him safe she would have risked everything.

With a hard swallow, she pulled her thoughts away from him and concentrated on remaining a blank screen to those around her. The game she played was a dangerous one, and she more than likely wouldn't last long. But with the time she had, she'd make sure she made a difference.

When they entered the ground level of The Foundation, a sudden wave of fatigue cut through Kendra so viciously her knees buckled. Had Zayna not caught her, she would have fallen to the hard floor.

"Are you all right?" her mentor asked, one arm supporting Kendra around her waist.

Kendra's head swam and her eyelids felt like they were weighed down by a layer of concrete. All the mental gymnastics she'd been performing had finally caught up with her. "I ... ah" She blinked tiredly. "Just really sleepy."

Zayna pressed the button to summon the elevator. "That happens to me, too, after I've gone deep into someone's subconscious. It's harder work than you realize."

Ten minutes later, Kendra collapsed onto her bed. She was vaguely aware of Zayna pulling off her shoes and drawing the covers over her. The woman stepped away from the bed and Kendra heard the murmur of voices.

"She performed exactly as you said she would, Victor." Zayna's voice was calm with no inflection of the bitterness she held within.

Bedrosian's satisfaction rolled off him in waves that made Kendra want to retch. "Excellent," he said, his voice low and full of satisfaction. She could feel his gaze on her and it made her skin itch. "Let me just tighten my hold"

His mind pressed against hers and Kendra let him in, curious as to what he intended to do. Within a few seconds she felt her skin warm, her nipples bead, her clit thump with heavy need. In her mind's eye an image formed of two people entwined together on a bed--her, and Bedrosian. He pumped in and out of her, his cock a hard, hot spear piercing her sex. She shivered, her pussy hot and creaming as he mentally built her climax.

Then he backed away from her mind, the image fading like a poorly filmed movie, leaving her unsettled and unsatisfied.

"There," he purred. "The next time we're together, she'll be more than ready for me."

Kendra waited until the door closed behind them, then she got out of bed and ripped off her clothes. She felt dirty, used. Not at all triumphant like she'd thought she would.

She took a long shower and tried to blank her mind, although images of Quinn kept intruding. The one vision she couldn't get rid of was the one with Quinn strapped down to a cold metal table, glaring at her--*hating* her--while she sucked him off.

Dammit! Even when she was trying to be noble, to be a hero like him, she couldn't quite pull it off.

Forty-five minutes later, her skin was pruny, and she still couldn't settle her

thoughts. She put on a short nightshirt and climbed back into bed. Lying on her back, she stared at the ceiling and replayed the night's events. Her mind kept going back to that last little bit with Bedrosian. She'd had the feeling from the start that she'd end up sleeping with him. A man like him would expect it.

She didn't think she could do it. Not and be able to look at herself in the mirror. But if she didn't, how many innocent children would be lost into the depths of The Foundation? Closing her eyes, she ignored the lone tear that tracked down her cheek.

What was the life of an innocent compared to her being able to stare at her reflection? Besides, mirrors were overrated, anyway.

Chapter Thirteen

The sound of a fight from inside the cave house made Quinn pause outside the door. He shot a glance at his companion, Derek 'Yankee' Champion.

"Looks like you picked me up from the airstrip just in time," Yankee drawled, his blue eyes alight with humor and anticipation at being able to mix it up with someone.

Quinn grunted and punched in the access code. The damned man was always ready for a fight, which, most of the time, was a good thing. But sometimes that wild streak that was part Yankee and part aggressive hawk was fucking ill-timed.

The lock clicked, and he shoved open the door just in time to catch Max as he came reeling back from a blow from Sean Devane's fist.

Clearly, the deprogramming wasn't going so well.

Tynan Shepherd came from the back area, cradling his jaw. One of his eyes was swollen shut and blood from a busted lip smeared across his chin. "Don't let him out!"

In a rush, Sean came toward Quinn. Quinn and Max hooked their arms together and blockaded the other man while Yankee squeezed around them.

Sean was silent except for a few grunts and his harsh breathing, determined in his quest for freedom. His eyes met Quinn's and something flickered in their depths, some sort of bewildered recognition. Then they went dead as the brainwashing took over once more. He drew back his fist and let loose a punch.

Quinn jerked to one side, feeling the brush of air against his cheek as the knotted fist barely missed him. He held onto Max's arm, making sure not to create an opening for Sean to slip through. He kept his gaze centered on Sean, keeping the other man's attention off of Yankee's movements.

With the quickness of a striking bird of prey, Yankee swooped onto Sean. One brawny arm went around the man's neck and tightened, cutting off his oxygen. Sean struggled, his brown eyes dark with rage and fear.

Quinn registered Max's wife's shout of alarm, but didn't take his attention off the men before him. If Sean managed to break free, which he doubted--Yankee was just that good--then he and Max had to be ready to stop him once again.

When Sean slumped, Yankee carefully loosened his arm and lowered him to the floor. He put one finger to Sean's neck and nodded. "He'll be okay."

"He'd better be, you jerk." Catriona Didion shoved Yankee aside, knocking him off balance. She went to her knees next to her brother.

Yankee fell on his ass with a scowl. "Hey!" he protested as he got to his feet.

"You jerk!" she repeated. "You didn't have to hurt him." Her hand brushed against her brother's cheek.

"The hell I didn't," Yankee muttered. He jerked his head to get a fringe of black hair out of his eyes. "When they're like that, the only thing a Hyena understands is violence. Damned, mangy, flea-bitten sons-of--"

"That's enough, Yankee." Max bent and drew his wife to her feet. "Sheathe those claws, little cat. Yankee only did what Quinn or I would've done if we'd had to."

While Yankee and Tynan grabbed Sean under the arms and dragged him back into the bedroom area, Cat sighed and turned into Max's arms. "I know," she sighed. "It's just ... the deprogramming's not working."

"It's working," Quinn said, remembering that fleeting look in Sean's eyes. He put his hand on the back of Cat's neck and squeezed gently. "It's working."

She sighed again and rested against Max's chest. "I hope you're right. After three weeks of non-stop deprogramming, I'm not sure how much more he can take." A slight smile passed over her face. "I'm not sure how much more of it *I* can take."

Seeing Cat in Max's embrace made Quinn want his own woman back in his arms, where she belonged. He waited a few moments, then, as Yankee came back into the room, Quinn cleared his throat and said, "We need to go."

Max nodded. "Give us a couple of minutes," he said, turning Cat toward the bedroom area. They left the living room, arms around each other, Max's dark blond head bent over Cat's auburn one.

"It's good to see the Cap'n happy," Yankee murmured. "It's been a long time comin'."

"Yeah." Quinn strode over to their supply cabinet and opened it. He pulled out shoulder holsters and three Glock automatic hand guns. Adding silencers and electronic decoding devices to the pile, he looked over at the open doorway and shifted impatiently. "Come on, come *on*."

"Simmer down there, Lieutenant." Yankee's drawl was pronounced. "We'll get your li'l lady. Don't you worry. An', if we're lucky, we'll take a few Chosen Ones out while we're at it."

Quinn heard the suppressed rage in his friend's voice and almost felt sorry for any of the telepaths who got in their way. Almost.

"Just remember, Kendra's mine. She's not like the others." He hoped. But, regardless, she was his problem and no one else's. "You lay a finger on her, and you'll answer to me."

Yankee raised his hands in a gesture of surrender. "I've got nothin' against your lady, O'Rourke," he muttered. "But Bedrosian and Zayna ... well, they're a whole 'nother story."

Quinn knew there was history between Yankee and the Evelstad woman, but the taciturn Texan had never shared the details. It was clear, though, that he hated the woman with as much passion as he'd once loved her. "What'd she do to you, man?"

Yankee shook his head, his shoulders hunched. "Not important." His face darkened, and his blue eyes narrowed to slits. "Let's just say she wasn't beyond usin' me--seducing me--to get what Bedrosian wanted. It's as much my own fault for bein' such a sucker." He gave a sharp laugh. "That Bedrosian turned around and dumped her's poetic justice, I say."

Before Quinn could probe further, Max came back into the room. He took the holster, gun, and silencer that Quinn handed him. Once he'd fastened the holster in place and shoved the gun in it, he shrugged into his leather jacket. "Let's go, guys."

“How’s Sean?” Quinn asked, gearing up, as well. He tucked one of the access code devices into a utility belt then strapped the belt around his waist. He took out a backpack already filled with supplies and slid the straps up over his shoulders, adjusting it until it felt comfortable, a familiar weight against his back. His adrenaline surged-- finally some action, a chance to get back at the bastards who’d kept Kendra from him.

“He’s sedated, and they’ve put him back in restraints. Cat and Ty can handle him.”

Quinn nodded. He followed the other two out of the cave house, making sure the door was locked securely behind them.

As he caught up to his friends, Max said, “Nothing fancy. We go in, get Kendra, and get out.”

“Works for me,” Quinn muttered.

When Yankee didn’t respond, Max stopped and looked at him.

The Texan heaved a sigh. “Fine. In an’ out.”

“I mean it, Yankee. This isn’t a search and destroy. It’s strictly a recovery mission. We don’t have time for you to run off half-cocked after Zayna.”

“Son, I don’t do anything *half*-cocked,” Yankee responded in dry, even tones.

Quinn choked back a laugh, and Max lifted one brow, but said nothing.

* * * *

Quinn watched as Max put his ear to the hidden hatch. One big hand went behind his back in a signal to wait. After several tense minutes in which the only sound Quinn could hear was his own pulse thundering in his ears, Max eased open the small door.

Bracing one hand against the wall behind his friend, Quinn drew in a deep breath. All his senses went into overdrive as his wolfen abilities came to the fore. His vision sharpened, his sense of smell intensified. His pulse settled into a slow, steady rhythm. It was time to fetch his woman.

“Remember, no funny stuff,” Max muttered with a hard look at Yankee. “In and out.”

“In an’ out,” Yankee responded. “Hard an’ fast.”

Quinn’s groin tightened at the innuendo. When he got Kendra to safety, he was going to fuck her ’til neither one of them could move.

Fast and hard and deep.

He took a breath and focused on the mission, willing his dick to settle down and be patient. Soon enough he’d have her sweet ass under his hands again, feel it gripping his shaft like a tight fist.

First things first. He had to retrieve the little idiot before he could do anything else.

“Security room,” Max instructed softly. Staying in a blind spot, he sidled along the wall until he was underneath the first camera. He pulled a thin telescoping pole out of his pack and clipped a black cloth to the end. Stretching up, he dropped the cloth over the lens. “That’s the only one we can do this with,” he muttered. “There’ll be guards posted outside the main security office. Let’s go before they come looking to see why they’ve lost the feed on this camera.”

In quick formation, they started down the corridor, guns drawn, moving in a quiet

heel-to-toe walk, Max at point and Quinn bringing up the rear.

Pausing at the first juncture in the corridor, Max motioned for Yankee to move to the opposite wall, which he did. Then Max carefully peeked around the corner and signaled back to them what he saw.

Like he'd anticipated, two Praetorians stood guard at the security room.

With economical movements, Yankee withdrew a silencer from his pocket and quickly screwed it in place. At Max's nod, he stepped out and fired two shots in quick succession. He gave a thumb's up signal, and they moved forward. Once at the security office, Quinn pulled the decoding device from the utility belt around his waist.

He hooked it up to the access pad and waited for it to do its thing. In a matter of seconds, the alarm code was deactivated and the door to the office unlocked. Max shoved open the door and tumbled into the room, weapon at the ready. By the time Quinn unhooked the coding device and grabbed one of the guards and dragged him inside, the Praetorian on guard in the office was disabled and on the floor.

Yankee jerked the body of the second man inside and closed the door behind them. "Y'all go on and fetch Kendra," he muttered, taking a seat behind the control panel. "I'll keep things under control here." He punched buttons, switching screens from one camera to the next. "There she is."

He pointed to the screen. His gaze went down to another screen as he called up the blueprints to the place. "Down this corridor, left at the next juncture. Third room on the left."

"When you see us leave her room, you head back to the hatch and secure it."

Max stared at Yankee, the expression in his tawny eyes showing his doubts about Yankee's ability to follow the plan.

Yankee nodded, though Quinn saw a muscle in his jaw flex. "I know what we're here for, Cap'n. Don't worry about me. I'll do my job."

Max clapped him on the shoulder and looked at Quinn. "You ready?"

More than ready. It was time to go redeem his one chance at happily-ever-after. Quinn lifted his chin toward the door. "Let's do it."

He and Max headed out. This time, Quinn took point and Max watched their six. Knowing that Yankee had things handled on the security side, they made quick time.

Quinn stopped at the juncture of the corridors and peered around the corner. Two more guards stood outside Kendra's room. He recognized one--a Hyena named Sullivan. Quinn's hand tightened around the butt of his Glock. He glanced at Max and got the go-ahead.

Diving into the corridor, Quinn aimed and fired, hitting Sullivan in the thigh and the other man high up on his right shoulder. Another shot at Sullivan went through his right bicep, instantly numbing the man's arm and making his gun hand useless.

Before the guards could move, Quinn and Max were on them. Sharp, hard punches to their jaws knocked them out.

Quinn hooked up the coding device again and, as soon as the door unlocked, he went inside, leaving the unconscious bodies of the guards for Max to deal with. Eyes adjusting to the dark, he saw the dim outline of Kendra's slender frame beneath the covers of the large bed.

God, he wanted to do nothing more than crawl in there with her, to slake his anger and lust on her curvaceous body.

Later, O'Rourke, he reminded himself. Later he could take all the time he wanted with her. Now, they needed to go.

Chapter Fourteen

Kendra came awake with a start. She drew in a deep breath but, before she could let loose the scream building in her lungs, a large hand clamped down over her mouth.

She knew it was Quinn instantly. She'd recognize the touch of those roughened fingers anywhere. And, as she drew in another breath through her nose, dragging in his masculine scent, she recognized something else.

This man would always be part of her, whether she was with him or not.

She wrapped her fingers around his hand and tugged it away from her mouth. Or, more accurately, he let her push his hand away. "What are you doing here?" she whispered.

There was a thump near the door, and she peered through the dark. From the light spilling in from the corridor, she saw another big man bent over, dragging a body into her room. It was Max Didion. As she watched, he went back into the corridor and reappeared with another body. Her gaze shot back to Quinn.

"Don't worry, they're not dead," he grumbled. He stood and pulled her out of bed. His eyes glittered down at her. "But you say the word, and we can fix that."

"No!" Kendra stared at him in disbelief. He couldn't be serious. Seeing the slight lifting of one corner of his mouth, she knew he wasn't. Well, not completely.

He gave a slight grunt that she took to be acquiescence. "Come on," he muttered, taking her hand.

"Quinn, no!" She yanked away from him and backed up a few steps. "I can't leave. Not now." When he crossed his arms and stared at her, she added, "I can make a difference here."

He stalked closer and stopped, his nostrils flaring. "You're wet," he stated baldly. His eyes narrowed. He unfolded his arms, fists clenching at his sides. "Is that how you're going to make a difference? By whoring yourself with Bedrosian?"

"I'm not... ooh!" Kendra reached out and smacked him on the chest, then shook the sting out of her fingers. That was a damned hard chest.

Damned fine, but damned hard.

"I am not whoring myself with Bedrosian or *anybody* else." She gave him a pointed glare. "And I'm not going anywhere with you, you ... you Neanderthal."

"We don't have time for this," he muttered, and ran his hand over the back of his head. The long strands of hair fluffed briefly, then settled against his skull. "You're not staying here, Kendra. Not now, not ever."

Grabbing her hand again, he turned and walked over to Max, dragging her along behind him, completely ignoring what apparently were her puny struggles. Until she lifted her foot and pushed him on the ass.

He jerked forward, then turned and looked at her. "You tryin' to tell me something, little lamb?"

"You're acting like an ass," she fumed, tugging at her hand. "I'm perfectly capable of making my own decisions."

"Yes, you are," he agreed readily enough, but then had to spoil it by saying, "And this time you've made a helluva bad decision." When she started to argue, he released her hand and overrode her. "You're not staying, Kendra. And that's final."

She saw the two men exchange a glance, one that spoke volumes. *Women*, they seemed to be saying to each other.

Max motioned to Quinn, and he turned around so Max could root around inside the backpack. He pulled out a roll of silver tape and proceeded to tape the guards' hands behind their backs. Then he strapped tape over their mouths, giving them each a hard pat on the cheek.

Still unconscious, neither man stirred.

Max looked up with a grin, primal triumph glowing in his golden cat eyes. "That'll hold 'em for a while. The wounds aren't serious enough to put them in any danger." He motioned toward Kendra with his chin. "Now we just need to take care of her."

"Men," she muttered. "I am a grown woman. I do not need you macho men 'taking care' of me."

"Coulda fooled me." Quinn knelt next to Sullivan and began going through his pockets. He withdrew a small fob attached to a set of keys and grinned. He straightened and handed the keys to Max. "We might be able to use that."

Max nodded and pocketed them. He glanced at Kendra with one heavy brow raised. "Um, maybe you'd better put on a pair of pants and some shoes. And make it fast."

Her face heated. Damn. They had her so discombobulated she was parading around in a thin shirt that barely covered the important bits. And even as she thought about refusing to put on day clothes, Quinn made the decision for her.

"Come with us fully clothed or dressed like that," he said. "It's your choice. But coming with us you are."

Kendra muttered a curse and stomped over to the dresser. Yanking open the top drawer, she took out a pair of jeans and a t-shirt.

Turning, she headed toward the bathroom only to hear Quinn ask, "Where you goin', little lamb?"

She frowned at him. "I'm not changing out here."

"Yeah, you are. Max'll turn his back, won't you, Max?"

Max grinned and obligingly turned around so he was facing away from Kendra.

"You're not going out of my sight," Quinn muttered, walking closer. "Hurry up and change. We've left Yankee alone in the control room."

Muttering another curse, Kendra turned her back and yanked on her jeans, trying not to give Quinn a show. She thought she heard Quinn groan but, when she looked over her shoulder, his face was impassive. Ever the stoic Praetorian.

She drew the nightshirt over her head and let it drop to the floor. Pulling on her top, she turned as she smoothed it over her hips. "Quinn," she began, thinking to try one more time to get him to see things her way. She jumped to realize he was right in front of

her. For such a large guy, he moved with the silent graced of a predator.

He cupped her face in his big, warm hands. "Don't, Kendra. I'm not leaving you behind again." Resting his forehead against hers, he sighed. "Don't ask me to."

"But, the children..."

He drew back far enough to look into her eyes. "Can't you do what you do outside the confines of this place?" he asked. "Cast out a net and see what you get, so to speak? That's what Bedrosian does, isn't it?"

"Yes, but..." She sighed. "They'll come looking for me again."

"You let me worry about that, little lamb." Quinn brought his mouth down over hers, gently at first but then with increasing pressure. His groan rumbled through his chest as he drew away. "You've obviously managed to fool them into thinking you're part of the team. We'll figure out a way to keep you camouflaged and off their radar."

She shook her head. Part of her--a very large part--was more than ready to go. Her gut was tight with nerves, and she was more on edge than she'd been in her life. But to leave now felt like admitting defeat.

"I stayed here for a reason," she said, doggedly determined to see this through. "I can do a lot of good here. Let me stay."

Quinn tipped her chin up. His face once again wore the grim expression of the hardened warrior. With a shake of his head, he muttered, "I'll make it easy for you, sweetheart." He shrugged out of his backpack and handed it to Max, who put it on with a wide grin on his face. Like he knew something she didn't.

Without another word, Quinn bent and hoisted her over one broad shoulder. When she muttered a curse and bucked against him, he swatted her behind, his big palm making her skin sting even through the thick layer of her jeans. Then his arm wrapped around the back of her thighs, holding her in place. "Now you can get mad at me all you want for kidnapping you away from here." He joined Max by the door. "And unless you want us all to get caught, you'll keep quiet."

"Well, this looks familiar," Max said, his grin widening. "Seems like not all that long ago I was carting Cat out of here the same way."

"That's 'cause they're both damned hard-headed little idiots who manage to get themselves in a world of hurt."

"Look who's calling who hard-headed. I *can* walk on my own, you know," she said, finally conceding defeat. But he was going to have to understand he wasn't always going to get his way. He couldn't just toss her over his shoulder and make her do what he wanted.

Well, hell, he *could*, but he'd better not. Not if he knew what was good for him.

"I like you right where you are," Quinn responded with another swat on her fanny. "Besides, you don't have any shoes on."

"Because you didn't give me enough time."

Max eased open the door. "All clear," he murmured and moved quietly into the corridor.

Quinn followed. Kendra raised up, bracing her hands at his waist, and tried to peer over her shoulder. A muscle in her back cramped, and she quickly dropped back down, trying to stretch a bit to work out the kink.

“Would you hold still?” Quinn tightened his arm around her legs.

She muttered at him, but subsided against his back. Being hauled around like a sack of potatoes should make her mad, and it did, sort of. But it was also deep-down thrilling to have him show such mastery over her.

“That’s quite far enough.” Bedrosian’s cold, hard voice rang out in the narrow corridor.

With a low curse, Quinn bent and let her slide down until her feet touched the floor. When she turned, putting her back against his chest, she saw Bedrosian standing there, Zayna next to him, as well as four Praetorians who had guns drawn and aimed at them.

“Come here, my dear.” Bedrosian held out his hand to Kendra.

She swallowed and started to walk toward him.

Quinn grabbed her arm. Cold dread expanded from the inside out. “Sweetheart, don’t.”

She looked over her shoulder at him. “I have to,” she whispered. Her eyes pleaded with him to understand.

All he could see was that she was, once again, going to his enemy.

He ground his teeth together, a muscle flexing in his jaw from the pressure. God, when would he fucking learn? There was no such thing as a happily-ever-after for him.

Bedrosian’s smile was slow and smarmy as he put one arm around Kendra’s waist and pulled her against his side. “You need to *learn*,” he stressed, letting Quinn know clearly that he’d been sifting through the thoughts Quinn had been unwise enough to leave unguarded, “that Kendra belongs to *me*.”

“Not in a million years,” Quinn snarled. Kendra was his. His mate. And Bedrosian would die for putting his hands on her.

Quinn saw one of the men beside Bedrosian put one hand up to his temple. He shook his head a couple of times, then his eyes rolled back and he slumped to the floor. Very quickly the other three men followed suit, one of them falling toward Zayna, making her jump aside with a startled squawk.

Bedrosian looked at his men on the floor, a shocked expression on his face that turned calculating as his gaze went back to Kendra. “Well, well,” he murmured. Quinn saw Bedrosian’s fingers flex around Kendra’s waist. “I see I greatly underestimated you.”

Quinn felt a slight push at his mind, a twinge of pain that quickly faded. Bedrosian’s eyes widened, then narrowed and his lips thinned.

“Don’t bother trying,” Kendra said. “I’ve been practicing my mental shielding. I’m covering Quinn and Max. You can’t get through.”

Bedrosian’s face paled. The student had far surpassed the teacher, and the teacher hadn’t had a clue.

Quinn would’ve been able to see the humor in it if they weren’t in so much danger.

Well, it was still kind of funny. A slow, feral smile curled his lips upward. Kendra had evened out the playing field. “Bedrosian’s mine,” he told Max and started forward.

From one heartbeat to the next, Bedrosian moved his arm from around Kendra's waist to hooking it around her throat. Her eyes widened, and her hands came up to curl around his forearm.

"You hurt her, and you're a dead man."

Bedrosian's Adam apple bobbed as he swallowed. Quinn could smell the acrid scent of the man's fear-driven sweat, and it made his stomach churn. Take away the man's Praetorian guard and any advantage his telepathy gave him, and he was just another cowardly bully.

Zayna started to reach forward, her gaze intent on Kendra.

Max moved with the swiftness of a pouncing cougar and pinned her up against the wall. He put one big hand on the back of her head, curling his fingers into her hair, and banged her forehead lightly against the wall. "Stay the fuck outta my head, lady," he growled.

Trusting Max to keep Zayna contained, Quinn put his gaze back on Bedrosian. "Looks like it's just you and me," he drawled. He quirked an eyebrow. "Unless you're planning on hiding behind Kendra?"

With a snarl, Bedrosian shoved Kendra away from him so violently she smacked into the wall. She cried out, bouncing off the wall and rubbing her shoulder. "I'm all right," she assured Quinn, probably afraid he'd kill Bedrosian.

She might act like a wolf from time to time, but when it came right down to taking another person's life, she was still a lamb.

But if he had the fucking chance, he was going to take it.

He felt the sharp probe of Bedrosian's mind against his and winced at the pressure. Guess the gloves were off, which suited him down to his toes. Striking out with his right leg, he kicked Bedrosian in the knee, hearing the snap of cartilage with savage satisfaction.

Bedrosian yelled in pain and instinctively grabbed his leg. Quinn saw a look pass through the man's eyes just before Bedrosian brought his hand up and lunged toward Quinn.

The bastard had a knife.

Quinn deflected the blow, grabbing Bedrosian's hand. They struggled, seesawing wildly from one side of the corridor to the other, until finally Quinn drew back one fist and threw an uppercut to the other man's jaw. Bedrosian grunted and Quinn felt the other man's grip on the knife slip.

It was enough.

Quinn twisted his wrist and drove the blade deep into Bedrosian's chest. The other man gasped, his hands falling away from the hilt. Quinn eased him to the floor. Drawing his gun, he was about to finish the bastard off when he heard the sound of running feet.

"Forget it," Max muttered. "We gotta go. Now." He looked at the woman he held and murmured, "Sorry, sweetheart." Flipping her around, he punched her in the jaw. She gave one sharp cry and then collapsed in his arms, unconscious. Max laid her on the floor beside her fallen hero.

Quinn hesitated, staring down at Bedrosian. Now was his chance. Taking this

bastard out would make the world a much safer place, as far as he was concerned.

Kendra placed her hand on his arm. "Quinn?"

He growled low in his throat and turned away from temptation. Max was right--there wasn't time. Every second counted. And a wounded Bedrosian would give them more time as their pursuers would stop to check on him. As he ran down the corridor, Kendra at his side, part of him was glad for it.

He wasn't sure he wanted his little lamb to see the darker side of his nature.

Chapter Fifteen

The men's treads against the concrete floor were nearly soundless. Kendra was once more folded over Quinn's shoulder. She was slowing them down, he'd said.

She thought he just wanted another excuse to go all he-man on her.

They stopped at one point and peered around a corner. "Shit," she heard Max mutter.

"What is it?" she whispered and tried to peer around Quinn's side.

"Sshh," both men hissed.

"Use the fob." Quinn's voice was a mere wisp of sound, low and rumbling like the wolf he was.

Kendra heard the light jangle of metal as Max drew the keys with their round fob from his pocket.

"Just twist that there," Quinn murmured. "Right. And press that there. Now toss it."

The keys tumbled through the air, metal striking against metal, then skidded on the floor. Kendra wasn't quite sure what throwing keys at the bad guys would do, until the loud explosion rocked the facility.

A cloud of smoke billowed around them. She clapped one hand over her nose and mouth and tried to filter out some of the dust.

"Let's go." Max's deep voice was quiet and steady.

They proceeded down the corridor at a faster clip than before. Turning a corner, they paused. Quinn turned to look behind them, and that was when Kendra saw the third man.

Derek Champion, the one they called Yankee, because he wasn't one. He was as non-Yankee as they came. According to her brother, Yankee had protested his nickname early on, telling the men no self-respecting Texan would stand still for being called such a vile name, had even had fistfights over it. But after twenty years with all the men in his squad using the nickname, he'd finally given up.

She wagged her fingers at him in greeting.

He tipped an imaginary hat. "Ma'am." Looking at Max, he said, "I found an interesting bit of information while I was sittin' here waitin' for y'all to stop dickin' around." A grin tilted one side of his mouth, making a deep dimple start playing in his lean cheek. "Made a call to a buddy of mine at the Federation News in St. Louis."

"What information?" Max asked in a low voice.

Quinn muttered at the same time, "Who's the one dicking around now?"

Yankee let out a low chuckle. His long, square-tipped fingers felt around the edges of a panel in the wall, and within just a few seconds a small door released. He eased it open, waiting until Max and then Quinn with Kendra went through. Then he followed them, closing the door behind them. "Y'all will just have to wait and see," he

murmured, his wide grin still in place. "For now, I say we make like sheep and get the flock outta here."

"Can I please walk on my own?" Kendra asked. "My stomach's getting sore from your bony shoulder."

Quinn bent and set her on her bare feet. "When I get you home," he said in a low voice, leaning over her, "we're gonna talk about what you did to me." His eyes glittered. He gave her rear a pat and shot her a grin when she scowled at him. "And you'll get up close and personal with another bone of mine. You'd better believe your ass belongs to me."

A thrill shot low in her belly, making her breath hitch and her core tighten. Cream slid along her labia, her body readying itself for him.

She'd made her decision for all the right reasons, but she knew Quinn wouldn't appreciate an 'ends justify the means' kind of explanation. She had no fears that he would hurt her. But he would demand his pound of flesh.

Kendra bit her lip. That pound of flesh would probably mean she'd be saddle-sore by the end of the day.

She met his lustful gaze and a slow smile tilted her lips. She could hardly wait.

* * * *

Several hours later, Quinn waited impatiently for Max to input the code into the access panel by the door to the cave house. One hand was wrapped around Kendra's upper arm, the other was clenched in a fist in the front pocket of his jeans.

As soon as the door opened and Max moved into the living area, Quinn brushed by the other man, pulling Kendra along behind him. Catriona came from the bedroom area, a welcoming smile on her face.

"You must be Kendra," she said, walking forward with her arms outstretched. "I'm so glad you're all right."

Quinn didn't even slow down. "Later, Cat." Pushing Kendra in front of him, he shrugged out of his backpack and dropped it on the floor in the middle of the hallway.

"It's nice to meet you, Cat," Kendra called over her shoulder with a laugh.

Quinn dragged her into an unoccupied bedroom and let her go, slamming the door behind them. Hooking one foot over the other, he leaned against the door and tried to calm down.

She looked at him, a small, secretive smile curving her full lips.

That was all it took.

He had them both naked and on the bed in three seconds flat. Dipping his fingers between her thighs, he found her hot and slick with need, so needy that her sheath easily took three of his fingers as he thrust them into her.

"Quinn!"

"Tell me you're ready, little lamb," he muttered even as he poised at the entrance to her body. "I don't think I can wait."

"Don't wait. I want you now."

Holding her gaze, he pressed in.

She gasped and closed her eyes, her head going back, her body arching. Slender hands slid around him, strong fingers dug into his muscles.

He pistoned in and out, his need too great for gentleness. That her hips met his every thrust told him she was just as out of control as he was. He reached between their bodies and found her clit, rubbed small circles on it.

Her channel clenched around him, and she cried out with her climax. Two more strokes and he joined her, his release jetting into her with hot, thick spurts.

When he could catch his breath, he pulled away from her, avoiding her clinging hands, and scooted to the edge of the bed. The fast and furious lovemaking had taken off the edge, but he was still damned pissed with her. A feeling that grew the more he thought about what she'd done, how she'd invaded his mind.

"Tell me I can trust you to keep your word," he gritted between clenched teeth as he went to the small utility cabinet in the corner and pulled out a tube of lubricant.

"When you say you'll stay out of my mind, tell me I can believe you."

The smile left her face and she drew in a deep breath. The action thrust out her breasts, and his gaze lingered there. When she began to speak, he lifted his eyes back to her face.

"I meant it when I said it, Quinn," she murmured. Her eyes were liquid pools of chocolate, swimming with remorse. "I only did what I did to save you."

"Doesn't matter why you did it, little lamb. You did it after you swore you wouldn't." His gut tightened anew at the memory of her betrayal, however well-intentioned it might have been. He went back to the bed and sat down. He placed the lube on the mattress next to his hip, then patted his lap. "Come here."

She frowned at him. "You're *not* spanking me again."

"But you like to be spanked, sweetheart. Don't you?" he drawled and watched with interest as her nipples hardened. He quirked one eyebrow. "You're turned on by the idea, baby. Don't deny it."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Ooh, you're so unbelievably arrogant. You think you can threaten me with violence, and I'll be turned on?"

"There's violence, and then there's violence," he said, enjoying himself.

"Remember when I paddled that ass of yours back in Oak Creek Canyon? Your sweet little cunt was sopping wet by the time I was finished." He drew in a deep breath and held it, keeping her scent in his nostrils, in his lungs. "You're wet now."

"They would have killed you!" She reached out to him. Before her fingers reached him, though, she clenched her hand into a fist and dropped it to her side. "I would do just about anything to keep you alive. I love you."

He knew that. He'd always known it. And that she was willing to compromise her word because it was that or let him die He couldn't hold that against her.

She had the heart of a wolf, his little lamb. That she'd confessed her love for him with no expectation of a response in kind from him told him just how incredibly brave and selfless she was. But it still didn't let her off the hook.

Quinn motioned to his lap. "Assume the position."

A pulse thudded in her throat, and the aroma of her tangy arousal grew stronger.

When he stared at her, keeping his features calm and steady, she bit her lip. Then with a muttered curse she crawled over the mattress.

The scent of her arousal was heavier as she neared him. When she paused beside

him on her knees, her thighs slightly spread, he couldn't keep his hand from seeking the wet folds of her sex. She was hot and slick--some of it was her cream, some of it was his. He slipped one finger into her core and pumped in and out, watching her shiver with need.

With a low groan, he withdrew his hand. There was time for that later. Right now, she needed to understand some things. First of all was that, when it came to her safety, all bets were off.

"Over my lap, little lamb."

She blinked and slowly draped herself over his legs. He shifted his thighs to better support her and pulled her forward just enough so that her shapely buttocks thrust into the air.

God, her ass was perfect--tight and round, the skin creamy smooth like a mocha latte. He spread her legs and stared at her glistening pussy. Her position hid her anus from him, but soon enough he'd spread her sweet cheeks for a deep, reaming fuck. His dick jerked beneath her belly.

"Get on with it, why don't you?" she muttered in a disgruntled tone.

A tone that did nothing to hide her deepening arousal.

Quinn grinned. He lifted his hand and brought it down hard. *Smack!*

"Ow!" she shrieked. But with the way her pussy got even slicker, he knew it was more of a token protest than one of real pain.

He smoothed his palm over the red imprint left by his hand. She wiggled her ass, which only made him go back for more.

He brought his hand down again and again, laying down a pattern of swats that made her yelp and jiggle, trying to ease the sting. In between smacks, he thrust his fingers into her pussy, rubbing against the sensitive walls of her sheath, ramping her arousal higher and higher.

Picking up the lubricant, he twisted off the cap and squirted a large dollop onto the fingers of his left hand. Then he moved his slick fingers to the tempting little rosette between the reddened curves of her butt. He eased one finger inside. The snug hole parted, gripping his finger like a vise.

She moaned and arched into his hand.

Quinn's erection thickened as he imagined how it was going to feel fucking into her tight backside. "Tell me what I'm thinking right now," he murmured. He added another finger, stroking deep and hard, spreading her, stretching her for his thick cock.

Kendra shook her head. "No. I'm not going to ... oh, God ... delve into your mind ... ah ... on a whim." When he scissored his fingers, widening her more, she whimpered and shivered.

He paused his ministrations, holding the fingers of his left hand deep inside her channel.

She moaned and wiggled on his legs. "No matter how much I might want to know what's going on in that convoluted mind of yours," she whispered, "I won't intrude."

God, she was stubborn. Enough like him that it made him crazy.

"But if I want you to"

“No.” She drooped over his lap. Tears made her voice thick. “I know what you’re doing. Your thoughts are your own, Quinn. I won’t intrude unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

Well, now. This was interesting. Quinn pulled his fingers from her anus. “So, you’re telling me you’re *not* promising not to get into my head anymore.”

She spread her hands in a gesture of helplessness. “How can I promise that? After what we’ve just been through, after what *you* were put through.... I can’t promise that.”

He swatted her buttocks again with his right hand. And again. “You don’t ever go into my head again without my permission, little lamb. You agree, or this spanking is as far as we go.”

Kendra shook her head. “I don’t think I can.” The one way--the *only* way--she could help keep him safe was to be able to manipulate his thoughts if that’s what had to be done.

He sighed and lifted her off his lap and onto the bed. Picking up his t-shirt, he wiped his fingers with it and stood, staring down at her with eyes gray with pain and sadness. He tossed the shirt into the corner, and turned and went back to the utility cabinet. Picking up a bottle of disinfectant, he sprayed across one hand, then the other. “I guess we’re done here.”

“No!” Kendra jumped to her feet. He couldn’t mean it. He couldn’t just walk away from her.

Quinn sighed and walked over to her. He urged her to sit and sat next her on the edge of the bed. Taking her hands in his, he played gently with her fingers, staring down at their joined hands. “I’m not an easy man, sweetheart. I want what I want when I want it, how I want it. And what I want *most* is for you to be safe and happy.” He lifted his gaze to hers, the intensity in them willing her to understand him. “But you have to understand this--if it takes you not being happy in order for you to be safe, I’m willing to make that sacrifice. First and foremost, I need to be sure you’re safe from harm.”

Her fingers curled around his. “And I want you to be safe, too.”

“So you understand where I’m coming from?” At her nod, he leaned forward and closed his mouth over hers, seeking, possessing. Claiming. When he drew away, her sigh followed him. “And understand this, too, little lamb.” Bringing his right hand up, he cupped the side of her face. “The reason I’m so concerned about your safety is because I. Love. You.” He touched the side of her mouth with his lips, then trailed upward to sip a tear from the corner of her eye. “I love you, Kendra Shepherd.”

She’d always wondered if it was possible for a heart to stop beating. Now she knew. Hearts could stop, breathing could suspend, in those initial seconds of the shock of hearing something you never thought you would.

And she knew she had to give in on this one. She’d find another way to keep him safe without betraying his trust. “I love you, too. And I promise to stay out of your head unless you give me permission.”

The smile that spread over his face stole her breath. Again. Then he swooped over her, his mouth grinding onto hers. All too soon, though, he released her and jumped up from the bed.

“Whoa, wait a minute.” She thought they’d settled things. Where the hell did he think he was going?

“Calm down, sweetheart. I’m not going anywhere.” He grabbed the pillows. “Hands and knees,” he instructed, his voice low and harsh with hunger.

Kendra shivered and moved into position, craning her neck to watch him from over her shoulder. He put the pillows beneath her hips and then, with one big hand between her shoulder blades, urged her upper body down until her shoulders and chest rested against the mattress.

The position left her with her ass thrust up into the air. She glanced to the side and saw his huge erection, the head almost purple with lust. Then he climbed onto the bed behind her, between her legs.

She heard the squirt of lubricant and imagined him slicking up his thick cock. A shudder worked its way through her. When he pressed the fat head of his cock against her anus and began to press inside, she sucked in a hard breath. Groaning as her ass began to painfully stretch around his width, she squeaked, “Oh, God, that hurts.”

He stopped. “Does it hurt too much?” he asked, his voice raspy with lust.

She shook her head. “Just go slow.”

“Slow and easy it is.” He started pushing his way in again.

Kendra closed her eyes, taking deep breaths. His cock felt huge as he reamed her ass with one long relentless stroke. It set off a blazing ache that made her clit thump and swell.

Quinn began a slow glide out, and she gasped in startled arousal. As painful as the entry had been, the exit was delicious wicked bliss.

He stroked back in, faster this time. Being stretched open was still a hot flash of pain but, as he pulled out again, her nerve endings shrieked with carnal pleasure. Then he began fucking her in earnest, shuttling his big cock in and out while she writhed beneath him.

“God, you’re so tight,” he groaned, his fingers digging into her hips. He slammed into her, harder, faster. His right hand left her hip to bury itself between the folds of her sex. As he thrust two fingers inside her pussy, his thumb strummed her clit. Her orgasm roiled through her. She screamed in ecstasy, barely aware when Quinn stiffened, his shout of completion coming at the same time as he filled her ass with hot, thick come.

He collapsed onto her, driving the rest of her body onto the bed. With a groan, he rolled to his side, cradling her in his arms, keeping his cock wedged inside her body. She turned her face, and he lowered his head.

The kiss began as a slow and gentle meeting of lips and tongues. In a heartbeat, it heated to a fiery inferno as their love and lust for each other blazed once more. She tried to twist around so she could reach him easier, but he stopped her. “Don’t move,” he growled, his eyes a stormy gray. “I’ve finally got my dick in your sweet little ass, and I don’t want to move for a while.”

She smiled against his mouth. “I love you.”

“I love you, too. My little lamb. My last chance at happily-ever-after.”

Joy spread through her in rush of sparking heat. As their lips met again, the fire consumed them both.

Epilogue

"The President is making a speech, sir." Hatchet stood just inside the doorway to Victor Bedrosian's office and watched the other man limp over to his desk. Bedrosian's left arm was in a sling to keep pressure off the knife wound that had missed his heart by only a centimeter. His blood loss hadn't been nearly as much as Hatchet would've expected--due in large part to the quick response of The Foundation's medical team.

Bedrosian sat down behind his desk, wincing and muttering a pained curse.

Hatchet hid a satisfied smile. Bedrosian had needed taking down a notch or two, Mr. I'm-the-most-powerful-man-in-the-world. Most-impotent-nancy-pants was more like it. Not only had he let a truly powerful telepath be taken from right underneath his nose, but he had let her fool him on her very first assignment.

Perhaps that was more of a testament to Kendra Shepherd's natural abilities than Bedrosian's lack thereof. Bedrosian was a great telepath, to be sure, but he couldn't read Hatchet, and Hatchet wasn't even trying that hard to block his thoughts.

No, the big man had gotten soft. He'd become too comfortable with his sleek leather furniture and expensive gourmet meals. His time of running The Foundation was nearing an end. Hatchet only hoped the Triumvirate would contact him soon and tell him to take Bedrosian out.

As Bedrosian turned up the volume on the plasma vidscreen, Hatchet leaned against the edge of the desk and made sure his face remained expressionless. It wouldn't do for the other man to suspect his hatchet-man's loyalties were guided by someone else.

"As many of you are aware," President Ingram of the North American Federation was saying, "a reporter with the Federation News in St. Louis disclosed from an unnamed source that Raymond Ortiz, my Chief of Staff, has been declared a telepath."

"Damn." Bedrosian's eyes narrowed on the screen.

"Further, Mr. Ortiz used his telepathic abilities in a clandestine effort to undermine other Federations in the world." The President leaned forward on the podium, his brown eyes staring directly into the cameras.

Hatchet would give him this much--the man knew how to speak to an audience.

"I want it on the record right now," the President went on, his voice firm, "I had no knowledge of Mr. Ortiz's activities. That telepaths exist cannot be denied, nor should we discriminate against them for something over which they had no choice." He clasped his hands and maintained his eye contact with the camera. "However, to use those abilities in a deceitful manner cannot and will not be tolerated by this administration."

Then Hatchet saw it. A minute flutter of a small muscle at the corner of the President's left eye. The man was hiding something.

"Ortiz isn't the only Chosen One in the administration, is he?" Hatchet asked.

Bedrosian shook his head and pointed to the screen. "Our best kept secret," he murmured. "The President of the North American Federation himself is one of ours. As

will his counterpart with the Asian Federation soon be.”

President Ingram went on to talk about the man he planned to announce to the congressional members as Ortiz’s replacement. With a scowl, Bedrosian picked up the remote control and hit a button, shutting the vidscreen off. He looked over at Hatchet. “How in the hell did the word about Ortiz get out?”

“We know there was a third man with Didion and O’Rourke,” Hatchet replied evenly. “More than likely in the security office.” He shrugged one shoulder. “Wasn’t his problem, so he wasn’t going to worry about it. “He would’ve had access to computer files from there.”

Bedrosian pounded his fists on the top of the desk. “Dammit to hell. I want to know how the fuck they keep getting in and out of here. How the fuck are we supposed to get the job done if they fucking keep waltzing in and out?”

Yet another reason the Triumvirate felt Bedrosian was past due his retirement. Hatchet bit back a sigh of impatience. “I have assigned a team to discover their point of egress, sir.”

God, calling this slimy bastard ‘sir’ was driving him insane. He couldn’t wait until he got the green light to take him out.

Until then, he would watch and wait. He would follow the instructions given in the goal of the greater good--protect the Chosen Ones, recruit more Praetorians.

All in a day’s work.

Hatchet turned away from Bedrosian and walked to the other side of the room where the lights were off. He settled in his usual spot on the plush leather sofa.

Yes, he would bide his time. The traitorous Praetorians would be dealt with, and soon. But, in the meantime, he would keep a close eye on Bedrosian and, when he got the word, carry out his duties swiftly and without mercy.

He wasn’t called Hatchet for nothing.

THE END