



Loose Id

Dept  
57

*Dev's Eyes*  
LYNNE CONNOLLY

# DEPARTMENT 57: CAT'S EYES

Lynne Connolly

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## Dedication

*My grateful thanks to Marta, Ana, and Katharina, who made sure my Brazilian Portuguese worked. Thanks for all the dirty words, ladies!*

*I've put a glossary at the end in case anyone is interested in Brazilian love words!*

## Chapter One

Silje picked up her drink, controlled her shaking hand, and fixed an expression of interest to her face.

“Ladies!” The emcee’s voice boomed over the speakers as the lights dimmed, heralding the arrival of another act. “You’re in *Hel!*” Silje smiled grimly. As a Norwegian, it was ironic that her first visit to the Norse underworld should be here, in New York.

“Our next act is from the hellishly hot Brazil!” A chorus of raucous cheering arose, and Silje sat up straighter in her chair. These were the boys she’d come to see. “Presenting to you, in all their glory, two *Hel*-worshippers!” The cheering grew, punctuated by whistles and shouts.

The lights went out, then rose again, flaring brightly once in a blaze of color before dimming. The effect made Silje’s eyes go nuts. Her vision disappeared completely as her eyes dilated, trying to catch up with the wildly fluctuating lighting. Silje partially shifted, switching to the cat-eyes of her other form. She could see much better in the dim light with those.

Screams and applause reverberated around the club. Her companions, Diane and Candy, sitting on either side of her, exchanged grins.

One man was tall and slender, athletically muscular; the other a couple of inches shorter, and bulkier. Both were beautiful, and either tanned or naturally bronzed, their bodies gleaming with the light oil the strippers all used. She wondered if they had any tan lines. No doubt she would find out in due course.

Both wore feathers and nothing else, but enough to cover any tan lines they might have. Feathers traveled in swirls up their bodies, exotic flicks of bright color, and more feathers swept behind their backs like wings and cresting on their heads. All the audience could see of their faces were two sensual mouths under their gorgeous half-masks.

They kissed briefly before bursting apart, leaping backward, their eyes fixed on each other, and at that moment, the music started. Latin American music, but only drums, in a one-two samba rhythm. The bird-men rocked their hips side to side in a seductive motion that made their muscles ripple in the atmospheric lighting. The audience hushed, but one or two whistles punctuated the drumbeat.

The boys from Brazil were popular.

They circled the audience, letting the avid watchers get a good look at their ripped bodies. The stage jutted out in a semicircle and was low enough for people to touch, if they wanted to, but every time someone tried, the dancer moved away, laughing.

Then the feathers started to come off, the men scattering them like exotic birds ruffling their plumage. Silje shrank back, but a laughing Diane pushed her chair forward again. Now she sat in front of Diane and Candy. They were setting her up.

Fair enough. She tried to stay calm. Renowned in the European branch of Department 57 for her coolness in a crisis, she tried hard to live up to her reputation, but she was finding it difficult now, and it was getting worse all the time.

The Brazilians were hot. Genuinely hot. Not oiled-muscles-going-through-the-motions hot, but they really, really enjoyed what they were doing. They were billed as “*Hel’s* newest sensations,” so perhaps they were new to the male stripping scene.

The club owners had done their homework, too. Pictures of the Norse goddess Hela in various states of provocative undress were featured around the club, as were the real stars of the show -- the men who were to worship at her feet, and take their clothes off in the process. They looked alarming, from the All-American Marine to the more exotic offerings. Well, she'd seen them all now, and they were about as alarming as she'd imagined.

The club appeared to be the classier end of the business, though Silje couldn't be sure, since this brought the total number of male strip clubs Silje had visited up to one. Although she had lots of practice hiding any nervousness she might feel, she was finding it hard now. Difficult, she quickly amended, squirming in her seat. She shouldn't let the talent turn her on; she was supposed to be working here. Hard described what every act displayed at the end. She'd never seen so much cock in her life before, much less the erect variety.

This was not her scene, or so she kept telling herself. The first two acts were interesting, but easily resistible, and nothing touched her psi senses, which she extended to detect any unusual activity.

She tried a gentle telepathic probe toward the performers and met two mental brick walls. Nothing, which in itself was odd. Only other Talents could block telepathic contact as decisively as that.

Candy was a shape-shifter, and Diane could receive telepathic communications, a useful skill for a mortal at the Department. Out of the corner of her eye, Silje saw the glitter of the diamante tips of Candy's outrageous manicure as she reached for her drink.

*They're Talents, or they know about us,* Silje sent to the two other women.

Candy's response was laconic. *Yeah, I noticed that.*

*So do we take one each?*

*Depends what you have in mind, girlfriend.* Candy's laughter echoed through Silje's head. *It's your operation. You make the decisions.*



*So why exactly am I in charge of this?* Her question was more from exasperation. She knew the answer.

*Cristos likes to test his new operatives.*

Silje gritted her teeth. She'd come highly qualified to the New York branch of Department 57, and the boss wanted to test her?

Fine, she'd pass his fucking test. With flying colors.

She would find whoever was dealing Cephalox in this place. First developed to help shape-shifters, now used against them, Cephalox was the shifters' morphine, necessary but dangerous, volatile, and addictive. It gave mortals a high, and it was the new fashionable designer drug of choice. Closing this particular leak was a priority, before New York really got the taste for the stuff.

Decisions were difficult when the feathers were coming off faster, and she had a very fine male butt in her face. Or nearly in her face.

Oh, it really was a fine ass. Telling herself the dancers wouldn't be interested in her didn't help. Candy claimed all the dancers here were gay, but personally, Silje doubted it. Regardless, they were still fine specimens, and they danced really well. The dancer moved on, but not before she caught a flash of speculative dark eyes glittering behind the bird mask.

Shit!

She switched back to mortal eyes, and at once felt the loss of the enhanced cat-sense. But she'd seen enough, perhaps too much.

Now she knew what the difference was. These two performers were with the audience, not going through the motions. She felt their heat, their enjoyment of the moment, and knew they weren't acting.

They came together, and their tongues extended to touch just the tips to each other, then the dancers spun away as the music escalated, and other instruments played over the hypnotic drumbeat. Was it getting hot in here? She saw a few other patrons removing

jackets, loosening their clothing, and Silje wondered if the management had turned the heating up, just a little. It'd be a good ploy.

No, she was sure they hadn't. The dancers made the temperature rise all on their own. Did they ever!

Their interest in each other and familiarity with each other's bodies enhanced their swaying, sensuous dance. Nearly naked now, except for a small, hip-swinging girdle of feathers, every movement threatened to expose everything they had, but by some miracle, didn't.

They joined spoon-fashion, the shorter one's butt hard against the taller one's cock, and they swayed. The man in front leaned forward. Their movements grew more explicit as the music sped up, and with the one behind leaning back, his mouth taut with ecstasy, he slid his hands around to his partner's stomach and traced his navel in a teasing motion every woman watching wanted to emulate.

This wasn't a hard-core club, so the audience watched, numbly, as two men went through the best imitation of sex anyone had ever seen. If they weren't doing it for real now, they would be soon; nobody had any doubt about that.

Silje heard the collective sigh when the hand slid further down. "No touchee," the signs festooned around the club read. She wondered, along with, she guessed, everyone else, if that was just for show.

The little feather kilt slid away, and at last the audience saw him.

Not that soft-core, then. Not soft at all. Shit, his cock -- she hadn't known they came in that size. In her sixty years of life, with her pathetic tally of lovers that barely reached double figures, Silje had never seen one so beautiful, so fucking *big*. She tried to think aesthetic thoughts, how beautiful they were, how they'd make a good Bernini sculpture, but it didn't work. He was gorgeous, built, ripped. Hot, hard flesh, not cold marble.

When the taller man moved away, he took his partner's remaining feathers with him.

"If those two really are gay, they should be a bit smaller," Candy murmured in her ear. "They must have problems fitting in."

Diane overheard and laughed. "I could help them. Jesus, these guys are hot!" She picked up a coaster and fanned herself. "And you think they're --" she broke off, too experienced to say what she was thinking out loud -- *Talented?*

*Either that or they're after the same people we're looking for,* Silje responded, on surer ground now. *What better way to flush out drug dealers than getting a job at the club? We need to keep in touch with these guys.*

*Do we go backstage?* Diane queried.

*What, and show them who we are?* An amateur's mistake and she was anything but amateur. The Department paid extremely well for its agents' services. Not that most of them needed the high pay, but it was nice to be appreciated. *No, we follow them. Have either of you detected anyone else here who might be Talented?*

A pause. *Nope.* That from Candy, and then another negative came from the only male they'd brought with them, the vampire Dubreis, currently serving at the bar. Dubreis managed to get a temporary job as a barman. She hadn't realized how ripped he was until she saw him in the topless getup the waiters wore here, but he didn't do what these two dancers did to her. She clamped her thighs together, but that only made the sensitivity worse, and she felt moisture seep between them.

She really had to get her mind back on the job and face her problems, as she always did. *We'll follow them when they're done.*

Oh, God. Just when she thought they couldn't take the audience any higher, they did.

This time by kissing. Just kissing. They stood in profile, their cocks aligned against each other, but they didn't move their lower bodies now. The hip swaying stopped, and only their mouths moved against each other. There was no way this was anything other than a full-on

French kiss, open-mouthed and passionate. Their cocks twitched, and when the drumbeat accelerated, the dancers sprang apart, as if an electric current had burst in their faces.

Although their masks covered the top half of their faces, firm, clean-shaven jaws and the occasional glint of dark eyes gave the illusion of good looks. It was completely impossible to see any more. Long, dark hair swept the shoulders of the shorter one, and the other either had short hair or wore it tucked up under his mask. Reflexively, Silje touched the neat French roll at the back of her head, assuring herself her hair was correctly pinned and tucked. It got in the way when it was loose, but she hadn't ever taken the obvious step of getting it all cut off.

Now their hips swayed again, and they danced around each other, and then pressed together, back to back, ass to ass. Using their shoulders as support, they slowly sank into a limbo position, legs wide apart, strong bare feet planted on the floor. Their erect cocks jutted into the air, tight, hard balls supporting them, and their chests curved up in powerful bows of muscle and bone.

Then, without pause or touching their hands to the ground, they stood up in one simultaneous, synchronized movement.

The lights went out.

The audience erupted in applause.

Silje switched to cat eyes again and saw them leave the stage.

*I'll make my way around the back and let you know when they leave.* Dubreis was good, picking up her instruction almost as soon as she'd thought it.

*Thanks. We'll stay until the end, in case we pick anything else up.*

She hadn't realized how hard she was applauding until her palms began to burn. Next to her, Diane and Candy were screaming and whistling, but good though the act was, she wasn't ready to go that far.

Not yet, at any rate.

## Chapter Two

“We should wait,” Devante protested as Ari headed straight for the dressing room, dragging him behind. He caught Brad’s smirk as the unrepentant heterosexual male headed for the stage in full Marine gear.

“No. Brad’s only out there twenty minutes. I want you, *gato*. Now.”

Devante gave up and let Ari tow him, only pausing inside their dressing room door to unfasten his bird mask and toss it to the floor. Ari’s followed, and then they were in the miniscule shower. Ari turned to Devante and kissed him.

Devante was about ten pounds heavier than Ari, but when his partner was determined, it would take more than Devante’s halfhearted protests to stop him. Besides, Devante didn’t really want to.

Ari tugged him close for a kiss, a deep-throated one, tongues entwined, sucking voraciously as if Devante could give him more. Devante brought them together, and growled low in his throat when their cocks touched. He slid his hand between their bodies and gripped them together before he started to thrust.

No time for anything else. He needed this now. Ari knew exactly how to touch him, sliding his hands over his oiled body, and he caressed Ari in return, massaging his shoulders. Ari's deep groan of pleasure echoed in his mouth and throat.

He loved this man so much.

Ari tore his mouth away. "*Você cheira tão bem*, Devante!" His voice, usually a controlled musical tone, was now hoarse and deep. Devante loved the way he could do that to Ari.

"You smell good, too, Ari-stides!" He drew the last word out as Ari enthusiastically quickened Devante's rhythm. They used scented oil, not the plain baby oil most performers used. As the heat from the light drew the scent from their bodies, the customers could get whiffs and occasional scents, elusive and all the more tantalizing because of it. The skin of his cockhead stretched, and his balls drew right up.

The combined scents of patchouli and lavender mingled and rose between them. Devante kissed Ari's shoulders, then sucked gently, careful to leave no mark because that would mean makeup tomorrow night.

Nobody had a cock like Ari's long, slightly curved one, with its bulbous head meant for sucking and kissing. But not tonight. Or rather, not until later tonight when they were home. *Now* was about coming as fast as possible.

It didn't take long. A warm shot of heat against his chest signaled Ari's fulfillment, and a moment later, his come spurted out, jets of hot, thick liquid mingling with the oil, the scent of sperm overpowering the more delicate scents.

He gasped and pulled Ari close for a deep kiss, not passionate this time, but loving and close, moving to slide their come together on their chests.

Ari moved a little, and a stream of water flowed over them. Ari pulled away.

"Ten minutes left before Brad gets here," he gasped, still as breathless as Devante felt, his chest moving strongly as he pulled in air. "We better get clean."

“And we need to talk.”

“Not the least being about getting our own dressing room.”

Ari chuckled and reached for the soap.

It was quicker and far more pleasurable to wash each other, but they didn't linger -- much. Just a few gentle strokes, reminding each other of their pleasure and teasing for what remained of the night ahead.

They dried on the big, fluffy towels they brought in with them each day and Brad contemptuously dismissed as “wussy,” chatting as they dressed.

“You saw them?”

“I saw a lot of women. You mean the three at the front? The one with the red and green striped hair, the one with the wild fingernails and weird clothes, and the one in the middle?”

Devante grimaced. “Yeah, them.”

“Hard to miss.”

Devante glanced at Ari, currently pulling on his shirt. “You want them?”

Ari shrugged. “The best I've seen in the club, especially the one in the middle. Cool and sophisticated-looking. I played to her.”

Devante gave a short laugh. “So did I. I wanted to get a rise out of her, but she just looked bored and took a drink.”

“She did?” Ari left the top three buttons undone and reached for his slacks. “So did you see her eyes?”

That was it. He thought he had, but he wasn't sure. “Cat eyes.”

“Could have been contacts. The one with the manicure was wearing contacts; I saw them when she turned her head and one of the lights got her, but they were ordinary ones.”

Devante considered. "No. For cats, yes, they would have had to be full eye contacts. And the shape of her eyes changed, I think, but in those lights I couldn't be sure. I tried to read her but got nothing."

Ari zipped up and turned to face him. "So what do we do? Break the habit and go out there to please the customers and get tips?"

The door opened, admitting a naked Brad, carrying the clothes he'd just stripped or had stripped off his body. Top of the bill, unabashedly heterosexual, and completely sure of himself. Brad irritated Devante, and the sentiment was fully reciprocated. Devante wondered why he worked here, since most of the other strippers were either gay or bi, but perhaps he needed to keep his adrenaline at a healthy level. After all, he had really been a Marine, even if his stage costume was a velcroed-together parody of the real thing. Brad waved his schlong at them without using his hands, his party trick. They'd seen it before and although it was an impressive size, it failed to impress either of them.

"Are you joining us tonight, boys?" Brad always asked that, ending with the derogatory "boys" and a suggestive wink. The joke was wearing thin. "I keep tellin' you, that's where the money is, the tips for posing and maybe letting the ladies get a quick grope."

Devante shrugged. His refusal was clear in any language. "We no like. Maybe other night." Nobody at the club realized they were as comfortable with English as with Portuguese. As far as the management here knew, their English was poor.

Out of sight of Brad, Ari gave him a mock wince and switched to Portuguese. "You don't want to go out front to check those women out?"

Brad growled when he heard the foreign language, but found one of his oh-so-masculine tiny towels and headed for the shower.

Devante reached for his shirt and answered Ari in the same language. "No. We'd have to put the costumes and masks back on."

Ari zipped up his chinos "Then what do we do?"



“They were interested in us.” Devante smoothed an errant lock of hair off his partner’s brow. “You’re looking at women now?” A gentle tease, but he couldn’t resist.

“I always did, my love. I learned early not to be too fussy.”

Since Ari had suggested this outrageous farce of actually appearing at the strip club, Devante had begun to enjoy it. If Ari’s father ever got word of how they were looking for the source of the drugs, however, he’d probably throw Ari out of the family business.

He glanced over Ari’s shoulder and switched to broken English. “You want women?”

“A hole is a hole, eh?” The harsh voice behind them came from Brad. He crossed the room to the rack that held his costumes and found a pair of tight slacks. “Not fussy what goes around it?”

“I am very fussy,” Devante said. He straightened to his full height, three inches taller than Brad. Brad, at five-ten, was the perfect size for a photographic model and dancer. Any taller and his dick wouldn’t appear quite so big on the pictures, although God knew it was big enough.

“How you keep your hard-on so long?” Ari asked.

Brad chuckled. “Don’t you have drugs in Brazil? Funny, I thought my supplier said some came from there.”

Ari shrugged. “No need.”

“If you keep on in this business, you will.” Brad sneered, his artificially plump top lip curling a little, despite the collagen-aided stiffness. “A fluffer can only do so much.” As *Hel* was a classy joint, it had its own fluffers on staff, people whose jobs were to keep the men hard. *Hel* employed male and female fluffers, some of whom wanted to be strippers themselves one day, others who would have paid to do the job.

Brad strolled out, and Ari exchanged a glance with Devante. Then he shrugged again, dismissing Brad, and switched to Portuguese, just in case Brad was still hanging around. “So what do we do?”

"I sensed them. At least two of those women are Talents."

"Yeah." The terse agreement confirmed what he'd sensed. "I went a small way into the outer mind of the one in the middle, and I saw a small cat sigil. A cat shifter." Ari had seen the identification sigil every shape-shifter held at the forefront of the mind as a courtesy to other Talents.

"Shape-shifters like us."

Devante curved his hand around Ari's bicep. "Not quite."

Ari chuckled. "No, not quite. Talents aren't all on the side of the angels, and since it's the drug of Talents we're looking for, Talents might be dealing it. We need to get hold of him and find out for sure. But we can't do it while we're working. If it's one of those women, let them come to us. They'll want Talents as customers. We'll get our card to them." He bared his teeth. "Then we'll have them all to ourselves."

"Your father will be pleased."

"He won't be the only one."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Silje? You okay?"

"Sil-ya," she corrected automatically, but Diane had known her on the computer screen before she'd met her in person, so she was still pronouncing her name phonetically. Siljay instead of Silya. After six months in New York, battling with bank managers and taxmen, Silje was getting tired of it. Diane was probably the easiest person to forgive. Of course, her new boss, Cristos, pronounced it perfectly from day one.

She liked Diane. Genuinely friendly, lively, and warm, a mortal in the midst of so many powerful beings should be out of her depth, but Diane took to the challenge with excitement. She could give any Talent, from a vampire to a shape-shifting dragon, their orders without even raising her voice. Her outlandish appearance must help her cope, but

Silje didn't know her well enough to ask yet. Did green and red striped hair boost her confidence when staring down a vampire? Probably. Until recently, Cristos's personal assistant, now taking part in the occasional field operation, Diane was an important part of the New York office.

Silje put down her empty glass, and at once, a ripped waiter arrived with a tray holding fresh drinks. She glared at him. "Where did these come from?"

"Compliments of the house, ma'am."

"Why?" Diane's voice sharpened. Agent training dictated they never accept a drink from a stranger.

"A gift from two of the performers. They wished to introduce themselves."

"Thank you."

The waiter put the drinks down, together with a business card, and they watched him leave.

"Nice butt," Candy said in a gentle, contemplative way.

Silje reached for the first drink and used her Talent. She was one of the rare shape-shifters who could detect Cephalox.

None of the drinks held any Cephalox. As part of her test, she tasted every one and decided she rather liked Diane's mojito. She'd have one of those next.

No, there could be no next. On duty, she had to keep a clear head. She picked up her own ginger ale with a regretful sigh and put the drinks in front of the other two.

"Next time, I'll be the designated driver," Candy said. "About time we introduced you to some good ol' New York cocktails."

Silje gave her a doubtful smile. "Maybe."

"Hey, here's our answer." Diane picked up the business card. "'The Brazilian bombshells will completely blow your mind,' it says." She flipped the card over. "And a

handwritten extra. 'We perform for selected customers in private. If you have a birthday, we will make it unforgettable.'"

"You can forget your budget," Silje added dourly.

"Lucky it's not our budget, then, isn't it?" She gave Silje a sly grin. "I think your girlfriends are going to treat you to an early birthday present."

## Chapter Three

“You sure you want to do this on your own?” Diane frowned in concern.

Silje grimaced. “I have to. Candy is a basilisk, and it’s hard for her to fuzz and keep all her senses alert.” Fuzzing was the art of persuasion. A Talent surrounded itself with an aura so people saw what they expected to see, not what was actually there. Silje’s other form was near enough to a natural one for her to dispose of fuzzing, when she needed to, allowing her to concentrate on her other senses.

“No, you do not have to.”

They started at the male voice they both knew. They’d been sure they weren’t followed down here to the car lot, but they should have known better. Dubreis would have used the stairs to the underground area, rather than the antiquated goods elevator that screamed and protested every inch of the way down. Experienced and scarily Talented, Virgilio Dubreis was on permanent night duty, along with most other vampires. It made sense, since vampires only had their full powers between sunset and sunrise. Before moving to the States, Silje had little experience with vampires, and they still unsettled her. Their intensity warred against her cool nature, or at least, that was what she kept telling herself. Dubreis, with his lean, rugged face and powerful frame, was also one of the sexiest men she’d

ever met, but she kept away from him, unsure of what she might be getting herself into if she let their relationship go beyond the professional into the personal arena.

He kept his mind completely closed off, except for the outer layer, which all Talents kept open out of traditional courtesy and as set communications channels, so she hadn't a clue how he felt about her, or about his job, for that matter.

Now he stood close enough to her for her to smell his aftershave, something warm and musky. "You follow them, and I will shadow you telepathically. We are put into teams so that we complement each other."

Although the reminder was timely, Silje resented it. She wasn't used to working so closely with teams. At home in Norway, they worked individually and called for backup when they needed it, but New York was a lot more densely populated than home, even Oslo, and it made sense to work closer together. "What will you do if I get into trouble?"

"If I can see what you see, I can flash to your side." No one knew how flashing worked, least of all vampires, the only Talents capable of accomplishing it, but if they could see where they were going clearly enough, they could appear there.

"Okay." Without further ado, Silje began to strip, handing her clothes over piece by piece to Diane. Dubreis moved uncomfortably, the sound of his sneakers sharp on the cement beneath their feet. Well, good. She hoped he was uncomfortable. His intense stare unnerved her, despite all the times she'd stripped to shape-shift in front of other people.

Down to her panties, she took pity on him and started to shapeshift. Before she'd shimmied out of her underwear, she'd begun to sprout fur and shrink to smaller than her natural form, until she appeared as a mere domestic housecat. *You think the Brazilians are our source?*

The switch from verbal communication to telepathy didn't faze Dubreis. She hadn't really expected it to, but she'd had a vague hope to get him off-center for a change. *I've researched everyone working at that club, and there are a few who could be the Cephalox*

*dealers. They arrived in New York recently, but so did a few other workers at the club. They came from Brazil, and that's probably where the illegal Cephalox is coming from.*

*What else did you find out?* She watched Diane shove her clothes into a large shoulder bag. Oh well, the cleaners could probably get the creases out.

*Nothing. We know the flight they arrived on from Rio, but not if they originated there. We're working on it.*

*Great.*

Diane moved away after a glance from Dubreis, nodded to Silje, and headed out of the garage.

Dubreis stayed with her. *Don't go out of range, and call me the minute you need me. How are you going to get back into your apartment?*

*I told the janitor I have a cat that gets out a lot. He knows to let it back in to the lobby. After that, I can use the keypad.*

*Clever.* For the first time, she heard admiration in his tone. She'd used that method for years at home, but she didn't tell him that. When one's other form was a fluffy, silver-gray cat, not a scary dragon or weird basilisk, more mundane explanations became possible.

Not that she was just any old fluffy gray cat. Every shape-shifter was a mythical beast, and she was no exception. The English called them grimalkins, gray cats, but they were so much more than that. Legend said they used to draw the chariot of the goddess Freya.

Gray cats indeed! She humphed as she looked down at the fluffy silvery fur covering her slender limbs.

A sound from the direction of the elevators alerted her, and she shrank back into the shadows, where Dubreis already lurked.

*Here they come,* he warned her. *Close your mind; be cautious how you use your telepathy.*

*Duh.* She might be new to the States but she wasn't new to agent fieldwork. She'd just switched countries, that was all.

Two men strolled across the parking lot in the direction of the line of cars at the end. From old Porsches to VW convertibles, every car was of the flashy variety, which was how it was so easy to spot where the performers at the club parked.

The tanned bodies and dark hair stood out, even in the dimness of the underground parking lot. One had short hair, just as she'd supposed. The other kept his long and loose, sweeping just below his shoulders. She couldn't see their faces.

Theirs was a red Mazda Miata. A nice car, not as flashy as some of them, but better kept. Silje went into action. Sauntering forward, she headed for them, and just as the taller one reached for the door, she mewed. And limped.

*"Uma gata!"* he exclaimed, bending and scooping her up. She gave him the pathetic "I'm hurt" treatment, snuggling close and wincing when he reached for her paw. The language problems wouldn't make much difference to telepathic contact. She could find out what she wanted without having to communicate with them verbally.

"You've found a cat, Ari?" His companion, already seated in the car, looked up, and his face softened.

Her heart missed a beat. Why the fuck did he wear a mask for the show? This man was gorgeous. Dark, liquid eyes set in a broad, high-cheekboned face that indicated he had a lot of South American native in him. He also looked vaguely familiar, though she couldn't quite place him. "Read her, Ari. Don't forget why we're here."

Only the faintest lilt betrayed his origin. His English was near perfect.

Dubreis's mind sat below her defensive shields, where these two couldn't penetrate. If they tried, both she and Dubreis would know, and in order to get through them, they would have to hurt her and alert her. She doubted they could do it, even then. She was Department-trained. They weren't.



As expected, she felt a foreign mind, Ari's, gently probing hers. It was usual, when Talents met, to enter the mind to touch the sigil, the little sign put there at puberty, which showed what she was. A kind of etiquette, but etiquette or no, hers was well hidden behind the barriers they couldn't enter. She was a cat. A pretty cat who'd been hurt. She kept the cat image and mindset firmly at the forefront of her mind, disguised her barriers, and let him in.

What she didn't expect was the sheer sensual intelligence of the mind she met, and the gentleness with which he searched before withdrawing.

"She's just a cat." Ari touched her left front paw, and she growled low in her throat before meowing plaintively. "And she's hurt."

"Let's see."

The beautiful man reached for her, and unwilling to leave her new protector, she shrank back a little. But Ari, the taller one, was driving and needed his hands free. It gave her a chance to feel this one's aura before exploring a little further. She nestled into the other man's arms and felt his hands close over her, gently searching her body. "She might have been run over. This is no feral cat. We need to find her owner."

"At this time of night?" Ari shook his head and reached for the ignition. "No. If she's a pet, she'll probably have a microchip. We should take her to a vet's and let them scan her."

"And if she's not claimed?" Silje tried not to shiver with sensual abandon when he stroked her.

"We could take her in for a while. She is a beautiful animal, but don't get your hopes up, Devante, my love; she is probably a cherished pedigree animal."

Ari smiled down at her, and she melted all over again. This man had an aristocratic face, a patrician. He must be all Portuguese. A wonderful contrast to his friend. The feathered masks only meant one thing; they didn't want anyone to recognize them, which indicated that someone would, if they saw them like this. It also explained why they hadn't toured the club after the formal floor shows were over, having their photos taken,

distributing kisses, and receiving tips. Since *Hel* was the latest hotspot for the wealthy New York socialite, the tips were more than good. She'd wondered then. Now she knew.

*I think these are the people we're looking for.*

Dubreis growled his agreement. *Find out where they live.*

*Sure thing. This assignment won't last much longer.*

Dubreis grunted. *Plenty more waiting for us.*

Silje should be glad, but these men had much more compassion in their minds than she expected from drug dealers. Visions of movie megalomaniacs cradling white cats on their laps returned to her, but she knew that was fiction, although drug dealers sometimes had a sentimental spot.

Her greatest strength in this form was looking sweet and adorable when she could increase her size and rip them limb from limb if she felt so inclined. Not that she would. Even if they were the people for which she was looking, she wanted their connection, so the Department could close down the whole pipeline.

Ari backed the car out of the garage and turned left, then, after a few more turns, drove onto First Avenue and headed north. That surprised the hell out of Silje. How could two strippers afford an uptown address? Though she had to admit she didn't know the city well yet, and there might be some district more appropriate on the same route.

Deep inside, she knew she was wrong. Both Ari and Devante wore expensive clothes. Ari had on a pair of slacks that looked suspiciously made-to-measure, and his shirt collar fit around his neck perfectly, even though he'd left the top few buttons undone. The shirt folds fell so crisply around his lean body, it had to be top quality. She squinted at his wrist; it was no imitation Rolex, if she were any judge.

Devante wore a pair of chinos and a silk shirt. Rich boys both. Perhaps stripping paid better than she thought. Already disturbed by her evening, more than she'd admit to, this disturbed her even more.

*How much do male strippers earn? I'm sitting in a car with Rolex and tailor-mades.*

*If they did the lap-dances, the extras, and had built up a reputation... Yes, they could make good money.*

*They don't do that normally. You asked.*

*No, they don't.*

They didn't have to say more. These men were getting money from something other than their stripping. Silje wasn't surprised any more when the car continued up First Avenue toward Central Park.

Devante stroked her soothingly, and when he tickled the sensitive area under her chin, it was automatic to stretch up her head for him and purr. His mind slipped into hers, and she let it. Just so far around the cat mind she'd painstakingly created for him. She let him slide his senses into her injured paw and created the illusion she needed. When he probed with a gentle finger, she snarled.

He pulled back. "No broken bones, but the paw is severely bruised. Have we any tidbits we can give her?"

Ari shot him an amused glance. "Milk, and I daresay we can find something suitable. Maybe that foie gras you didn't like. Do cats like foie gras?"

Devante went back to the chin-stroking. She could get used to this. "We could try her on it and find out. It shouldn't do her any harm."

The car sped along the Avenue. This being New York, there were always cars around, but not as many as earlier in the evening, when the dinner crowd made its way to its favorite eating places, or the nightclub crowd headed for the newest sensation, only to find themselves lining up for a few precious places. Silje had been to a few, and she couldn't see the difference between a hot spot and a not-hot spot, but she wasn't unworldly. The people made the difference. The crowded, sweaty clubs held a tingle, like the atmosphere in *Hel* tonight.

The car slowed, turned, and swept up East 81st Street to a prestigious block of apartments. She relayed the address to Dubreis.

*Okay, now get out of there. They're Talents; they're living beyond what they should be earning. That's all we need to know for now.*

Getting out would be easier said than done. An underground parking lot, operated with a keycard. Easy enough for a cat to slip underneath, but she didn't want to alert their suspicions. Agents they might not be, but they were Talents. Any attempt to use her Talents, and they'd notice. Any attempt to mess with their minds, in effect.

Devante kept a firm hold on her while they parked. Then, with him cradling her in his arms, so careful not to touch her "injured" paw, he got out of the car.

She glanced around. Two or three cars stood nearby. She could use them.

A squall, a yell, one rake of her claws, and the job was done. She left a howling Devante behind her and, after an attempt to race after her, Ari turned his attention back to his friend. She lost them both in the line of cars near the exit.

Only when they'd gone away to fetch some equipment to help them in their search did she disable the security cameras and call Dubreis to flash in and get her. Outside, ruffled, naked except for Dubreis's greatcoat, they waited for the car to take them home.

"Why didn't they shape-shift?" she wondered. "They are shape-shifters, right?"

"Oh yeah," Dubreis confirmed. "They're shifters. Didn't you see their sigils? Jaguars."

Shit.

Just what she needed. More cats.

## Chapter Four

“Your birthday present should be arriving soon,” Diane said.

Silje’s anxiety rose, clogging her throat. She cleared it. “Does it have to be me?”

Diane grinned. “It does now. I booked them earlier, told them about you and what we wanted for you. Your birthday, a private dance with the feathers, courtesy of your girlfriends.”

“You or Candy could pose as me.” She gave her best appealing smile, but it didn’t work.

“Not Candy; she’s our geek. We might need her in the apartment if they have hardware. She and Virgilio Dubreis are breaking into their apartment while they’re here; I’m outside on watch.” Diane wore her distinctive hair bundled up into a ball cap, and only a few green hairs straggled down over her cheek. Her clothes were nondescript. A driver, that was all.

On the other hand, Silje was dressed to party in a short blue lace dress, her hair bound up in its French twist but enhanced with a decorative clip. High heeled shoes, pearls, and a great makeup job made her look ready for dinner, a club, anything. She stood in one of the Department’s nondescript apartments in Queens, instead of her own nondescript apartment a few miles farther south. Quite a few miles, since the ’burbs offered better value. She hardly

noticed the quiet click of the apartment door as Diane left, but paced the carpet in the living room -- in this compact apartment the only room, apart from the bathroom and a tiny lobby, which hardly qualified as rooms at all. The daybed in the corner, the sofa, the TV, all were what she would describe as "nice," together with a few pictures and personal items scattered about to make the apartment look more like home.

Nothing like the apartment the two Brazilians had on the Upper East Side.

That address had confirmed their suspicions. The apartment was owned by a Brazilian conglomerate, the one high on the list of possible distributors of the drug. The Santos Group had a pharmaceutical division in its long list of interests and investments. All the Department needed was proof, and then they'd bring the Brazilians in. Tonight, if possible. Agents were stationed outside, backup to Silje if she needed it.

It all panned out. Maybe the supply pipeline was shorter than anyone suspected, which was good news; it could be shut down faster. Or maybe these two were mavericks. Try as they might, no one at the Department had discovered the identities of the two men yet, not for sure, but that elusive likeness she'd recognized in the shorter of the two haunted Silje, and she'd had a sleepless night thinking about it.

Now she had a private dance booked, and she was supposed to keep them busy until Dubreis sent her the word. She just hoped it was a long dance, and that they didn't get violent. That was why Dubreis was on the case; he'd constantly monitor her, and flash here if she needed him. Not that she would. She could take care of herself, but these two Brazilians were Talents. If they were mortals, they wouldn't stand a chance, but they were unknown quantities with unknown Talents. Her best bet was to humor them until the team had finished with the Brazilians' East Side apartment. Which meant letting them dance for her.

She checked the digital alarm clock sitting on the table next to the daybed. Half an hour had passed since Diane left. No wonder her feet felt weary from all that pacing. They should be here soon.

*Le sigh.*

From her brief mental hook up with the men, she'd established an unintentional link. She liked them. They might be purveyors of a drug that could become the next scourge on society, but they were nice guys. People sometimes forgot that dealers could be family men. They had partners and children. They weren't always the stereotyped sneering baddie.

She kept telling herself that she'd done worse things, been in worse places, but nothing made the coming ordeal any easier. Her natural reticence made her shy away from situations like this; her deep desire for personal privacy gave her a dread of revealing her emotions to anyone else, even to her long-dead husband, a quiet mortal with whom she'd shared a comfortable but fulfilling, relationship for twenty years.

The setup was that she expected her friends to pick her up for dinner, but the guys would turn up instead and dance for her. The janitor downstairs had seen a lot in his stay here, but she'd bet two Brazilians in carnival costume would be a first.

When the bell rang she didn't shriek, although she wanted to; she merely jumped a foot, smoothed down her lace skirt, and opened the door.

There they were, giving her their professional smiles. One had a large CD player in his hand, the other carried a sports bag, and they wore the feather outfits from the previous night.

She could even tell which was which. The slightly shorter one with the powerful muscles and skin tone more mocha than the cappuccino of his friend ... that was Devante. The taller, leaner one...that was Ari.

And, she reminded herself, they were gay. Hot, but gay, and she was working.

"Oh my goodness!" She knew her shock looked good. She'd practiced it in the mirror until she got it right. "Aren't you...?" Raising her hand to her face was probably overkill, but it was totally genuine this time.

These guys really were sexy. They stood at ease in their ridiculous feather costumes with those killer smiles. Devante bowed to her. "We are a birthday present from Diane and Candy."

Then Ari turned on the CD player, and those drum rhythms started up.

She backed up, and they followed her, right through the cramped lobby, suddenly even tinier in the hot atmosphere.

"Oh, my goodness. I thought it was my friends at the door!"

So far, it was going as planned.

Ari put the CD player down on the floor, and after Devante drew a chair into the center of the room, Ari took Silje's hand and sat her in it. Then they began to dance. That hip-swaying motion did its job all over again and warmed her, from the core of her being out. Their feathers touched her as they moved, getting closer, and then backing off. *Please don't strip. Please.*

The first feathers fell to the floor.

"I thought you guys didn't do anything outside the club?"

Their smiles fixed on their faces, they continued dancing. Oh, God, they were good at this. Really, really good. Now her brain caught on the word "really" and wouldn't let go, chanting it in her mind as they danced and shed their plumage around her.

The music escalated, the beat got faster, and other instruments joined in. Around her, the feathers whirled, falling to the floor like brightly colored rain. The dancers postured and twisted around Silje, but did not touch her.

Muscles gleamed with sweat, beading on the lightly oiled bodies. She wanted to touch, to slide her hands over the sweat-slicked skin, taste them with the tip of her tongue, and join them in whatever hedonistic pleasure they had in mind.

The thought shocked her right down to her soul. Never had she forgotten her job before, never had she lost her cool, but then she'd never been forced to watch two men



stripping down to their feathers just for her. Two men with incredibly beautiful bodies at her command. They prostrated themselves before her, going down limbo-style, on their knees, the bulges at their crotches making her mouth water.

They were gay. She'd seen them kiss.

*Brazilian*, her treacherous mind told her. *They have all kinds of variations down there.*

Both men were down to their G-strings, or whatever they were called on men, when she felt the first probe to her mind.

She'd been waiting for that.

She let them in. Right in, or at least farther than they'd been before, enough to see her for what she was. In the club, she'd kept her identity carefully hidden, the way she'd been trained, but now, in this controlled environment, she could show them what they were up against.

It had the effect she wanted. Devante, at present in front of her tightly clasped knees, stopped dead. Ari, behind her, ceased in the act of feathering his fingers above her arms. His hands stilled, barely touching her goose-bumped flesh.

She felt rather than saw them lock gazes over the top of her head. The music pounded on, but they lost the rhythm and remained still.

Ari's hands gripped her arms. "You're a Talent."

"Yes, but aren't we entitled to some fun?"

Devante got to his feet in an easy motion and crossed the room to the CD player, switching it off. "Yes, you are. We are, but you aren't having fun, are you?" His accent was noticeably less than when they'd arrived at the door, and his English much more fluent.

"Y-yes. Of course I am." Her job was just to distract. She could be a civilian Talent, nothing more than that. Get them into conversation, offer them a drink. Give her agents enough time to search the apartment on East 81st Street.

Ari's dark eyes narrowed speculatively. "No, you're not. If your girlfriends set you up, as they told us, you either would have thrown us out, or enjoyed what we were doing. You look nervous. We expect to make our audience hot, and you are that, but you have a lot of nervousness underneath."

She pointed her nose in the air. "Arrogant, aren't you?"

"Oh, yeah. We're good at what we do. We've danced at the Rio Carnival too many years not to know." Oblivious, as she was not, of his near-naked state, Ari balanced his hands on his hips. "So what's going on? This isn't your apartment, either, is it?"

"H-how can you tell that?" That was simply amazing, unless...she put her head in her hands and groaned.

"Devante is a strong empath. He can match people with their belongings, with their backgrounds." Ari turned and impatiently kicked a feathered garment aside.

"I know what this is about." Devante's voice -- lower, firmer -- held a note of shock.

Ari spun around to face his friend. "What?" He must have seen something in Devante's face because shock now etched his features. "Oh, God, the apartment!"

He whirled around and headed for the sports bag they'd dumped in a corner. He ripped it open and dragged out some clothes.

"What are you doing?" She blinked and opened her mind, ready to call Dubreis. Things were getting out of hand here.

Another mind slammed into hers, one she didn't know, but after the first shock of arrival, she realized Devante wasn't stopping her communication, but trying to give her extra strength for a strong communication. She stared at him in shock, and he gripped her shoulders, meeting her eyes. "That apartment is booby-trapped. If they don't open the door by swiping the keycard a set number of times, they could die. Whoever they are, stop them!"

*Dubreis!*

No reply. Dear God, what had she done?

Ari thrust the clothes into a small drawstring bag and slung it around his neck, but at the same time, he was shape-shifting. Golden fur rippled along his spine, growing thicker and denser, interspersed with dark brown blotches. She'd never seen a jaguar shape-shifter before, and in his other form, Ari was just as magnificent as his human form.

"Clever girl. Keep trying to contact your people." Devante still held her, but not so hard she couldn't wrench away if they needed to.

Ari got to the door, opened it with his one remaining human hand and left, slamming the door behind him.

*Dubreis!*

No reply again. Her numbed mind beginning to work again, she opened the channel wider.

*Can anyone hear me?*

*Yeah.*

*Candy, the apartment locks are booby-trapped.*

*We know.* Candy sounded grim, and Silje's stomach tightened.

*Dubreis?*

*He's okay. Tell those guys we're used to dealing with poison gas. He passed out when he got a whiff of the stuff, but he'll be fine. He was in full vampire mode. Ask them what it is. We've disabled the traps, but it's something we haven't seen before.*

Fuck, poison gas! No wonder the Brazilians were worried, but shouldn't they be pleased if they were drug dealers? None of this made sense.

*There's a jaguar on his way to you.*

*Check.*

"What's the gas?"

Devante's features paled, thin lines etching his mouth. "Has it killed anyone?"

"No. We're used to dealing with booby traps. So what is it?"

He closed his eyes and sucked in a relieved breath. "Thank God. It's not commercially available, and it has a very long scientific name. One of our chemists developed it, but we decided it was too dangerous to put on general use. It kills without leaving a mark, and it can't be detected afterwards. The last capsules are at the apartment. I told Ari we should get rid of the stuff, even though we have the antidote handy."

She gaped at the thought of such a lethal weapon at large in New York. "So what about the formula?"

"We erased it from our chemist's mind and destroyed all copies."

That more than anything else tipped the scales for her. These were no evil drug dealers, bent on creating a new addiction.

"Who are you?" A thought belatedly entered her mind. "And what do you mean '*our* chemists'?"

A faint trace of a smile etched Devante's face for a bare moment. "Ari's father owns the company Santos International. I am their adopted son."

"So he is --"

"José Aristides da Costa Santos."

"And you are?" She caught her breath. *Now* she knew. "I've been seeing your picture on posters all over the city recently. If it weren't for the dark glasses and the -- the clothes, I'd have realized sooner. You're Devante Siruto, aren't you?"

Silent, his full lower lip caught between his teeth, he nodded.

"The child from the streets who became a millionaire. The author of that book, *Siruto*."

He let the lip go with a sensual droop that made her want to touch it, and not with her hands. She ached to trace that lip with her tongue. Shocked, she allowed herself that much honesty. She'd never been so attracted to a man on such a short acquaintance.

“Ari’s father found me living on the streets in Rio, and he took me home to São Paulo. Even as a child, I was empathic, so he suspected I was Talented or at least a sensitive. When I came into my full strength at puberty and performed my first shape-shift, I turned out to be a jaguar, like his family.”

He put his hands on her shoulders when she would have moved away. His proximity unnerved her, made her want to reclaim her space. He was so vital, so deeply male, and it was years since she’d been this close to a man in his prime.

“Tell me your name now, your real name. Who are you? What are you doing here? I suspect government intervention. Shit, I told Ari you must be when I sensed your Talent last night, but he wouldn’t listen. He’s paranoid, desperate to find the dealers who stole the Cephalox formula. He thought you might be connected to them.”

“Ah.” The pieces were falling into place now. “Someone stole the formula from the Santos Company. How do you know it’s their Cephalox the dealers are selling in the club? More companies than Santos make it.”

“We have a few subtle variations that tell us it is ours, the addition of a placebo in the mix. Many drug companies do this, as a kind of marker. We stand to lose our reputation, and in our business, reputation is very important.”

“We?”

“We. Ari and I are one. If he suffers, then so do I.”

He released her at last. To Silje’s shock, she wanted him back, wanted him touching her again.

“So who are you? I can guess, but tell me anyway.”

“Department 57,” Silje told him. “You’ve heard of us?”

“Who in the Talented community hasn’t?” He ran his hands through his hair, ruffling the already disordered mass of dark waves. “You’re government. That’s why we were frantic when we realized what was going on. You could close us down if you thought Santos

International was involved in smuggling illegal drugs into the country.” He broke off and the distant look in his eyes, plus the extra activity in his mind, told her he was contacting his partner telepathically. She took the time to contact Candy and relay Devante’s information.

*We guessed as much from what we found here, Candy told her. It’s a company-owned apartment, but a luxury one, owned by the family. Only family would stay here. Too many personal things about to be a general business apartment.* She paused. *So we call this operation off?*

*We still have drug dealers to find.*

*Yeah, so we do.*

Silje was still team leader on this one. *Okay, find out what you can from Aristides when he gets there. I’ll question Devante Siruto and join you later.*

*Sure thing, boss.* Silje expected sass or sarcasm, but she sensed none.

“Ari is there, so he will speak to your agents, he says,” Devante announced, breaking into her conversation. She relayed that information too and received Candy’s assurance that they’d talk to him, not arrest him.

Then she realized their apartment was miles away. “Nearly there? I didn’t realize jaguars could travel so fast.”

Devante shrugged, and that traitorous part of her mind admired the play of his strong muscles, enhanced by the oil he wore for his dance. “We are jaguar-gods, the kind that were worshiped many years ago. We are not like ordinary cats, though we share their characteristics.”

He turned to the sports bag, giving her a wonderful view of his very muscular buns. The G-string didn’t cover anything, merely tantalized her. That was an ass she’d like to touch, her body told her, though her mind said to keep off, push her mind away from any thoughts of sex. A beautifully toned, strong body, a stunning back view...but not for her. Even though Devante was friend, not foe, she had no business going there.

He turned back to her, a pair of jeans in his hand, but he made no effort to put them on.

When she looked up at him, she could tell he knew what she'd been thinking about, her thoughts so instant, so unbidden she'd had no time to hide them. The wicked gleam in his eyes told her everything about that, though she stayed out of his mind.

"*Fofinha*," Devante said. She loved the sound of that, though she had no idea what it meant. "You are the white cat of last night, are you not?"

She nodded, words having temporarily left her.

"I thought you were beautiful. The jaguar in me called to you, but I suppressed it. It was not right. You hid your human side very well."

"I've been trained."

"Obviously. You'll have to train me." He took a step toward her, dropping the jeans on the floor as if they didn't matter any more. The light in his dark eyes was one she hadn't seen in him before, but which she'd seen in other places a long time ago. Desire.

"What did you call me?"

"*Fofinha*. It is an endearment. Loosely translated, it means 'little fluffy one.'"

Silje burst into shocked laughter. That there should be an appropriate nickname for her, in Portuguese of all languages, surprised the hell out of her. "I can be big and fluffy as well. My true size is closer to yours."

"I have never heard of a cat such as you. Tell me what you are. It also occurs to me that I don't yet know your name, just what you are. Won't you tell me?"

"I'm a grimalkin, a Norwegian forest cat, the kind that used to pull the goddess Freya's carriage."

"I thought she had peacocks?" He took another step toward her, but she held her ground. If he was trying to intimidate her, he was doing a poor job of it. With her trained psi senses, she had no need to fear him.

"That was Hera, the Greek goddess."

"And your name?"

"Silje. Silje Nordstrom."

"Sil-ya." The name sounded far more musical in his dark, liquid voice than it ever had before. She wanted him to say it again. "Silya."

His arms went around her, and his mouth descended to hers.



## Chapter Five

Silje pressed against him, heedless of oil or anything else. She'd suppressed the sensual nature of her cat self for too long, and deep inside, it pined for the mating rituals, the unabated sexuality of the cat in season. Not that she had ever allowed it any freedom, too afraid to loose the leash and set it free.

His tongue entered her mouth like a suppliant, carefully easing its way, and she greeted it eagerly with her own. Relief and desire mixed in her body, relief that her instincts weren't wrong, desire because this man was simply gorgeous, the best-looking man she'd ever met, apart from his friend. If she'd had to choose between them, she'd have been hard-pressed to do it.

She felt his relief, that he and Ari hadn't unwittingly killed representatives of the American government, likely to get them into more trouble than the theft of the Cephalox formula. Then she felt his open desire for her, free of any inhibitions, any doubts.

She pulled back, her mind catching up with this turn in events and said the first thing that came into her head. "I thought you were gay."

"I'm Brazilian." He touched her lower lip with his finger, tracing its curve. She wanted to suck it into her mouth, but she still wasn't sure where this would lead, or if she wanted it if it did. "We don't have the hard and fast designations you Americans do."

"I'm not American; I'm Norwegian," she said. She hesitated. "At least, I was."

"Tell me." He eased her back and only then did she realize how close they were to the bed. She had either to sit, lie, or fall on it. She chose to sit. He sat next to her and curved his arm around her shoulders, not allowing her any space to pull away.

"This is my new life. I 'died' in Norway six months ago. I'm starting afresh in America."

"Did something terrible happen?"

She hadn't imagined he could sound so sympathetic. Her smile didn't waver. "No, it was time for me to move on; that was all. I'd reached sixty and my parents had died a couple of years before. I was a widow of twenty years' standing. No reason for me to stay." No reason at all. No friends, no ties, and she could keep her job, just relocate. Cristos found her a new identity, allowing her to keep her own first name. The new identity came with a different kind of loneliness, but one she found easier to cope with.

He pressed a kiss to her forehead, and followed it up with one to her nose, and a gentle, barely-there brushing of lips. "But it is a strain, no?"

"Yes." She licked her lip to gather his taste on her tongue.

"I have not done this yet, started again. I'm on my first life."

Shocked, she sat up. "You're in a relationship. You called Ari 'my love.'"

He pulled her back into his arms, nestling her head on his shoulder. "We have room for another. I wouldn't hurt Ari; *this* will not hurt him."

"You've done this before?"

"Shared our bodies with others? Yes."

Still she tried to find a reason to back away, her lack of experience, her inability to let another into her life coming to the fore. "I'm too old for you."

“That is simply foolish. Mortal talk.”

He tugged at her hair, and she realized he’d released her hair clip. A few thuds told her hairpins were falling on the bed as he relentlessly drew them out. “You look about twenty-five. The perfect age for me. I am thirty-five years old.”

He dropped kisses on her hair, her face, and then he curved his strong hands around her jaw and tilted her face up. His next kiss devastated her senses, took her completely by surprise, because she’d thought she’d already experienced an intense kiss from Devante. This one deepened and strengthened, went on and on. She never wanted it to stop. Silje trembled with emotion, with desire, on shaky ground now. As an agent, she was confident and in control, but not here.

When he finally dragged his mouth from hers, they were lying on the bed, and his hands were buried in her hair. He rolled her onto her back and sat up, staring down at her. There was no way his tiny G-string could hold his erection, and his cockhead pushed over the top of the miniscule scrap of green fabric, glistening with his pre-come. Its firm, broad head made her mouth water.

“When I saw you at the club my first impulse was to purr,” Silje told him, abandoning everything in favor of honesty. “My cat called to you, and you replied; I heard you. I wanted you then. I want you now.”

His eyes stared into hers, wild and wanting, before he lifted her. “This dress is very pretty, very alluring, but I want you out of it.”

If she agreed to this, she was agreeing to sex with him. Was she mad? She must be, because she wanted him, and she couldn’t think of one good reason why she shouldn’t fuck him now. Completely insane. Relief at Candy’s news from the apartment undoubtedly added to her surge of emotion, but the outpouring of desire had as much to do with her total lack of intimacy with any other person for a very long time. “I haven’t done this for a while.”

"I have, but not with a woman." The certainty in his voice, the determination, and the way he looked at her melted the rest of her inhibitions away. Still trembling, but with desire as much as nervousness, she accepted this was going to happen.

She lifted her arms to allow him to slide the dress over her head. The silk lining shushed as he threw it aside. The gleam in his eyes intensified. "I like your taste in underwear."

Since the lace dress had a wide neckline and might give a peep of strap, she'd worn her only set of blue underwear, which happened to be silk, with a lace-trimmed bra. Her Norwegian self had reveled in sensible underwear, white cotton for the most part, so when she'd arrived in New York, while Cristos was still establishing her identity and she had little to do, she'd indulged herself on Fifth Avenue, splurging on delicious little scraps of nothing. She'd never dreamed she'd have the opportunity to show off her new purchases so soon.

Silje shivered under Devante's scrutiny. With one blunt finger, he traced the curve from just under her breast to the top of her hip, and then flattened his hand on her stomach. The variation in skin tone was startling, and sexy as hell. He smoothed both hands over her, watching in absorbed fascination. His warmth seeped through her, but just as she was beginning to wonder all over again what she was doing, how she'd got here, he stopped all speculation by giving her another of his devastating kisses.

"No," he said, when she made a small protest. "You want this; I want this. We will have this."

"Won't Ari object at all? Are you sure?" That was her last effort at decency, at the straitlaced Norwegian she was finally leaving behind for good.

"He will not mind, *gatinha*." He kissed her again. "Only that he wasn't here to share."

That sent her mind reeling. She didn't want to know what that meant. Did she?

Not now. Not when he was kissing her mouth, his lips leaving hers with reluctance in a long, hot separation to touch her throat, her neck, and the hollow at the base, which made her gasp.

“You like that?” He kissed her again, leaving a damp mark. “I like it too. You have wonderful skin.”

“I should say that. Yours is gorgeous.”

“Mmm.” At least he didn’t deny it. Dark coffee, his skin sang under her hands. The oil slid, but there wasn’t as much of it as there’d been in the club last night.

“Is it scented?”

“What?” He nudged her bra strap aside.

“The oil you wear.”

“Lavender tonight,” he said, intent on kissing the skin he’d exposed.

“It’s nice. Every time I touch you, I get another waft of it.”

“Mmm. Ari created it.” He lifted his head. “He uses it for massage.”

The thought made her hips glide against the slippery bedcover in a sinuous wriggle.

He slipped the other bra strap down, and she felt the cool air when he exposed her breasts. But not for long. Hot, wet heat engulfed them as he sucked one into his mouth and cupped the other with one large hand. He played with her nipple with his tongue, flicking it in the hot, dark heat of his mouth, and she rewarded him with cries of delight. Her fingers tightened on his back before he moved, and she lost her grip, her fingertips sliding across the taut muscle.

“Shit! I’m sorry; you have to be perfect for the dance, don’t you?”

He lifted his head, his eyes gleaming, his mouth curved in a wicked smile. “Do what you want to me, *minha doçur*. We will improvise, or fuzz, or -- something. Do not deny me your natural actions. I want them; I welcome them.”

Still, she tried hard not to scratch him. She hadn't Candy's amazing manicures, but her nails were a feminine length, past the ends of her fingers, and strengthened by a recent salon manicure and polish.

He slid down further, and she heard his deep intake of breath. Tired of passivity, she made to sit up, but he pushed her back down. "Let me do this. I haven't had a woman for a long time. I want to explore you, and remind myself why women are so delectable."

The thought of being his first for a while, whether it was three weeks or three years, heightened her excitement. "Then let me look at you. I saw you at the club, but then --" She sucked her breath in between her teeth as he pushed her panties down her legs.

"If you stay like this, then yes."

He climbed off the end of the divan bed and grasped her ankles, easing her legs apart and urging her heels toward her buttocks. She lifted her knees and felt herself blush, the heat rising to her skin.

"Oh, yes. Just like that." Devante's eyes fixed intently on her pussy; he climbed out of his G-string and kicked the scrap of fabric away. "I wonder if I could make you come just by looking at you?" he said, his voice calm. She stared at him, but his gaze melted her. He raised it slowly to her face, lingering at her breasts. "Do you know what I'm doing?"

"Me, I hope."

His smile broadened. "Of course, but I want to connect with Ari, show him what I'm about to take. He can watch if he wants to. You have any objection to that?"

She began to shake her head, but fixed with that intent stare, she couldn't lie. The thought made her squirm. She shoved her shock of realization aside, too intent on experiencing the moment to stop now.

"Oh, yes, you are hot for that. I see your juices flowing."

\* \* \* \* \*

Several miles away, Ari shuddered.

*Look at this, lover. Look what I'm doing while you are talking to the authorities.*

He looked at the cool woman he'd left shortly before. There was nothing cool about her now. She lay on her back on the bed in that cheap apartment, making even the basic divan and the shiny pink polyester cover alluring. Her legs opened wide, her gleaming pussy revealed in all its glorious detail. A natural blonde with a lightly trimmed bush of hair he longed to run his fingers through, into the treasure framed, not hidden, by the fair curls. He closed his eyes.

"Ari? Are you all right?"

He carefully brought his senses under control before he opened them again to give Candy a cool stare. "Perfectly, but I am tired. You say there is some delay before your boss gets here. I think there may be some time before Devante arrives with your agent. They seem to have gotten into some -- ah -- traffic problems. Do you mind if I go lie down for half an hour?"

She sighed and tapped a tooth with one diamantéed nail. "Sure. Go ahead. I'll wake you when they arrive."

Hoping his erection didn't show, Ari got to his feet and strode to his bedroom, reaching the sanctuary with a sigh of relief. All the time, he saw Devante with this woman. Ari lay on the bed and reached for his fly.

She was white, so pale-skinned, and her fair hair flowed around her on the pillow. Ari wanted that silky mass wrapped around his cock. The thought made the flesh harden even more under his hand. He shoved his jeans down his thighs and let Devante lead the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Devante, is he watching?" The thought shouldn't turn her on, but it did. Devastatingly. She was showing off her body for another man, one she couldn't see and who

couldn't participate. She moaned and felt her juices flow, running down the crack in her ass. When she twisted, the cover underneath her chilled her with its dampness.

"Ari is watching. He enjoys seeing you like this." The dark eyes gleamed. "And so, I see, do you. Let it take you, *fofinha*; don't fight it."

She swallowed. "I don't know what I'm doing here, why I'm letting you do this."

His gaze seared her. "Because you enjoy it and so do we. Forget *should* and *should not*. Let your body tell you what it needs."

Silje sighed and stretched her arms up to him. "Come to me."

"With pleasure." But he didn't come over her. He bent and slid his arms under her thighs, and took another deep breath. "You smell good, Sil-ya." God, she loved the way he said her name, with that slight halt after the L. He savored her name as he savored her body, with a connoisseur's enjoyment. "This time, *minha doçura*, let me control. Another time, it will be you, but I want to enjoy and share with Ari."

"Do you share everything with him?"

"Pretty much." He looked up at her face, his head tilted to one side. "Do you mind?"

"I g-guess not." This was so far out of her experience, she didn't know if she minded or not, but her treacherous body loved it. Though she didn't know how she was going to face the aristocratic Brazilian again without revealing her embarrassment. This was too good to worry about tomorrow, or even five minutes from now.

"Devante, can't I do anything?"

He leaned one hand on his chin, his elbow propped between her legs. His smile was positively mischievous. "Do what your body moves you to do, but let me control this time. I want to."

She waved in an aristocratic gesture. "On, slave."

He chuckled. "We'll play that game another day if you like it."



His gaze returned to her pussy, and she felt another gush of liquid escape. It was as if it was performing for him.

"I cannot resist," he muttered as if to himself, and bent to her, spreading his hands over her thighs.

One long lick from opening to clit made her shudder. Another made her squirm, but his hands held her firmly in place. His breath warmed her, and when she felt her eyes closing to savor, she forced them back open. She didn't want to miss a minute of this.

He touched his tongue to her clit in greeting. She saw his mouth, then his eyes flicked up to her face, and he grinned. "Watch me, baby. Watch every minute. I want to get to know you in the worst way."

He wriggled his tongue against her slit, so carefully, almost fastidiously, the way she first touched herself when she masturbated; she'd masturbated a lot recently. Being young, good-looking, and single in New York hadn't been the invitation she'd thought when she first left Norway. Or perhaps she'd been looking in the wrong places.

His tongue was more sensitive than her forefinger, and more flexible, too. He curled it around her clit, stroked, and audibly lapped, making a sound of appreciation low in his throat, something between a growl and a purr. "If I'd known Norwegians tasted this good, I would have sampled many more."

"Ah!" She jerked. He licked with more purpose, circled her clit with the very tip of his tongue until he maddened her with wanting. His mouth busy, he couldn't speak, but he could still communicate.

*You taste good!*

"Oh, God!"

She shuddered with a sudden, fast orgasm, her pussy contracting violently. She couldn't remember when that had happened to her before. It had been too long.

*Yes, keep going, fofinha, keep coming!*

His mouth closed around her clit, wet and hot, and he took his hand off her left thigh. She watched, fascinated, as he traced her leg with a teasing finger before trailing it into her center.

He drew it down, past her clit without touching it, tantalizing her, sliding through her soaked crease. He pushed deep, touched her pubic bone and made her feel every single nerve ending, every spot, before driving it inside her with a sudden, hard, shove.

Who would have imagined one finger could do all that?

No longer interested in anything except watching him and feeling him, Silje cried out when he pushed two more fingers in to join the first one. She was so wet now she felt she could take a tree trunk. His mouth descended on her clit, sucking it, drawing it up and out. It must fill his mouth; it felt so huge.

He sucked lavishly, extended his tongue to lap below, then closed his lips and increased the suction. She was barely aware of what he was doing, completely at his mercy and happy to be that way, opening her throat and calling his name, chanting it until with a last suck and a thrust of his fingers, he made her howl.

"Your muscles are good, very strong," he whispered against her sensitized skin as he came up her body, his body sinuously sliding up hers, the scented oil marking his progress like a great cat marking his prey.

His cock slid along her soaked crease, but he didn't thrust inside her. She lifted her legs to circle his waist, urging him in. He lifted his head, his lips glistening with her juice.

The sight drove her crazy. "Kiss me."

He lowered his head to caress her lips and whisper against them, his breath flowing into her mouth and over her cheeks. "You taste good, *gata gostosa*. I'll want that again before too long."

If he didn't fuck her soon she'd go mad, she was sure of it. His broad cock rested outside her pussy, sliding in their combined juices, teasing her.

She moved, and he slid an infinitesimal amount inside. If anything, this was worse. Almost howling, she jerked up off the bed, and impaled herself, reaching down to stretch her hands over his buttocks and force him in.

His low groan reverberated through her whole body, shaking her to the core. She'd known he was big, but seeing it and feeling it were two different things. Completely different. His hard flesh invaded her wet, silky softness, forcing its way into her body.

"Devante, you're amazing."

"Tell me what you feel, *fofinha*. Show me. Open your mind."

"Not my heart?" Why had she said such a stupid thing?

He just smiled. "We may get to that another time. For now, enjoy what is. Open your mind to mine. Merge with me."

She'd never done that before, although she'd heard about it. Talents that merged with each other, minds as well as bodies.

Well, fuck, who imagined tonight would end like this? Silje certainly hadn't. Careful to protect her secrets, the ones concerning the Department, she opened her mind. Let him see how she felt.

A rush of wet passion drove straight to her core. He lifted and drove deep inside her, rotating his hips to feel all of her and experience her.

Silje reveled in the way he surrounded her, covered her, before he lifted up onto his hands and stared down to where they joined. "We go together so well, Silje. Look."

Her fair pubic hair meshed with his black curls, both wet, intimately locked together. He lifted and drove in rhythmic precision, deep and hard, intent on watching her. She watched him. He was worth watching. Dark eyes made even darker with desire, mouth full, reddened from their kisses... Every pore of his strong, muscular body concentrated on her. She felt him, felt his mind, completely centered on her. Nothing had ever been so sexy.

The wet, rhythmic sounds of their lovemaking filled her ears; sweet and spicy scents filled her nostrils.

Their minds merged, their bodies joined; they were as near one being as any two creatures ever got. He drove into her hot, wet pussy, ruthless and relentless, and feeling it from both sides. His strength, her resistance, pushing against each other. Never so intimate, never so joined.

He groaned, and she watched avidly as he closed his eyes. "You feel better than you should, *gata gostosa*."

She knew what he meant. This was almost too much. The peaks rising inside her feverishly heated to a climax like she'd never known before. He stroked her, his hands gliding down from her breasts to her hips and up again, all he could do while he rested on his elbows, but enough. He dipped to take a nipple into his mouth, so much more sensitive now, and purred against her skin. His low purrs and growls pushed her to the final peak, and she screamed.

She hadn't realized she'd gripped her legs hard around his waist until he laughed and lifted his head.

"My turn," he managed before resting his forehead against hers and giving one last growl.

He pulsed and shot his seed inside her in a series of short, hard jerks. Silje had never *felt* a man come before, and she loved the extra warmth, his uncontrolled shuddering, and her response, her cunt milking and sucking every last drop from him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari came so hard and so high that drops fell onto his face. He lapped at them, wishing they could be Devante's come.

\* \* \* \* \*

“What does *gata gostosa* mean?”

“Literally it means a cat that tastes good. You do.” He kissed her, sucking briefly at her lips before completing with a soft caress of his tongue. “You taste sweet, Silje.” He kissed her again, as if unwilling to relinquish her taste. She lay with her leg tucked between his, her breasts cradled against his broad chest.

“And *gatinha*?”

He grinned. “Kitten.”

She smiled back. “Appropriate. Thank you. It’s a long time since I had sex.”

He touched his lips to hers again. “Or made love.”

She wanted to laugh derisively. How could she possibly love someone after one encounter? She’d heard about shape-shifters who merged so closely during lovemaking they fell in love with each other as a result, but she hadn’t believed it before.

That hadn’t happened here, she told herself firmly. She’d met a hot male, he wanted her, and they’d fucked like bunnies. Never had the missionary position been so hot, but his relentless seduction hadn’t really left time for anything else.

“So how long has it been since you’ve fucked with a man?” he asked, breaking into her denials.

“Twenty years, maybe. Something like that.” Nineteen years and five months. It felt like five hundred to Silje sometimes. Childless, but then many shape-shifters were; she’d had little to do but her career in helping to develop Department 57.

Devante’s breath escaped in a light whistle. “Twenty years! Why so long?”

She tried to explain, but it wasn’t easy. “My husband died young, when I was forty, and after that, I never found time for a private life.” She didn’t share the shard of pain that always touched her when she thought of Erik, but she refused to hide it either. Devante’s hand stroked her arm in a comforting gesture, and she knew he’d sensed it. “We needed the Department in Norway and Sweden, Denmark and Finland. It was a dangerous time and

several families threatened to reveal themselves to society at large.” She sighed. “I come from a straitlaced family. They didn’t approve of love affairs. Above all things, they believed in control, self-control above all, and that meant abstinence. After all, my father said once, what was twenty years when you lived for five hundred?” She stroked his cheek. Devante lay completely still, watching her with no expression on his face, but inside their minds, they still linked, and she felt his horror. “There is more to life than sex, Devante.”

“Yes, but why deprive yourself? Why not enjoy and live? What’s wrong with laughter?”

She found explaining to someone as vital as Devante almost impossible. “When everyone around you feels the same way, it is harder to rebel. I loved my parents dearly. It would have hurt them if I defied them, simply because I could.”

“Would you have done, if you’d found someone like me, for instance?”

“Yes.” She sat up in a sudden, jerky movement, shocked by her instant admission.

Devante gaze darkened and his hand went to her breast, stroking down the slope and over her nipple. “Don’t worry. I think, had I been in your situation, I might have done the same. I was feeling anger toward your parents until you said you loved them. Then I felt a shadow of their love in your mind. They did as they thought was right. That was why you would have hurt them had you gone your own way. But, *minha doçura*, you are moving on now. Times are different. You are different. Do you not think?”

She laughed. “I would never have gone to a male strip club before and enjoyed it!”

“You liked it?” He laughed too. “I am glad. I won’t ask which act you liked the best.”

“You don’t have to.” She trailed her hand over his bare chest and touched his navel. He shivered. “Do you shave?”

He smiled. “For the club, yes, but not completely. Women prefer a little hair.”

She ran her hand over his groin and felt the stubble of close-shaved hair. His balls were cleanly shaven, but he’d left a patch around his cock. Black and wiry, but soft to the touch.

“Your chest?”

Smiling, he shook his head. “It’s naturally bare. I think it’s my ancestry.”

“You said Ari’s family took you in.” She bit her lip, breaking off what could be a painful question.

He reached up to cradle her cheek in his hand. “It is all right. There is no trauma. I don’t remember my parents. I lived on the streets until I was about seven. Then the police rounded me up. I was in Rio then. You know what Rio police do to itinerant children?”

She nodded. She’d read about it. The authorities rounded the children up and put them in institutions, or sometimes vigilante groups who wanted to “clean up the streets” killed them.

“How could a shape-shifter family give up a precious child?” Fertility was so low among shape-shifting communities that contraception between consenting adults was frowned on. If they’d been into making laws, she didn’t doubt that would be one of them. Even just now, when she’d made love with Devante, neither had given a thought to protection. They couldn’t catch or pass on mortal diseases -- the monthly shape-shift took care of that -- and the only other reason was negated by the lack of children.

“I think my mother must have been mortal. Maybe she fucked a shifter without knowing what he was. So many women in Rio are there to service the tourists, or cannot afford to keep a child. We don’t show our abilities until puberty, but I was a companion and friend to Ari, and we grew to love each other. Then, at puberty, I shifted for the first time and I turned out to be a jaguar, just like Ari and his family. There was no going back then.”

“How did you survive until they found you?”

He gave her a gentle smile. “I was a big boy. I managed better than some others.”

“And I was sheltered and cared for.” It didn’t bear thinking about, that children ran wild on the streets and were treated like vermin. “So you’re writing about the ones you left behind in your book.”

“Yes.” His dark eyes glazed over with a distant look. He was remembering. When Silje slipped into his mind, he let her in, past his mental barriers so she could share what he was telling her. “I needed to make it on my own. I always wanted an identity apart from the family, and Ari’s father encouraged me. When I started my business, I took no money from the Santos family. I discovered a product my country produced that hadn’t had much success and set up an export business.”

At her questioning look, he smiled and touched the tip of her nose with one finger. “Ceramic tiles.”

“The feature in the *New York Times* didn’t go into many details.”

“No. I made a fortune in a few years, but I never forget that I began my life as a street child in Rio, and that was the angle the journalists wanted to use in the articles. What I wanted them to use.” The papers had been full of the newest sensation in biographical stories, the riveting story of a street urchin who became a millionaire.

“You’ve been on the *Tonight Show*.”

He nodded. “And I’m going on some other TV shows soon. I can’t stay at the club much longer. Someone is bound to recognize me.” She knew why she hadn’t made the connection before. Wearing a tailor-made suit and shirt, sitting at his ease in the interviewee’s chair, discussing business and the plight of street kids in Brazil, he was a far cry from the stripper in *Hel*. But in whatever incarnation Devante Siruto presented himself, he was still one of the sexiest men she’d ever seen. The other one being his partner, Ari.

“The idea is to show the plight of the street children, not to glorify Devante Siruto. I want people to take notice. Things are improving, but not fast enough; I thought my story would help to bring attention to it.” His smile turned wry. “I didn’t expect quite this level of success.”

“You’re giving the profits from the book to the children.”



He shrugged. "Hardly a sacrifice. I don't need it, but I remember the police roundups, and worse, the vigilantes. They turned hunting the street kids into a sport." She shuddered, and he drew her down again, closer to him. "What a thing to talk about in bed!"

"I'm glad we did. I'm glad you told me." She gave him a soft kiss. "Thank you for telling me."

He grunted. "Someone will recognize me at the club soon, despite the mask."

"So we have to find the source of the drugs soon."

He kissed her gently. "We do."

This was Devante Siruto? This man who'd arrived feathered and oiled, ready to dance for her pleasure? She laughed.

"What is it?"

"I was just thinking that now I know why you don't come out for the tips and photos at the end of the evening at the club. Why you don't take off your masks."

He grinned. "Yeah." He cupped her breast, massaging it gently. "I would like to stay here with you all night, but I think we are expected somewhere? Or may we stay here? This is not your apartment; I knew it as soon as I stepped over the threshold."

Glancing around the far from spacious room, she sighed. The neutral furnishings and deliberately scattered possessions were intended to look personal, and had come to mean a great deal to Silje. This was where a man had reawakened her to things she'd forgotten, feelings long buried.

She would never come back here again. Would her new lover be as fleeting? She swore to herself that she would never think of Devante as anything but a kind, generous man.

And one hell of a lover.

## Chapter Six

“About time.” Cristos turned as Devante and Silje entered the apartment. “What kept you?”

Ari gave Devante a secret smile as his lover, flushed from his recent lovemaking, took a step in front of the woman in a protective gesture. “Traffic holdup,” he growled.

Although Silje wore the delectable blue lace dress he'd seen her in earlier, there were creases there that he hadn't noticed before, and she wore her hair loosely bundled up and pinned, not in the severe French twist she'd worn when he saw her last. To an experienced man, these were sure signs that it hadn't been traffic that held them up.

Devante had let him see them fucking. He wondered how much Silje thought he'd seen. Certainly her naked body, but Devante had been so careful with her, she'd agreed almost without thought. Ari knew, when he'd seen the welling of her woman's juices, that the thought turned her on. He'd been careful not to demonstrate his presence in Devante's mind, kept hidden and carefully quiet, but at times, he'd found it difficult. He wanted her, and Devante knew it. One glance at him had confirmed that, the gleam in his lover's eyes: anticipation, mischief, and excitement.

“Take a seat,” Cristos said. “Mr. da Costa Santos has an idea.”

“Aristides,” he murmured. He only used his formal name in his business life.

Cristos favored him with a brief nod. “As you say.”

Cristos radiated power. The Department had been his idea, a worldwide organization now, the members working for human and Talented society. Of medium height, Cristos appeared to be in his late fifties, but as Ari knew, appearances were deceptive. Cristos could be anywhere from fifty to five hundred. Or more. Ari probed his mind, but his barriers were strong.

Now Cristos watched him, his heavy-lidded, gray eyes questioning. Ari waited until Devante had found a seat for Silje and then himself around the large round dining table, currently occupied by Candy, Cristos, Diane in front of a top of the range laptop, the vampire Dubreis, and himself. Ari was as wary of Dubreis as he was of Cristos. The vampire exuded immense power and control, but Ari wouldn't like to get on his bad side. His stern features didn't invite it.

Once everyone settled, Ari outlined his plan. Devante had seated himself where they could look at each other without turning their heads or making it too obvious, but there was really no need. They lived in each other's minds, and while they were courting danger, did it deliberately. Part of the reason Ari had remained in Devante's mind tonight was to make sure he was safe. He hadn't stayed for that, though.

He masked his smile and turned to the business at hand, addressing Cristos directly. “You say you want a trained agent with us. You say we have made some elemental mistakes. I do not believe that, but I have to accept that your break-in to this apartment was too easy for my liking. I should have replaced the canisters of the poison gas with something else, but what with one thing and another, I forgot.” He looked up, caught, and held the gazes of Candy and Dubreis for a few seconds each. “For that, I am sorry. If you were not skilled, the gas could have killed you. There is no more of it. It will be replaced by a sleeping mixture.”

Cristos nodded, and the hard muscles tensed around his mouth eased a little. "Thank you for that. Go on."

Ari nodded. While he was used to dealing with people at the highest levels of business and society, he had the feeling Cristos could dominate him without even trying. The thought made him shudder, but it wasn't from fear. He enjoyed occasional dominant play.

Which reminded him what he was supposed to be talking about. "I suggest we bring one of the female agents into our dance at the club." It was obvious which one, but he wanted to give her some space. "Since Silje Nordstrom is leading this operation for you, it should probably be her."

Cristos glanced at her. Ari thought she held herself very well, considering the heat she and Devante had generated not long before. Cool and thoughtful, she looked as if ice would have a problem melting on her. His treacherous mind went back to the imagined sight of ice melting in Silje's beautifully indented navel. There would be time enough for that, he hoped.

"I'm not a trained dancer," she said mildly.

"I know. You could be a planted member of the audience. Then we will come and get you, make you our victim or our goddess. We can work out the details later."

He glanced at Devante. His partner was smiling happily. "That's a good plan. Since we take the theme of gods and sacrifices, that could work out very well."

"I -- I'm not sure I can." Silje kept her voice low but her nervousness vibrated through Devante, and through him, Ari. "How can I retain control if I'm going undercover?"

"Just for a few nights." Ari had rarely heard Devante sound so tender. She'd really gotten to him. "We need you inside the club to help us."

She turned to Candy, mouth already open to ask but received a flat, "No. I'm needed to trace the electronic trail."

"That's settled." Cristos brushed Silje's demurs aside. Instantly, Ari's protective instincts rose, but Devante touched his mind.

*She needs to learn to express her nature, Ari, for her own sake.*

Ari wasn't so sure, but business included give as well as take, and this was no different. Devante's last sentence decided him.

Cristos fixed Ari with a cool, gray stare. "We ran some checks on the Santos Company and your other holdings, and we're satisfied with your story. The checks were necessary."

"I would have suspected no less. I spoke with my father about you earlier, while you were running your checks." Just after he'd recovered his mind from the shattering, long-distance orgasm. His father knew Cristos, had met him once or twice, and his orders were to stay with him and give him all the aid he could.

Cristos frowned. "Why didn't you come to us as soon as you hit New York? Why wait until now?"

Ari's lips thinned. "As far as we knew, the theft of the formula was a family matter. We wished to take care of it in our own way." And dispense the justice he saw fit, but he didn't have to say that.

Cristos nodded. "Now we've agreed to work together, we need to enroll you as agents, if only temporarily." He tossed a couple of plain black wallets across the table to Devante and Ari, then followed up by distributing other, similar wallets to the other agents. Their expressions of surprise spoke for themselves. Ari opened his wallet. An authorization document, declaring he was an associate of the CIA. Well, wasn't that nice. He turned the wallet around to look at the document on the other side of the transparent window.

"The Department of Homeland Security?" Silje looked up. "Have we changed agencies?"

"No, it merely regularizes our activities within our own borders." Cristos shrugged. "Similar alterations are occurring with the other Departments, where needed. We need the freedom to work inside our own country as well as outside, and I used the destruction of our

old San Francisco branch to facilitate matters.” He stared at Devante and Ari. “You know about the PHR?”

Ari shook his head. “Not much.”

Cristos sat back and folded his arms, deliberately allowing his antagonistic body language to show. In this room of trained agents and Talents, he must be aware they’d all noted it. “The Perfect Human Race, or PHR, is a terrorist organization. They are organized in cells, and work from the principle that they want every Talent dead. We think they’re behind this attempt to flood New York with Cephalox.” He paused and glanced around the table. “I came here today to meet you two and try to establish a connection between the Department and your company. Not to interfere with this investigation. Silje, the floor is yours.”

“What?” She flushed a delicate pink, making Ari wonder how much of her body was covered by her blush. He ached to find out. “Oh, yes. Pardon me, I was letting my mind go.” She sat up straight, and Ari wondered if Devante was touching her under the table, and exactly where. “I want to be sure we’re targeting the right place.”

Candy looked up from her screen. “I was just mapping it, putting the new knowledge into our model.”

“And?”

Candy sighed. “It’s the club. All the Cephalox with this formula can be traced back to the club, all the routes coming into the country and out to the known users, center there. Small at the moment, but growing exponentially every night.”

Silje tapped the table. “Then we need to stop it now, before the dealers spread out to other centers. Why haven’t they done it already?”

“I can answer that,” Ari found himself saying. “The formula was stolen six months ago, and some of the processes to make Cephalox have to be matured to take full effect. They’ll only have a small amount available at present.”

That was good news. They had the outlets pinned down to one place.

"So we don't need to preserve anyone, to take anyone alive?" The coldness of her statement startled Ari. Was she trying to impress her new boss, or did she really hold life so cheaply?

"Not if you don't want to." Cristos's words were equally cold. "What do you suggest?"

"Back in Europe, it was normal to give the order to kill as few people as possible and to do as little damage. The protocol was to rescue the innocents, preserve the computers, and close down the threat." She looked around. "I would like to work that way here. My target number of deaths is zero. I will not compromise on that. We only kill when absolutely necessary."

"Even if they're unsalvageable? If they've killed many of our kind?" That from Dubreis, curiously gentle.

"Even then. You can't question dead men. I know virgin Sorcerers are in short supply, but I would imagine the Department has some they can call on." Virgin Sorcerers had the most powerful psi abilities of their kind, but their gifts were bought at a terrible cost. Ari couldn't imagine making such a sacrifice. Worse than monks, who could at least indulge in masturbation, as long as they confessed and spent a few days on their knees, virgin Sorcerers weren't allowed sexual release by anyone's hand but their own, and they only used their own hands if their mental health was threatened; even that diminished their power. That was why they were so rare. Very few Sorcerers chose to take the path of the virgin. Yet a virgin Sorcerer was still the most efficient way of interrogating a suspect, dragging out the information the subject would rather not give. Ari had seen it done once. Only once. He hadn't the stomach for any more.

"We have one or two," Cristos admitted.

"Then I want everyone possible preserved," Silje said, "and the hardware captured."

"So how do you want to accomplish this?"

Although everyone's eyes were on her, Silje didn't flinch. "Devante, Ari, and I will discover what we can tonight and perhaps tomorrow if we have to. Everyone else stand by. Information gathering mode." She turned to Cristos. "Would we have a team available, if I decided on a raid?"

He nodded. "I can have one ready, but I want your timetable. I can't leave them hanging indefinitely."

"Yes, of course." Decisively she turned to Ari, her cool blue-gray eyes revealing nothing, her mind closed on all levels but the outer layer. "What evidence do you have?"

"We're pretty sure it isn't Dirk Clovelly, who owns and manages the club. Devante" -- when he heard his partner's chuckle, he avoided his gaze -- "embarrassed Dirk and read him while he was flustered. He knows about a certain shipment of cocaine that goes through the club, though."

"If you find out more about the coke, let me know," Cristos remarked. "It never hurts to have an in with the Feds."

Ari glanced at him. "Sure."

"As long as it doesn't take your focus from the Cephalox."

"Nothing will take my focus from that. Our Cephalox is very distinguishable, and if it becomes known there are illegal supplies on the market, our company is screwed." His mouth twisted in a sneer of distaste.

Silje agreed. "So what else have you found out in the club?"

"Apart from the fact that it's probably not the management, not much. We started with Dirk Clovelly, thinking that was most likely."

"It sounds reasonable."

"We were going to start reading the staff next. It is necessary for us to distract them, to read when their minds are open, confused, or excited, so we tend to do much of our reading while we dance."



She nodded. "Have you checked the guest list?"

Ari shrugged. "How?"

"It's a club; that means membership."

A small sound from Candy as she reached for her mouse. "I'm on it."

Devante slapped his forehead. "Computers!"

Candy chuckled. "There ain't many like me, boy."

Devante gave her an easy up and down look that brought a slight flush to her cheekbones. *Way to go, Devante.* "There aren't many like me, either."

"I'm in." Candy's terse remark jolted Ari out of what complacency he had left.

"Already?"

"Yeah. The pathetic security suggests they're not trying to hide anything. I'll run the list through our database." Candy clicked a few buttons.

Ari was impressed. One day, he'd really like to try to get Candy for the Santos Company, but he had a feeling she wasn't for sale. She was a shape-shifter, but he didn't recognize the creature etched in her brain. He was sure she'd love São Paulo, if she gave it a chance.

"If Candy has the membership covered, we should concentrate on the bar staff and the other performers," Devante said.

"That shouldn't take long." Silje tilted her head to one side. She must do that when she thought. It was enchanting and made Ari want to kiss the furrow between her brows away.

He considered. "Two nights should do it. Maybe one, if we get lucky."

"Then what?" The question came from Dubreis.

"We take the dealers into custody. Stop the traffic and any factories they set up." When Silje looked depressed, her bright eyes dulling over, Ari immediately sent her his support. He

did it automatically, without thinking. Something very unusual, for him. She was doing well, and he was proud of her.

Even though, he reminded himself, he had no right to feel it.

"We'll read every performer, all the bar staff, and the regulars to the club in the next two nights. Then we make our move. If we have to, we'll take them all." She raised a questioning brow, and Cristos nodded.

"We can handle it. Bring them in. I'll send the address of the general holding cells. Anyone we isolate as particularly suspicious, we'll move to the specialist cells at the Department."

Ari should be relieved. That meant the operation would be over in time for Devante's round of TV appearances to publicize his book, the ostensible reason for their visit to New York.

Left to his own devices, he and Devante would have cleared this mess up in a couple of days. A few deaths, a little reimbursement to the management of *Hel* for any inconvenience, and the thing would be done.

Still, this was a small price to pay for a chance at the delectable woman sitting opposite him. A very small price, but Devante seemed really taken by her. He took women and moved on, but this one...Ari could sense affection.

Wasn't that a big surprise?

## Chapter Seven

Silje stretched her arms above her head, luxuriating in the smooth cotton sheets cradling her naked body. Just like the sheets in her parents' house.

But she wasn't there now.

The realization brought her completely awake. She remembered dropping into the bed after a brief wash and cleaning her teeth, and kissing Devante goodnight. He'd left her alone, telling her she'd had enough excitement, that she needed her sleep.

Devante. The memory of his laughing, handsome face morphed into reality when after a brief knock, he entered the room. "Time to wake up, *gatinha*." He put a cup down on the glass-topped nightstand.

She sat up, dragging the bedclothes with her. Devante wore a pair of shorts and a T-shirt. Had he been out for a run? She admired his energy. "I've brought you coffee, nice and strong. If you want to eat, you'll have to get up." He leaned across to kiss her but made it brief and friendly, standing up afterwards to stare down at her with softened eyes. "Damn, you look good like that. Why do you wear your hair in such a severe style? It is so beautiful like this." He reached out and rubbed a strand between finger and thumb.

"It keeps it neat and out of the way." She reached for the cup, careful to keep the sheet tucked up under her arms. "This is a beautiful room." Silje looked around her, as much to avoid the intimacy that still made her feel uncomfortable as to admire the room. As she looked, she realized she was right. It was the kind of room that didn't draw attention to itself; understated elegance and comfort was the order of the day. She knew the pale blue carpet would feel soft and silky under her bare feet, and the large mirror on the vanity would be set at the perfect angle for her to check her makeup. The furniture was modern, but in natural wood, a golden color darker than pine but lighter than mahogany.

"Satinwood," he said. He hadn't dropped her hair, but curled a strand around one finger.

"Were you reading my mind?" Once allowed in, it was relatively easy for someone to return.

"No, just following where you were looking." He bent, and the intensity of his gaze mesmerized Silje all over again. "Don't be afraid of what you feel, Silje. We are here for you, both of us. We will keep you safe, and if you give yourself to us, we will take care of you and respect you."

She stared into his eyes, lost for words. His smile warmed her, and then he bent and kissed her. A simple, soft, closed-mouth kiss.

"But now," he said, standing briskly, "before we think of anything else, we must rehearse a routine for tonight. Ari went to your apartment and packed a case for you while you were asleep. He grumbled that you lived too far away, but he insisted on collecting familiar things for your comfort. We did not pry. It isn't our way. You're a very private person, aren't you?"

"Yes," she admitted. She didn't like the idea of Ari messing about in her drawers, especially her underwear drawer, but before she'd slept, she'd given him permission and her apartment keys. She would have liked to say she'd done it under mental persuasion, but the

truth was, she was too tired to do it herself, and she knew she'd need some of her own things if she were to stay here for the next few days. Everyone -- meaning everyone but her -- agreed it was the best way.

"I shall leave you, then. Put on something casual and light. Dancing makes you sweat." At the door, he turned back, an unmistakable gleam in his eyes. "Other things make you sweat, too, but we will get to them later."

She had no doubt of it, but he'd said "we," and after her experience of the previous night, she knew that meant three, not two. She still didn't know if Ari was gay or bi, as his partner seemed to be. Devante told her they were "Brazilian," as if that meant they were beyond such classification. However lightly he might dismiss it, there were people welded to single-sex or heterosexual relationships simply because they were wired that way. She should know. She was definitely of the heterosexual variety. A long time ago, she'd posed as a lesbian on an undercover operation, and although her partner had been sympathetic, loving, and even sexy, she'd hated every minute of their encounters. So much so that after the first time, they faked as much as they could. She'd loved Marlene, but not in that way.

Which was a shame, because Marlene had been famous in her day and was one beautiful, sassy blonde.

Entering the living area half an hour later, she found both men dancing. Her guest room was on the ground floor, but looking up, she saw this large room encompassed both floors of the two-story apartment. A big, modern chandelier dominated the ceiling space, drops falling in a dizzying spiral toward the ground. She looked hastily away, at the two men just -- dancing. Nothing special, no routine, but they were more than delicious. Devante glanced her way and extended a welcoming hand. "Come. You need to warm up. You'll hurt yourself if you don't."

Shooting him a doubtful look, she joined them. She'd never seen Ari so open, and when she opened her mind, she found his open, too. Not completely -- very few shape-shifters ever did that -- but she shared his emotions, currently warm, which surprised her. So

she had to share hers, too. It didn't come easy, but his welcoming smile gave her the courage to do it.

Gentle jogging at first, then a little more bending and stretching. They danced to Latin American music, lilting and inviting. Since most of it was in Spanish or Portuguese, she hadn't a clue what the singing was about, but the music spoke to her, and she enjoyed the workout more than any she could remember.

By the end of the twenty-minute session, she was smiling, and the men smiling with her. Devante moved to a panel on the wall and changed to a different CD, then hit the pause button.

Ari held his hands out, and without thinking, she put her own in them. "We thought you could sit in the audience, and we can come and take you. If you wear something we can remove easily, we can treat you like a sacrifice or a goddess. We'll act the part of priests --"

"Wait." She tried to draw her hands back, but he held on to them. "You want to remove my clothes?"

"You have a problem with that?"

"You bet I do."

Ari stared at her, one dark eyebrow lifted. He looked so gorgeous with his high cheekbones and deep, natural tan; she found her mind wandering.

"How about if we undress you, but don't let anyone else see you?"

Devante's sinful murmur from behind her took her by surprise, and she melted inside, just a little bit. He slipped his arms around her waist. One held a small remote. The other slid up her body to palm her breast.

Her head went back against his chest. His warmth, his touch, brought last night shockingly alive again, and she felt his hard cock inside her, the scent of the lavender oil. She wouldn't smell lavender again without getting turned on. "See, *gatinha*? They don't have to see a thing. Want to try?"

The hunger in Ari's eyes burned into her, made her want things she hadn't even imagined before last night. She blinked.

"You have to get comfortable with us touching you. As comfortable as we are touching each other." Devante reached out with the hand holding the remote, and Silje watched, as in a dream; Ari stepped forward, and laced his arms around her waist from the front, embracing Devante behind. Without warning, he kissed her.

Ari tasted different and delicious. Cinnamon and spice and hot need burst into her mouth as she opened to him and his tongue invaded her, tasting her voraciously. Behind her, Devante grunted and moved closer. His hard cock branded her upper buttocks and back with its heat. Ari pulled away, panting slightly, gazing down at her. She wanted another kiss. And then another.

"I can't do this," she whispered. "I can't."

"What is it?" Ari sounded understanding, but she didn't know him. She could if she wanted to. His mind was still open to her, inviting her to learn about him. That level of trust shocked her, that he would open himself that much to her, a virtual stranger.

"I trust you because I trust Devante. He tells me you are worth our confidence." Ari lifted one hand and touched her forearm, sliding his hand up to cup her shoulder. "What we do here is ours and ours alone. But the more you enter within our relationship, the better our performance will be."

"Is it really so important that the dance is perfect?"

He smiled, seductive and sultry. "No. This would be for us. You know I watched you and Devante, don't you?" She nodded and swallowed her nervousness down. "You might not know how crazy that made me. To see you and my lover making out so beautifully was almost more than I could bear." He gave a single laugh. "I came uncontrollably."

She felt the hot blood rush up under her face and saw his expression subtly change. "I promised myself that the next time you did that, I'd find out how far the blush went."

Devante let her go and stepped back. She felt the rush of cool air on her back, and then heat flooded her again when Ari grasped the hem of her T-shirt and lifted it over her head.

"Such beautiful creamy skin," he said. "So lovely."

"What if we let you control it?" Devante said suddenly from behind her. "If you say no, we stop."

She cleared her throat, nervousness making her choke. "Can you do that?"

"Yes." With Ari staring at her so openly, she couldn't doubt him.

"I've never been naked in front of more than one person before. Ever."

"You already have been."

Yes, she had. Ari had watched, and she knew it. Even now, thinking about it, her nipples tingled and her crotch dampened. He smiled, and she knew he'd caught her thoughts. Reaching forward, he flicked open the front catch of her bra. Her shoulders twitched when she instinctively made to catch the garment, cover herself again, but she clenched her fists and forced herself not to do it.

"Dance with me, Silje." Hands from behind helped her remove her bra and numbly, she watched Ari remove his own T-shirt before she stepped into his arms. A soft trill of guitar notes told her Devante had used the remote to start a track, too slow for anything but an unhurried, intimate dance.

"You make a beautiful couple," Devante murmured. She turned her head to flick a glance at him and saw only approving warmth in his eyes. His mind bathed her in pleasure, and she relaxed into her partner's arms, nuzzling her sensitive nipples against his bare chest. A low, throaty purr told her he enjoyed it, so she did it some more. Moving slowly, he guided her in the dance, a slow, gentle turn, and then he pushed her so she took a couple of steps backward.

"Very good," Ari whispered in her ear. His tongue tickled the rim and paused to trace it down. "Can you do any formal dances?"



“A few. The waltz, the polka, the -- the --”

“Tango?” he suggested.

“No, I never learned that one.”

Ari chuckled. “We’ll teach you.” The words sounded different when Ari used them. Earthier. Dirtier. He guided her around the highly polished, natural wood floor, and by the time they returned to where Devante stood, she’d become accustomed to the feel of her breasts pushing against his chest. Accustomed enough to admit it was incredibly arousing.

Ari released her and stepped back in one smooth motion. “Now show us, *gata gostosa*. Show us your beautiful body. To the music.”

Deep embarrassment flushed her skin, and knowing Ari liked it somehow made it worse. Or better. Sensation prickled along her body as the men put her under slow, careful scrutiny. Under their shorts, their erections pulsed. She could see the sudden responsive throb in Ari’s shorts when she moved a little and her breasts jiggled. “I guess that answers one question. I thought perhaps one of you was gay.”

“Me?” Ari smiled. “No. Firmly bisexual. I’m Devante’s first male lover, and his last, I hope. But you, you are lovely, and I can’t wait to get inside you.”

A spike of sensation dampened her panties and made her want him here and now, but they were supposed to be dancing. The music went on, a lively acoustic guitar solo, the Latin rhythm pushing her hips into swaying, moving her breasts. She didn’t try to hold her body rigid, but let it go, and closed her eyes.

“No, Silje. Open your eyes. Look at us.”

Her eyes snapped open. The men watched her, dark gazes lambent with desire. Never before had she imagined having two men primed and ready for her, and the thought made her weak-kneed.

Time to throw off all the inhibitions she’d thought she’d left behind in Norway, but in reality had only shelved. They had to go. Now.

She made the choice and held out her hands. They didn't need any further invitation.

As if rehearsed, Devante moved behind her again and supported her waist.

"Lift your legs," he murmured in her ear, heating it with delicious tickly sensations. When she did, Ari shoved her shorts and underwear down, following them with his own, stepping out of them as he took the stride that brought him between her legs.

He kissed her as his cock found its way home. She responded, leaning back against Devante, his erection burning her lower back until it slipped free to nestle underneath her.

Ari filled her, pushed deep, and touched a place inside that drove her instantly wild. When she bucked, Devante held her steady, one arm clamped around her waist, his back firmly supporting her. He slid his free hand up her body to caress her breasts, and Ari leaned back far enough to allow him access.

Ari clasped her hips, dragging her lower body on to him. Delightfully helpless, pinned between them both, she crossed her legs behind Ari's waist and rode him, giving back as much as she could. Ari's heavy eyelids drooped, but he kept his eyes open, watching Devante fondle her breasts, tug at her nipples. "You feel so good, Silje, better than I'd hoped, better than Devante said you felt."

Devante kissed her ear. "And that is more than I ever felt before with a woman."

When she stiffened, Ari leaned forward and licked a nipple, sucking it into his mouth before straightening up again and thrusting deep and hard. "Relax, *gata gostosa*. Let us do the work, this time. Another time..." He finished his sentence by raising a dark brow, and Silje laughed. Ari howled. "Oh, God, do that again!"

Devante touched her, tickling her under her breast, and she squirmed and laughed in response. Ari shuddered. "I don't think I'm going to last much longer."

Silje tensed, feeling him inside her, rubbing her G-spot with every stroke. Higher and higher, almost unaware of where she was, or who was doing her. Almost. When she forced

her eyes open, she felt Devante at her back, strongly supporting her, his cock underneath her perineum, bouncing against it with every stroke as his partner drove into her.

Then Ari howled, more like a wolf than a cat, and she felt the hot jets shoot way, way up inside her.

She was so close! Ari laughed, and she remembered they were sharing minds. “Darling, that’s why there are two of us. I’m sorry I couldn’t hold on, but I wanted you too much. Let Devante take you now.”

He slid out of her, and still demented from her near high, she groaned. Ari gripped her around her waist, and Devante probed, then slipped inside her from behind. His teeth clicked as he gritted them in an instant response. “You feel so good, *fofinha*. Have you any idea what you do to me?”

Since they rested in each other’s minds, she did have some idea. His excitement, already at fever pitch from his mental eavesdropping and holding her for Ari, burned into her. He completed what Ari had so nearly achieved. She came, bucking in Ari’s arms, hearing his purring laugh and knowing he was sharing this experience. Bright, sparkling shards seemed to fall around her, and when she looked up, the chandelier spiraled toward her. This time, her dizziness enhanced her feeling of weightlessness. Ari laughed in pure joy, and Devante thrust hard into her one last time, pushing her to an encore, a final orgasm. She heard his grunt when he came, too.

Her feet, literally, didn’t touch the floor. Devante withdrew; Ari swung her into his arms, and headed up the stairs, to the bathroom.

## Chapter Eight

Silje sat at a table in front of the stage, her stomach churning. The last time she'd been here, on the floor of the club, she'd deliberately used her edginess to enhance her performance, used the extra adrenaline to sharpen her psi senses. This time, she couldn't do anything much except tremble. She took a sip of the screwdriver she ordered.

When she felt her nervousness decline a tad, she swept the club, trying to pick up anything unusual. A tingle to her psi senses made her focus on the curtains at one side of the stage, and she picked up the presence of Brad. Dirk had announced "something special" tonight, and Brad, already unnerved by the popularity of the Brazilians, was definitely nervous. As usual, she could only touch the outer levels of his mind, but it was enough. He was angry, nervous, and unsure. Volatile and dangerous.

Dirk's disembodied voice boomed over the club and the level of anticipation and excitement rose. "Here they are -- the boys from Brazil!"

A movement at the side of the stage signaled their entrance. They stood frozen in bird-like poses, arms held up, in their feathered masks and little skirts, feathers wound around them. Reds, yellows, and oranges swirled with the occasional touch of blue. And those

masks. She smiled, remembering the perfect faces behind the masks, and admired the way the coverings turned them into creatures of myth.

The lights went out, and the slow drumbeats thundered through the club. The guys grinned at each other when the lights came back on, and then they flicked off again, then slowly up to show their silhouettes. They began to dance. Silje watched their sinuous movements, slowly increasing with the beat of the drums, hips swaying when other instruments joined the drumbeat.

Silje's heartbeat thundered, as loud to her as the drums, when Devante moved toward the edge of the stage, toward her. She just stopped herself smoothing her sweaty palms down her silk dress, the orange color reflecting the heat she felt inside. She wanted to tug the sash tighter, the only thing holding the dress together.

Ari's beaked face jerked sideways when he noticed his partner's movements, and he swayed across the stage to join him. This was it, then, her debut as a stripper.

They beckoned to her, and she shook her head, partly prepared to give the audience a chance to think that Ari and Devante might move on to another woman, part natural inclination.

Their consciousness entered hers, no words but warmth and reassurance. She swallowed, her throat suddenly dry.

She got to her feet, resting her fingertips on the table for balance. Would she leave and make them choose somebody else? They let her hesitance spill out for a few seconds before she reached up her hands and let Ari and Devante take them in their firm grasps. They pulled her up the two shallow steps onto the stage.

They usually didn't have any props, but while they'd been enticing Silje, one of the stagehands had placed a long padded stool on the stage.

They led her to the bench, and she sat down as primly as she could manage, but let her dress slip a little, showing a bit more cleavage, and pushed her leg forward so it peeked through the slit in the side.

She noticed some of the other dancers watching, and Dirk, standing at the other side of the stage. She couldn't see Brad, but she felt his tense presence. There wasn't much space in the wings, but the backstage onlookers were making the most of what there was.

Devante flung himself at her feet, fully prone, and then lifted his head. *Oh yeah. The view is good from here, Silje sweetheart.* He licked his lips.

Brad grunted, and Silje monitored him, as coolly as she could manage. *Do your job, Silje. Remember why you're here.*

She locked in on Brad's outer thoughts.

*I'll do my act, get backstage, and fuck the woman. Then I'll go out front to mingle. Give her enough to make her want to wait, because I like seconds. Or maybe I'll make her deep throat me first. Yeah. I can almost feel my come pouring down her throat.*

Gross. As usual, she couldn't get past his barriers or work her way through them, so she withdrew and scanned the other backstage watchers. Nothing relevant, nothing about the PHR or Cephalox, but their thoughts made the heat rush to her skin. Telling herself to concentrate, she tried to perform.

She moved to one side, and her dress opened a bit more. The guys were dancing around her, nearly but not quite touching her, close enough for her to feel the faint breeze their hands made when they moved. Dancers weren't supposed to touch the public without permission, and most dancers had perfected a technique of looking as if they were touching while not actually doing it. They were good at this.

Ari's hand brushed over her shoulder, pushing the sleeve off to reveal smooth, pale skin. The men froze, staring at each other, their eyes glittering behind their masks. This was where the audience should wonder if she would play along or storm off the stage. When she

scanned, she realized some still thought she was an ordinary member of the audience. They wouldn't think that for much longer.

She played along. Watching her carefully, Ari pushed the sleeve further down her arm, revealing the skinny strap of an orange bra.

Devante pulled at the sash of the dress. She let the dress slide down her arms to pool over the bench. Ari took her hands, and Devante took her ankles to persuade her to lie down, arms stretched over her head. She scanned again. Most of the audience had realized she was part of the act now, but the earlier doubt had boosted interest.

They danced over her, leaping over the bench, losing a few more of their feathers each time. Dressed only in her orange bra and panties, occasionally she moved her body in a little wriggle to show they were turning her on.

She couldn't relax completely. Her body was still stiff, and when Ari pulled her arms, she sat up again. *That's it, fofinha, go with your instincts. They're loving it.*

She shifted away from him slightly, sitting primly like a schoolmarm in the pretty underwear, chosen to appeal to the women in the audience, inviting them to imagine themselves in her place. The bra was a push-up one, and when she moved her breasts quivered.

Ari took a couple of steps, coming up behind her, while Devante knelt at her feet. He put his hands on her waist, sliding them up to just under her tits.

Then her bra came loose, and she had to stop herself grabbing the side straps. Ari had unclipped it.

Her hands came straight up to her tits, her bra straps sliding down her arms. *Ari?*

Awkwardly, she tried to stop its progress without showing any of herself, but Ari bent and murmured in her ear. "Remember what we promised, *gatinha*. They won't see a thing."

She trusted him. She leaned against his chest, and he slid the straps down her arms. Her elbows bunched in, but the bra hung off her chest now, the straps dangling around her wrists, the cups only held in place by her hands.

The whole audience gasped when Ari slid his hands under hers, under the bra and cupped her tits. She didn't need her psi senses to feel the tingle running through the audience like an electric current, a current she felt when Ari wiggled his fingers and stimulated her nipples to form hard points against his palms.

Ari pulled her slowly to her feet, his hands over her breasts. He murmured to her again. "Drop your hands, Silje. Trust me." She swallowed and did what he told her, letting her hands fall gracelessly to her sides.

Devante stood up in front of her and slid his hands down her body, pushing her panties a little way down her legs. Not enough. The three of them swayed in time to the music, Silje between them, but easily in view of the audience. Every turn threatened to reveal her boobs, but Ari's hands remained over them. He cupped them, but didn't keep his hands still. Everyone had to see he was caressing them, but she couldn't stop him, or cut her mind off to his pleasure. Everyone could see her, but not see her. Despite, or maybe because of her nerves, Silje felt her pussy dampen. She was getting aroused.

Now the guys were down to their little G-strings, which barely covered their erections. She brushed against Ari's, wanting to tease him in her turn. Ari winced and moved back, his fingers slipping until her nipples were barely covered. But every time she thought he would reveal her, despite his promise, he moved his hands the fraction of an inch to cover her again.

Devante growled. *I really want to see those nipples, want them in my mouth where I can lick and bite them in front of everybody. They'd taste so good.*

Silje groaned, low in her throat.

Ari's voice sounded hotly inside her head. *Remember the next part, gatinha?*



She did. When she brought her hand up to cover her breasts, she caught one of the ties holding up Ari's G-string.

Without bothering to rescue it, he shook the garment off. Her eyes widened when she saw what the slip of material had only just revealed. She had rarely seen his erection so urgent. It throbbed, pulsing with his need.

*You're surprised?*

She heard Ari's voice in her mind, reminding her of her next move.

With a sudden movement, she bent to pick up her bra, but Devante was there, and he covered her breasts from the front, shielding them from view with his forearm.

The movement stretched her panties and revealed the curves of her ass. She lifted her head and looked closely at Devante. He leaned forward and kissed her. A long, devouring kiss, his tongue entering to control and conquer her.

Ari stepped behind Silje and grasped her shoulders, yanking her to her feet, covering her tits again with his forearm and one hand. His corded muscles showed how strong he was under that soft, tanned skin, and she melted against him.

He stood close behind her, his cock grinding into her ass, and Devante danced for them both, sinuous and sexy, never losing the beat. He put his hands on his hips and deliberately, carefully, untied each string, holding the garment up for a moment before pausing and lifting his chin, asking her a silent question.

Silje licked her lips, and nodded. Devante let the G-string fall.

Another hard erection, for her...just for her.

Devante took a step and hauled her against his chest, his cock probing her belly, hard and hot. Ari let his hands fall, so her bare tits pressed against Devante. All that lay between her and total nudity was her panties, which had slipped even lower. Ari got on one knee and hauled them down, then stood on the other side of her, his erection against the upper part of her ass, where her cheeks curved up to the dip of her waist.

The audience gasped and even the clink of glasses from the bar stopped. Devante seemed lost in his kisses, and Ari shaped her body with his hands, smoothing down her back, cupping her ass. One finger slipped between, touching her but not entering. *Oh God, gatinha, you're soaked!*

Ari lifted his hand away and brought one finger to his lips, tipped his head back and stared at the glistening digit, bright in the spotlights with moisture. But not her moisture. They'd used a little sleight of hand, a small sachet in his G-string, transferred between her legs, then palmed when he touched her.

Laughing, Ari flicked his hand at the audience and a spray of liquid arced in the lights. Women shrieked, and then some laughed.

Laughed?

"Orange juice!" one yelled over the persistent throb of the music. A playful touch that dissipated the heat a little, brought it back down from fever pitch to "Oh, yeah!"

Ari and Devante were both taller than Silje, so when Devante's lips left hers, all he had to do was lift his head to receive Ari's equally passionate kiss.

The music ended abruptly, and a moment later, the lights went out.

Devante grabbed her dress and threw it around her shoulders, while she thrust her arms through the sleeves, and Ari wrapped the sash around her and tied it.

When the lights went on again, she was dressed, although her underwear still lay on the floor. Devante bent and swept up the scraps of silk as they bowed to the wildly applauding audience. Screams and yells almost lifted the roof.

## Chapter Nine

Back in the dressing room, Ari hugged Silje hard. “You were perfect. Just what we imagined this afternoon.”

“You shouldn’t have let me sleep.” The guys had worked out the routine while she’d been in a delicious, post-coital doze. She still felt guilty about that. “Please, Ari.”

“Please what, *gatinha*?” He looked down at her, a smile on his face, and dipped for a tender kiss. It turned wild when he thrust his tongue into her mouth, and she returned his embrace, lifting her legs to curl them around his waist.

Since she wore no underwear and Ari was still naked, her movement brought his pulsing cock into contact with her wet pussy. And it was wet. It had gone past damp about fifteen minutes before.

“Fuck me, Ari. Please.”

“Say it in Portuguese. Say it.”

She found the words in her head. She would have said a lot more than “*Fode-me, fode-me agora!*”

“*Sim, gatinha.*” With one hard thrust, his cock found its way home. Silje let her head fall back against the door as Ari started to fuck her, hard and fast, just the way she wanted it -- needed it.

The sound of a chair scraping across the floor made her open her eyes, and she smiled dreamily at Devante, who'd moved a chair to where he had the best view of them both, just to one side. He smiled back. “I know what it is about you now. You like to be watched, don't you, *fofinha?*”

She swallowed, unwilling to acknowledge something she'd never, ever suspected.

“Tell me. I want you to say it.” He grasped his dick and moved his hand up and down, completely in time to Ari's drives inside her. The sight was an incredible turn-on.

Silje moaned. “Yes, yes, I do!” Admitting that being watched by a hundred or more people while she stripped, and now, by Devante, turned her on more than she'd imagined possible and drove her higher.

A gush of warm liquid from her pussy drove Ari to bury his head in her neck and groan loudly. “Ah, that feels so good! Shall we do this more? Watch, maybe even take some pictures? A special album just for us?”

“Yes! Oh yes!” The thought drove her crazy, but her next thought made her tighten around him. “But I only want you. You and Devante.”

“That is no problem.” He lifted his head and stared at her, eyes glazed and heavy-lidded with desire. “Only us. We can let others watch, if we are masked.”

She met his gaze, a still moment in the storm of lovemaking and said, “Does it turn you on, too?”

“*You* turn me on. I will do it however you like, wherever you like. Say *fode-me* and anywhere, any time, if it is humanly possible, I will.” He quickened his thrusts inside her, and she opened to them both, Ari and Devante, letting them feel her heat.

“Ah!” With one great spasm of her womb, Silje came, and Ari followed, groaning his pleasure into her neck.

Devante gasped. “*Você é Linda*, Silje.”

She glanced at Ari questioningly. He lifted a hand and cupped her cheek. “He said you are beautiful, and you are.”

She smiled and bowed her head to hide her blushes. Ari chuckled. “How can you blush? Accept it, Silje. You are lovely and we both --”

Behind her, a knock sounded on the door. Silje jerked forward, into Ari’s arms. With a chuckle, muffled against her skin, he carried her away toward the shower.

By the time the door opened, the water was running. Muffled voices followed, but Devante didn’t call them, so she imagined he had matters under control, whatever they were.

“You are something, Silje.” Ari’s words were admiring, not derogatory. He washed her, and she washed him in return. Although it was the most efficient way of cleaning two people in this small space, she loved the way his body felt under her hands. She moaned when he washed gently between her legs, making a thorough job of it. He chuckled. “We have a better bathroom at the apartment, but this has its appeal. We should leave Devante some hot water, though.”

“What about Brad?” She hated the arrogant pig, but she had to be fair.

“Fuck him. He was a Marine; he’s used to cold showers. The way he was watching us from backstage, he probably needs one.” Now it was her turn to chuckle.

When they emerged from the shower, dressed in light toweling robes, it was to a cramped dressing room. There was little space as it was, and Devante took the opportunity to squeeze past them into the shower cubicle, trailing his hand across Silje’s shoulders as he went.

Dirk, tall, middle-aged, powerfully built, leaned against the shelf that served as a vanity, and Brad stood, stark naked, arms crossed and legs wide apart by the door. Still erect. She was beginning to think that was Brad's only state. He grinned at them and gave Silje a wink. "Nice one, sister."

She gave him a shy smile. "Thanks."

"Dirk says you were a plant. You had me guessing."

She nodded this time.

Dirk was more forthcoming. "Kids, that was great! I want that in the act every night." He addressed Silje. "Do you speak their language?" She nodded. They'd agreed she'd "translate" for them. Although their halting English relaxed people around them, they needed someone as a go-between.

Dirk rubbed his hands together. "Great. Then you can tell them what they don't get."

"Sure."

"You from their country?"

She shook her head. "Europe." That was near enough for Dirk, it seemed, as he nodded, satisfied everyone in Europe spoke Portuguese.

"You've done this kind of thing before, right? That shy member of the audience thing is a killer; it puts every woman in the room on the stage!" Dirk rubbed his hands together as if he could feel the money growing between his palms.

She shook her head. "It's not something I've done very often. It's the guys -- they knew just where to position and pose me."

Brad made a full-throated sound of appreciation. Silje chose to ignore him, but in her mind, Devante, eavesdropping from inside the shower, stopped her.

*No, read him. I picked up something when we were in there alone. He wants you, Silje, but get past that. He could be our man.*

*What?* That explosive question came from Ari, who turned abruptly away, toward the rack where their street clothes hung. Feathers festooned the dressing room, but he didn't even try to put them straight. With no modesty at all, he dropped the towel and stepped into a pair of tight boxers. He had a gorgeous butt.

*Thank you.*

She was hard put not to laugh at his appreciative words, but how to manage this?

"Tell you what," Dirk said suddenly. "I'll give you the top spot."

"What the fuck?" Brad's loss of mental control when he heard Dirk's offer gave Silje her chance. She slid into his mind, using her years of experience to find the slightest gap in his very strong mental shields, and his shock was just what she needed. She slipped out again, shaken.

*He's the man. He's dealing the Cephalox. It's all buried deep inside.*

*Shit.* That from Devante.

She made an executive decision. *You guys give Brad a chance to ask me out. I'll go home with him.*

*The fuck you will!* Furious, Ari wrenched on a pair of dark slacks and did up the zipper violently. Devante came out of the shower, not even bothering to hide his nudity, and stood on the other side of her in a protective gesture.

*You will do it, or I'll take you off this operation. All we need is some proof, and we can take him in.*

*We don't need proof. We'll take your word for it.*

*And do what?* Scorn edged her thoughts. *I work for a government agency, so we need material proof. Telepathy doesn't cut it in a court of law. We have to catch him with the stuff on him, and our best bet is to take him off guard. If he offers me a date, I'm going with him.*

*We have his address.* Dubreis's voice cut through the conversation unemotionally.

Ari spun around to face Devante, a question in his eyes, but Silje answered his question. *Dubreis is my backup. He's there all the time when I'm working.*

*So are you working when you're with us?* It was Ari who asked, but it could as well have been Devante.

*Not...all the time.*

Still shocked at her personal revelation of enjoying public display, not sure how she felt about the men, she needed time with her job. If she had a feeling for Brad before she probed his mind, now it increased threefold. She dropped the words she knew Dubreis was waiting for.

*He's PHR.*

*Okay.*

She smiled and dropped her towel.

The guys watched her, and Brad's gaze roamed all over her body before she couldn't stand it any more and turned to take her panties from Ari, who clutched them like he didn't want to let them go. His hand gripped the silky fabric convulsively before he came to, and released them to her. As calmly as she could, Silje climbed into the orange silk scanties.

"A natural blonde," Brad rumbled.

She straightened and gave him a come-on smile. "All the way."

"Natural fur, too. I like that."

"Yeah," Dirk added. Unlike Brad, he wasn't slavering. She could almost see the drool forming at the corners of Brad's full, probably collagen-enhanced lips. "It makes it look as if you're the real deal, a woman from the audience. It won't be long before they catch on to it, but we can use that angle for the next week. Gives you a chance to come up with something new. So don't shave until then, Silje."

"I wouldn't mind helping out with the chores," Brad said.



Silje gave him a sultry smile, ignoring Devante's low warning growl. "I'll bear it in mind. Thanks."

"Ever done any film work?" Brad was really coming on heavy, his eyes slumberous, his mouth curved in a half-smile. "I can introduce you to somebody."

She pretended to consider. "Let me work my way in here, and yeah, that sounds interesting. The money good?"

"It can be."

She tilted her head to one side and let her breasts jiggle a little. Behind her, Ari stood perfectly still, like a cat ready to pounce.

Figuring she'd pushed them as far as she dared, she picked up her bra and shimmied into it. She had to do this. She belonged to nobody, and she had to make her own decisions for herself.

Besides, she was a team leader, and her decisions had to mean something.

So when Brad mentioned he knew a nice place that stayed open late where they could get a bite to eat, she accepted and smiled at him. Brad dressed, and while Dirk gabbled excitedly about the club taking a completely new direction, Ari and Devante stood in frozen fury. She smiled at them vaguely and went out with Brad.

\* \* \* \* \*

Brad's "place" turned out to be a reasonable diner. Not exactly four star, but clean, and the food was basic, freshly cooked, and tasty. Silje watched Brad drink the equivalent of a pot of coffee and wondered how he ever slept.

They chatted while they ate, and she trotted out a few lies, that she'd known the guys for a while, turned up the night before at their request to see the act, decided to give it a try. She was a secretary, but she'd done a few topless spreads and one nude one, but no open-crotch.

"You shouldn't be scared of what you've got," Brad said around another mouthful of steak. "Your body is natural, and the directors are screaming for that these days. There's still a good market for huge tits, probably always will be, but they want the natural look for the newest videos. Natural looking bush, big natural tits." He looked her up and down, from her waist to her breasts, his gaze lingering on them. Now he knew what they looked like, and she didn't have to get into his head to know that gave him great satisfaction.

She let him talk, easing her way into his mind. Talents' minds were carefully organized, both as a courtesy to other Talents and to preserve their own privacy. Mortals' minds were more chaotic and took some sorting out sometimes. Although most people automatically tucked their secrets and private thoughts away, strays and remnants still appeared at the forefronts of their minds. Unscrupulous Talents could pick up PIN numbers and other useful scraps of information and part of the Department's more mundane work was catching these miscreants.

Brad told her about his experiences, and the world of the sex film. If she'd been listening properly, she might have been embarrassed, although she suspected he meant her to be turned on. He was a good-looking man, with a heavy jaw and nicely chiseled features, but he left her completely cold. Devante and Ari were her ideals of handsome men. Natural and sexy, with devastatingly hot bodies and real emotions.

She worked her way into his mind. She saw no sigil, no identification of any Talent. She'd found references to Cephalox, enough to tell her he knew what it was and what it did, and the three ominous letters: PHR. He was a member, he was Department, or Talented, or a member of another government agency, and she easily discounted the last three.

He was a member of a PHR cell, recruited to distribute the Cephalox and weed out Talents. He was also enjoying the money his drug dealing brought him.

Brad was a nasty piece of work, totally and exclusively interested in Brad Cooper. To him there was nobody else in the world, not even the woman who loved him, another member of the cell.

Silje concentrated on the woman. A wispy blonde named Theresa. She couldn't find the woman's surname and concluded that Brad didn't know it. Not unusual for a cell like this, but typical of Brad that he wasn't interested in finding out. He had sex with Theresa when he found it convenient and told her what she wanted to hear.

"So shall I mention your name?"

She blinked. "Sure, but you don't know my name."

"Sylvia." Shit. Near enough to Silje. Someone must have said her name in Brad's presence. Surely not Ari or Devante! They were the only ones who knew, surely?

"How did you know that?"

"One of your girlfriends called you that the other night."

She forced a smile. "Oh, yeah. Well, I don't want to use my real name if I do this."

He shrugged. "Nah. Not many do. Think of something cheesy. The clients like that. You don't mind if I call you Sylvie, do you?"

She shook her head, letting her loose hair fall about her shoulders, but Brad wasn't interested in the subtle nuances of seduction. He'd probably grab her the first chance he got. She shuddered and intensified her efforts to find out what she could.

*It's okay. That from Dubreis. We'll pick him up and put a Sorcerer on the job.*

*No! The rest of the cell would scatter if you pick him up now.* They always did. Every cell had two "daisies" -- one link to another cell, so, like a daisy chain, the organization was in constant contact, but with limited exposure. One cell went out of business, the two either side of it just joined forces, and the organization was as strong as ever. And nobody knew too much. It was a bitch to break. No central headquarters, no mastermind, just a series of groups varying between three people and around twenty in size, all working for the same purpose -- to eliminate Talents from the face of the earth. Prejudice as extreme as it got. They passed information along the chain, so when the Department took out a cell, it was important to try to get the hardware, if there was any.

*I'll find out what I can, and we'll give it another couple of days. Let Brad think he's winning.*

*Those boyfriends of yours won't take it for long,* Dubreis answered her. *There's one of them out here with us.*

*What?*

Dubreis chuckled darkly. *He's in his other form. Thinks we don't know. Either that or he doesn't care, but he's here.*

*My money's on the doesn't care theory.* She guessed it was probably Devante, but she couldn't be sure. The old-fashioned attitude irritated the professional in her, but deep inside she warmed at the thought that someone cared enough to do this for her. She'd have to explain to the guys that, while they were on the operation, they were under her control. Fuck, even Dubreis understood that, and he was one of the most ancient and powerful vampires in existence. Silje also knew that as one of Cristos's right-hand men, Dubreis was probably informing Cristos of her effectiveness as a team leader, but she expected nothing less. Her efficiency meant the safety of her team and her ability to stop these people using and abusing Talents and mortals too, since Cephalox was dangerous to both.

So there was no place for independent activity in this operation.

*Call my cell, Dubreis. It's time for me to get out of here.*

Brad forestalled her. "This place will be closing soon. We should be going."

She checked her watch. Four a.m. "I thought New York never slept?"

He chuckled. "Some places close for a few hours. So do you like it here?" She raised a brow. "Here in the States."

"Yeah, I love it. My company sent me, so I should be here for some time."

"Does it pay well?"

"Not any more. They laid me off a few days ago." Let him think she needed money. "They won't pay my trip home, but I have a work permit, so I decided to stay for a while."

“Do you need the money to get home?”

Nice of him to ask, but she assumed it was so he could get a firmer hold on her, get her to do more than soft porn. “Yes, I do.” She forced a smile and let him know it was forced, stretching the skin at the corner of her mouth.

He gave her an easy, superior smile. “I can help you with that. Don’t worry, darlin’, you’ll be okay with me.” Now that she’d managed to tune in to his mind, she could sense his thoughts. She was alone in the States, not even an employer to worry about her. Easy pickings.

Sure, she’d be okay with Brad. Like she’d be okay with a vulture. She should go with him, let him recruit her for his filthy operation, but her mind balked at the thought. Why she should find the task so difficult now, when she’d done it before, she didn’t know. She was a damned good operative, and she’d infiltrated PHR cells before now, but this time, she felt pain when she thought of it.

She’d have to leave the guys, Ari and Devante, and go back to the fake apartment to set up her cover. That was the source of the pain, she realized suddenly. How could they have gotten to her so quickly? How could she have permitted the full mind-merge that allowed it?

Giving Brad a bright smile, she stood. “I have to go.”

His dismay was almost comical. “Don’t you want to...talk some more?”

Except his mind wasn’t on talking. Back to his place and a quick seduction in the guise of “getting comfortable with each other.” No chance. Her soul shuddered in revulsion. Brad was handsome, but totally self-absorbed. No room in his heart for anyone else.

“No, not tonight. Really. The guys had me rehearsing all day and tonight. I didn’t know excitement took that much energy.”

“Let me see you home, at least.” He didn’t much care whose bed they ended up in.

“No.” She paused, and laid a hand over his. “But tomorrow, I’d love it.” She gave him a sincere smile.

He brightened. "Sure. Probably better anyway. I'll take you somewhere nice after we've finished at the club." Give him a chance to sweet-talk her a bit more.

He didn't offer to see her to a cab. Slimeball.

She walked out of the diner and headed for the end of the street, where a large, dark van was parked across the road. Knowing there was no need to knock, she wrenched open the door and leaped in, closing the door gently behind her.

Dubreis sat on the narrow bench, Candy next to him. They grinned, but before they could speak, another sharp rap came on the door. She knew who it was. She let him in.

Stark naked and radiating fury, Ari got in and sat next to her. Candy tossed him a shirt and a pair of pants. That was all the notice the agents took of him. He fielded the clothes and laid them in his lap. Despite the chilly evening, heat poured off him.

"I thought you'd go with Brad," Candy said.

Silje shook her head. "No. I want to make him more eager. Get him off balance." She sighed. "Oh, hell, he gives me the creeps. Have you been in his mind?"

Dubreis regarded her for a fraught moment. Would he denounce her, report her as unsuitable to Cristos? Tell their boss that she backed off when she had the chance to close the operation? She forced herself to breathe and calm down.

"Your instincts are right. I think he's too volatile for you to go in alone," Dubreis said eventually. "In my opinion, you'd be taking an unnecessary risk going home with him. We should be able to rein him in without you doing that."

Candy nodded. "He takes steroids as well as the Cephalox he deals. Other stuff, too, when he can get it. He's a walking time bomb."

Silje's glance sharpened. "You've discovered a lot."

"Since you identified him in the club it got easier to track him. Brad Cooper's not the name he was born with, and he was a Marine for the briefest time possible; he flunked training. He's been a porn star ever since, and like most of them, he uses a variety of names,

depending which magazine he's posing for or the sexual preference he's using. We're close to the cell. He's too arrogant to hide it well."

"Do you know why he joined a PHR cell? It's hardly likely to further his career."

Candy huffed a brief laugh. "That's where you're wrong. One of the big directors of porn is a PHR man, Rod Gartside, in Los Angeles. We've known about him for years, kept him under observation. We think he's planning some kind of big deal, so we're waiting to see what happens. There are others, here in New York. Brad's worked for a few studios, so I've got some people on it now."

Now it was Silje's turn to laugh. "That must be hard. To wait and see." She shrugged. "Better the devil you know, I guess."

"Silje is tired now," Ari said quietly. "She should come home."

Home? Yes, the beautiful apartment on the East Side felt more like home to her than her place in the 'burbs, but it was one thing for her to think it and another to hear it articulated. Ari's quiet statement seemed to make it real.

She couldn't think like that. Even for a shape-shifter, it was too sudden, and in any case, she couldn't set up home with both of them. Could she? Even as the thought entered her mind, she dismissed it. The mind-blowing sex she'd had with the guys was one thing, but a long-term affair was something else entirely. It just couldn't work.

Dubreis looked at her. Oh, no. She wasn't going to have him tell Cristos she was too tired to carry on, but it had been a hard day. "Okay. We watch Brad. Put a man on him, but keep back, find out which studios he works for. We want him to take us to his cell before we shut him down. He's selling the stuff, but there might be more dealers back at the cell, or supplies. If it's the Cephalox from the Santos Company, we need to close the pipeline down and find out how it's coming in."

"I gave Cristos the usual legitimate lines of supply into New York," Ari said, his voice controlled but his mind in turmoil. She felt it like it was her own.

“Diane’s working on that,” Candy said. “If we can find that source and trace it directly to the cell, we can close them down.”

“Sure.” Silje fought to keep her eyes wide open, her back straight. “So that’s about all we can do tonight.”

Dubreis climbed through to the front of the van, careful not to knock any of the electronic equipment. This wasn’t a surveillance vehicle, no carefully fitted listening equipment or set-in screens, just a couple of laptops stacked in one corner and some small black cases, which Silje knew contained tracking bugs and similar items in case they were needed. They might as well use all the technology available to them, and in some cases good old-fashioned electronics beat psi Talents. Long-distance bugging, for instance, was much more reliable with electronic listening devices. And admissible in open court, too.

Dubreis drove, and all the way back to the apartment, he hummed. Something almost tuneless that Silje couldn’t identify, but trying to kept her alert enough to appear awake and in control, even with the naked, totally gorgeous body of Ari sitting next to her.



## Chapter Ten

Ari left the clothes in the van and strode to the elevator naked. Once they were inside the tiny room, she stepped away from him, but he reached out and dragged her close. “You cannot do this.”

“Do what?” She put her palms on his chest, pushing away from him, but it was like pushing a rock with about as much effect.

“Go to that man.”

“I have to, Ari. This is my project.”

The elevator doors slid open, and he swung her up into his arms. Realizing the futility of struggling, she let him take the few steps to the apartment. Devante was there, the door open, and he gazed into her face as Ari carried her through.

“Put me down.” Ari glanced at her and lowered her to the ground. Silje clenched her fists by her sides, furious, and now she could actually show it. “First, you could have compromised the operation, following me like that. Stray Talents are a hindrance in a carefully organized job.”

“It isn’t the *operation* I care about.” Ari’s words were hard, clipped as if he were the one hiding his temper. “I won’t have you in danger. Brad Cooper is dangerous. He takes

steroids, coke, and any other drug he can find. He's added Cephalox to that by now. He could go off at any moment."

She looked down her nose at him. "I'm a shape-shifter. He's mortal."

"He has Cephalox, and he can hurt you with it," Devante said from behind her. "I'm with Ari on this. I don't want you anywhere near that sleaze."

She put her hands on her hips and gripped, hard. "I'm in charge of this assignment. The sooner you guys realize that, the better."

"We aren't part of your team," Ari said through clenched teeth, before he took a deep breath and forced his jaw to unlock. "We are cooperating with the Department because it's in our interests to do so. We were handling this fine before you came along."

"Yeah, and you would have killed Brad. Then we wouldn't have any line to the PHR cell. They'd just start up somewhere else."

"So what do you plan to do?" Devante's voice was soft, but laced with the same kind of menace Silje felt in his partner.

"We'll take as many as we can alive," Silje replied.

"So you can talk to them, save them?" Now he sneered at her.

She spun around to face him. "No, although we give them a chance. Our Sorcerers question them. Do you know what that means? Do you know many Sorcerers?"

Devante shook his head, his dark eyes glittering. "Not many."

"They will dissect the minds of the cell members, find out everything they can. Then they'll wipe the minds of all the filth. After that, there's not much point killing them. They'll be able to function, but they won't be much use to the PHR."

Devante had paled, as much as he was capable of doing under his bronzed skin. "Compulsion?"

Compulsion, or making anyone do what they wouldn't want to do, was banned, one of the only two rules Talents had, the other being not to tell anyone outside the community

without specific permission from a Guardian. The punishment for both was death. No appeals.

“Cristos is a Guardian, and the procedures take place under his auspices.”

“What about where you were before?”

“The Department heads are all Guardians. Don’t you have any contact with the Department?”

“Not before this. Only to pass along routine information, as a courtesy, like when we were delivering a large shipment of Cephalox to the hospitals.” Devante’s full lips tightened.

“Okay, you can do what you need to, but you won’t go anywhere with Brad alone.”

“I’ll do whatever I have to!” She hadn’t meant to yell; she rarely did so, but this time she was pushed beyond bearing. “What century do you think we’re in?”

“We won’t see our woman in danger, especially danger as unpredictable as Brad Cooper.”

Silje began to walk toward her room, the one she’d occupied last night. “I’m not your woman. I’ve had enough of this. I’m going to bed.”

“Not there!”

She must be really tired, because she didn’t notice Devante coming up quickly behind her and sweeping her off her feet. Before she had time to draw breath, he was halfway up the stairs, Ari following close behind. Fighting with him would only make her look stupid, and probably make her feel worse, so she let him. If they thought she’d obey like a good little girl, they had another thought coming.

He almost threw her on the huge bed in the master bedroom, and rolled over her to lie on his side. Ari forestalled any quick exit by lying on her other side. Despite, or maybe because of, her anger, her libido rose. Devante reached for the ties on her orange dress but she sat up. “And you guys think you can persuade me with sex? Is that it?”

"No," Devante growled. "I want you naked. Now. You believe we're thinking this through? Let your instincts grow and develop. Touch our minds. Dare to." The fire in his eyes challenged her and invited her.

Put like that, she found his dare irresistible. She'd show them who had the strongest, best-disciplined mind. Accepting his invitation, she entered his mind. What she saw there shocked her cool, analytical nature, and she knew that after tonight she'd never be the same person again.

Red, the color of anger and passion, flooded Devante's mind, pouring through her. She tried to block him, but the images shocked and seduced her into opening for him. Something long hidden, unsuspected, deep inside her, reared up to destroy the ice in her veins, to burn it into red-hot passion.

She swung away, toward the refreshing anger in Ari, but he'd latched onto Devante too, and now the images were his as well. When she turned her head, she saw passion glittering in his eyes, and when she looked down, she saw how hotly it surged in his groin. His cock stood proudly, seemingly reaching for her. When she felt a movement behind her, she saw Devante had shucked the robe he wore, and was waiting. Watching.

"I meant it. You can't manipulate me with good sex." *But you can try*, her rebellious mind protested.

"I heard that." She jumped when Ari touched her thigh. He held her steady while Devante, watching her carefully, undid the tie on the orange dress.

They'd seen the matching underwear before, but when Devante leaned forward with a growl, it was as if he couldn't help himself. He bit her through the orange silk of her bra before Ari could unclip it from behind. Then he pulled away, dragging the garment off with his teeth.

Silje felt the surge of liquid between her legs. As the silk brushed her nipples on its way off, they hardened into sharp points of sensation.

This didn't go unnoticed. Ari reached around to cup her breasts, his touch firmer than usual, and Devante took the invitation, sucking one right into his mouth and pulling hard on it. Her head went back, and she cried out.

Ari kissed her. Not the gentle, loving kisses he'd given her up to this point, but a ravaging, devouring kiss, sucking her tongue into his mouth to hold captive while he plunged into hers, exploring and taking.

Devante's hand glided down her stomach and into the nest of curls guarding her pussy. He drove his fingers straight through and into the furrow between her labia. She would have squirmed away, but Ari held her firm, his hands gripping her breasts like an iron corset.

He held her for his lover to finger-fuck, and Devante didn't stop at one finger. When he discovered how wet she was, he growled, nearer a cat sound than that of a man, and plunged another finger in to join the first, and then another.

Silje howled into Ari's mouth. He drew away.

"Look at me!" She looked up, straight into his dark, liquid eyes. "Have you ever been fucked in the ass?"

She gaped.

Devante released her nipple with a wet pop. "Answer him!"

"N-no."

"Do you believe me when I say I won't hurt you?"

"Yes." Even with anger still simmering under the surface of Ari's passion, she knew he wouldn't hurt her. She felt his satisfaction, and felt the fire in his veins build to a conflagration.

He crooned in her ear as Devante continued to suck and tease her breasts while his fingers drove her wild, sliding in and out of her with increasing ease. "Baby, I want you, and I want Devante at the same time. I want to drive you both out of your minds. My little kitten, my *fofinha*, let me know the minute you want to stop, but try for me. Just try. You

are the hottest woman I have ever met, half-cat even when you're human. You purr, you squirm; you are delectable. You have the softest skin, the silkiest hair."

To have one man murmur into her ear while the other fucked her and sucked her drove Silje to a peak of arousal she hadn't even known existed. The more she writhed and moaned, the more they held her firm and took her.

Devante left her breasts at last, and went further down her body to tease her navel and her clit, licking them lightly in greeting before tasting what his fingers had so recently sampled. The sounds from his throat were as if he were eating a particularly succulent peach.

Silje was almost beyond words. Ari took over her breasts, massaging them, pulling her nipples in soft and hard pinches of his fingers. His cock pulsed against her. She felt every heavy throb.

Devante's words reached her, mind to mind. She knew Ari could hear him, too. *So sweet, so perfect. I want to show you to the world like this, gata gostosa! Everyone should see something so beautiful. But they cannot taste as I can; they can't drink you down, as I am doing!*

"Oh, God!" Shivers swept through her in powerful waves of sensation, rendering her almost powerless. She opened her mind and body, let them do what they wanted, in the sure knowledge that the minute she wanted them to stop, they would.

Control and power she gave up to her two lovers. For now.

Ari came back up to her, eyes glazed with desire, and took her lips. Her taste flooded through them both; then he was gone, and she turned her head to see Devante and Ari kissing, sharing her flavor and enjoying each other. She moaned, wanting to watch, wanting to take part, wanting to do everything all at once, now. When Ari turned his head, she saw their tongues entwined. All the while, Ari played with her breasts, tweaking and pinching, maintaining her arousal.

With his lips still on Ari's, Devante slid his cock between her thighs, released from its position between their bodies. He pushed forward, and it slipped between her wet lips.

When he slid inside her, she gasped. She felt wide open, as if she could take Ari's there, too. He groaned and tore his lips away from Devante's. "We will, *gata gostosa*, I promise you! Anything you want to try. We'll show you things you've never imagined, all for you."

"All for us," Ari echoed, whispering to her, breath falling over her ear. Devante rolled her onto her back and thrust hard two or three times, but as her legs came up to curl around his back, he rolled again, so she ended up on top.

Silje planted her knees on either side of Devante and sat up, embedding his cock deep inside her. Ari sat up as well, and stroked her breasts, marked with the signs of their loving -- small, reddened puckers where their teeth and fingers had pinched and bitten and aroused her. This time he was gentle, soothing her wounds that, with a shape-shifter's gift for healing, would be gone by morning.

"Beautiful woman," he murmured. "Lovely kitten."

Ari kissed Silje while Devante watched and moaned his appreciation. His rhythm, shorter but deep inside her, continued to send shivers through her. She was no longer sure if each shiver was an orgasm, or one big climax, nor did she care.

She reached up to hold him, but Ari slipped from her arms and went behind her. She remembered what he said earlier. Did he mean it?

Now her shivers increased, moved into deep, convulsive shudders. When Ari slipped one finger down between her buttocks and around her asshole, the supersensitive skin reacted to his touch by clenching, then releasing. He crooned to her, no words now, but a gentle, soothing sound low in his throat. His finger tickled, teased, and then slipped inside her, pushing and easing, turning gently. The sensation mesmerized her. She didn't know if she liked it; she had nothing to compare it to, but she remembered her promise and let him carry on.

Heat chased the chills running up her spine, and Devante thrust up, swiveling his hips and totally capturing her attention. He reached for and tugged on her shoulders, easing her down to him and opening her for Ari. He never let up. Something cold hit her backside. Lubricant, maybe, but it wasn't cold for long. It warmed as Ari massaged it into her. He still had one finger inside her anus, slowly working it around until he hit a spot that sent more than chills through her.

Then he pulled his finger out and replaced it with his cock. He swirled around her opening, easing his way, and she felt him slip the rounded head inside her ass. Devante crooned to her, soothing her, murmuring words of reassurance in Portuguese and English. She couldn't hear the words properly, but the tone and his hands holding her steady soothed her. Ari slipped in some more and touched a place inside her she hadn't known existed before.

"Oh, my God!" She shot into orbit, and Devante held her safe while sensation spiraled through her. His mind caressed hers, such a strange feeling and a first for her. Soft, warm, soothing.

When she came around, resting in Devante's arms, there were two cocks inside her, not one. She laid completely still, her knees tucked up on either side of Devante's waist, his arms gripping her forearms. She gazed at him. He smiled. "Okay?"

"Yes." How on earth could she be okay? But she was. She felt amazingly full; it was a good feeling. No pain, not even when Ari withdrew a little and thrust.

Devante cried out. "I can feel you, Ari. My love, oh yes!"

Growling, Ari thrust some more, and Devante, under Silje, braced his body to take the thrusts. He moved then, and when Ari thrust again, he pushed up into her in counterpoint. Thrust and retreat. For the next few minutes, that encompassed her life. All that mattered, all she wanted. If they stopped, she thought she might die.



They didn't stop. Thrust and counter, until Ari's growls turned to groans, and Devante writhed under her. Together, they massaged a spot deep inside, from each side, working her up to something of which she wasn't quite sure. She couldn't call it orgasm; she knew what they were, or she thought she knew. The sensations were familiar, but so amplified she hardly recognized them. Relentlessly, the men, *her* men, drove into her, left her helpless, but all the time she was in control, she called the shots. She knew it, because they rested in her mind, waiting for her to cry out, "Enough!"

But the only sounds she made were helpless, keening ones, until she managed, "Never stop, never!"

For that, Devante pulled her down far enough for his kiss, and Ari bent to place a kiss on her back, just under her shoulder. His mouth opened wider, and he moved up her body to bite.

The sharp pain stung and amplified her senses, driving her up another notch when she thought there were no more notches to go.

Her vision changed, color fading to pastels, and the bright spots cast by the dim bedside lamp glowed brighter. Without her conscious volition, she'd partially shifted to her cat eyes. Her claws extended from her hands, and dug into the sheets on either side of Devante. His only reaction was to push harder and purr. She watched as he partially shifted, his eyes golden-yellow, the pupil a narrow slit. Did he know, or was he oblivious, as she had been?

Ari's tail curled around them, caressing them with gentle, furry strokes.

They'd partially shifted involuntarily. She knew what that meant, what it was supposed to mean, but she didn't dare hope for it. It meant compatibility, sharing, and possibly bonding, if they wanted to. Her thigh burned, and she didn't have to look to know what it was. The tattoo only appeared when she made love with someone compatible, someone with whom she could bond, but she didn't know if that meant Devante, or Ari, or both. She'd

never seen it before, but perhaps next time, they'd let her look. Right now, she just wanted them to push her higher and higher until they all combusted.

Still, her plateau of ecstasy shifted and climbed, beyond control, beyond thought. Sensation became her name, her very being. Devante and Ari pounded into her with long, sure strokes until she heard an unearthly wail.

It was her.

An eruption of emotion, and togetherness like she'd never known swept through her in a cleansing wind and for the first time in her life, Silje passed out.

She came around when Devante lowered her into Ari's arms in the huge sunken tub in the bathroom. He cradled her, and kissed her awake. She smiled up at him through dreamy, human eyes.

"I still run the operation," she said.

Ari threw back his head and laughed. "Yes, ma'am."

## Chapter Eleven

“People came back to see your act again tonight.” Dirk faced Ari, eyes gleaming. “You can always tell when dancers are faking it, but you’re not, are you?” It was Devante’s turn to take Silje into the shower, so Ari waited in the dressing room. This club really needed a bigger shower.

Smiling, he shook his head and opened his mouth to say he didn’t understand, but Dirk forestalled him.

“Enough with the broken English. You understand everything around here. I’ve watched you listening to people. So answer me in proper English while there’s just the two of us.”

Ari sighed. Silje had called them amateurs, and it looked as if she was right.

“We all enjoy it, and yes, we’re a real threesome.” A frown creased his brow. Dirk had been good to them, in his way. He owed him something. “Dirk, I’m not sure how long we’ll be here like this, full time. I have another job I have to go to, and Silje is jumpy. If things work out the way we want them to, Silje will be with us for some time, but we can’t commit to every night at the club any more.”

A cloud crossed Dirk's features, but he waved it away. "That's okay. You've given me an idea. I'm thinking of making this a club for couples. Let's face it, male strip clubs are doing good business, but we need something new. So maybe have nights for the women, Friday nights do best, and a few nights for couples of whatever sex. Acts like yours are a natural for that. Mixed. I can see that working real well, and not hard core. I was thinkin' of hard-core, but there're too many dangers." He fixed Ari with a concentrated stare. "You think I don't know what's going on here? The drugs? The bar staff knows about it, and I pay my workers well to tell me. You're here for that, aren't you? To find out who's dealing?"

Ari sighed again, realizing what a failure he was at undercover work. "Yes."

"Don't worry; I won't ask any more, like who you're working for, but finding out about the drugs made my mind up for me. I didn't know whether to take this place harder or softer, but I don't want the kind of rep that goes with drug dealing, and there could be a lot of money in soft-core. So I want to employ a better chef, get some girls in to supplement the guys, and make it more for couples and artistic. Acts like yours, where the dancing is as important as the stripping, is what I want. Acts like Brad's have to go. His is all about posing, not dancing. I ain't mourning for him. That big dick is a natural for Hollywood porn. Hell, now Schwarzenegger's gone, he might even make it into mainstream."

Ari nodded. "That makes sense. You're in a good situation here. Office girls looking for a fun time and couples looking for something a bit different. Good luck with it." He extended his hand, and Dirk took it without hesitation.

"You can still do guest spots, right?"

Ari smiled. "If Silje wants to. I'd like it."

Dirk touched his fingers to his forehead in a mock salute. "Keep me informed, and let me know when you've got the dealers. I thought of getting my boys involved, but I'll give you a few days to do an official cleanup. Besides, if I start that, I'll have to deal with the

gangs.” He shrugged. “Things were a lot better when the Mafia ruled New York. You knew where you were with them.” Grinning, he exited, closing the door behind him.

Ari sat on the hard wooden chair in front of the vanity and stared at himself. Fit, strong, he enjoyed showing off his body, something he couldn’t do in his buttoned-down business suits. Hell, yeah, he’d like to continue dancing. Call it a hobby. And it turned him on to see Silje naked but concealed in front of all the customers. It’d be even better with more men in the audience. Then they’d all know how lucky he and Devante were. He wanted Silje in his life for longer than this operation. Much longer. He’d have to discuss how to achieve that with Devante. Perhaps they should just up and ask.

Brad walked in, naked as usual, his dick half-erect. Ari sometimes wondered if he stopped on his way from the stage to have a fluffer jack him off as he was soon erect again, once he’d taken something from his stash of illegal drugs.

Brad growled at him, “You don’t need to look at that, you fucking fag; we’re not going there.”

The shower door opened, but when he saw Brad, Devante held Silje back. In one smooth move, Ari was off his chair, and he slid past Devante, giving him a quick kiss to rile Brad some more.

Then he was alone in the shower with Silje. If they did anything, Brad would hear.

Oh yeah.

He reached for her with a gruff, “Come here, *gata gostosa*,” and before she could protest, he had her in a deep kiss.

The shower smelled of Silje and Devante, their mingled essences, and to follow his partner with her body turned him on more than he’d thought possible. He turned her, so she hit the tiled wall at the back of the shower and broke their kiss, framing her face with one hand. “Are you sore?”

Wide-eyed, she shook her head. “You take good care of me, you and Devante.”

"We try to. Devante just had you, didn't he?"

"We had each other."

He gave a low, feline growl "You turn me on, Silje. You've been deep into my mind, and you've let me deep into yours. Your generosity astounds me." He lifted her and drove into her, his cock needing no guidance. He groaned. "Every time, *gata gostosa*, every time, you feel so good, it takes me by surprise. It will always take me by surprise." He stopped short, and drove into her until she softened around him and her pussy wept for him.

"Ari, I -- I..." She trailed off.

"Say it, baby. Say it, *minha doce*ura."

"I can't." She gasped, and her head went back as her first climax hit her. He shared it with her, rode it out.

"Then I'll say it. I love you."

"Ari!" Open-mouthed, she stared at him, so delectable, he had to kiss her. He reached back to secure her legs around his hips and found the soap. Lathering it between his hands, he stared down to where his cock entered her, slick and wet, and he withdrew and drove into her, watching her juices ooze around his pubic hair and his balls.

He smoothed his hands over her back, washing her and fucking her at the same time. "I mean it, and yes, I'm sure."

She stared up at him. "I don't know how I feel. It's not possible to fall in love so fast, even for shape-shifters, is it? I'm confused, Ari."

He wasn't, but he understood her feelings. She'd spent twenty years on her own, self-sufficient, holding herself away from other beings, whereas he'd spent nearly all that time loving Devante with him, fulfilling their fantasies and dreams. He knew what love felt like, and this was it.

"Don't worry, *gatinha*. We can give it time, plenty of time. Just let me love you, and maybe you'll come to know how you feel."

She reached up to caress him.

“When we’re done here, would you like for me to keep shaving my chest?” Ari asked.

She chuckled, and her hand drifted over his pecs to rest on one hard nipple. “Are you very hairy?”

“Like a cat,” he said, and watched her smile. “Not too much, but enough. Devante likes it, but if you do not, Devante will have to put up with it.”

“I’d like you to grow it back.”

“Then I shall, but if you had wanted it, I would have shaved there forever.” He gripped her hips and pushed, once, twice, and felt her convulse around him, bringing him to a hard, fast, intense orgasm. “I love you, Silje.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Surprised but happy, Silje left the shower with Ari.

They emerged, shivering, as the water had turned cold about five minutes before they finished. The dressing room was empty, much to Ari’s obvious relief when he let out a heartfelt sigh. “I guess Brad got tired of waiting, or he realized we’d stolen all the hot water.”

He crossed to the vanity, where a note lay, weighted down by a tub of powder. “Here. It says, ‘Gone down to the car. I’ll see you there. Love, Devante.’” He looked up, his face grim. “Get dressed, Silje. Fast.”

He took the two steps that took him to the clothes rack and grabbed his T-shirt and jeans.

The sudden transition from playful to serious unnerved her. “What is it?”

“He put the text acronyms for ‘see you’ instead of the words. He never does that. And ‘Devante’ is spelled wrong.”

He wanted to tell them something. He hadn’t gone willingly, and there was a trap waiting for them downstairs.

*"Fordømme!"* Silje grabbed her clothes, glad she'd worn jeans to the club. She'd need the mobility. While she dressed, she contacted Dubreis and gave him the alert. It took all of ten seconds, and she was dragging up her zipper by then. "They want us in the parking lot. They'll be waiting for us."

Ari gave her a glance from under his lashes. "Then I'm not sure why we dressed."

She got his meaning immediately and undid the zipper again. "Yes. They'll have Cephalox, won't they? If we're in our other forms, and they inject us, we'll still have our powers."

She cursed the few seconds it took her to strip, but she kept the clothes in her hand as they left the room and raced for the elevator. "Dubreis will meet us there. He's calling other vampires in the vicinity. He says stay back," were her last words before, alone in the groaning, creaking elevator, she shape-shifted. Like hell they'd stay back.

Instead of leaping out of the elevator doors when they opened, they tried the opposite tactic, both shrinking to the size of mice and lurking in the shadows. So all their would-be captors saw when the doors creaked open were two pairs of jeans and two T-shirts.

Not one of them realized the significance for a count of probably five, which was enough time for Ari and Silje to leap out of the shadows, growing in size as they jumped.

Three people waited, and Ari and Silje took them down in half a minute, teeth and claws extended. Their attackers never had a chance to use the hypodermics they held, and it wouldn't have done them much good if they had. In this form, Ari and Silje were strong and in full control of their psi senses.

From the shadows came the sound of applause. Dubreis walked forward, backed by two other figures. All Silje could see was one male and one female form, but she touched their minds and saw two vampire family sigils.



Ari had the presence of mind to shove one of the bodies between the elevator doors, to stop it from closing and taking their clothes away. He threw Silje's jeans to her once he'd shifted back. "That was too easy. What now?"

"It was only too easy because we got here first," Dubreis said with a lift of his heavy, dark brows. "We've taken the other three down. One dead, two who wish they were, or will soon. We left the other three for you."

"Thanks." Ari nudged one with his foot. "I think I killed this one."

Dubreis shrugged. "No matter. I've sent for a cleanup team. They'll be here soon."

"They've got Devante." Silje kept her voice deliberately calm, despite the death. Deaths on the job were often messy and unnecessary. "Any idea where they took him?"

Dubreis shook his head. "They grabbed him before we got here, or got him out another way."

Ari finally hauled the body clear of the doors, and the elevator closed before Silje could stop him. He realized his mistake himself. "Shit. I forgot. We'll fuzz anybody who comes down."

And somebody did. Before the cleanup team arrived, the groaning heralded another elevator passenger. The doors opened, and Dirk stepped out. Ari held up a hand, stopping Dubreis taking his mind. "What do you know?"

"I know Brad Cooper is dead if I get to him before you do." He glared at them. "These yours?" Ari nodded, rather than go into detailed explanations. "I can give you his address, or at least the one he gave me."

"We have it."

"He also works for a photographer. Do you want his name?"

"Anything you can help us with. They've got Devante."

Dirk's slumberous eyes widened. "Sure, I'll help you. That bastard Brad has taken more than his usual drugs. I checked his stash earlier. I found too many vials backstage for my

liking so I checked his stash.” He snorted. “The stupid cunt doesn’t think anyone knows where he puts the drugs he uses. He’s dangerous tonight, so be careful.” He grimaced. “I’m gonna fire his ass if I ever see him again. Okay, the photographer is Simon Chapman, and he has a studio downtown. He does spreads for mags, mostly, and he’s trying to get into film. Brad wanted him to come into the club and take some publicity pictures, but I don’t like the crowd Chapman runs with.”

“Very wise,” Dubreis rumbled. “We know about him.” *Suspected PHR, no proof.*

*You’ve got it now,* Silje replied. *I’m coming with you.* She was desperate to find Devante.

*No, stay back. They have Cephalox.*

*If I stay in my other form, they can’t do much.*

No, Dubreis told her. *We have enough vampires and Sorcerers to cover this. If you insist, I’ll give way, as you’re team leader.*

But it would be a black mark with Cristos. Right now, she didn’t care. She’d broken one of the golden rules; she’d let her personal feelings interfere in an operation, but she didn’t give a flying fuck.

Ari’s hand on her shoulder made her think again.

*Breathe, gatinha.*

She took a few deep, cleansing breaths. Yes, that was what they wanted, for her and Ari to go in, fur up, emotions at full stretch. That thought, more than anything else, made her pause. She’d be giving them exactly what they wanted.

“Okay, go, but go now and keep in touch, all the way. We’ll be at the apartment.” She could link up with Candy on the Department’s net. Candy was the hub, at her bank of computers at Department headquarters on 57th Street. If Devante got away on his own, he’d head home, so that was where she wanted to go now.

Ari pulled her away, toward the Miata. He drove her back in silence. Neither needed to speak; they knew the score, and it was a measure of Ari's trust in her that he gave her this thinking time. By the time they reached the apartment, she had a plan, more or less, in hand.

Ari parked the car and walked around the back to open the door for her. She smiled up at him.

"You don't usually do that."

He dropped a kiss on her forehead. "I don't underestimate what you do and what you are, but that doesn't mean I don't want to care for you or look after you. You can allow me to do that. When we get upstairs, I'm contacting my father to see what he can discover."

"Good idea." That had been part of her plan, but she was glad Ari had thought of it on his own. She rested in his mind nearly all the time now, and she felt his distress and absolute determination not to let it get in the way of clear thinking. His self-discipline astonished her. She'd thought of these guys as stereotypical Brazilians, out for a good time, thinking only of today. She was very wrong.

They walked toward the elevators. This apartment building had a card protection system and was in the process of installing fingerprint scanners for the residents who wanted it. A few pieces of equipment lay around, shiny brushed aluminum catching the dim light.

Only when she felt her powers drain did she realize it wasn't shiny aluminum. It was silver. About half of all shape-shifters had a severe allergy to silver. Unfortunately, she was one of them. So was Ari, it seemed. He stared at her helplessly, caught in the beam cast between two silver pillars that had been activated by walking through it.

"Fucking idiots." Brad walked forward out of the shadows, something black and dull in his hand. He shot Ari, who gave a grunt of surprise and slumped to the floor, blood pumping out of him.

"No!" When Silje surged forward, trying to get to Ari, someone gripped her arms from behind, bending them painfully behind her back.

“Payback.” Another sharp pain and she looked down to see a hypodermic syringe hanging grotesquely from her thigh. Then everything went black.

## Chapter Twelve

Groaning, Silje sat up, holding her head between her hands in an effort to keep her surroundings steady. The world spun, as though she'd drunk the best part of a bottle of bourbon, but the rest of her felt weary, not drunk.

The pain -- the needle. Shit.

Cautiously, holding her head between her hands, she looked up. She sat in a windowless room, the only lighting coming from dimmed spotlights sunk into the ceiling above her. This side of the room was a cage, and she didn't need to see the dull gleam to know that the bars contained silver. She felt the weakening effect her allergy brought her, but if they'd injected her, the chances were she'd had a shot of Cephalexin as well, so she couldn't shift form. Whichever form she took, the silver would drain her strength, in any case. Spotlights were aimed at the cage, and the only way she could see out was to shade her eyes with one hand. Beyond the cage, the room was dark and silent.

A cage made for a lion. Or a jaguar. Or even a Norwegian forest cat.

"Silje?" His voice was barely above a whisper, but she'd know it anywhere.

"Devante!" Her sudden turn made her head spin more, but she held on to her stomach and its contents. Barely.

What she saw nauseated her. Devante lay on the hard floor. His face was a mass of bruises and cuts, and one arm lay at an odd angle, obviously broken. More injuries probably lay underneath his clothes. They'd beaten him badly. They'd pay for that, she thought with a surge of anger.

Forgetting her own troubles, forcing her nausea down, Silje slid across to him. "Oh, Devante! What have they done to you?"

"If we can get out of here, I can survive." He tried a smile, but his lips were badly swollen, and only the jagged ends of his front teeth remained. "They've broken ribs -- difficult to breathe."

She tried mind-to-mind contact, but it was useless. Silver inhibited all her Talents, weakened them until they became useless. For the first time in her adult life, Silje was alone in her own mind. How did mortals do this? So alone, so lonely! Used at least to Talents politely probing the outside of her mind, touching her moods, she realized the importance of body language for the first time. It was the only subliminal message mortals had, the only clue apart from direct communication to moods and thoughts.

She brushed his forehead and wished she wore more than a T-shirt and jeans, so she had something to put between his poor head and the cruelly hard floor. Instead, she lifted his head onto her lap, offering him what comfort she could.

"Rest, Devante. They haven't hurt me. Only jabbed me, probably with Cephalox and some kind of sleeping drug to knock me out."

She had to lower her head to his lips to hear his next words. "They still think I don't speak English well."

Something inside her lifted. One advantage, then. The other was that the Department and Ari would be looking for them.

Ari! She looked around wildly, but there was no sight of him. That only meant they might have him in another room, not that they didn't take him. She couldn't contact him.

She couldn't contact anybody. Hell, she didn't even know where they were. They'd taken her wristwatch, increasing her sense of disorientation. They could be in another state, in another country, even, but she didn't think so. Her gut told her they were still in Kansas. Or rather, New York.

She touched Devante's hand, and his poor, broken fingers curled around her own, but he couldn't grip her. Someone must have stamped on his hand. Was there any part of him unmarked? PHR bastards wanted their fun before they destroyed more Talents.

A sliver of light cracked the darkness beyond the cage when a door opened. Silje lifted her free hand to shade her eyes, so she could see who had just entered their prison.

"I'd get away from him if I were you."

Brad. She might have guessed.

"Why? You hurt him badly. If you don't get help, he'll die."

The lighting abruptly changed. More lights went on in the room beyond, making it possible for them to see. The walls were a dingy white, smooth concrete. Old-fashioned air vents darkened the walls at ceiling level, and there was one large window, covered by a heavy black blind.

An incongruous mural at the other side of the room from the cage showed a tropical beach scene, palms waving over a golden beach, with a blue, blue sea beyond. Portable spotlights, lighting umbrellas and a couple of mounted cameras, as well as other handhelds resting on the floor, revealed the everyday use of this room. She groped in her mind, still foggy from whatever they'd given her, and brought out a name. Simon Chapman, photographer.

A small pinch of hope blossomed in her mind. The Department knew about Chapman. They'd be on their way. Please, God.

Brad, dressed in a dark blue terry cloth robe, his bare feet thrust into a pair of leather sandals, strolled forward to the cage. "He isn't human, Silje, but you know that, don't you?"

She put her chin up. "They are human. As human as you."

"No they're not, but that means you know. Too bad."

He turned and smiled as two more people entered the room. The tall, skinny man with mouse-brown hair must be Simon Chapman. The other one Silje knew only too well.

"Dirk."

Dirk gave them a greasy smile. "Yep. You're so easy, little girl." He waved at the other man. "Meet Al Penney." The skinny man gave her a mock bow, teeth bared in a feral grin. "Pity you didn't walk away from these two scumbags while you still could. Now it's too late, but not before we've made you a star." He produced a key and unlocked the padlock that closed the cage door. "Come on down, cutie."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari kept his jaguar form until the worst of his injury healed, but shifted back and made the medic bind it tightly as soon as he could. It would complete the process on its own now. A shoulder wound, but one that might have killed him had he not been shifted by the special paramedics Dubreis called to the scene, people trained to enter the minds of shape-shifters and help them change form if they couldn't do it themselves.

He hovered over Candy, watching her long fingernails fly over the computer keys. "We've hit all Chapman's legitimate studios. Since he's into porn, the chances are he's got more places for the illegal stuff."

"Does he have a record?" All the time he forced himself to concentrate, to think. He'd called his father in São Paulo, and he'd gotten the considerable resources of the company searching for Devante and Silje. Surely, one of them would find the sleazy heart of the photographer's business before it was too late.

To lose both the people he loved most in the world didn't bear thinking about. Devante he'd loved most of his life, their physical relationship long-standing and unbreakable, but



with the addition of Silje, they'd become a family. If he lost them, he wouldn't stop until he found everyone involved and broke them apart, piece by piece.

A heavy hand on his uninjured shoulder told him Dubreis stood by his side. He didn't look away from the computer screen.

"We have a team of vampires and Sorcerers on standby at various parts of the city. We're checking all the porn studios we know about, not just Chapman's."

"What if they've left?"

"They haven't. We're pretty sure of that," Candy said. "I got on to all the airports and put out an alert. Now that we're Homeland Security as well as CIA -- I'd still like to know how Cristos pulled that one off -- we have more power. They'll hold any suspicious luggage, something large enough to hold a human or anything marked 'livestock,' any heavily veiled or bandaged people, until they're completely certain and everything checks out."

"You told them you were looking for shape-shifters?" Did the whole of the US authorities know about them?

"No. Just told them we had a security alert." Candy sounded patient, as if she was placating an idiot, and Ari shut up. His anxiety was getting the better of him again. He always prided himself on his cool head in a crisis. God knows he'd faced enough in his business career, but now, with Silje and Devante in the hands of these monsters, his head spun, and rage threatened to take over.

Candy continued to hit the keys, putting up arrays and lists, searching for key names and faces. She worked faster than a human could, and she'd put all the computer experts she could find on to doing the same thing. They'd tapped into the FBI's files, found all the known pornographers in the city, searched the records of all strip clubs, classy or otherwise, in the hunt for Brad Cooper and Simon Chapman.

Then Candy stopped dead and stared at the screen. "Well, lookee here. Same face, wrong name. Different ID."

Ari bent and looked, then swore, loud and long.

“Dirk Clovelly, aka Graham Bradshaw, aka Ivor Stud, aka George Hartman. Porn actor for twenty years, contracted AIDS, and retired from the business, or so we thought. He took a lot of care to hide the Ivor Stud ID. He’s had facial surgery to conceal his appearance, paid a lot of money for a new ID and a false background. Guess what? Ivor Stud worked for Rod Gartside in Los Angeles.”

“Rod Gartside is PHR.”

“Yep. We’ve found our daisy, the link to the LA cell. You can forget Chapman; I have a different name here under old Dirk’s associates. Alvin Penney. He probably used Chapman’s name to put us off the trail.” She clicked to another screen. “Oh yeah. Chapman fired George Hartman five years ago. Dirk probably thinks it’s cool to get us to raid Chapman’s studios while he’s at Penney’s, holding Devante and Silje.”

Ari straightened. “Okay, give me the address. I’m on my way.”

\* \* \* \* \*

If she refused to go with Dirk, they’d probably just kill her and Devante now. She had to do as they said. Although Devante reached for her, groaning her name, she kissed his fingers and laid his head gently back on the hard floor before turning and walking out of the cage. She forced herself to take Dirk’s hand and let him lift her over the bar at the base of the doorway.

“Wouldn’t want you bruised now,” he sneered as he put her down on her feet. “Can’t have your movie ruined.”

Startled, she stared at the backdrop and cameras, and took a step away from Dirk, but no further, because a grinning Brad blocked her way.

"This is going to be a pleasure," he said. He stripped off his robe, and surprise, surprise; he was naked and aroused underneath, his hard cock almost purple at the tip. "I'm ready for my close-up," he said, unconsciously quoting one of Silje's favorite films.

"Mr. de Mille," Dirk finished. Brad frowned in puzzlement, and Dirk laughed. "Never mind, Brad. I'm sure Silje knows what I'm talking about."

Penney was already testing the cameras, looking through the lenses and lining them up.

"You're going to star in your very own movie," Dirk said. "That's all we want you to do, Silje. Just have sex with Brad. Do you know what a snuff film is?"

She shook her head. Of course, she knew. She didn't need Devante's shouted curse to tell her, but best she act ignorant for now. That might, just *might*, give her an edge if they thought she didn't know they planned to kill her in the act of sex. Probably strangle her. That was how the sick fucks who bought those films got off. "Then you'll let me go?"

Maybe acting stupid would help.

Brad opened his mouth to answer, but it was Dirk who said, "Maybe. We can talk to you, get you to see the light. You might want to help us, instead of those monsters you've been associating with. Have you seen what they can do?"

She bowed her head. He'd said "they." Not "you." Plans raced through her mind. Should she pretend to be totally innocent? Maybe turned on by fucking animals? Kept a whimpering slave by them? Any of those might work and buy time.

Dirk's voice turned serious, all his usual bantering tone gone. "They're animals, Silje. They can turn into animals. Abominations, some people call them. Others call them deviants, but I think that gives deviants a bad rap." He really meant it. What an idiot, not to accept that people are different, but still people.

Brad sniggered.

Penney interrupted them. "Are we gonna do this, or what?" He was on edge, nervous.

"Sure." Brad leered at her. "Go stand in front of the camera and strip. I'll join you in a minute."

Wait. Penney didn't look nervous; he looked bored. He was covering his nervousness well. So how did she know?

Because she'd touched his mind, that was how.

Keeping her head bowed, Silje sniffed to cover her near-gasp of awareness. They hadn't given her Cephalox in that hypodermic. Only something to make her sleep. Shit, this was brilliant, fantastic. This close to the silver cage, her powers were reduced, but the studio was at the other end of the room. It wasn't a big room, and she'd never tested her powers close to silver, but she wasn't surrounded by the stuff any more. She could function. They must think she was mortal.

She snuffled. Then she had another idea. "Don't you want him to change so you can film him, too?" That would start the healing process Devante so badly needed. And they'd want to film him shape-shifting as evidence for their PHR buddies.

"Oh, yeah," Dirk said. "But right now he can't. He's full of a drug that stops him. Say, have you met any others like him?" He glared at Brad. "Shame you killed the other one. We could have used him to find others. But hey" -- he shrugged -- "we got two more than anybody else this year. It's been a thin year for shape-shifters. We'll let him change form just before we kill him."

She wasn't that good of an actress. The sight of Ari's lifeless body flashed before her. She couldn't lose Devante too! "No! Don't, please. I'll do anything!"

"Strip."

After her two nights at the club, Silje thought she was getting used to stripping in front of people to get them off. This was different to stripping to shift. Nobody stared at her then, nobody stroked their crotch when they looked at her, nobody yelled out obscenities or

encouragement. Stripping to shape-shift was natural, with its own etiquette. They didn't shake their booties or any other part when they stripped for the shift.

She took her time crossing the room, extending her senses as much as she could, which wasn't much, but she touched the three men. Brad was excited, far more turned on than she'd ever sensed him before. The pervert got off on this, his ultimate fantasy. Dirk was excited too, but in a more controlled way, and his excitement held a lot of power and control. That got him hot, power. Telling her what to do, directing her actions, and then telling Brad when he wanted her killed.

She clenched her hand into a fist, and felt her strength returning, coursing through her the farther she moved away from the cage. Brad would have more of a fight than he ever imagined.

When she reached the far side of the room, she crossed the sand strewn over the canvas covering the concrete floor. It felt like a travesty of a beach: cold, damp, and dead. She still wore her jeans and T-shirt from the club and the underwear from her performance that night, lacy black bra and thong panties. Four garments.

The camera clicked, and Penney watched her through the viewfinder. Dirk picked up a handheld and clicked it on, staring down at the little screen. "Okay, baby. Take one."

Brad sniggered, and Dirk gave a mild "Shut the fuck up, Brad. I want to keep as much sound as I can." They wanted the sound of her death throes.

Silje lifted her head and looked across the room to where Devante lay. The only sign of life was in his eyes, glittering in fury. She couldn't contact him behind the silver bars, but she gave him a slight nod, hoping he'd get her message. She couldn't tell if he understood.

Lowering her chin, she gave the camera a sultry smile and began, as slowly as she dared, to take off her clothes.

Only by keeping Devante's plight firmly in her mind did she manage it. Stripping in these circumstances was everything dancing in the club wasn't. This was unpleasant, hateful, and it brought goose pimples to her skin.

When she was down to her panties, Brad, naked, walked into shot. He stared at her in what should have been a sultry way and took her in his arms. She felt suffocated next to his oiled, firm muscles, pumped up by drugs and too much exercise. The bright lights at this end of the room glanced off his body, defining it and the heavy sinews that roped his skin every time he moved.

He put the desire on his face. She watched, and he switched it on, like a light bulb going on in his head. His light gray eyes glowed, his full mouth curved in a slight smile. She could almost swear it was real, but it wasn't. She sensed his dead emotions. The only thing Brad wanted was to get some relief for his dick. He was full of the little blue pills, the little white ones, and some white powder. He was also looking forward to throttling her just before his orgasm.

Silje suppressed a shudder and concentrated on the best time to launch her attack. If this place was completely silver-bound, she couldn't guarantee the Department finding her before these bastards tried to kill her. Luckily, she had one of the homing devices the Department now insisted on injected into her forearm; there was no way Candy would miss that, if they had no jamming devices installed here. Hopefully, the cavalry would arrive sometime soon. Hopefully. That was all she had. That and her Talent. It had to be enough.

She turned to show her profile to the camera, and away from Brad, but he spun her around to face him, his hands on her shoulders.

"Down," he growled. "On your knees."

Oh, yeah. Silje bowed her head to hide the triumphant expression in her eyes and knelt. She waited.

"Suck me off, bitch."

She reached for him. His dick felt strangely rubbery, erect but not quite right. She stroked it, making a production of it. Glancing up at him, she saw him staring at her avidly. She gripped it firmly and drew it to her mouth.

Silence from the cameramen waiting to record her death rattle.

Well, that wasn't what she planned. She opened her mouth wide, and sucked the head of Brad's cock in.

Immediately, Brad's hands speared into her hair, and he gripped her, preparing to push her forward, going for the deep throat. He wouldn't care much about her gag reflex. She read his need, aching hunger the only emotion he felt right at the moment. He'd make her deep throat him and then he'd fuck her and strangle her.

He'd done it before. She saw the satisfaction in his mind, the mental tallying of numbers. Well, he'd made his last snuff film.

Before he could shove his cock to the back of her throat, she shape-shifted to cat teeth and cat eyes, then she bit down. Hard.

A gush of blood filled her mouth, and Brad's howl of pain was everything she'd hoped it would be.

"Fuuuuuuckkk!"

She yanked her head back, spitting out blood, uncaring if she caught any more of Brad's dick or even ripped it off. It wouldn't matter a great deal, anyway. The lowlife had killed his last woman. No time for niceties, she shape-shifted fast and increased her natural size, which was about as large as a jaguar, then she became bigger.

"Jesus, Brad, didn't you give her a shot of Cephalox?"

Well, duh. Now she'd read him, she knew why. Brad refused to believe any woman could be a threat to him, even one that might shift into a cat with sharp teeth and even sharper claws. Claws that raked across Brad's throat even as he lunged to get out of her way,

leaving the blood pulsing out of him, bleeding out onto the sandy floor that had witnessed too much innocents' blood.

Her first priority had to be Devante. Getting to him, helping him shape-shift so he could start to heal. His weak cry of triumph was silent to anyone's ears but hers.

None of her powers would work inside the silver cage, but now she had shape-shifted, she possessed the strength to stop them killing her. She was nearly invulnerable in this form, though the silver would weaken that a bit. Even if she could do nothing but retain her cat form, her natural weapons, teeth and claws, should be enough.

Rapidly she assessed the situation, glad to know her cool was holding up under stress. Never had anyone she loved been involved in an operation, and yes, she did love Devante. The tearing grief she felt when he'd been kidnapped, and her agony when she saw what they'd done to him, convinced her beyond a doubt.

The photographer was nearly at the door, and Dirk stood in her way, a syringe in his hand. The drop at its tip gleamed in the light from the spotlights meant to illuminate her death.

Too late, or didn't he realize that? Not caring any more if she hurt him or not, she slammed her mind into his, through his puny barriers. *You jab me with that, you're stuck with the cat for the next twelve hours. I won't lose anything, but you will.*

He winced and stepped back. Good. With a thought, she dropped him to his knees, and then twisted the knife by plunging into the pain center of his brain and tweaking a few nerves. Not too many. She really wanted this bastard taken alive, so he could realize what he'd done and suffer for it.

When she pulled out of his mind, she felt dirty. Dirk was good at deception, and conscienceless killing. He liked to watch the kill; it was the only time he really got excited these days. All that talk about cleaning the club up, making it more mainstream was true,



because Dirk was in the process of buying another club, one for hard-core, live sex shows. He'd sell the Cephalox at both places, find different markets for it.

Just as well she'd caught him now.

The cameraman, Penney, had gone. Now she had a choice to make. Pursue him or rescue Devante, whose breathing was audibly weaker to her enhanced hearing.

There wasn't a choice. Not really. She went back to the cage, shifting size so she could pass through the narrow doorway.

His eyes had glazed over, the blood running slower now, because there was less of it. She couldn't prevent a fresh gush of blood as she clawed through his torn T-shirt, careful not to pierce his skin, and hauled him to the door. No time for niceties. If she didn't get him out of this cage, he'd die, weakened by his allergy to silver and his wounds.

Outside, with Devante on the floor, she went into her mind and found her telepathic sense. *Help! Any Talent anywhere?*

A voice she knew came back. *Yes. The bug in your skin is working. Five minutes.*

*Somebody got away, the photographer.* She sent a visual to Dubreis and turned all her attention back to Devante.

Five minutes might be too late. Devante was breathing shallowly now. There was only one hope left for him. She entered his mind, and because he was semiconscious, his barriers were up. She had to push her way through them.

Inside, she found everything closing down. Frantically, she searched for the part of his brain only shape-shifters had. If he died like this, with her firmly embedded in his mind, he might take her with him.

Like she cared. If she didn't save him, she deserved death.

She grabbed what little of his consciousness that remained and added her own powerful changing powers to it. It had to be enough. It *had* to be.

Completely merged, she shared her strength with him, deliberately fusing every part of them, body and soul. Her essence flowed into him, and she took what she found there as her own. Nothing remained hidden.

She reached down and felt the burning mark on his thigh, feeling her own heat up as the bond solidified and took shape. Silje and Devante became one being in two bodies, their thoughts one, their existence one.

Shape-shifters usually bonded for reasons of love, and on her part, that was why she chose to bond with Devante now. She loved him. His consent was almost automatically given, as if he didn't care, so she had no way of knowing if he meant it. Nor did it matter at this moment. This was the only way to keep his spirit with her, to keep him alive.

Except what she'd just done meant that when Devante died, she would die too. Two souls bonded as one, two beings as close as they could ever get in this world.

*So we'd better live, my love, hadn't we?*

## Chapter Thirteen

After they first burst into the studio, Ari thought Devante and Silje were dead. He hadn't been able to contact them, and guessed -- hoped -- the reason was silver, or another inhibitor.

Anything else was unthinkable. At least, he didn't want to think it. He wouldn't, not until he knew for sure.

He saw the two people he loved most in the world, man and cat, side by side on the floor, both unconscious. His heart plummeted. When Silje had managed to contact Dubreis, he was overjoyed, but five minutes might have proven too late. Looking around the room, the pool of congealed blood in the devilish cage at the other end forced him into realization of what had happened. The bright lights and the cameras gave him the other. He stared at the body of Brad Cooper with grim satisfaction. If they hadn't killed him, he, Aristides, would have sought his death. Then he felt the faint presence of two Talents, confined to this silver-enclosed room. He gasped in relief. They weren't dead.

After one quick visual sweep of the room, all his attention focused on the two beings in the center of it.

He saw the bonds. The physical evidence, the leaping jaguar on Devante's upper thigh, fading now the bond was achieved, and the mental evidence, obvious when he touched their minds. Locked, mind and body, their limbs, skin and fur, twined together, their hearts beating as one. Even as he saw it, he refused to accept the fact. Devante and Silje were bonded. Forever together.

That didn't affect the way he felt about them. He loved them both, but they'd taken their relationship another step, one into which he could not intrude.

Ari watched Dubreis scan, sensing the powerful telepathy he used. Dubreis also held some kind of electronic equipment that beeped every so often.

Ari ran forward and put one hand on Silje's forehead, the other on the back of Devante's neck.

Alive! Though alarmingly weak. He poured all the energy he could find into them both, trying to give them equal amounts of power, all the power he had. He truly couldn't have chosen which one to save had it become necessary for him to do it.

Ari was hardly aware of the medics arriving and making a rapid examination, but he pulled back a little to listen to their diagnosis. The woman glanced at him, her blue eyes dispassionate, but he sensed reined-in anger seething under the professional exterior.

"Without the bond, he would have died. She did the right thing, for him anyway, but she could die now along with him."

"What did they do?" He dared not move out of their minds, trying to give them the stability they needed while their essences moved between the two of them, sustaining and healing.

"They beat him badly. Broke some bones, caused internal bleeding. It's hard to see how he lived through it, and it's certain their bond saved him. He lost a lot of blood, but when she gave him her strength, the outer wounds started to heal much faster, and the internal bleeding stopped. The bones are knitting, so we need to set them before they set bent."

Ari pulled back a little more and put the room into focus. The medics were acting fast, setting Devante's wounded arm the old-fashioned way, with splints. Another worked on the gashes in his flesh, binding them together with large, clumsy stitches. Speed was the most important thing here. Stop the blood, set the bones. It would take Devante some time to recover, if he ever did.

A voice made him look up. Dubreis, face set grimly. "Does he need blood? I fed tonight, and I fed well."

One of the medics glanced up at him. "Yes."

Dubreis knelt and stripped off his leather jacket, revealing a sleeveless black T-shirt. One of the medics grabbed his bag.

"Wait." Ari hadn't met many vampires, and certainly didn't understand what was going on here. "I thought vampires took blood, not gave it."

Dubreis spoke slowly and clearly, as if to an infant, but Ari didn't resent the implications. He needed Dubreis's clarity. His mind was working as if it was fighting through molasses. "All vampires have the universal blood type, and when we feed, the blood we ingest is converted to ours. Our bodies filter and clean it, so we are excellent donors. We sometimes carry more than the usual eight pints, which helps." He bared his sharp, white teeth, and Ari caught a glimpse of his tooth buds, above the eyeteeth at the front, currently all he could see of Dubreis's fangs.

The medic took out a plastic tube, with what looked like hypodermic needles at each end.

"My blood isn't tainted, nor is it diseased." Dubreis hardly winced when the man stuck the needle deep into the vein at the bend of his elbow. "We are ideal donors. When we're finished here, I can feed again, if I need it." He grinned wryly when Ari couldn't completely control his shudder. "It is a pleasant sensation for the people we take from, or so I'm told. We

don't drink much. We don't need much. Your blood banks take much more and in a more traumatic way."

Ari knew it, but he'd never seen a vampire feed, and the thought filled him with horror. "How can you drink blood?" he said, before he could censor his words. He shook his head, trying to regain the self-control for which he was famed, but it had left him.

"I don't. Our fangs are hollow tubes, like this needle." While Dubreis was speaking, the medic had attached the other end of the tube to Devante's leg, a tourniquet helping to reveal the vein shrunk by Devante's lack of blood. Now the clear tube linking them was a healthy red. "We draw what we need up into an organ near our kidneys, which filters the blood for our use. Without it, we die, but it's a long, painful death. Like starving, but we only need a little blood to survive. It has to be fresh blood, though our scientists are working on that." He grimaced. "To tell you the truth, even if they find some kind of magic pill, I'd still prefer to take it the old-fashioned way. Our psyches are made like that. We need the connection, and the actual taking of blood is as satisfactory as a good meal in a fine restaurant."

"I've never seen a vampire eat."

Dubreis shrugged. "We need nourishment, just as the rest of humanity does, but the newly fledged can only take food during the hours between sunrise and sunset, and the rest of us prefer to limit our intake."

The discussion helped to calm Ari, as he strongly suspected it was meant to. While Dubreis spoke, the transfusion did its work and he felt the strength returning to the linked bodies under him. All this time, his hands were still on his lovers' bodies, unable to break the contact.

Even though, one day, he might have to let them go, now was not the time.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ari stretched, every pore of his body aching with fatigue. At last, it was time for him to rest. In the bed, Devante and Silje lay, human again after a day in their cat forms. The medics

had converted Devante as soon as the Cephalox in him wore off, as he was much stronger in that form.

They'd looked stunning, Devante's sinuous but powerful jaguar form entwined with Silje's thickly furred but sleek cat. He should feel jealous. Fuck, he *was* jealous, but he was also worried as hell.

Not so much today. Today he knew they would live. Today they'd allowed them home from the hospital, and they lay in the big bed which until recently used to be the one he slept in with Devante. Now he supposed it would belong to Devante and Silje. They'd bonded. That was that, as far as his involvement was concerned. They might invite him to join them from time to time, but he'd be the extra person in their bed, not the other way about.

It didn't mean he didn't love them both, or that he'd miss them like hell. He shook the newspaper out and carried on looking down the list of apartments. Maybe he'd just leave it in the hands of an agency.

A shaky, croaky feminine voice broke into his studies.

"Hello." He dropped the paper on to the floor, and with a cry of joy, he fell on his knees by the bed. Ari took Silje into his arms, but the kiss he gave her was a gentle one, on her forehead.

"Welcome back, Silje."

She coughed, and he drew back to find the water in a carafe by the bed. "Dry?"

His arm supporting her head, he helped her drink. She gulped nearly the whole glassful before she paused and asked, "Devante?"

"Next to you."

She turned her head, and the expression on her face told him the bonding wasn't only to save Devante's life. That warm look of longing said he was doing the right thing. His heart

broke a little, but he gave no outward sign. Since he wasn't bonded to either of them, he could still keep that private, if he built careful barriers around his thoughts.

She seemed to remember him and turned back, the remnants of that glorious smile still wreathing her face. "You got there in time, then."

"Just." His mouth went dry when he remembered how close it got. "Dubreis donated blood to Devante, and then we took you to the hospital; Devante had a proper transfusion. What made you do it, Silje? We could have lost you both." The thought made his voice shake, just a little bit, though he controlled it immediately.

Still, she noticed, and she laid her hand over his. "I couldn't bear a world without Devante in it. I don't know how it happened, but I fell deeply in love with him. I still don't know how he feels about me, though, so don't tell him. Please."

"You don't have to." The deep, sandpaper voice startled them both. Neither was using the telepathy that linked them, and Devante had come to so quickly they hadn't time to moderate what they were saying.

Devante lifted his arm to curl it around Silje's naked waist, as if he needed to touch her. "I know. I felt it, deep down. You saved me, my love, and for that, I owe you. But that's not why I love you."

Ari felt out of place. He stood, keeping his smile firmly fixed on his face. "You've both been out for a day and more. I bet you're hungry." He held up a hand. "No, don't deny it. I've been sitting here listening to your stomachs rumbling. I have just the thing in the kitchen. I'll go get it."

He left the room to the sound of their laughter.

Instead of going to the kitchen, he went to the guest bedroom downstairs, where he'd slept the night before. He'd managed to get enough clothes out of the bedroom so he could manage for a while. He'd go to a hotel. Maybe treat himself to the Astoria for a few nights, in



compensation for losing Silje. If his heart was going to break, it might as well break in luxury.

\* \* \* \* \*

Devante's first impulse was to visit the bathroom. Silje watched his broad back and firm ass, enjoying the view as he disappeared inside the huge room. He wasn't gone long, and she could take her turn. Spending thirty-six hours unconscious was a big strain on the bladder, but she hadn't been aware of it until the glass of water made its presence felt.

Practicality and real life intruded all too often. After she accomplished her bathroom break and cleaned her teeth, she felt much better and climbed back into bed, into Devante's welcoming arms. "Did you mean it?"

He drew her close and pressed his lips to hers, taking her in a ravishing kiss, as passionate as it was brief, searing her to her very core. "What do you think?" He kissed her again, but drew back, gazing at her as if he couldn't get enough of her. "I fell in love with you that first time, but I thought I was too fast for you." He cradled her cheek in one large hand and kissed her. She returned his embrace with fervor. "I knew what I felt. I entered you, mind and body, and I fitted there. In both places. You are my other half, Silje. I love you."

"I love you, too, Devante, but I never realized until you nearly died on me. I put my job at risk to save you, when I let the photographer go. He could have been the other daisy we were looking for. If he'd gotten away, Cristos would have had my head for it. I didn't care. I needed to save you, and you wouldn't have lasted much longer in that cage. I made the choice, and it was you."

"I don't remember much about it. My Brazilian macho upbringing says I should have been there to save you, but you saved me." He gave a short, self-deprecatory laugh. "All that matters is that both of us are alive." He brought their lips together again, drawing her fully into his arms, his erection pressing insistently against her belly. He pushed it into her flesh,

unable to resist, and in the age-old response, she pushed back. The hard, insistent length felt wonderful. They were alive. They'd won.

He pushed her onto her back, and she went willingly, but after one kiss, he drew back. She felt his concern before he said anything. They'd never be able to hide anything from each other ever again. "What is it?" Then she picked it up. "Ari?"

"What -- how --?"

She pressed a finger over his lips. "You don't have to say. Devante, he's planning to leave, isn't he?" Devante nodded. "We have to stop him."

He breathed a sigh of relief against her fingers. "I'm so glad you said that. Come, my love."

\* \* \* \* \*

They found Ari in the downstairs guest room, the one Silje had occupied for a brief time when she'd come to this lovely apartment. He had his back to them. A case lay open on the bed, and he was carefully folding a shirt.

"Going somewhere?" Devante asked.

Ari dropped the shirt and spun around, his face flushed red. "I'd hoped to slip away after I brought you something to eat." His eyes gleamed suspiciously bright, but Silje couldn't imagine the controlled Ari weeping. "You two need some time to yourselves."

"No, we don't." Standing hand in hand with Devante felt right, but not if Ari wasn't there as well.

"You've bonded. You need some time on your own to come to terms with what that means."

"Don't go, Ari. Please."

Ari spread his hands in a placatory gesture. "I'm sorry. I can't stay and witness this. In a few days, maybe we can get together for dinner or something. Silje will have to go in to the Department for debriefing, at least that's what Dubreis said, and we can meet then."

"Aristides."

He shivered when Devante said the one word, full of love and understanding, but he held firm. "Guys, I'm happy for you. I really am, but I need a break. You can understand that, can't you?" He turned his back to them and picked up his shirt.

Silje exchanged a glance with Devante. Ari would only accept their decision from her. They both knew that.

When she touched his back, he flinched away.

"Ari, we can't do this without you. We need you. We both do. If I could have, I would have bonded with both of you, at the same time, but I had to save Devante's life."

His shoulders slumped. "I know that. You had to save him, and the only way to hold on to him was to bond and pull him back, threaten him with losing your life, too." He turned around. This time there was no disguising his tears. "But I meant what I said, Silje, in the shower last night." She remembered. "I need some time. I won't collapse, but I can't watch you two. I honestly wish you all the best, *fofinha*, but I need the space."

"Ari, don't go. Please. I want you." She drew a deep breath. "I meant what I said, too."

He stared at her, eyes wide with shock. "You can't. You've given yourself to him. There is no such thing as three-way bonding. Whether you think so now or not, one day you'll resent my being with you. I know you love me. I love you, too." He glanced up at Devante. "Both of you." He gave Silje his attention again, his gaze searing into her. "I can't take second best. I love you both, but I need to be number one with someone. Please understand. It wouldn't be fair on any of us."

She reached out and flattened her palm on his chest. In despair, Ari looked into the eyes of his male lover, but Silje spoke. "Ari, we love you. We both love you. Neither of us is

complete without you.” She gave a shaky laugh. “God knows how you did it, both of you, but I can’t think of one of you without the other. It isn’t *right*. So we wanted to ask -- will you try to bond with us both?”

His hand came up to cover hers. “It’s not possible, Silje.”

“Why not?” His warmth filled her with hope although he hadn’t yet let his inner mental barriers down. She couldn’t read more than his superficial feelings, but they softened just a little. “Who’s to say what we can and can’t do? All I know is that I love Devante, and I love you, and if anyone asked me to choose -- I couldn’t.”

He stroked her hand. “Silje, I love you too, and I love Devante. I understand why you had to bond with him, and I know it would hurt both of you to be apart from each other. Couples don’t bond lightly. It means that when you die, he will die also. It means you are one, you can’t hide any truths, you can’t be apart. How can I intrude on that? How can I be anything but the extra person, the add-on lover? I don’t want that, Silje.”

“I know. But won’t you at least try? You and Devante could have bonded years ago. Please, Ari. Come to bed one last time. Try to bond with us. If you can’t, if it is really impossible, then we’ll let you go, I promise.”

“I swear it.” Devante’s voice came softly, but penetrated the sudden silence.

Ari gazed down at Silje and swallowed. “I didn’t know it was possible to fall in love so quickly, but I did. One more time, then.”

When she threw herself into his arms, he hugged her tight, and then lifted her chin with one hand to kiss her, long and lingering. His lips clung to hers, as if he couldn’t leave her, and she stood on tiptoe to reach him. Without taking his mouth away from hers, he bent and scooped her up, his arm under her suddenly weak knees.

He crossed the room and leaned over her to kiss Devante. She watched their mouths working, as their tongues came into play and felt her pussy getting progressively wetter. Yes. She needed this. They all did.

"Upstairs," Ari whispered, his voice a thread in the still air. "Before I lose my nerve." Devante made for the stairs while Ari strode in his wake, holding Silje securely in his arms.

She had no time to wonder how she got to this point so fast, deeply in love with two men, unable to imagine life without either of them. She'd come to America for a new life, but she'd never imagined anything like this. A new way of life. Not that she wanted to fight against it.

Ari murmured to her, words in his native language she only understood because he was in her head, showing her what he meant. "*Minha doçura, meu amor, minha paixão... Você é Linda.*" My sweet, my love, my passion... You are beautiful.

She clung to him, determined not to let him go until they reached the bedroom. Devante threw off his robe and climbed into bed first, and then Ari laid her gently down on the cool sheet. "Are you sure, *fofinha*?"

"Positive."

He glanced at Devante.

"Completely sure, Ari," Devante told him. "Come to bed, my love."

They watched as he stripped out of his T-shirt and jeans. His underwear and socks came off at the same time, and he slid into bed on Silje's other side. She lay on her back and smiled up at the two men leaning over her. "So when did I get so lucky?"

"When did we?" Devante leaned down to kiss her, and someone -- Ari -- put a hand on her breast, plumping it up to receive his mouth. He licked around the nipple and savored her taste before he sucked her nipple in deep. Devante caressed her with his tongue, curled his arm around her head and caressed the upper part of her ear, a particularly sensitive part of her anatomy.

When she felt hands on her belly, one from each, she shivered with the intensity of the sensation. *I think we have to be in you at the same time, Silje. And in each other.*

*Yes, Devante, I think so too. How do we do that?*

Devante's low chuckle reverberated in her mind. *Leave it to us, meu amor.*

She was happy to do it, when they made her so hot, so fast. She went from cool to the boiling point in ten seconds flat, but with two gorgeous Brazilian men feasting on her body, she stood no chance of keeping her cool.

Devante left her lips to scatter little kisses over her face and neck, before joining Ari at her breasts. They kissed each other, they kissed her nipples, and they heated her with their breath. Devante took Ari's hand, and together they traced the lines of her body, down to her stomach, around her navel and below.

She held her breath. One breast each, sucking, licking and caressing...that alone could drive her to orgasm, but their linked hands, Devante's large, capable one, and Ari's leaner, more artistic hand, stroked down her body, tantalizingly slow, until they reached the nest of blonde curls at the apex of her legs.

"So fair," Ari murmured between kisses. "A snow queen of a cat."

"Mmm." Devante's breath purred on her skin, heating and driving chills deep into her bones. "Such a delicious contrast. Look, *meu amor.*"

Silje lifted her head to watch, through the small gap they left when they shifted their heads. Their bronzed hands, fingers twined together, stroked through her curls, dipped into the cleft between her legs. When they brushed past her clit, she stiffened and drew a sharp breath.

Ari looked up at her. "Watch, love."

Their index fingers probed deep. Together, sliding along the copious wetness at her core and deep, deep inside her. Two fingers, one from each.

"Oh, God!"

Devante kissed the side of her breast, and Ari licked her nipple.

They pushed deep into her, and their movements were so coordinated, she knew they'd linked, mind to mind. When she tried to link with them, Devante kissed her again while Ari said, "No, sweet. We'll open to you and draw you in when it's right."

Their probing was driving her crazy. Their fingers explored together, but independently, touching her, pushing into her, stretching her, until they withdrew. Together.

She arched her back, gasping, responding to them instinctively. Ari sucked her nipple back into his mouth. She felt the hard tip hit the roof of his mouth before he sucked rhythmically, pushing the ultrasensitive flesh backward and forward.

They played inside her until Devante withdrew, his larger digit using her juices to slide back and slip around her ass, easing and teasing.

Of course. They'd have to enter her at the same time, though she didn't know how they would enter each other as well.

Her pussy throbbed. Ari released her nipple wetly and licked his way up to her neck, then her lips.

His kiss, exploratory at first, turned passionate, and he pushed hard inside her while he took her mouth. His movement freed her hand, and she turned it, and found his hard, pulsing cock waiting for her. She loved the way he felt, and when Devante pushed his cock against her other hand, she gloried in the sensation, pushing and pulling as they took turns at her mouth.

One kissed her, then the other, while she worked their cocks in long, hard strokes, pushing the soft, thin skin over the rigidity beneath. They cupped her breasts, massaging her, plucking and pulling her nipples until they felt twice as long and hard as they ever had before.

Devante pushed a finger into her ass, and she lifted her legs to give him better access. He smiled, and she watched him, his face tender, as he worked her toward the first climax.

When Ari's finger inside her pussy came into contact with Devante's finger in her ass, she screamed and bucked, everything inside her convulsing with the violence of her orgasm. Ari crooned in her ear, his breath bathing the rim in heat. "Oh, baby, you feel so good, so right. Better than anyone else, anywhere else. Take us, *meu amor*, take us any way you want."

Devante's low groan added counterpoint to his love words, and they lifted up, slowly moving on to their knees, toward each other.

Silje watched their cocks come into contact, first the broad red heads, then the thick shafts, as if they were measuring themselves against each other. Ari was a little longer than Devante, but Devante was thicker. Both made her mouth water.

Silje knew what she wanted to do. She sat up, and leaned toward them.

When she snaked out her tongue, she partially shifted, and she licked them with the rougher, harder cat's tongue. Neither expected that, and they cried out together. Devante's body sagged a little, but he came back for more, pressing his cock eagerly to Ari's, so she could lick them both. However much she desired it, she couldn't get them both into her mouth at the same time, but she licked and sucked and caressed, circling both heads, starting at Ari's and ending at Devante's, around the beautiful, proud cockheads of the men she loved. They pushed, rubbed each other and touched her lips. Two drops of pre-come, one from each man, tasting subtly different, made her want more, but when she opened her mouth wider, determined to at least try, Ari lifted her up, one hand under her arm to guide her.

His mouth was half-open, panting with need. "That's not the part of you we want to take us," he said, pausing to take a breath. He glanced at Devante, and they leaned back on their elbows, across the wide bed. Silje looked from one expectant face to the other and as she watched, they lifted their knees and planted their feet on the mattress, Ari's legs over Devante's, their beautiful dicks still pressed close together.



Waiting for her, left in the middle, like a rose whose outer petals have finally curled back to reveal the full beauty of the blossom.

“Come to us,” Devante whispered. “Make yourself one with us.”

Both inside her pussy at the same time. Could she?

She could try. She climbed over them, facing Ari and grasped their cocks. Ari slipped one hand between her legs and pushed two fingers into her. He gasped. “You are so wet, *fofinha*, so ready. Does this turn you on? Two cocks, waiting to fuck you?”

“Does it ever.” Daunting, but never let anyone say that Silje Nordstrom backed down from a challenge.

“You are so beautiful. Please, Silje, take us.”

When Devante put it like that, how could she refuse?

She lifted and hovered over them, her hand still curled around them, to hold them steady. Then her pussy slid over the tips of their weeping cocks, their combined moisture providing natural lubrication. Devante reached up to grasp her waist, holding her steady but not preventing her slow glide over the bodies of her lovers.

She thought she might split, but she knew she was safe with them. They wouldn’t hurt her. Ari watched, eyes gleaming, as his cock and Devante’s disappeared inside her, so very slowly. Gingerly, she pushed, and paused before pushing some more.

She came to a stop about two inches short of the bases, and lifted, before slipping down again. Devante and Ari groaned in unison, their voices balm to her very soul. The sound they made together was unbelievable: wet, juicy, and better than anything she’d ever heard before because it was the sound of them together. Inside her, loving her.

“This,” Devante gasped, “is incredible, but we can’t do it for long. It would hurt you, sweet love.”

“Right now,” she managed, “I don’t care. You’re reaching so deep inside.”

They withdrew and thrust, together, and she moaned. "Now!" Devante said. "Open your mind now."

She opened as completely as she knew how and felt them enter her. Devante took Ari, surrounded him with love in a golden glow and bore him to the places only bonding could provide. Together now, linked as only they could ever be linked, she merged with them, entered their minds, as they entered hers and each other's. The three-way link gave them access, each to the other.

Ari's mind was finely tuned, carefully schooled, but he wasn't afraid of intimacy, of opening fully to allow her to love him, as he loved her. He loved her at least as deeply as Devante, and she loved them both.

Her thigh burned with the mark of the cat, the physical evidence of their bonding, and she reached out with both hands, stroked up until she found the heated proof. Marks on Ari and on Devante, both too hot to touch for long. Her men.

When Devante gave her a gentle push, she sagged forward into Ari's arms. She felt his tears on her cheek, but this time his tears were of joy. "I promise I will never let you regret this. You are ours, Silje, as we are yours."

"Always," Devante murmured. Then he thrust, hard, and her world turned into spinning whirls of color. Ari held her while Devante worked them both, pushing them into hard ecstasy, driving them up until he paused, groaning, and Ari took over for the few strokes it took to push them all to a single, shared climax.

Silje exploded, crying out in a nameless shout, hearing them join her, and wetness flooded her and the men under her.

They'd bonded. Nothing would ever separate them again, not even death.

## Epilogue

*Six months later. The Bahamas.*

While Silje, Ari, and Devante couldn't marry in law, they could have a blessing, and they stood in front of a smiling official now, Silje in the middle, her men on either side. They'd signed the legal documents in New York, a three-way bond that reflected their union and combined their futures and their fates.

The sea provided a gentle symphony for their joining, and Ari's mother sniffled behind them. Silje knew her parents would never have approved of her choice, but Ari's parents accepted her wholeheartedly. Her new friends from the New York Department stood witness, Diane resplendently scarlet-haired, in pure white and Candy, outrageously manicured, her hair a mass of short brunette spikes, her bikini and sarong a colorful reminder of this lovely place. Cristos and Dubreis stood to one side, open white shirts, slacks, and sunglasses their only concession to the tropical heat.

At a sign from the official, Devante took Silje's right hand and Ari her left, and both slid identical gold bands on the third fingers. She took her rings from the lavender velvet cushions and held them out for her husbands to slide their fingers into.

“May the great Goddess bless this ritual, and may you all enjoy your union for the full span of your lives together.”

First Devante, then Ari kissed her. They looked wonderful in shirts and chinos: powerful, loving, and hers.

She yearned for their wedding night and their honeymoon on this wonderful tropical island. The bonding was their real joining, but this union, with their friends and family as witnesses, sealed the bond they had made six months before.

Could anything be more perfect?

Silje was sure nothing could.

~ \* ~

## Glossary of Brazilian words

I thought Ari and Devante should talk to Silje in their own language. She's trying to "become American," so she only uses one Norwegian word, "Fordømme," which is a curse word, but when I discovered the beautiful endearments in Brazilian Portuguese, I couldn't resist.

*fofinha* -- little fluffy thing, a sweet, loving endearment

*gatinha* -- kitten

*gata* -- female cat

*gata gostosa* -- beautiful cat, a more adult version of *fofinha*

*meu amor* -- my love

*minha doçura* -- my sweet

*minha paixão* -- my passion

*você é lindo/linda* -- you are beautiful

*você cheira tão bem* -- You smell good

 THE END 

## **Lynne Connolly**

Winner of two EPPIEs, for Romantic Suspense and Paranormal Romance, Lynne Connolly is the best-selling author of dark and edgy paranormal romance. She describes her Dept 57 series as “James Bond with claws and fangs,” and it's received five star reviews and recommended reads from major review sites and blogs all over the net.

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