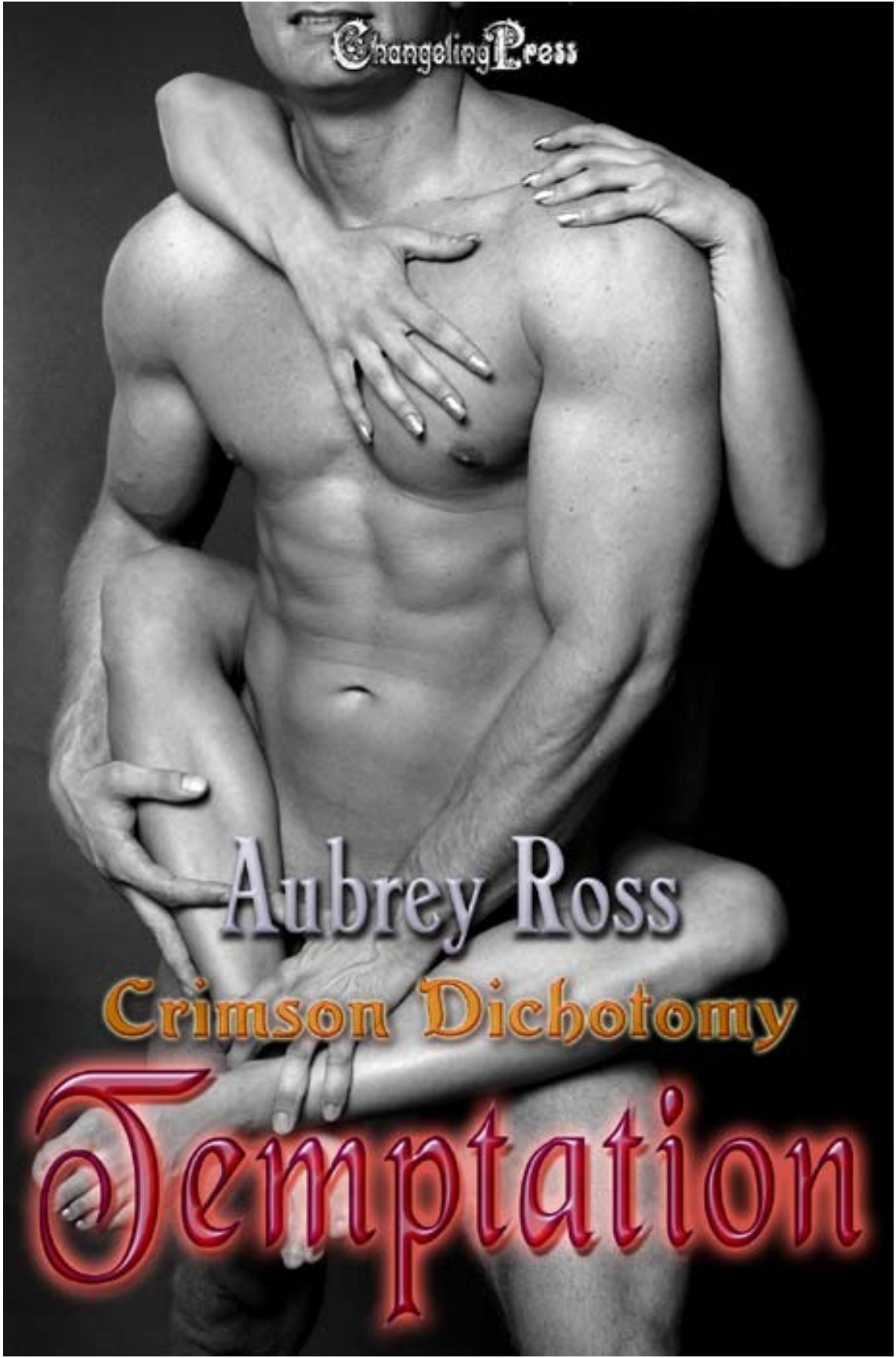




Changeling Press

Aubrey Ross

Crimson Dichotomy

Temptation

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Crimson Dichotomy 3: Temptation

Aubrey Ross

Ruggedly handsome and intensely confident, Max takes it upon himself to protect Colette from a rogue vampire. People frequently underestimate Colette. She can shapeshift effortlessly and still others feel the need to shelter her. Max might be her temporary guardian, but he is more tempting than any man she's ever known. Refusing to be ignored, and hoping to prolong their time together, Colette volunteers for the next mission.

His men managed to kill Taerok; now Max must locate the vampire's lair. Having a female shapeshifter along would make things easier, but Colette is a complete unknown to him. Besides, the mission will take them deep into the seedy underworld of renegade vampires -- which is no place for an adorable pixie!

Colette insists she's uniquely qualified for the mission, so Max challenges her to a night of "conditioning." Expecting his first sexual demand to terrify her, Max soon realizes there's more to Colette than her impish appearance and feisty personality.

Chapter One

From street level, PSN headquarters looked like any other office building, with modular cubicles and the proverbial water cooler. It was only as visitors ventured beyond the benign façade that the paranormal nature of the organization was revealed.

Colette Eldrik had been taken to sublevel three shortly after her arrival. Commander Max Brigham had been polite, gallant even. He'd assured her that metaphysical shields, as well as conventional devices, would conceal her location from the vampire who was hunting Dichotomy halflings. He'd shown her where she could sleep, shower, find food, and explained what limited entertainments were available without leaving the building. Then he'd left her to her own devices for the next four days. If he'd known her better, he would have realized the folly of that decision. Colette didn't deal well with boredom.

She'd learned at an early age that inactivity didn't necessarily translate into mind numbing tedium. All she had to do was shift into something or someone more interesting than herself and the problem was solved.

The strategy had served her well during her stay with the Sentinels. She was careful and subtle, doing nothing to draw attention to herself. She flowed from one shape to another, watching and listening, only interacting when absolutely necessary. Taking on another's outward appearance was far easier than mastering their mannerisms and personality.

She stood at the end of the main corridor on sublevel two, watching Victor Ratcliff gather his belongings and head home. Victor was the newest member of the Preternatural Sentinel Network. Max didn't know him well, which was one of the reasons Colette had chosen his likeness for her demonstration. If she didn't quite master the nuances of Victor's demeanor, Max wasn't likely to notice.

Suddenly, Victor slung his backpack over one shoulder and headed down an adjacent hall. He had to go topside to leave the building, so where the hell was he going? The elevator hummed, indicating another interruption.

Damn it! She hated loose ends. With Victor out of the building, there would have been no possibility of her running into him while she was with Max. Well, there was no help for it. She had to catch Max before he left this level or she might not get another chance.

Top secret meetings and death-defying missions, it all fascinated Colette. In fact everything about the Sentinels intrigued her. From their extraordinary abilities, to their seamless organization, and the stealth with which they operated, she was impressed by all she had learned.

And then there was Max. Warmth washed over her body as she thought of the Sentinels' commander.

The elevator door started its inevitable slide and she ducked around the corner, quickly forming Victor's image within her mind. She inhaled deeply and released her breath in a slow, steady stream. The shift rolled down her body, undulating and reshaping, forming her into the image stamped upon her brain. Searing pain drove the last of her breath from her lungs. Lights danced before her eyes and she shuddered. It didn't matter how often she changed, or how skillful she had become; shapeshifting hurt like hell!

She rolled her shoulders and arched her back, acclimating herself to her new body. The lingering burn gradually receded and she focused on her goals. She would demonstrate her abilities, reveal a potentially dangerous lack in Sentinel security, and then ask Max for a job.

Rounding the corner with new confidence, she found the corridor empty and smiled. Whoever had exited the elevator must have entered one of the offices. This was sublevel two, moderate security. Agents pretty much came and went as they pleased. She knew there were at least three additional sublevels, but she hadn't actually been lower than sublevel four.

“Ratcliff?” The deep, commanding sound of Max’s voice was unmistakable. “I thought you were taking off.”

Showtime. She schooled her expression and turned to face him. “I have an idea I wanted to run past you before I left for the night.”

His gaze narrowed slightly as he assessed her features and she quickly looked away. Victor was new. Max was cautious not suspicious. She needed to relax. Besides, the penetrating beauty of Max’s eyes never failed to captivate her. It wouldn’t do for him to sense sexual awareness in his new recruit.

“Walk with me. I’ve got to check on our reluctant guests.”

Her heart leapt at the unexpected offer. To her knowledge, Victor hadn’t been allowed beyond sublevel four. “Yes, sir.” She tried for a combination of excitement and nervousness, but her tone sounded far too breathless.

Max chuckled. “Don’t worry. I won’t let either of them bite you.” They stepped into the elevator and Max moved in front of the scanner. “Sublevel six.” Facial structure and retinal scans verified his identity and the computer set the car in motion.

She stole another look at Max. He topped Victor by at least six inches, which meant her head would tuck neatly under his chin. Max was sculpted from head to toe with chiseled muscles. Jeans and a tee shirt couldn’t hide his broad shoulders or thick biceps.

“So talk,” he prompted. “I thought you had an idea for me.”

Her mind was filled with all sorts of ideas, but none of them were appropriate to the situation. Gods, the man was delectable, but this wasn’t about sex. She cleared her throat and... the elevator door slid open.

She followed Max into the corridor and a shiver skittered down her spine. Before she could begin her explanation, he spun her toward the wall and bent her arm up behind her back.

“Who the fuck do you work for and what’s your objective!”

Confusion kept her silent for a moment. Was he suspicious of Victor or had he sensed she was a shifter?

Within seconds she was flanked by armed Sentinels, stoically watching the drama unfold.

"I... don't know what you mean, sir." She forced her dry throat to swallow, but her tongue wasn't any more agile for the effort. "Why are you angry with me?"

Max pressed in close. His body heat surrounded her, insidious and soothing. "I can almost picture your eyelashes fluttering, Colette. Return to your natural shape and put your hands on the wall in front of you."

Seeing no advantage to resisting, she released the shift and flattened her palms against the cold cement wall. He blocked out the rest of the scene with his big body, making her feel isolated and vulnerable. She'd toyed with various ways to draw Max's attention. This was definitely not what she'd had in mind.

She was supposed to wow him with her skill and prove herself indispensable, not make him think she was a spy!

"At ease, men. I've got this."

"If she needs to be strip-searched, please let me know," one of the guards said and the other laughed.

"Dismissed." Max didn't raise his voice or change position, but his men instantly obeyed. That tone. That deep, imperious snap made her toes curl and her body ache in places she didn't dare think about. "You've been very naughty, Ms. Eldrik."

"I was only --"

"You don't have permission to speak." His hands pressed over hers, the heat of his palms shocking in contrast to the coolness of the wall. "Procedure mandates that I search you." He slid his hands along her forearms, splaying his fingers to maximize contact.

She shivered, tense and anxious.

"There are only two reasons I can think of for this game." His hands paused and his scent filled her nose, faintly spicy, utterly masculine. "Either you're a spy or you're after something -- personal."

"May I ask a question?"

His hands resumed their leisurely descent, squeezing her elbows and pushing up the fluttery sleeves of her blouse. "All right."

"If my interest was 'personal,' why would I shift into someone else?"

He teased the underside of her arms, making her shiver. "Then you're admitting you're a spy?"

"No. I wanted to..." Slipping beneath her blouse, he brushed her collarbone, his fingertips grazing the upper curve of her breast.

"I'll only ask this question once." His breath stirred her hair and he whispered, "Do you want me, Colette?"

Here in the hallway, with his men watching on surveillance cameras? She'd wanted him to touch her since she first saw him, but not like this. Desire rolled through her, hot and heavy, driving back her uncertainty. "I want... You can touch me with your hands."

He pressed his face against her hair, his chuckle deep and muffled. "I don't negotiate, doll. Yes or no."

His arrogance annoyed and thrilled her. He was overbearing and way too sure of himself. She should duck under his arm and... "Yes." The word was out before the rational part of her brain could complete the objection.

Following each contour and angle, he explored her shoulders and neck. "Your skin is so soft." He brushed her hair aside and breathed against the nape of her neck. His lips lingered as he asked, "Tickles or tingles?"

"Both." He skimmed the outer swell of her breasts, avoiding her sensitive nipples. Her skin warmed despite the fabric separating them. Her frantic heartbeat settled into a strong, steady rhythm, but she began to squirm.

"Should I strip-search you?" His hands settled on her hips. "Shifters are never really without a weapon."

"Do we have to do this here?"

He finally cupped her breast and her knees wobbled. Large and firm, his hand easily encompassed her rounded flesh. His thumb brushed back and forth across her

nipple, while his other arm banded her waist. "I have no doubt they're watching, but they can't really see anything. My back is to the camera and you're protected by me."

The phrase took on a whole new meaning. She generally resented people who presumed she was helpless and in need of protection. The word was far less offensive when whispered by Max.

Her blouse was loose and sheer, floating about her torso in a colorful swirl. His hands slipped beneath and encountered the slick fabric of her camisole. "You are wearing entirely too many clothes."

She couldn't help but smile. He sounded nearly as anxious as she felt. Untucking her camisole with determined tugs, he finally found bare skin. His fingers wandered for only a moment before her bra presented another obstacle.

With a frustrated grumble he unhooked the bra and pushed both undergarments up out of his way. "You should wear it like this, with nothing underneath."

"Is that a request or a command?"

His fingers closed on her nipples, rolling and gently pulling until sensations shot deep into her belly. "Would you like me to command you, sweetheart? Do you understand what that means?" Before she could respond, the elevator droned and Max let go. "Talk about timing." His heavy sigh wafted across her ear. "You're right. I shouldn't have started this here."

Feeling his absence with palpable intensity, she hurriedly righted her clothing. What had she been thinking? She couldn't fuck Max, not if she wanted him to take her seriously. She turned around as one of his men stepped off the elevator. Max nodded to the Sentinel as he walked past. Neither man said a word.

Tension hung in the corridor, arcing between them like sparks. Hunger pulsed at the juncture of her thighs and her hands trembled. It didn't matter! This was not why she was here.

She licked her lips and crossed her arms over her chest, stiffening her resolve. "When did you realize I was a shifter?"

"Two seconds after your first shift. We have sensors that register paranormal activity."

Her gaze flew to his. "If you've known all along, why did you jump me? I thought you were serious."

"I was serious. You seemed harmless enough, but I had to be sure you weren't a spy."

Amusement warmed his eyes, making the blue shards all the more striking. She'd never seen eyes like his, sapphire stars scattered across a velvet black sky. She had to stop thinking like this!

"Did you honestly think we wouldn't realize?"

"Why wait until now to confront me?"

"As I said, your antics seemed harmless and it was keeping you occupied."

She leaned against the wall and glared up at him. He made her sound like a bothersome child. "What do you intend to do with me now?"

"There's a loaded question." He cupped her chin with his fingers and brushed his thumb across her lower lip. "You're pouting."

She gasped and pushed his hand away. "I do not pout."

"I told you this morning you were free to go." His posture stiffened and all signs of amusement fled. He was Commander Brigham again. "What's with the Victor charade?"

Heat raced up her neck and blossomed across her cheekbones. Did she have to admit how completely he'd outmaneuvered her? "It was my intention to reveal a weakness in your security and ask for the opportunity to apply for employment."

"You want to work for me?"

His amusement returned with a vengeance, which made her temper flare. "I'm a damn good shapeshifter. You might have been aware of my activities, but can you deny my skill?" She planted her fists on her hips and stepped away from the wall. "I could be useful in any number of situations."

A sexy smile quirked one corner of his mouth. "Now there's a concept I'd like to explore."

"That's not what I meant and you know it."

"Do you have any military experience, any training that would qualify you to become a Sentinel?"

"I do, but I can't give you details." She rubbed the bridge of her nose as frustration threatened her aspirations. He had no intention of giving her a chance. "My background is classified."

Leaning his shoulder against the wall, he stared at her with a mixture of speculation and doubt. "Without divulging state secrets, give me a rough idea of your experience."

"My skill set falls more in line with recon and espionage than armed confrontations. I speak Spanish, French, Mandarin, and Russian, as well as English. I've had some martial arts training, but my objective has always been to slip in and out without anyone realizing I was there."

He was silent for a long time. She didn't rush him. Determined to appear less anxious, she unfolded her arms and slipped her hands into the pockets of her pants.

"Why did you part ways with your former employer?"

"I didn't. I'm a consultant, more or less. They utilize my services when my skills are necessary for a particular job."

"If you're still on good terms, why are you interested in the PSN?"

She shrugged, refusing to reveal any more. He didn't allow the evasion. Taking her by the upper arms, he reversed their positions and she found herself back against the wall.

"I have to understand your motivation before I can even consider this seriously."

"I'm tired of hiding my abilities." She glanced into his eyes, hating her vulnerability. "I seldom work with the same team twice and knowledge of what I can do is strictly need to know. The ones who do know treat me like a freak. I think that's

why my handler works so hard to keep what I am a secret. I'm tired of being isolated and --"

"I understand. I'm pretty sure everyone in this building understands that sort of loneliness." He stepped back with obvious reluctance. "Are you up for a trial run?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"I know you're one hell of a shapeshifter, but I'd like to see some of your other skills. Payne, the male vampire, has become more of a challenge than we anticipated."

"In what way?"

"We need to know the location of his master's lair and we've been unable to scan his mind. Actually, we can scan his mind, but his thoughts are so chaotic it's impossible to discern anything intelligible."

"What do you want me to do?"

"He keeps asking about Valerie, the female vampire. In fact his demands to speak with her have become more urgent over the past few hours."

He kept his hands to himself, but his gaze was a different story. Rather than ogling her body, he focused on her mouth, which was even more disconcerting. Was he imagining their first kiss or something more decadent?

Jerking her mind back to the issue at hand, she asked, "Is there some reason you don't want him to speak with Valerie?"

"Valerie hasn't emerged since we took her into custody. Emily, her day-dwelling twin, has been present continually."

"Wait a minute. The female vampire is a transformed Dichotomy?" This was one of the details he'd carefully kept beyond her reach. "I had no idea that was possible."

"This is a first for us too. And here's where it gets really weird. The nocturnal twin was transformed, but Emily doesn't show any signs of vampirism."

She began to understand his dilemma. "The male is asking to see Valerie, not Emily, and Valerie refuses to transition out of sleep state."

"Correct. And even if we could force Valerie out of sleep state, we have no way to control her."

"You want me to shift into Valerie's likeness and talk to the male?"

"Yes. If we can get him to calm down and communicate rationally, perhaps we can locate Taerok's lair."

"I thought Taerok was dead."

"He is."

"Then what's your interest in his lair?"

He rubbed the back of his neck, his expression tense and guarded. "You already know far more than you should. After all, this is classified."

His annoyance was understandable, but old habits were hard to break. "If you're satisfied with my performance, I'll let you contact my handler."

The compromise seemed to please him. "Taerok was collecting biological samples and documenting some rather unorthodox research. We need to destroy the samples and archive the documentation. It's possible Taerok stashed everything somewhere else, but his lair is the obvious place to start."

She paused for a moment, enjoying his undivided attention and savoring his scent. If she became a Sentinel, would that make her off limits again? It shouldn't matter, but it did. She'd never been this attracted to anyone before.

"You won't even be in the same room with him." He misread her hesitation. "You'll be perfectly safe."

Frustrated by his attitude, she sighed. The best way to quail his doubts was to demonstrate her abilities. "If Valerie is unavailable, I need to touch someone who touched her fairly recently."

"Within the last two weeks?" She nodded and he took her hand. "Touch me anywhere you like."

Chapter Two

Max stood in the control booth, too agitated to sit down. Colette had taken on Valerie's shape with effortless skill. She was good. There was no denying her skill. Her instincts were equally impressive. She pushed for more information with just enough stubbornness, yet sensed when it was time to back off.

"She's one hell of an interrogator," Lukas said, his chin propped on his hand as they watched the surveillance feed. A transparent wall separated Colette from Payne and both rooms were visible from several angles.

"You're not listening to me," Payne snapped, pounding his fist on the barrier.

"You're not saying anything I don't already know." She tossed her head and moved closer, lowering her voice. "Taerok was close. I know he was. If we can just --"

"Forget about Taerok!" Payne's voice was shrill, his eyes wild. "You must get me out of here. As soon as he learns, they will come for me."

"Who will come for you? Why are you so frightened?" She kept her voice even, almost emotionless.

"I'll serve you willingly. I'll worship you with my body and fulfill your every desire. I'll awaken you each night with my mouth on your cunt and I'll --"

"How will you serve me if you're dead?"

Payne staggered back, stricken. "We must hide. I can't stay here. He will find me."

Bracing himself for the chaos, Max sank into the vampire's mind. Thoughts and memories swirled and twisted, converging in an indistinguishable blur of images and sensations. Terror cleared a path through the dimmer scenes, guiding Max deeper into Payne's memory.

A man's face came into focus, sharp features and penetrating eyes. Darius. This was the source of Payne's fear, but Max could discern nothing more.

The scene expanded, gradually revealing the surroundings. An opulent room, a hotel suite or perhaps an upscale nightclub. Payne stood before Darius, naked and trembling. Taerok held the golden chain attached to the collar around Payne's neck.

A woman stood on Payne's other side, her smile cold and calculative. "You must admit he's spectacular."

"He's not yours to offer, Damara. Why present him to me?"

"Taerok is my business partner. All of our assets are shared."

"You know how I feel about your 'business.' You'd be wise not to mention it again."

"If you'd accept the customary tribute, our business might seem less offensive."

His long fingers grasped her throat, drawing her slowly toward him. "I want no part of your flesh peddling. I find it distasteful and you know it."

"We operate within the Charter," Taerok said, his gaze averted. "Samcillian is growing rich off profits that could as easily be yours."

"Samcillian is welcome to your tribute. You are his progeny."

"But, sir," Damara managed to speak despite Darius's warning grip. "Taerok has agreed --"

"I expect what is rightfully mine. Nothing more, nothing less. You are descended from my blood, so you will present an annual offering. The offering must be yours and it must be willing or it means nothing to me. This creature reeks of fear. I have no interest in Taerok's pet." He waved his hand dismissively.

Dread, cold and cutting, jarred Max from Payne's tormented mind. He waited for a lull in the manic conversation then sent his thoughts to Colette. *Ask him about Damara.*

Her expression didn't change. He wasn't sure she'd heard him then she rubbed her forehead and glared at Payne.

"Who is Damara? Her name is echoing through your mind."

Payne shuddered, crossing his arms over his chest in a protective hug. "I must not speak her name. I must not see her face." He slapped his head, leaving red blotches on his pale skin. "I fed from her. Oh God, I reveled in her suffering, while Taerok drained her life away. It's forbidden. He will not rest until she's avenged."

"You're right; we can't stay here," she whispered, her voice barely registering on the surveillance feed. "If we leave we must have somewhere to hide or someone who can protect us."

Max held his breath, waiting for Payne to take the bait.

"The lair has been defiled. There is nowhere to hide. No one... Nowhere..." Payne shrieked, batting imaginary threats away from his face as he rushed to the corner and collapsed. Drawing his knees up to his chest, he wrapped his arms around his legs and sobbed.

Max triggered the door on Colette's side of the room and met her in the hallway outside the control booth. She flowed from Valerie's likeness into her natural shape with mesmerizing ease. "Did you understand what that last bit meant?"

"Most of it."

She fell into step beside him, not bothering to ask where he was taking her or what he'd thought of her performance. Pale blonde hair framed her delicate face and streamed to the middle of her back. Her body was gently curved and the inherent grace in her movements made him wonder about her ancestry. She looked far more like the Fae than the Dichotomy.

"Am I allowed to know what it meant or have you finished with me?" Irritation snapped through her tone and iridescent sparks burst in the air around her.

He'd caught the momentary shimmer out of the corner of his eye, but he hadn't imagined the phenomenon. "There are only twelve organic vampire bloodlines left in existence. Darius appears to be the leader of one of these lines. If Damara was a pureblood organic and Payne helped Taerok murder her, he has reason to be afraid." Max opened the door to his office and motioned her inside.

"Was his mind any easier to scan or are we left with his cryptic ramblings?"

"I locked on to a memory that explained a great deal." He sat down behind his desk as she settled in one of the chairs facing him. Her cheeks were flushed and curiosity made her eyes shine. More green than gold, the thick-lashed orbs were remarkably expressive. "You did an amazing job back there. I'm impressed, and I'm not easily impressed."

A beaming smile parted her lips, and an alien warmth spread through his chest. It wasn't lust, exactly. This sensation was softer, almost... tender? He shook away the disquieting thought and rested his elbows on the desktop, steeping his index fingers as he considered his options.

She was bright and ambitious, undeniably skilled. There had been numerous situations when a female agent would have been highly beneficial. Still... "I'll need full disclosure if I hire you. I understand the importance of discretion, but I can't put my other agents at risk."

"Of course." She pressed her lips together in a vain effort to hide her excitement.

"This is still an if, Colette."

Folding her hands in her lap, she tried to look less thrilled, but those thick-lashed eyes gave her away. "What's the next step?"

"Let me talk to your handler. I've networked with other covert organizations before. Perhaps we can figure out a way to share you." Her cheeks pinked with an adorable blush and he rested back in his chair. "I guess we better talk about this before I bother with the call. To my knowledge, fraternizing hasn't been a problem with any of my operatives."

Her shoulders squared and her chin rose. "I can keep my personal and professional lives separate."

"That's far easier said than done for anyone. Even me." He let the implication sink in before he went on, "You've been damned hard to ignore just being under my roof. If we work this case together, things are guaranteed to get complicated."

"What are you afraid of, Commander?"

She softened the challenge with a smile, but lust shot through Max with punishing speed. His blood sizzled and his cock hardened, making him thankful for the position of his desk. "Have you ever fucked a fellow operative?"

"Yes."

Her answer was crisp and unrepentant and he had to glance away from her lovely face. It was far too easy to imagine her naked and writhing while a lover drove into her willing flesh. Her back would arch and her legs would wrap around his waist. *Not just anyone's waist, my waist.*

Max shook away the thought and pressed on. "You were lovers or it was necessary for the mission?"

"We were posing as lovers and we got carried away."

"Did the relationship end with the mission?"

"No. We were together for almost two years following the mission."

"Have you ever slept with your handler?"

Her smile broke through again. "You'd have to see my handler to understand how ridiculous that question is. He's older than my father, but I understand your point."

He pushed back his chair and came around in front of his desk. "I'm not sure you do. Taerok and Damara were partners in some sort of slave trade. That connection is our strongest lead, which means this mission is going to turn dark fast."

"I can do dark."

"Really?" He drew her to her feet. "You wanted to stop in the hallway because you were afraid someone would see me touching you. I suspect you've never tasted any flavor but vanilla."

"It just caught me off guard." His hands lingered against her upper arms. She held her ground, neither leaning closer nor pulling away. "You'd hardly looked at me since I arrived. I had no idea you were attracted to me."

"Despite the fact that I was your protector, I've thought of little else. Which is part of the reason I'm reluctant to use you for this mission." He touched the side of her face, enjoying the softness of her skin before pushing his fingers into her silky hair.

Her eyelids drooped and her lips softly parted. She was so ready to be seduced. And he was more than ready to seduce her.

"Won't a genuine attraction make our roles more believable?"

"Undoubtedly, but I don't want the outcome of the mission to taint what we're feeling." He didn't kiss her, though she obviously wanted his kiss as badly as he craved her lips. They were teetering on the brink of something unique, something special. He wasn't willing to risk extinguishing the spark before it had an opportunity to burst into flame. "If I take you with me tomorrow, you'll have to do a whole lot more than dress the part. You'll have to become my submissive."

Submissive. The word whispered through Colette's soul, a silken temptation stimulating nerve endings and igniting sparks of anticipation. Max was right. Her experience was pretty damn vanilla, but in her fantasies she abandoned herself to pleasures she'd never been brave enough to try. This was her excuse, her justification. She could silence her mental objections and indulge every naughty impulse that had ever flitted through her mind.

"Yes, Master." She delivered the line with a cheeky smile and Max laughed. His gorgeous eyes lit with amusement and tenderness, momentarily stealing her breath.

He stepped back, leaning against his desk, his hands braced on either side of his lean hips. "Do you have any idea what being a submissive entails?"

"Trusting your partner enough to give them complete control over your body."

"Trust is fundamental to submission, that's true, but I'm not the only one you need to trust." She started to sit back down. He shook his head, his expression suddenly grave. "Stand." The change in his demeanor was inescapable. He radiated authority even with his semi-casual stance.

"Who else will I need to trust?"

"Yourself. Your instincts and desires. True submission can't be forced and it can't be faked. It can be taught to a willing partner, but we have very little time for your transformation."

"Maybe we should consider a different cover?"

"We'll be investigating flesh peddlers in the vampire underground. No other cover would be believed. Vampires are dominant by nature."

"You're going to try and pass yourself off as a vampire?"

His features morphed right before her eyes. His brow creased and his cheekbones jutted as his incisors distended into sharp looking fangs. "I don't have to try."

More fascinated than afraid, she reached toward his face then snatched her hand away. "But you're not nocturnal. I've even seen you in direct sunlight. Are you a shapeshifter, like me?"

He released the transformation, returning his features to their earlier appearance. "I'm a mutt, like you. You're clearly more than a human/Dichotomy hybrid. Somewhere in there you're Fae."

"My grandmother was a Faerie. Many of my abilities come from her. When my parents fell in love, they were warned that it was doubtful they could have children. Too many incompatibilities in their DNA. My grandmother used Fae magic to help my mother conceive. But she died a few years later, so my father never got his son."

"Neither one of us is supposed to exist. You were formed by magic and I was created in a laboratory. Imagine the chaos we can create together." His tone was distracted, as if he were lost in memory.

"It doesn't have to be chaotic. It might be wild and wonderful."

His gaze returned to hers and a sexy smile parted his lips. "I say we find out."

He took her by the hand and led her to the door on the far side of the office. She'd nosed around sublevel three enough to know his quarters weren't located with the other apartments.

Lights activated automatically as he pushed the door open. She wasn't sure what she'd expected, but the utilitarian accommodations made her sad. This was his haven? Where he spent his "off" hours? Compartments and drawers were built into the walls and the neatly made bed dominated the room. Organized with military precision, the room mirrored the expressionless mask he wore so often. Neither offered even a glimpse of the man beneath the professional façade.

"Privacy protocol, authorization brigham394."

She returned her attention to Max. "Security monitors in your bedroom?"

"I have enemies."

"Isn't there anywhere you can go to escape the microscope?"

"Occupational hazard."

Another pang of compassion tore through her. She averted her gaze, afraid he'd interpret the expression as pity. She had so many questions, so much she wanted to know about him. She'd observed him in his work environment. He was confident and respected, intelligent and ambitious. Still, in many ways Max was a mystery.

"Do you have family?" She tried to sound casual, conversational.

"Not anymore." Pain flashed in his eyes with unmistakable intensity. "We don't have a lot of time. If you can't pull this off, I need to find someone else."

Wow. Talk about the wrong question. She squared her shoulders and met his gaze. "I'll do whatever needs to be done."

His expression softened and he brushed his knuckles across her cheek. "I'm sorry. There's an element of this mission you probably need to understand. Taerok was my half-brother. I can't help feeling responsible for his obsession and all the people who were harmed because of it."

The vampire who'd been hunting her people was Max's half-brother? Another tidbit of information that had certainly not been in the council brief.

"If this changes your --"

She placed her fingers against his lips. "We don't choose our relatives. You've been hunting your brother all this time. I can't even imagine how horrible that must have been for you. Let's find his lair, so you can put all this behind you."

He smiled, his lips parting beneath her fingers. "My thoughts exactly." He nipped her fingertip then kissed the center of her palm. "Vampires offer no mercy and accept no compromise. Once we enter the underground I won't be able to offer you the security of a safe word. However, we can use one tonight if it will make you feel more comfortable."

"Tonight is a rehearsal for tomorrow. I'd rather know what to expect. How actively will we be expected to participate?"

"That depends on our reason for seeking out a slaver."

She shuddered. Even in the human world sexual slavery was a problem. Children were sold into prostitution by their parents, runaways were victimized by everyone, and young girls were snatched off street corners and advertised on the internet by ruthless pimps. Even so, she'd never imagined herself "seeking out a slaver." The entire concept repelled her.

"What are our options?"

"A temporary third would be the most obvious motivation."

Heat rolled from her head to her toes in an intoxicating wave. Now there was a concept that was anything but repellent. Had he guessed or was it just a common fantasy? Her nipples tightened and her face flamed.

His wicked chuckle compounded her reaction. "That shouldn't be hard to sell. Maybe you're not as vanilla as I presumed."

She brushed her hair off her forehead, feeling restless and awkward. "So we'll pretend to be a couple looking for a temporary third. In what way will the slavers expect us to interact?"

"No vampire is going to buy merchandise they haven't sampled. If the slave can't arouse us, I'd be wasting my money. And the slaver isn't going to leave us alone while we play."

"That makes sense on some twisted, depraved level."

"They'll need to believe we are twisted and depraved. Are you starting to understand the scope of our cover?"

"I understand the set up, but why would a Dom allow another man to touch his sub? Aren't Doms... well, territorial?"

"I can't speak for all Doms any more than you can speak for all women. And who said the third would be male?"

She gaped, trying to imagine another woman touching her, kissing her, licking...
"I don't think I can respond to another woman. I'm --"

"Hopelessly vanilla." He grinned. Sitting on the end of the bed, he openly assessed her. "It's a Dom's responsibility to guide his sub, to find ways of intensifying the pleasure for both of them. His strategies might include other people or unusual situations, depending on the sub. In return the sub surrenders control and offers herself without reservation. Communication is vital to the relationship. Unless the Dom is psychic, literally, the sub has to let him know what she wants."

"What if she doesn't know what she wants?"

"Then they experiment together. But she has to be honest with herself and with her Dom."

She smiled, fiddling with the hem of one sleeve. "There's a lot more to this than handcuffs and spankings."

"Infinitely more." His tone turned smoky and hushed as his gaze focused on her eyes. "We'll start with the basics. Are you ready to begin?"

"I think so."

"You will not speak unless I ask you a specific question. Also, I'm not technically your Master, so you will address me as sir. A Master/slave relationship is different from the bond we're establishing. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Take off your clothes, fold them neatly, and stack them beside you."

Holy shit. This was it. She either obeyed without hesitation or ended their relationship before it began. Kicking off her shoes, she started undressing as her mind continued to process. This was preparation for tomorrow, but part of her understood the arrangement had nothing to do with the impending mission. Max was clearly a Dom. If she wanted to explore her feelings for him, this is where she had to start.

She wasn't ashamed of her body, yet she'd never been comfortable naked. Her breasts were too small, her legs too short, and her hips were rather boyish. She was tiny, fragile looking, anything but feminine. And Max was so damned big.

Her camisole joined the growing stack of folded clothes. She unfastened her bra and slipped the straps off her shoulders. His gaze moved openly over her body, making her skin tingle and tension mount.

"Turn around as you take off your panties. That tight little ass has been tormenting me all week."

Emboldened by the comment, she took her time, slipping one side down and then the other until her bottom was bared. She pushed them lower, bending from the waist as she reached her ankles. He exhaled in an audible hiss and feminine power rushed through her. It felt so good to know she'd triggered a reaction in the ever-composed Commander Brigham. She stepped out of her panties and placed them on the stack.

"Spread your legs and bend over again. Don't rise until I give you leave."

A secret smile curved her lips. The pose should be humiliating, so why was anticipation zinging through her veins? She moved her legs apart and locked her knees, bending forward until her fingertips touched the floor. The blood rushed to her head and her pussy lips parted, offering him an unobstructed view of her core.

Take me. Thrust your fingers inside me and pinch my clit. Squeeze my ass cheeks then pull them apart and...

Excitement gathered as her imaginings grew more graphic. Would he spank her? Would he fuck her ass? She'd only done that once and her partner had been so apologetic, he'd ruined the experience for her. Max wouldn't apologize. Of that she had

no doubt. Whatever he did, he'd do with authority and confidence. Her pussy tingled and her heart fluttered. She'd never wanted anything more.

Chapter Three

Mesmerized by the beauty of Colette's naked body, Max allowed himself to stare. Her legs were toned, her ass delightfully rounded. Her pussy looked soft and moist, the delicate pink folds just starting to flush. He pushed to his feet and approached her, forcing himself to take his time.

He traced her slit, dragging his fingertip from her clit to her anus in one sustained caress. She shivered and her breath hissed out in a tense sigh. Resisting the urge to penetrate her, he removed his hand and said, "Stand up."

She glanced back at him as she obeyed, disappointment clear in her eyes. Good. Let her wait. Let her simmer, until her lust equaled his. "Lift your arms and lock your hands behind your head." He ran his hands along her upraised arms. "This is what I wanted to do in the hallway." His hands explored every inch of her skin, lingering on the softest spots. "I pictured you naked and trembling, while I touched you everywhere."

He cupped her breasts and pressed against her back. Her nipples were pebble hard, poking against his palms. "My men were watching, wanting you, knowing they would never be allowed to have you as soon as my hand touched your flesh." Rolling and tugging, he worked her nipples into diamond hard points. "So delicate. So responsive. And all mine."

One arm crossed her torso, fondling her opposite breast, while his other hand moved lower. She squirmed, murmurs and gasps revealing her agitation. He covered her mound and absorbed the heat of her pussy.

"Be still. Feel my fingers. Accept my touch." She stopped wiggling, but her thighs still trembled. He pushed his hand between her legs and her head tossed against

his shoulder. "Relax." His middle finger rubbed her clit and her entire body jerked. "Why are you so tense?"

"I'm not sure."

She tried to turn around. He tightened his embrace. He'd help her work through her anxiety, but she had to accept his authority. "Are you frightened?"

"No, sir. I want this. I just can't seem to relax."

"Was it the thought of being watched that upset you?"

"I'm not really upset. I'm... I don't know what's wrong with me."

He bent and pressed a kiss to the side of her neck. "Nothing is 'wrong' with you. This is new, perhaps a bit intimidating." He didn't want to kiss her until she came the first time. They were teaching her body new ways of responding. Kissing was intimate and tender. He often used slow, deep kisses as a reward for surrender.

He lifted her against his chest, dragging her to her tiptoes. She gasped and clutched his forearm as his fingers resumed their movements between her thighs. "I'm in control, Colette. We can't move on until you accept that fundamental truth."

Her folds surrounded his fingers, hot and slick with her earlier response. He pushed deeper. Hotter and wetter, her passage awaited him. "Surrender, sweetheart. Let me guide you."

Gradually, she relaxed in his arms. His hand moved more smoothly. The tension eased from her thighs and she canted her hips. He pushed two fingers deep into her pussy and her inner muscles tightened around him. "So hot." He slid in and out, massaging her mound with the heel of his hand. "Let go, love. Come for me."

She moved with him, rocking her hips to deepen each thrust. Her nails bit into his arm and her passage pulsed around his fingers. She bent her knee, lifting one foot off the ground so he could finger-fuck her more easily.

"That's it." He spread his fingers, stretching her sheath as he rubbed the heel of his hand over her clit. She tensed then shuddered, grinding herself against his hand. She came in long, slow pulses, her cunt caressing his fingers.

Reluctantly withdrawing his hand from between her thighs, he turned her to face him. "That was the first of many. I promise you." He drew her bent knee higher and angled her leg around his hip. Their lower bodies aligned, his aching cock pressed snugly against her warm belly.

She licked her lips, her gaze still clouded with passion's haze. His free arm supported her shoulders and his mouth claimed hers, the kiss both demanding and tender. Her lips were parted and soft, waiting for him. He rubbed his mouth across hers, introducing his tongue slowly as she wrapped her arms around his back.

He curled his tongue around hers, drawing her into his mouth. She responded eagerly to his kiss, while her hips subtly rocked against his body. She tugged on his shirt, trying to loosen it from his pants. He caught her wrist and broke off the kiss. "You do not have permission to undress me. Think of this as a dance. You must follow where I lead or we'll step on each other's toes."

The longing in her eyes told him how much she wanted to see him naked, but the fundamental lesson was not yet learned. No vampire would put up with an aggressive lover, unless they had intentionally driven their partner to the aggression.

"Kneel before me and clasp your hands behind your back." She took a moment too long before she obeyed, but she lowered her weight to her knees and bent her arms behind her. He unfastened his belt and lowered his zipper. "Close your eyes and open your mouth. You're going to suck me, but you haven't earned the privilege of seeing my cock."

Her long lashes fluttered as she lowered her lids, her hesitation just as apparent as her willingness. The conflict challenged and fascinated him. It wasn't easy for a strong-willed, independent female to submit, but the reward was all the sweeter for the struggle. She licked her lips then opened her mouth. Max smiled even as his cock throbbed painfully. Fuck, she looked amazing with her hair tousled and her face flushed. He was mesmerized by her fragile beauty.

His dark nature surged, wanting to claim her, demanding release. He wanted to fuck her mouth and cover her in his scent. He wanted her writhing beneath him while

he pounded into her tight, wet cunt. With years of discipline and determination, he reined in his feral desires. She wasn't ready for the full force of his darkness. She'd barely glimpsed the full scope of his hunger.

Rather than thrust his cock into her mouth, he scooped cream from between her thighs and rubbed it across her tongue. She shivered and her eyebrows scrunched together over her nose. "Suck it off, Colette. I want your taste fresh in your mouth when I fill you with mine."

Her lips closed around his fingers and her tongue swirled, tentatively at first, then with more assurance. He slipped his fingers from her mouth and fed her more cream. Only when her lips were shiny and she accepted the essence without hesitation did he free his cock. He wet his fingers one last time and brought them to his own mouth as he pushed his shaft past her parted lips. His heart thudded in his chest as his body absorbed her essence.

She swirled her tongue around his tip and sucked him deep into her mouth. Her lips tightened, but her head remained still. "Very good." He drew back then pushed inward. She caressed him with her tongue and tilted her head, taking him as deeply as he cared to thrust.

He stroked the hair back from her face while he smoothly fucked her mouth. Her eyes remained closed, her arms bent behind her back. He slid against her tongue, embraced by the firm circle of her lips. Steadying her head with one hand, he reached down and teased her nipples with the other. First he rolled them, then gently pulled, and finally pinched until a soft cry escaped her throat.

Pleasure gathered in his abdomen, shooting sensations up and down his spine. His balls tightened and his cock throbbed. He thrust faster, thrilled by her willing surrender. Pushing to the back of her mouth, he came with a sharp cry. His seed shot down her throat, while he shuddered and moaned.

She swallowed and licked, working frantically until she'd claimed every drop of his cum. Her eagerness pleased him nearly as much as the physical pleasure. He slipped from her mouth and drew her to her feet. Framing her face between his palms,

he angled her head and lowered his mouth to hers. His tongue swept in and gathered the lingering taste of his release.

"Now we taste like each other, your pleasure and mine combined." He swept her into his arms and laid her sideways across his bed. He knelt on the floor and pulled her toward him, draping her legs over his shoulders. "Of course, I only got a quick taste before. It made me hungry for more."

She lifted her hands above her head and laced her fingers together. Her voluntary submission surprised and delighted him. He hadn't expected her to adjust so quickly. Her breasts quivered with each ragged breath and her gaze stared into his, luminous and watchful.

"This is all still pretty vanilla." He smiled into her eyes. "Are you ready to try another flavor?"

"Yes, sir." Her voice was a bit tentative, but desire blazed within her eyes.

Colette could barely breathe as she waited for Max to pounce, the predatory gleam in his eyes hypnotizing. He might consider this vanilla, but she'd never experienced anything as exciting as being commanded by him.

And the adventure had just begun.

Her pussy ached, eager for his mouth or his fingers. His thumbs stroked over her outer lips, pulling back gently to open her wide. She'd had lovers go down on her before. Surely he didn't think this was that unusual?

He pushed his long middle finger into her core, gathering her essence as he pulled out. His gaze never left her face. He coated her anus, his lips curving as he revealed his intention. With gradual pressure, he entered her ass. Her sphincter released and his finger slipped deeper. Spread before him, his mouth mere inches from her sex, the slight penetration seemed all the more significant.

She closed her eyes as he pressed his lips against her slit. His tongue circled her clit and his finger began a steady slide in and out of her tight back passage. Relaxing into the sensations, she let waves of heat wash over her.

He used his whole mouth with amazing skill, rubbing her clit with his lip while his tongue sank into her passage. All the while his finger slid in and out, in and out. He rotated his wrist, adding a second finger as his tongue returned to her clit.

Tension turned to urgency and she arched into his caresses. The fullness in her ass accented the emptiness in her pussy. She wanted him there, wanted everything all at once. His arm curved around her hip and he used his thumb on her clit, freeing his mouth to devour her cream-drenched pussy. He licked and sucked, thrusting deep into her cunt with his tongue.

Her climax built gradually, but burst with sudden violence. She cried out sharply and ground against his mouth. Her inner muscles clenched and rippled, caressing his fingers and his tongue. Pleasure blinded her, muddled her thinking until there was nothing but the blissful echoes of her release.

With frantic movements, Max slipped her legs off his shoulders and grasped her hips. The blunt head of his cock pressed against her vaginal opening and time seemed to slow. She looked into his eyes, still floating in warm lethargy.

“Mine,” he growled between clenched teeth then thrust his entire length into her.

She gasped, overwhelmed by the sudden fullness. He gave her no quarter, finding a fast, deep rhythm without delay. Her cream still shone upon his lips and his fingers dug into her hips. He rocked between her thighs, shuttling his cock in and out of her passage.

Each thrust was a separate claim, a forceful possession of her trembling body. She couldn’t embrace him, could only accept and submit. The passivity seemed odd at first, yet her body understood what he needed. She watched his face and the ripple of his muscles, squeezing him tight at the apex of each thrust.

The blue flecks in his eyes ignited, casting a sapphire glow over his features. He sank into her mind, burning, absorbing, melding. She never thought to resist, had no desire to be without him. Like the persistent beat of a hammer, the connection became more tangible with each stroke of his cock.

His pace sped, his features tensing as his need overwhelmed his control. He tossed his head, and grasped the backs of her knees, pressing her legs up and back. Still not satisfied with the position, he crawled onto the bed and bent her thighs up against her chest.

Pinned beneath him, impaled by the ruthless power of his cock and the burning intensity of his being, a shiver of fear disrupted her response. Her body eagerly accepted his aggression, but her mind registered the ease with which he could hurt her or enslave her.

He slammed into her with a strangled groan, his cock pulsing deep inside her. His presence in her mind ebbed as well, though she still sensed a connection. A pang of disappointment made her look away, but his hand eased between their bodies. "I'll never leave you wanting." His fingers gently pulled on her clit, triggering her reluctant orgasm.

Deep spasms of ecstasy blasted through her body and she gladly rode the wave. He eased her legs down and kissed her lips, allowing her to enjoy the afterglow. "Know this, Colette." He waited for her to look into his eyes. "I will never hurt you. No matter how wild I become, I will never hurt you." The vow warmed and soothed her until he whispered, "Unless you crave the pain."

* * *

Darius paced his lair with frustrated energy. Something was wrong. One of his descendants was either dead or dying. Thus far he'd been unable to determine who was in danger or which of his children he'd lost. He'd consulted with a seer and dispatched his best spies and still he had nothing more than this gnawing disquiet that would not be silenced.

"Come back to bed," one of his three pleasure pets murmured. They sprawled in his bed, naked and eager to please. He was naked as well, yet sated from their most recent bout of fucking.

All three were young and physically perfect. The two women were both voluptuous and giving, the male even more docile. They offered their bodies and their

blood with lustful enthusiasm, so why wasn't he aroused? It had been almost an hour since he shot his load inside Carry's greedy mouth. He must be getting old.

"Entertain each other," he muttered. "I'm too distracted to fuck right now."

Without objection the three rotated toward each other and continued on with their games. Carry and Megan, the two females, wrestled Jessie to his back on the bed. Jessie loved to be overpowered. He kicked and writhed, his cock quickly hardening as his lean body arched and twisted. His protests sounded almost sincere.

"You're a teasing slut," Megan said in a silky tone. "You flaunt your body, display your fine cock, then cruelly turn us away."

"My cock belongs to the Master," Jessie objected. "You know he will punish me severely if I put it in anyone but him."

"The only thing you like better than fucking the Master is being punished by him." Carry turned to Megan and said, "Straddle his legs. Help me hold him down."

Megan climbed on top of Jessie, sitting on his thighs and holding both wrists. With one yank, Jessie could have freed himself, but it was so much more fun to pretend.

"If your cock belongs to the Master, then I'll ride your tongue." Carry swung her leg over Jessie's head and agilely straddled his face. "Stick it out, slut." She reached back and twisted his nipple when Jessie failed to obey. "Now!"

Amused by their antics, Darius pulled up a chair and decided to watch their performance. His need for domination cast the females in a passive role the majority of the time. Jessie only found pleasure when he was overwhelmed and humiliated, so Darius saw no harm in allowing the women to assert themselves from time to time.

Until his spies returned, he had nothing better to do.

Jessie shook his head and moaned, but Megan held his arms tightly against his sides. "Do it, you stingy bastard. Lick her pussy until her cream covers your face."

Carry parted her pussy lips and lowered her sex toward Jessie's mouth. "Lick my clit. Do it now." Like a small pink snake, Jessie's tongue darted out and flicked Carry's clit. "Again. Harder this time."

Megan pulled Jessie's arms onto his belly, grasping his wrists with one hand so she could play with his cock. "Lick her nicely and maybe I'll suck you." She wrapped her fingers around his stout shaft and lazily pumped up and down.

Lust stirred within Darius. They really were spectacular. Each beautiful in their own right, yet the contrast was even more appealing. Carry was blonde, with pale gold skin. Megan's skin was mocha and her hair grew in tight spirals, forming a thick ebony cloud around her lovely face. And then there was Jessie. With flawless copper skin and long black hair, Jessie was by far the most exotic. His wide amber eyes revealed his lusty nature despite his frequent shows of reluctance.

As if he sensed the Master's gaze upon him, Jessie bucked Megan off and spread his legs wide. Darius smiled. Framed by sleekly muscled thighs, Jessie's cock formed a long, thick column along his washboard abs. Then he rotated his pelvis and drew his knees toward his chest, presenting his ass for the Master's pleasure.

"You slut!" Megan slapped him hard on the ass and Jessie yelped. "He said we were to entertain each other. Stop trying to seduce him with your whore's body."

"He's obviously desperate for cock," Darius said. "Give him one."

Apparently intrigued by the new development, Carry lifted herself off Jessie's face and turned around. She quickly drew his arms above his head and pinned them to the bed with her legs. Then she straddled his face again and pressed her sex against his mouth. "Get busy. You still haven't made me come."

Jessie didn't bother with protests. He licked and sucked at Carry's folds, while she played with his nipples. Grasping the hard brown nubs, Carry pulled and twisted.

Proudly holding a sleek glass dildo, Megan returned to the bed. The toy gleamed with lubricant, but Jessie wouldn't know that until Megan shoved it rudely into his ass. "Is this what you want so badly?" She knelt beside Jessie and pulled his ass cheeks apart.

"Do it," Carry encouraged. "Fuck him fast and hard."

Jessie trembled visibly as Megan drove the toy inward. His body stretched wide to accommodate the dildo and a strangled cry tore from his throat. Megan didn't stop

until the toy was rammed deep in his ass. She pulled out slowly, then drove in fast. Darius imagined the burning fullness and the blissful slide. Then he reversed perspective and remembered the tight grip of Jessie's inner muscles, the heat and the friction.

His cock jerked against his thigh. Stubbornly ignoring the pressure, he enjoyed the raunchy display. Megan wielded the dildo with cruel persistence, giving Jessie exactly what he needed most.

"Greedy whore." She paused with the dildo deep and slapped his ass. "Look at your cock! You're about to blow. Don't you dare come until we give you permission. Sluts always come last."

She slapped him several more times, bringing a lovely glow to his smooth skin. Then she resumed her fucking. Darius watched the thick shaft sink into Jessie's body and felt his cock buck. Perhaps he wasn't as distracted as he thought.

He stood and approached the bed. Carry ground her pussy against Jessie's mouth, but her gaze followed him. Megan was so focused on fucking Jessie she didn't notice him until he stepped up behind her and pulled her ass cheeks apart.

"Master?" She tensed, losing her rhythm with the toy.

"Don't stop on my account." He opened a small wound on his thumb and dripped blood into her crack. The scarlet drops rolled across her dusky flesh and obediently pooled in and around her anus. He anointed the head of his cock with more blood and his fangs distended.

Circling her opening with his cock, he smeared the blood further as he positioned himself to take her. He matched her next inward thrust, filling her ass as she drilled into Jessie. Her hot passage clasped him so tightly he groaned. Carry pulled Megan's face toward her and kissed her passionately. Darius watched their mouths cling and slide, enjoying the occasional glimpse of their entwined tongues.

He grasped Megan's hips and rode her hard. She increased the speed of the dildo, matching his rhythm as she fucked Jessie. Jessie in turn adored Carry's pussy with his lips and tongue. It was a frantic circle of sexual demand.

Carry came first, her cry muffled by Megan's mouth. She moved to Jessie's side and raised his leg to her shoulder, keeping him open for Megan while allowing her access to his cock.

"May I?" she asked and Darius nodded.

Megan reached between her thighs, rubbing her clit while Darius continued to fuck her. With Carry greedily sucking his cock and Megan pounding into his ass, Jessie was soon shuddering with a powerful climax. His body arched toward Carry, his ass cheeks flexing around the dildo.

Carry removed the toy and pulled Jessie off the far side of the bed. Too aroused to speak, Darius sent an image to their minds, showing them exactly what he wanted. He dragged Megan toward him until her knees rested at the edge of the bed. Her forearms supported her upper body and she went on rubbing her clit.

Kneeling beside him, Carry caressed his thighs and his balls. He felt warm hands on his ass and knew Jessie had returned. Jessie's lube-slicked fingers thrust into Darius as he drove into Megan.

"Oh yes," he cried. The combination was amazing. Jessie faultlessly matched him thrust for thrust, the dual stimulation nearly more than Darius could take. He tossed his head and reached for Carry's free arm, drawing her wrist to his mouth.

Hunger surged as he neared release. He bit into Carry's wrist, prolonging his climax. His cock pulsed violently as he drank deeply, his head spinning with the rush of power and pleasure.

"Sir, if you're finished." Completely unapologetic, Michael stood just inside the doorway. The oldest of his transformed children, Michael had been his valet for decades.

He retracted his fangs and glared at Michael. "What is it?" No one else on earth could have gotten away with such a rude interruption.

"You asked to be notified when your spies return. Rick is waiting in your office."

"I'll be there momentarily." Licking Carry's blood from his lips, he pulled out of Megan and conjured clothes. "Make sure you eat something," he told Carry. "I was hungry."

Rick stood near the window staring out into the night. He was human, but his family had served Darius for generations. He had often been tempted to gift them with transformation, but once transformed they would have been nocturnal, unable to guard him during his solar trance. So he rewarded them with wealth and appreciation.

"What have you learned?"

"Damara is missing, sir." Rick turned from the window and faced him. His posture was stiff, his bearing militant. "She departed with Taerok and his favorite toy and never returned."

Darius frowned. "If she were dead, I would have felt her passing."

"I believe she took them through the Veil. That might account for your confusion. Your senses would have been greatly hampered by the barrier."

"Has Taerok returned?" Why Damara chose to associate with such a foul person, he couldn't begin to understand. He had encouraged Samcillian to control his progeny, but Samcillian was perhaps more vile than Taerok. And there was only so much influence one ancient had over another.

"I have confirmed reports that the Sentinels killed Taerok," Rick continued. "I don't know what happened to the toy."

His gaze snapped back to his spy. "Why would the Sentinels kill Taerok? Their leader has blood ties to him."

"I only know what I've told you, sir. I can't explain their motivations. I have confirmed that neither Damara nor Taerok's toy are in the Otherworld. If they are alive, they are on this side of the Veil."

"I see." He rubbed his chin, digesting the information as he formed possibilities. "Is there anything else?"

"No, sir. That was everything I was able to learn. Would you like me to continue my search?"

"That won't be necessary. You've done very well." He swept his hand toward the door. "I'll conclude the investigation on my own."

"Very well, sir. If you need anything else, you know where to find me."

Darius crossed to the window where Rick had been standing and closed his eyes. He reached into the darkness, better able to search with a specific target in mind. He summoned Damara, demanding she respond. Nothing. No ripple of awareness, no echo or thought.

"Do you believe him?" Michael asked from somewhere behind him.

"She's no longer there. Rick must be right." He turned around and folded his arms over his chest. "Damn it, Michael. I've lost another female."

"I'm sorry, sir. The death of any female is a loss, regardless of their character."

Darius chuckled at the offhanded criticism. "I must find out exactly what happened to her. No one robs my bloodline of a female without repercussions."

"I understand," Michael muttered, though his expression lacked conviction.

"Should I allow her murderer to go unpunished because she was flawed?"

"Of course not. Vendettas are a time honored tradition. Who am I to disagree with such a practice?"

Darius shook his head. "I allow you far too much freedom for a transformed servant. I should have taught you manners ages ago."

"You appreciate my honesty far more than you crave my deference -- sir."

"I suppose I do." He turned back to the window, feeling the centuries with oppressive clarity. "The world is changing, yet we ramble on, bound by the same archaic traditions."

"You could break with tradition and redefine your role in this changing world."

"Shall I buy a hybrid and load up my MP3 player with rap tunes?"

Michael laughed. "Wouldn't that be a sight? I was thinking of something more fundamental."

"Such as?" Michael didn't reply, so Darius turned around.

He was alone with his troubled thoughts.

Chapter Four

After a long leisurely shower, Max led Colette back into his bedroom. She had responded so sweetly and submitted so naturally, he had no doubt she could play the part he needed her to play and more. The real question was did he want to risk their fledgling romance by dragging her into the cesspool he knew they would face? There were definite risks, but the mission wasn't extremely dangerous. Still...

"What are you thinking about?" She'd slipped on his tee shirt and she was combing out her damp hair.

"If I decide not to take you with me tomorrow, what will you do?"

"Why wouldn't you assign me to the mission?" Her eyes flashed with disapproval. "Do you still doubt I can handle it?"

"No. I have every confidence in your ability. I'm just not sure I need to risk your safety when I can simply pose as a lecherous vampire."

"Would you send any of your men in alone?" Challenge radiated off of her in waves.

She had a valid point and they both knew it. "I'll take backup. It just won't be you."

"I knew this would happen." She tossed the comb on the bed and planted her fists on her hips. "You don't need to protect me. I'm a trained operative just like any of your men." Defiance flashed through her eyes and she morphed into Lukas Mandalay.

"Are you less afraid for me now?"

The shift left Lukas naked below the tee shirt and Max laughed. "You are specific with your shifts, aren't you?"

She released the image and settled back into her own form. "Give me a chance to prove myself in the field. That's all I'm asking."

He had no valid reason to refuse. If she'd been a man -- perhaps even another woman -- he wouldn't hesitate. "I hope to hell we don't both regret it, but I'll give you a chance."

With an excited cry, she threw herself into his arms. "Thank you!"

He wrapped one arm around her waist and cupped her bare ass with his other hand. "Now it's time for full disclosure. Who do you work for and how extensive is your training?"

"I'm FBI," she admitted. "My handler's name is --"

"Jason Renshaw?"

Her brow creased and she slid down his body, landing lightly on her toes. "How did you know?"

"I've worked with Jason several times before. He deals almost exclusively with paranormal cases and paranormal personnel. It just made sense."

"Well, then you know he wouldn't turn me loose in the field without the proper training."

"Jason's a good man. I'd still like to talk to him before we head out tomorrow."

"You know more of my secrets than he does. I can guarantee it." She picked up the comb and dragged it through her hair.

"How long have you worked for him? How did he find out about your abilities?"

She shrugged and continued with her grooming. "Jason has a team of 'talent scouts' that keep an eye out for people like me. One of them befriended me in college and before I knew it I'd applied as a covert operative."

"Was his mission to befriend you or was it a chance encounter?"

She laughed. "I thought you knew Jason. There are no chance encounters in Jason Renshaw's world. I've worked for him off and on for the past six years." She set the comb on the built-in dresser and sauntered toward him. "Your turn. Tell me three things I don't already know about you."

"There isn't much to tell. You've seen my operation. The PSN is my life."

She placed her hands on his shoulders and pushed to the balls of her feet, lightly nipping his chin. "Try harder. Tell me something personal."

"I've never been married, have no children, and spend all of my time here. I don't know what else you want me to say."

"You said you were created in a laboratory. Who created you?"

He heaved a sigh and set her away from him, slipping his hands into the pockets of his pants. "A team of scientists. I never learned who was funding the program, but there had never been a team like theirs before: one human, one elf, and one vampire. They were determined to create the perfect being by combining the DNA of all three species."

"You're the result of combining human, elf, and vampire DNA?"

She sounded intrigued not appalled, so he continued, "They weren't able to create a viable result when they started from scratch, so they turned to genetic resequencing. My father was an organic vampire; my mother was his half human consort. This is how Taerok's obsession began. He was my father's legitimate son with his organic wife. I was a bastard with tainted blood, yet Taerok watched me transform into a being neither vampire nor human, nor elf, but some twisted combination of the three."

"So he started trying other genetic combinations, hoping to achieve a similar result?"

"Basically. He learned about the Dichotomy, a race of beings both day-dwelling and nocturnal. He was convinced their DNA would allow him to control his solar trance."

"As you control yours?"

"Yes. And it's a tempting concept for any vampire. His research needs to be archived and the samples he collected destroyed. We can't have someone else taking up where he left off."

She was silent for a moment as she absorbed all he'd told her. "What happened to the team that created you?"

"I was their first success, but they didn't stop with me. They realized children of blended couples were the easiest to genetically reengineer. My mother was half human, so my DNA already contained contributions from two separate species. They grew more ambitious and bolder. They were no longer focused on better health and higher intelligence. They wanted beings with god-like powers and longevity. My abilities are moderate compared to what they were able to accomplish in subsequent generations."

"Generations?" She moved closer again, her brow knitted with disbelief. "How long did this program go on?"

"Forty-seven years." He paused to make sure she'd heard the statistic. "Ethan Ziegler and I realized they would never stop unless someone stopped them. We organized the others and broke free. Ethan stayed behind to destroy the facility. I convinced the others to scatter. At least I thought I'd convinced them. We made sure it looked as if we'd been killed by the explosion so no one would come looking for us."

"What happened to the others if they refused to scatter?"

He glanced away from her face, lost in memory. "Most had never lived outside the program. They were 'recruited' as infants, so they had nowhere else to go. When I realized they were holed up in an abandoned warehouse, scavenging for food like rats, I rounded them up and --"

"Formed the PSN?"

Distancing himself from the pain, he nodded and returned his gaze to her face. "Yes. The original Sentinels were all created by the same team that created me."

"What happened to Ethan?"

Damn. She didn't miss a thing. "He was hurt badly during the explosion and never fully recovered. But his son is a Sentinel. He'd be really proud of the man Steffen has become."

She touched his arm, her hand warm and gentle. "How long have you been responsible for all these people?"

"Roughly fifteen years."

"Wait a minute." Confusion pushed through the compassion in her thick-lashed eyes. "You said the program went on for almost fifty years and you mutinied fifteen years ago? Are you saying they were resequencing DNA back in the forties?"

"It was elvin technology. They've been messing with genetics longer than humans have been alive."

She shook her head and a soft smile curved her supple lips. "If I hadn't seen this place for myself, I probably wouldn't believe you."

"There is far more to this world than most humans believe. If they knew how many other species shared their precious planet, they'd run screaming for the hills."

"You don't think very highly of humans." She flashed a playful smile. "I'm sure glad I'm not one."

He returned her smile. "I'm part human too. They just act as if they're the only race that matters. It's frustrating sometimes."

"Most of them don't know any better. They think vampires are bloodthirsty demons and Faeries float around near fields of flowers."

"I can't imagine where they got those ideas." She laughed, a warm musical sound. He wanted to continue her introduction into the pleasures of submission, but they really needed to get some sleep. "I think you better return to your room. If you stay here, we'll both be exhausted in the morning."

Her hand slid from his arm to his chest and she stepped closer. "Do I have to?"

Desire flooded his system, jarring his senses with awareness and anticipation. "You're causing trouble."

"Then shouldn't you punish me?"

The question sealed her fate. Sleep deprived or not, she was never leaving his side. "Would you like me to punish you?"

"Maybe."

He pinched her bare bottom then yanked her against his chest. "The proper answer is yes, sir. Would you like me to bend you over my legs and spank your bottom before I fuck you again?"

"Yes, sir. I've been very naughty."

Colette couldn't believe her boldness. The thought of being without him was unacceptable, but did she want to be spanked? She'd never considered something like this, much less suggested it. Less than a night in his bed and she was a wanton. What was happening to her?

His hand moved from one of her ass cheeks to the other, squeezing and caressing her by turns. He suddenly swung her up against his chest and she wrapped her arms around his neck.

"Have you ever been spanked before?"

"No, sir. I'm usually very well behaved."

He chuckled and sat on the side of the bed, still cradling her in his arms. "Do I bring out the naughtiness in you?"

"Most definitely." She raised her hand toward his face then hesitated. "May I touch you, sir? Please." She saw flashes of tenderness in his eyes and hungered for the day when he wouldn't hide the emotion.

"Yes."

She took advantage of his generosity, running her hands over his face and through his short dark hair. She followed the strong column of his neck to his incredibly wide shoulders then down his arms. These strong capable arms supported so many, protected so many, and tonight they belonged to her. His biceps felt like stone and his chest was only slightly softer. She raked his chest hair with her fingers, fascinated by the wiry texture.

He didn't object to her exploration, so she grew bolder, shifting so she straddled his lap. She needed to know him as intimately as he knew her. His intense gaze stared back at her, an occasional flash accenting the sapphire shards. Would their connection deepen each time they made love? Made love? She doubted he thought of this in those terms. This was training, preparation for a mission. She better slow things down in her own mind or she was going to get hurt. She ran her index finger down the slope of his nose then traced the arch of his eyebrows with her thumbs.

"May I kiss you, sir? I want your taste in my mouth while you spank me."

Lust burst in his eyes and he literally growled. An animalistic sound had never been so sexy. His fingers tangled in the back of her hair and his mouth took possession of her lips. Warm and moist, his tongue pushed into her mouth. She greeted him with enthusiasm, rubbing her breasts against his chest. She loved the way he kissed, the way his tongue fucked her mouth. She followed into his mouth and fucked him in return.

"Take off the shirt," he whispered against her damp lips. "I want you naked, now!"

She tugged the tee shirt off over her head and dropped it to the floor with a smile. His assertiveness revealed how badly he needed her. "Better?"

"You're not supposed to talk." He kissed her again before she could respond and his free hand moved possessively over her body. His mouth left hers and worked its way down the side of her neck, nipping and sucking as he went. Tingles jumped along her nerve endings, making her shiver. She arched her back, pressing her mound against his belly and angling her breasts closer to his face. His fingers tightened in her hair, holding her in the arched position.

He palmed one breast, while his lips explored the other. "Would you rather be pinched or suckled?"

"I'll let you know in a minute." He nipped her breast and she giggled, embarrassed by the girlish sound.

"Hold still. Concentrate on the sensations." With his fingers still anchoring her in place, he drew one nipple deeply into his mouth while he firmly rolled the other between his thumb and forefinger. He released her nipple from his mouth and asked, "Well?"

"Suckled."

He moved his hand between her thighs as he suckled one breast and then the other. His fingers lightly stroked her bush, teasing, petting, without even parting her folds. She wiggled restlessly, trying to bring his fingers into more intimate contact with her pussy.

Without warning, he lifted her and then draped her facedown across his lap. Her hands barely touched the floor and even with her ankles extended, her toes didn't touch down. She could just imagine the view he was getting with her ass pushed up in the air.

He moved her legs apart and traced her slit. "You're very wet. Did kissing me do this or are you anxious for your spanking?"

"I don't know. I've never been spanked before."

His hand caressed both cheeks, soothing her as anticipation built. "It seems almost wrong to mark such delicate skin, but you did ask for this." He brought his palm down across one cheek and then the other.

Colette jerked nearly off his lap. "That hurt!"

He chuckled and moved her back into position. "It's punishment. It's supposed to hurt." His hand stroked over her skin, accenting the heat left behind by his sharp slaps.

She closed her eyes and focused on the signals her body was sending. Heat, tingles... Her clit twitched and her pussy clenched. Was that supposed to happen? He spanked her again, pausing between each slap, allowing the heat to spread.

His fingers explored her folds again, leisurely circling her clit. "You're getting even wetter. It's definitely the spanking." A finger pushed into her core. "Squeeze me."

She bore down on his finger, blood throbbing in her head. He stirred the heat across her ass with his fingertips, while his other hand moved between her thighs. It felt odd, yet exciting. Would stronger sensations add to her excitement or put out the fire? She had to know. At least this one time, she had to cast off her inhibitions and... explore.

"More," she whispered, afraid of angering him.

His fingers pulled out and she whimpered. "More of this?" He thrust in with two fingers this time. "Or more of this?" He slapped her already stinging ass and Colette cried out. Her clit pulsed as the pain mellowed into penetrating heat. She was so close to coming. All he had to do was --

His slick fingers moved to her other opening and he pushed in as he spanked her again. Pleasure/pain danced up her spine and her back passage convulsed around his finger. "You like that. Don't you?" He squeezed her sore cheek as his finger slid in and out of her ass. Hot temptation, so delightfully forbidden, eroded the last of her inhibitions.

"Yes, oh fuck yes!" Her naughty little body came in sharp, shocking waves. She grasped his thigh and shuddered, dizzy and trembling. "I'm sorry," she said automatically. "You didn't tell me to come."

He pulled his finger out and lifted her to stand between his legs. "I didn't tell you not to either. This is all new to you. We'll discover your limits together." Pushing her back just a little, he stood and slipped out of his pants. He guided her hand to his cock and curved her fingers around his shaft. "Touch me, Colette. I need your touch."

More than happy to comply, she stroked his length and reveled in his silk-over-marble texture. "May I look at you?"

"You can do anything you like."

Feeling like a child with a new toy, she sank to her knees and explored his sex. Wiry hair covered his balls. She was surprised by their size and weight. She knew he was big; she'd felt his cock stretching her channel. Still, her imagination hadn't done him justice. She cupped his sac with one hand and stroked his thick shaft with the other.

"I won't let you play all night. You better indulge your curiosity fast."

She brought him to her mouth and sucked just his flared head between her lips. His legs tensed and his hips rocked, trying to push deeper into her mouth. She allowed him to slip along her tongue, while her fingers began to wander. He seemed fixated on her ass. Would similar sensations please him too?

The skin behind his balls was silky soft and hairless. He groaned, so she paused to caress the spot. Still, her curiosity would not be denied. Using her own essence as lubricant, she found his tightly puckered opening and teased it with her fingertips.

Easing back until just the head of his cock remained between her lips, she looked up and asked permission with her gaze.

"I said anything you wanted." His voice sounded almost strangled.

She pushed past the tight ring of muscle and slid into his ass. He was hot and soft inside. Was this how she felt to him? She slid in and out and his cock jerked against her lips. He took her face between his palms and urged her closer to his body. His cock filled her mouth and she worked a second finger into his tight hole.

With a hoarse cry, he pulled out of her mouth and pulled down on his balls, determined to postpone his climax. "Bend over the bed. Now!"

His face was contorted with lust and she'd never felt so powerful. Thrilled by his lack of control, she bent over the bed and rested her forearms against the mattress. He opened a compartment behind her, and she tried to see what he was doing. She knew better than to ask, but she heard the sound of a condom wrapper tearing open.

He turned her head back around and said, "Look straight ahead."

Her bottom cheeks were pulled apart and something cool oozed into her crack. He rubbed the slippery substance over and into her bottom. She closed her eyes. Oh God, he was going to fuck her ass!

"I wasn't going to do this tonight, but I've reconsidered." His fingers pushed into her, sliding easily in the lube. "You come harder when I touch you here than anywhere else. I suspect you're going to love this as much as I do."

Anticipation sent shivers down her spine. Finally, a man who wouldn't apologize for wanting to fuck her every way possible. Then an image of his cock flashed into her mind, and her eyes flew open wide. He was fucking huge! Could he even get that thing inside her?

The blunt head of his cock pressed against her anus, and she bit down on her lower lip. "We need to do this together. Push back onto me while I push in."

His hands grasped her hips and he drove forward. She pushed back, her fingers twisting in the bedspread. Wider and wider she spread. Pressure spiked into pain and she cried out. His flared cockhead slipped inside her and he paused. Reaching around

from the side, he circled her clit as she adjusted to the invasion. The sting receded, leaving overwhelming pressure.

"You are so fucking tight." He groaned.

"You think?" She couldn't help the sarcastic jibe. "Push in or pull out. This is killing me."

"As my lady commands." He drove steadily inward, stealing her breath and invading her soul. Their bodies fused and she tossed her head. Lights danced before her eyes and her breath escaped in a low moan. He pulled back and hot tingles raced in his wake.

"Oh God!" Cascading ripples of sensation followed his cock like the tail of a comet.

He chuckled and executed another slow stroke. The inescapable pressure was one thing, but her entire body seemed to come alive each time he slid outward. Another coating of lube eased the last of the sting. He moved smoothly, steadily, his fingers lazily strumming over her clit.

"Was I right? Do you like it?"

"Yes, sir. Don't stop. Please, fuck me hard."

He whispered her name as his massive cock drove reality away. Higher and hotter, she'd never felt anything like it, never dreamed sensations could be so intense. His presence drove into her mind with his next stroke and she came hard, gasping and welcoming him home.

Her pleasure only sped his pace. His free hand pinched her nipples and rubbed her clit with no apparent pattern. She never knew where the teasing touch would appear, only that it wouldn't leave her entirely.

Beyond acceptance, she shoved back against him, taking him deeper with each thrust. He moved through her mind, weaving their souls together. Her nipples beaded and her cunt pulsed, desperate for penetration. If only he had two cocks! As if he sensed her lust-addled thought, his long middle finger slid into her feminine core. She cried out sharply as another orgasm rushed up to claim her.

Her body clenched and rippled, the pleasure momentarily robbing her of coherent thought. He thrust deeply one last time and joined her in the abyss. His harsh breathing echoed in her ear as his being slipped from her mind. They shuddered together, his fingers prolonging the spasms as he gently pulled on her clit.

Strength bled out of her legs and she collapsed across the bed. He carefully separated their bodies, disposed of the condom, and crawled onto the bed beside her. "Are you all right?"

"You know the answer to that." She playfully punched his shoulder. "Don't be so damned smug."

"Me? Smug? Never." Sprawled out on his back, he pulled her on top of him and leisurely kissed her mouth. "I think the only thing I haven't done is let you ride me."

She smiled against his kiss-dampened lips. "And when can we mark that off your list?"

"Is something wrong with right now?"

She wiggled a bit to determine the validity of his claim. "I know good and well you came. How can you be hard again already?"

"I'm part vampire, remember? I'm pretty much hard anytime I'm not totally engrossed in something else."

"I'll keep that in mind." She folded her legs beneath her and pushed up against his chest. "I like being on top." Reaching down between them, she guided his cock to the mouth of her passage.

"Well, enjoy it while it lasts, sweetheart." He grasped her hips and brought her down hard. "It's about my least favorite position."

"I'll just bet." He cupped her breasts as she found the rhythm, and they both enjoyed the ride.

Chapter Five

Mesmerized by the flashing lights and musical cacophony, Darius stood inside the casino and waited for his senses to adjust to the stimulation. He'd seen Las Vegas on television shows and in magazines. Still, nothing prepared his preternatural senses for the barrage of sights, sounds -- and smells. How did humans tolerate this chaos?

"Darius." Monique strolled up to him and looped her slender arm through his. "How have you been? It's been ages."

Her dark hair had been cut in a sleek, chin-length bob that artfully framed her lovely features. A strapless cocktail dress outlined her elegant figure and cunning gleamed in her jet black eyes. At first glance she appeared almost fragile, but Darius knew the vicious predator concealed beneath her charming façade.

It was an insult for Samcillian to send his daughter to greet a fellow ancient, but Darius would rather speak with Monique anyway, so he let the rudeness slide. "I've been well enough, I suppose. Is there somewhere we can speak privately?"

She led him to a bar in the far corner of the casino. High round booths created semi-private enclosures along the back wall. "Will this do or should we go upstairs?" Her lustful expression promised more than conversation if he insisted on complete privacy. Fucking her would be no sacrifice, but he wasn't in the mood to play.

"This is fine." Damara's disappearance wasn't really a secret. In fact it wasn't even important to anyone but him.

She slipped into the booth and waved the waitress away. "So, what can we do for you? Father sends his regards. He would have attended you himself, but we're dealing with some employee issues that needed his personal attention."

"I'm sure this place keeps you busy. I'll try not to take up too much of your time." He slid in across from her and folded his hands on the tabletop. The environment

was more subdued here, less overwhelming. Perhaps Michael was right. He really did need to get out more, reacquaint himself with the world around him. "Damara is missing." He came right to the point. "The last person seen with her was Taerok."

"How unfortunate. Taerok is dead."

"I suspected as much, but I wanted to be sure." He lowered his voice, speaking so softly no human could process the sound. "If you don't mind my asking, how did Taerok die?"

"He was killed by his half-brother's soldiers." She dropped her voice as well. "They call themselves Sentinels."

"I've heard of them. Is your father planning retaliation for the murder?"

She laughed and leaned back against the booth. "You really are old school, aren't you? Taerok reaped the ramifications of his own choices. My father disowned him long ago. Nothing Taerok did has any effect on my father."

"Taerok was a direct descendant of your father's bloodline. How can you dismiss his loss so casually?"

"Taerok was on a quest to transform himself into a day-dweller. We are nocturnal and proud of it. Father warned Taerok that his obsession would likely cost him his life, but Taerok wouldn't listen. Retaliation would serve no purpose. Taerok was the aggressor. The Sentinels were only protecting their own."

"Do you know what happened to Taerok's toy?"

"Payne?"

"I don't know his name. He was unusually attractive, with dark, reddish hair."

"Yeah, that's Payne. I didn't realize he was involved in this. Our intel only mentioned Taerok. Have you checked with George Feddar?"

"I'm not familiar with that name."

"George was Taerok's business manager. In fact, I think he managed many of Damara's interests too."

"Human?"

"I honestly don't know. He's not a vampire, but he doesn't seem quite human either."

Darius nodded. "Where can I find Feddar? And if he doesn't know anything, how do I contact the Sentinels?"

"Try Feddar first. If he can't help you, you'll have to talk with Father. I've never interacted with the Sentinels."

* * *

Catering to the unique needs of vampires and other paranormal beings, Station X was hard to find, exclusive, and very expensive. The ground floor was a dance club like any other, but the upper level housed private rooms and specially equipped "session halls." The amenities of the upper level were even more costly than the drinks, so they'd arrived in a borrowed Ferrari and Max had been flashing wads of cash ever since.

"What's Taerok's connection to this place?" Colette leaned in and shouted so her voice would carry above the pulsing music. Per Max's instructions, she wore a figure-hugging black mini dress and thigh high boots. Beneath the dress she was naked and she had never felt so naughty. A velvet choker encircled her throat. The discreet loop at the front identified her as a pet without broadcasting the fact needlessly.

"He may or may not own the place. We weren't able to determine which, but he's definitely provided them with talent on several occasions." Max wore black pants and a simple short-sleeved shirt. With a subdued gray and blue pattern, the shirt was about the most colorful garment Colette had ever seen him wear. Faded fatigues and a black tee shirt were far more his style.

The manager's office was situated above the stage and a large two-way mirror overlooked the dance floor. They needed to draw the attention of the manager before they attempted to access the private rooms.

Max led her onto the dance floor and Colette ignored the tension gripping her stomach. She'd been wild and uninhibited last night. All she had to do was draw on

that same sensuality and respond to the smoldering hunger that erupted each time Max touched her.

His hands skimmed down her sides from her armpits to her hips. She swayed toward him, letting the music flow through her. He pushed his knee between her legs and drew her near, pressing her sex against the hard muscle of his thigh.

She rested her hands on his shoulders and rocked in time to the music. Heat flared and their gazes locked. He slid one hand upward, his thumb resting beneath her breast as she undulated her hips.

All around them couples gyrated and ground against each other. How were they supposed to appear more provocative than anyone else?

We're shopping for a third. Look around at other men -- or other women. His hand squeezed her ass as he added the last suggestion.

He'd sent his thoughts to her before, but she hadn't tried to reply. He was so damned gorgeous. How was she supposed to convince anyone she wanted someone else?

You don't want someone instead of me. You want someone in addition to me.

Finding the link he'd established, she sent her response to his mind. *I have no problem with telepathy, but don't read my mind.*

He leaned down and brushed his lips over hers. *I apologize. You're just extremely easy to read.*

Rather than letting the comment annoy her, she immersed herself in her role. Grasping his upper arms, she rubbed her pussy against his thigh. The muscle teased her folds and awakened her clit after just a few seconds. As soon as the familiar melting sensation curled through her abdomen, she forced herself to look around. She boldly swept her gaze over every attractive man she saw and even eyed a few women.

Max grabbed her ass with one hand and her chin with the other, glaring into her eyes. "See anything you like?"

She quickly lowered her gaze. "I'm sorry, sir."

He shoved her back then grabbed her wrist and pulled her off the dance floor. Intentionally bumping into people as he passed, he made as much of a disruption as he dared without being thrown out of the club.

Marching away from the stage gave them the best chance of being spotted by the manager. He pushed her up against the wall near the open staircase. His hand slipped between her thighs and Colette instinctively grabbed his wrist. She had no way of knowing if the manager was watching, but half the heads in the bar were turned their way.

His fingertips barely grazed her curls, despite the position of his hand. Her pussy ached, uncaring that they were making a spectacle of themselves. She eased the tension on her thighs and Max slid his middle finger into her folds. Her senses hummed, her arousal amplified by all the curious glances.

"Do you need assistance, miss?" The bouncer was not as tall as Max, but he was even more heavily muscled.

"She's fine," Max snapped.

"I didn't ask you."

"I... No, I'm fine." She tried to smile and failed.

"You hesitated."

She pushed Max's hand away from her crotch and stepped to his side. "There's no problem. Just a misunderstanding."

The bouncer touched the small transceiver nestled in his ear and nodded. "Mr. Bronstein would like to speak with you."

"Who the fuck is Mr. Bronstein?"

"The owner." He motioned toward a doorway behind the stairs.

"What is this about?" Max crossed his arms over his chest. "You heard her. There isn't a problem."

"I suspect you'll want to hear what he has to say. It'll just take a minute."

Max wrapped his arm around her waist as they followed the bouncer. The doorway led to a hallway lined with storage rooms. At the back was a private staircase,

which brought them to a narrow corridor. The bouncer knocked on the door and pushed it open for them, but remained in the hall as they stepped into the posh office.

A thin man in a business suit stood in front of the two-way mirror overlooking the dance floor. He didn't turn around as he spoke. "Are you aware of our invitation-only amenities?"

"I've heard about some of them, but I'm not sure what you offer is worth what you charge."

With the hint of a smile curving his lips, the man turned around. "I'm Randolph Bronstein, owner of Station X."

"Your thug told us your name."

"Would you like something to drink or do you prefer a direct source?"

"My feeding habits are none of your business."

"True enough." His gaze swept over Colette before returning to Max. "You seemed dissatisfied with the experience downstairs. What can I do to make your evening more enjoyable?"

Max pulled Colette in front of him and wrapped his arm around her waist, staring at Bronstein over her head. "She's gorgeous, isn't she?"

"She's truly beautiful and very obviously yours. Does she require punishment perhaps or --"

"Don't presume to know what she needs."

"All right. Please explain what she needs. I'll do my best to accommodate you both."

"She wants someone she can play with, someone who will cuddle her while I'm away."

"And you're reluctant to establish such a relationship?"

"Relationship?" Max scoffed. "She's all soft and submissive whenever I'm around, but how do I ensure her loyalty when I'm not there to command her?"

She made a soft distressed sound, but didn't speak or make eye contact.

"I'm away a lot. It's not unreasonable for her to want companionship. I might even enjoy having a second pet."

"Please don't be offended, but it would be helpful if I understood how you and the young lady became... attached."

"I bought her, of course. How else do you ensure the obedience of a pet?"

"I see." He moved toward his large desk, his disappointment clear. "I'm afraid I can't help you. I don't utilize slaves or indentured servants. I can, however, refer you to someone who does."

"I was told Taerok had the best flesh on this side of the Veil. Do you know how I can contact him?"

"Actually, this gentleman associates quite closely with Taerok. I'm sure George Feddar can assist you with your selection."

* * *

Darius fidgeted on the wooden chair, impatiently waiting for Feddar to acknowledge his existence. This was absurd. No, it was intolerable! He liked Los Angeles even less than he had liked Las Vegas. Fifty years ago Feddar would have been prostrate before him, begging for his indulgence and offering sexual tribute. Instead Darius was kept waiting in this sleazy bar as if he were a common visitor.

Michael was wrong. The traditions were there for a reason. The Charter must be upheld.

A woman wearing only a black lace thong danced and shimmied, arranging her body in obscene poses not far away. Males of several races crowded around the small stage. They tucked money in her G-string and whistled as she displayed her assets for their lustful perusal.

"Would you like a lap dance?" one of the strippers asked, her eyes vacant within her gaudy face.

"No. I have an appointment with Mr. Feddar. Please make sure he's preparing for me."

"Matt went into the office a few minutes ago. I'm sure Mr. Feddar knows you're here." She moved off without another word and Darius seethed. Something had to be done about this. When one ancient was treated discourteously it cheapened them all.

No respect. No awareness of the traditions that had kept his race thriving for millennia. He sank into the corner, angry and discouraged. He had lived a long, prosperous life, but what about his progeny? Some had yet to see a century. There must be a way to ensure their viability, to prepare them for success in --

"He'll see you now." The man the stripper had called Matt motioned him onward with an impatient gesture.

Darius pushed to his feet and followed Matt across the dimly lit room. Didn't this imbecile realize he could snuff out his life with a thought? Or did he simply not care? The stench of alcohol and sweat assailed his nose. No wonder he never left his compound. The rest of the world had degenerated into places like this!

Feddar looked up from behind his desk as Darius entered. "So, you're Damara's sire? She told me you were some sort of recluse."

"Sire indicates transformation. Damara was my descendant."

"Whatever." He tapped away at the keyboard in front of him for a moment. The monitor faced the other direction, so Darius couldn't see what he was doing. "What do you want from me?"

"I believe Damara is dead and I'm investigating her passing."

Feddar scratched his scalp, leaving several strands sticking up at the side of his head. "I wondered about that. I haven't heard from her since she took Taerok to D'arcy Aiden."

"Have you spoken with Taerok?"

"Rumor is the Sentinels got him." The phone on his desk rang and he rudely interrupted their conversation by picking it up. "What?" After a short pause he said, "Give me a few minutes then send him in."

"Am I interrupting something more important?" It was all Darius could do not to fly across the desk and rip out the idiot's throat. Never in all his centuries had he been treated with such disrespect.

"Busy night." Feddar pushed back from his desk and stood. "Max Brigham just strolled through my front door."

"Isn't that Taerok's half-brother?" Darius was shocked. Had Max somehow learned that he wished to speak with him? No, that wasn't possible. Unless Monique had set him up!

"Yes, but what the hell does Max want with me?"

"Does he know how closely you were associated with Taerok?" He gave no hint to his own concerns.

"I don't know what the fuck he knows." He pushed his hand through his hair, disrupting what little style the strands had once claimed. "His men took out Taerok. He has no reason to come after me."

"His presence could have nothing to do with your former employer. Play it cool. I'll be nearby." Without further explanation Darius dematerialized.

Max and a stunning blonde were ushered into the office a few minutes later. With a muscular build and a watchful demeanor Max was obviously a military man. The woman, however, was ethereal and lovely, despite her sluttish attire.

Feddar stood in front of his desk, not a hint of emotion evident in his nondescript features. "What can I do for you, Mr..."

Ignoring the prompt, Max motioned his companion toward the sofa. Darius found himself staring at the woman. Was she human? It was hard to believe such a vision could have sprung from the cloddish human race.

"I was referred to you by a Randolph Bronstein." Max handed Feddar a business card.

Feddar glanced at the card then carelessly tossed it onto his desk. "My question remains. What can I do for you?"

Max didn't reply. His gaze narrowed and he tilted his head, his expression suddenly suspicious. "Why does this office reek of vampire?"

Very good. There was definitely more to Max than met the eye.

"I have no idea what you mean."

"Cut the bullshit, Feddar." His head turned from side to side as he scented the air. Darius poured energy into his shields. He should have thought to conceal his scent, even if Max was only part vampire. He had obviously retained a keen sense of smell. "You know damn well who I am."

"A lot of people have been wondering what happened to Taerok." Feddar glanced at the woman, his gaze downright lecherous. Displeasure rippled through Darius, yet he didn't understand the reaction. Why should he care what these two did with a human? "I've had five or six of his relatives demanding answers today alone. Care to shed some light on the mystery?"

Max folded his arms over his chest, his expression carefully schooled. "I'm here because of Taerok, but my interest is personal. This has nothing to do with the Sentinels or Taerok's obsession."

"We both know Taerok's dead," Feddar countered, "so who's really full of shit?"

"I'm here about Payne. With Taerok dead he's unprotected and -- I want him."

The statement rocked Darius. Then Max didn't have Payne already and Payne was still alive. With his purpose restored, he concentrated on each word they exchanged.

Feddar chuckled, his mouth quirked in a wily smile. "I understand your passion, my friend. Taerok was just generous enough with his toy to make damn sure we all knew what we were missing. He told Payne to give me head once, and I still get hard just thinking about it." He ducked back behind the desk and sank into the tall-backed chair. "Unfortunately, I have no idea where Payne is hiding. No one's seen hide nor hair of him since before they left for D'arcy Aiden."

"There's only one place in this dimension where Payne would feel safe," Max said meaningfully.

"You couldn't get inside Taerok's lair even if I told you where it is."

"Give me the location and I'll worry about getting inside."

"Taerok was one suspicious son of a bitch," Feddar told Max. "He had his lair shielded by the craftiest sorcerer I've ever met. There's no way to force your way through. You'll have to convince the maker to reverse the spell and that's never going to happen."

Max didn't look convinced. "Who are you talking about and where can I find him?"

"His name is Teladorian, but you're wasting your time. He only deals with organic vampires and an occasional demon."

"Tell me where I can find him."

"What's in it for me?" Feddar's gaze drifted toward Colette, and Darius's dislike for the man exploded. There was no way he would allow... allow? She was not his to command. At least, not yet.

"I'm not nearly as generous with my toys as Taerok," Max said. "Cash deal. Name your price."

With a careless shrug, Feddar named a figure and Max counted out the bills. Feddar wrote an address on a scrap of paper and handed it to Max. "Don't come running to me when he laughs in your face. Teladorian is far more expensive than I'll ever be and he doesn't need your money."

Darius made sure Max and the woman had departed before he returned to Feddar's office. "Teladorian's father was an incubus. You know exactly what he'll want."

"What I said was true. He only deals with organic vampires. They have no hope of striking a deal with him."

"If Teladorian has no use for money, wouldn't you rather I gave mine to you?"

Feddar grinned. "Which is why I sent Max to our favorite demon spawn. I figured you'd pay better than a working stiff. Was I wrong?"

"If you can get me through the shield before Max, I will reward you generously."

“Not a problem. Taerok gave me an incantation that creates a temporary opening in the shields.”

Darius stood and held out his hand. Feddar reached out to clasp it and Darius slashed his throat with his thumbnail. Blood spewed across the desktop and drenched Feddar’s shirt. The fool clasped the wound with both hands, gaping like a fish. Disbelief and terror clouded his eyes as Darius reached into his mind and retrieved the incantation. No one treated him with such disrespect and lived to tell the tale. He was not simply organic; he was ancient!

“Nice doing business with you,” Darius muttered then disappeared.

Chapter Six

Colette tried not to let her anxiety show. All of her assignments had been undercover, but her specialty was espionage not vice. Station X had been chic and sensual, while Feddar's bar emanated depravity. It was coarse and sordid and... evocative. Her body had been simmering ever since her provocative dance with Max. A dark, shameful part of her psyche hoped they'd have to pay this sorcerer with something sexual. God, she needed to come!

The Ferrari growled as they wended their way along the Pacific Coast Highway. Max had opened the sunroof and the warm, humid breeze played through her hair.

"Do you know anything about Teladorian?"

"He's a mercenary sorcerer, sells spells to the highest bidder. I hear his name from time to time, but I don't think he's caused any real commotion. According to some his father was an incubus."

She looked at Max. Even in profile he was ruggedly handsome, and so serious. She treasured his infrequent smiles, never knowing when the next one might appear. "Is that even possible? I thought an incubus was a spirit that fed off the sexual energy of female victims."

"The powerful ones can also possess a host body for a short period of time."

"Then wouldn't the child belong to the host body, not the incubus?"

His broad shoulders shrugged and a smile curved his lips. "I have no idea. We've never been able to verify the rumor one way or the other." He paused, his gaze moving over her face before he turned his attention back to the winding road. "Whether he was fathered by an incubus or just thinks he was, I'm pretty sure I know what he'll want in exchange for reversing the protection spell."

"Feddar said he only deals with organic vampires."

"Luckily, I'm working with the best damned shapeshifter I've ever come across."

"Or come inside?" She whispered the question with a shiver as she stared out the window.

"Would you rather not --"

"You trusted me with the mission. I'll see it through."

"I won't let him fuck you, but --"

"What if he wants to fuck you?"

"I'm a bit more jaded about all this than you are." He tapped his thumb against the steering wheel, his eyes looking straight ahead. "If we can destroy Taerok's lair and ensure that no one else dies because of this fiasco, I'll do just about anything."

She understood his determination, respected the nobility of his goal. Still, she wasn't sure she could match his resolve. Submitting to Max had been amazing. She didn't regret one heated caress, but sharing her body with a complete stranger seemed so cavalier.

"I will not let him fuck you, Colette." He sounded far more insistent the second time. If he wasn't reading her mind, he was certainly in tune with her emotions. Knowing he could sense what she was feeling no longer upset her. She found their connection comforting after so many years of isolation. "If that's his price," Max went on, "we'll find another way into Taerok's lair."

She didn't argue. Her mind returned to the original issue. Was saving a life worth having sex with a stranger? It was an odd sort of dilemma. She'd known all of Taerok's recent victims, had known his last victim really well. If fucking Teladorian could have prevented their murders, would she have gone willingly to his bed?

"What are you thinking about?" Max asked after a long tense pause. "You're miles away from me right now."

"We should do it." She took a deep breath and continued with more conviction, "If he can get us inside Taerok's lair, I'm willing to do whatever he wants. We have to make sure this is over once and for all."

"One step at a time." Max reached over and squeezed her hand. "He has to prove he can disarm the shields before we need to worry about the rest."

The address Feddar gave Max led them to a gated compound set well back from the road. Max lowered his window, preparing to announce their arrival, when the gate slid to the side.

"I guess he's expecting us," Max muttered as he pulled past the gate.

Trees lined the curved drive, momentarily obscuring the view of Teladorian's home. Colette lived in Malibu, but her eyes still widened as they approached the sprawling mansion. The multilevel structure followed the natural contour of the hillside and even by moonlight the elaborate landscaping was impressive.

"I can see why he'd be hard to bribe." Max turned off the car and looked at Colette. "If you leave your appearance unchanged, can you make him believe you're an organic vampire? They're a pretty tight community. I don't want to risk choosing someone he knows."

"This could be tricky, but I think I can pull it off. Think about your father. Concentrate on the rhythm of his energy." She clasped his hand and accessed his mind, letting his memories wash over her and flow through her. She isolated the pattern, memorized the energy signature and used it to pattern her own. "Unless Teladorian knew your father, I should be able to fool him." She mimicked the cadence for a few seconds longer before she withdrew from Max's consciousness.

"Ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

He walked around the car and pulled the car door open for her. She smoothed down her skirt and fluffed her hair, all the while wishing she'd worn something more conservative. Max led her up the wide stone steps and again the portal opened before he could make their presence known.

A handsome blond man in a neat, black suit motioned them inside the house. "This way, please."

The entryway soared three stories to an elaborate arrangement of skylights and stained glass panels. A large living room spread before them, the furniture modern like the house. Rather than taking them into the living room, however, the doorman guided them toward the music room on the left. At least she presumed it was the music room from the grand piano which dominated the elegant space.

"He'll be right with you," their host said, then disappeared around a corner.

"Wow," Colette whispered. "This house is something else." Max didn't comment. She checked the artificial rhythm to make sure her distraction hadn't changed the pattern. *Do I still scan vampire?*

You look like my lover, but feel like my father. He grimaced. *I'm trying not to think about that too much.*

Before they could decide where to sit, Teladorian joined them in the music room. Tall and lean, he flowed from one position to the next with hypnotic grace. His long black hair had been swept away from his face and secured at the nape of his neck. The sleek length appeared endlessly black one moment then shimmered with golden highlights the next. How could hair so dark have a golden cast? She'd never seen anything like it before.

He wore a shirt of forest green that matched his exotic eyes. They tilted at the corners, creating a decidedly feline impression. His lips were full and beautifully curved. Only his sculpted cheeks and firm jaw saved him from being pretty.

"Teladorian Haize. I've been expecting you." He held out his hand toward Max, but those captivating eyes stared straight at Colette.

Max ignored his proffered hand and slipped his arm around Colette's shoulders. "I need you to reverse the spell protecting Taerok's lair."

"I understand what you need." Teladorian lowered his arm and slipped his hand into the pocket of his tailored pants. "I don't, however, understand why you think I'd be willing to help you."

"Taerok is dead, no longer in need of your protection."

"I was hired to protect his lair, not the man himself. There is obviously still a need for his lair to be protected or you wouldn't be here."

Max glared at Teladorian and Colette grew restless. Her chest felt tight, her lungs sluggish. She didn't understand Max's hostility. Teladorian was being polite. His smile was pleasant and his eyes... In fact, all of his features were so beautiful. She couldn't seem to look away.

"I'm Taerok's closest living relative," Max tried again. "Anything in the lair --"

"If I'm not mistaken, you're also the person responsible for his death."

"He was conducting experiments --"

"I'm not interested in your justifications."

"What are you interested in?"

Teladorian smiled and Colette felt her knees go weak. Literally, her knees wobbled and she had to steady herself against Max. He leaned down and whispered, "Go wait for me in the car."

"If Colette leaves this room, our conversation is over," Teladorian warned.

Her heart lurched and she frantically scrambled to recreate the artificial rhythm. Had he sensed her blunder? "How do you know my name?" Max had been careful not to call her Colette all evening.

Teladorian took a step toward her and she tingled from head to toe. "All I have to do is look at a woman and I know everything there is to know about her."

"All you need to know about this woman is she's mine!" Max tried to push her behind him, but she twisted out of reach.

"You aren't doing this intentionally, are you?" A flash of pain in his gaze confirmed her suspicion. He was as much a prisoner of this phenomenon as the women he affected. Compassion soothed her, allowed her to breathe more easily. Until she heard his voice again.

"No female can tolerate the stimulation for long. If they try and fight it, they go insane."

She reached out for Teladorian and Max snatched her hand back. "Don't touch him. Can't you see what he's doing to you?"

"But he needs me." She ran her hands down her sides then crossed her arms over her chest as the pressure between her thighs kicked her heartbeat out of rhythm. The room spun sickeningly and she swayed. "He's so hungry. I'm so hungry."

Max grasped her wrist and started for the door. She dug in her heels with a soft cry. He leaned down, preparing to lift her into his arms.

"Kiss her and she'll calm down." Teladorian turned around and sat down at the piano.

Colette trembled, barely able to stand. Max drew her against him and pressed his mouth over hers. She parted her lips and wrapped her arms around his back. The kiss was slow and tender, calming her, relaxing her.

Gradually the urgency eased and her head cleared. She eased away from Max, using his body like a shield. If she couldn't see Teladorian, his influence over her wasn't quite so staggering. Desire still pulsed between her thighs, but the craving was bearable.

"Let's go." Max brushed her hair back from her face and kissed her brow. "We'll find another way in."

"I'm the only way in, Commander Brigham. Whether you like it or not."

"How long before your thrall is permanent?" Max challenged. "I won't subject her to this."

"Don't confuse me with a vampire." Resentment made his tone sharp. "I don't enslave the minds of others. My need simply stimulates an equal hunger in females and it's been a long time since I fed."

"Yeah, that's nothing like a vampire," Max scoffed. "Excuse my confusion."

"Do men ever feel this... attraction?" If she kept her gaze on Max she could almost think clearly.

"No."

"Then you could have a normal relationship with a man," she suggested.

"I'm not attracted to men sexually, and what man would befriend someone who can't be trusted with his sister or his daughter, much less his wife? Men resent me, and women are powerless to resist the call of the incubus."

"Then it's true?" She wanted to look at him, touch him, and feel his hands sliding all over her body. "Your father was an incubus?"

"According to my mother."

"This is all fascinating," Max grumbled, "but we didn't come here to unravel your past."

"No, you came to exploit my weakness, to discover my price."

"Taerok is dead." Max tossed the comment over his shoulder and pulled Colette more snugly against his chest. "Why do you care what I do with his lair?"

"I don't. I had intended to refuse you outright, but now I'm intrigued. Colette's nature is so rich and convoluted. I'm fascinated." He shifted his weight and the piano bench creaked. "I know she's not a vampire, but what is she?"

"None of your damned business." Max turned her around and nudged her toward the entryway.

"Wait." Teladorian took a deep breath. "Tell me what you need from Taerok's lair."

Desire bubbled up within Colette again. Her blood sizzled and her nerve endings hummed, anxious, ready to detonate with the slightest stimulation. Teladorian needed her. She could sense his hunger with every fiber of her being. It seemed impossible that Max couldn't feel the power radiating off Teladorian.

"My half-brother hurt a lot of people in his quest to tame his solar trance. I believe the remnants of his research are hidden in his lair. I need to make certain no one else is harmed by his obsession."

"I will take you to Taerok's lair, but you must allow Colette to feed me. Half now and half once I've gotten you safely inside."

Yes. Please God, yes! Let Max be reasonable for once in his life.

"I know how an incubus feeds. I will not allow you to touch her!"

"If you do exactly what I tell you -- while I still have some modicum of control -- I will not need to touch her."

Max's conflict was nearly as disturbing as the hunger Teladorian was creating. Colette touched his face and captured his gaze. "He's starving, Max. I can sense it. That's why his sway is so powerful. Let me do this. I want to help him."

"He's making you want him. We know nothing about this man," Max objected, his gaze tormented. "He could --"

"Lay her on the piano," Teladorian urged. "No harm will come to her. You have my word."

Unable to contain his frustration, Max growled. "The word of a demon spawn? I'm supposed to trust you with..." *My love, my life, my world?* He refused to utter the words out loud. Knowledge was power and Teladorian was already too powerful.

"Then go." Teladorian slammed one hand down on the keyboard, creating a dissonant, ringing thud. "I've told you my price. Take it or leave it."

"If you hurt her, you die!" He swept Colette into his arms and stomped to the opposite end of the piano. He sat her on the edge and helped her recline across the smooth black surface.

"Colette," Teladorian's voice caressed her name, making Max want to pummel his too perfect face, "spread out your arms and flatten your palms against the wood."

She instantly obeyed, her eyes tightly closed, lips parted. Her lithe body spread between them, while possessive lust made Max shake.

"Touch her, taste her, make her wild."

Intoxicated by the sexually charged atmosphere, Max ran both hands from her leather-encased knees to her bare thighs. She wiggled and arched, thrusting her breasts toward him. Her dress slid up on her thighs, barely covering her nudity. Max ignored the bunched material and explored her torso, cupping both breasts.

"Are her nipples hard?"

He stroked one puckered tip with his thumb and smirked. "Very."

Teladorian gazed at the gentle mounds as his fingers settled over the keyboard. The first chord startled Colette, but the song floated on the air, hauntingly beautiful -- like the musician. Max absorbed the tune, feeling the ache, the longing.

His hands moved over Colette, running from shoulder to knees over and over, while she undulated beneath his wandering palms. He lifted one of her legs and pressed a kiss to her inner thigh. Teladorian's playing faltered then resumed.

"Lick her pussy," Teladorian urged. "Feast on her cream."

Max didn't need the encouragement; he was headed there anyway. His brain resented the intrusion, yet his arousal responded to the desperation in Teladorian's tone. Max pushed her dress higher, allowing Teladorian a glimpse of her pale blonde curls.

Staring deeply into Teladorian's eyes, Max pushed two fingers into Colette's slick core.

"Show me," Teladorian whispered. "I'll stay out of her mind if you share this with me."

Knowing it was foolish to surrender any more to this creature, Max formed a detailed impression of his feelings and sensations and passed them to the other man. Teladorian groaned, his song louder and more intense.

Max slid his fingers in and out, watching as well as feeling her snug passage encase his fingers. Carefully keeping Teladorian at a distance, Max transmitted everything, while guarding his mind and Colette's from the very real threat.

One song flowed into another, or were they movements within the same song? Max didn't care. Colette was soft and wet, waiting for his kiss. He lowered his head between her thighs and moved his hands to her bare bottom. Lifting her sex to his mouth, he made it easier for Teladorian to see exactly what he was doing.

She came with the first brush of his tongue, but Max was far from satisfied. He licked and sucked and thrust into her cunt. Her scent surrounded him, her taste intoxicating and addictive. He wanted more, wanted Teladorian to see how completely she surrendered, how fully she belonged to him.

Quickly shifting her leg to his shoulder, he freed one of his hands. His fingers pushed back into her channel, while his mouth focused on her clit. She gasped and shuddered, lost in the building storm.

Teladorian remained in the distance, but his hunger made him vulnerable. Max scanned him, meticulously searching for malevolent intentions or violent tendencies. All he found was loneliness, an overwhelming sense of isolation.

Max couldn't dwell on the discovery. There was too much at stake. He moved his fingers faster, licking her folds and circling her clit. She rocked against his hand, brazen in her quest for completion.

Her second orgasm was slower, the spasms rippling on and on. Max lapped up her cream and went right on arousing her. She panted and moaned, her hands sliding over the piano top. Teladorian looked dazed, his eyes softly glowing.

Max worked his damp fingers back to her anus and teased the sensitive opening. She was likely still tender from before, but he couldn't make himself stop. He wet his fingers in her pussy then returned them to her anus.

"Who is touching you?" he demanded.

"You, Max, only you."

"How may I touch you?"

"However you please, sir. I am yours."

Teladorian groaned as Max drove his fingers into Colette's ass. The link was unconscious now, sensations flowing freely. Max reveled in her surrender, loving the heat and the firm grip of her sphincter against his fingers. He flicked his tongue over her clit and thrust in her ass, ruthlessly driving her toward another climax.

She cried out again and again, her body arched and trembling.

"Come, my love. Come for me now. Let us both feast on your pleasure."

He thrust his fingers in and sucked on her clit and she came in long, violent spasms. Max licked her pussy, sucking every drop of her essence from her flushed pink folds. Her back gradually relaxed and he followed her down, dragging every last shiver from her body before he finally raised his head.

Teladorian slumped over the keyboard, softly panting. Max wasn't sure when he'd stopped playing, but their collective breathing was the only sound. He gathered Colette into his arms and stepped away from the piano.

"Take us to Taerok's lair. Now."

Chapter Seven

Darius wandered around Taerok's lair searching for anything of value. What was Max really after? It was obvious Payne wasn't here, hadn't been here in many days. The upper level was a burned-out ruin, the secluded location likely the reason the property had never been restored. Beneath the ground, Taerok had torn down walls and created a wide open area that almost made one forget there was no natural light.

The incantation had allowed Darius to pass right through the shields. A quick search revealed he was alone, and now he was more curious than anything else. Why was Max so determined to make it inside the lair? And where the fuck was Payne? The rest of the ancients might have forsaken the traditions, but Darius refused to rest until he knew exactly what had happened to Damara.

Only two rooms remained separated from the main area. The larger of the two spaces was Taerok's bedroom. The smaller space looked to be part laboratory and part bondage playroom. Interesting combination. He immediately recognized the smell of blood and focused on a set of whips hilt down in a tall, thin bucket. Someone liked pain or liked inflicting it. He had no way to know which way the scenes unfolded, only that the whips were no mere toys. They were used with enough force to lay open flesh and saturate fibers with precious blood.

Against one wall was a wide work table cluttered with scientific equipment. He'd heard rumors about Taerok's obsession. Why would a vampire want to venture out into the light? It made no sense to Darius. Vampires had always been at one with the night. That would never change.

He found a wooden case filled with glass slides and sealed test tubes suspended in a plastic rack. How odd.

He pulled open one of the drawers affixed to the underside of the table. Inside was a large leather case and what looked like a journal. He flipped through the pages of the journal then opened the leather case. Pages and pages of messy notes had been shoved inside. Was this the treasure Max sought; the reason he'd risked an encounter with Teladorian?

A floorboard creaked above his head and he heard the rumble of muffled voices. He quickly shoved everything he'd found inside the leather case and pressed it firmly against his chest. The case disappeared with him as he dispersed his corporeal form.

* * *

"I agreed to get you inside." Teladorian looked at Colette, longing clear in his bright green eyes. "You were unexpectedly generous before, so I won't hold you to the other half of our agreement." He inclined his head with a wistful smile. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

He's still really weak, isn't he?

Colette was surprised by the compassion surging into her mind along with Max's thought. *This isn't a game, Max. I could sense him clearly during the energy transfer. He was extremely depleted.*

And now?

You're right. He's still very weak.

Then we should feed him. He's not evil. I could sense him too.

A temporary third? God, how the thought excited her. And she knew it wasn't Teladorian's dark sway. She'd been turned on by the thought long before she met their mysterious companion.

If you're sure this is what you want.

She sensed no resentment in Max, so she admitted, *I'm sure.*

Just remember, you can't keep him. He's a temporary third.

"A deal is a deal." Max's deep voice seemed loud in the shadowy ruin. Teladorian stopped walking and turned around. "Unless you don't want the other half of your payment."

For the first time since they'd met, Teladorian hesitated. "I didn't realize how deeply you were bonded. I don't want to interfere with that sort of connection."

"You won't." Max managed to smile. "This is a one-time offer and it's about to expire."

"I gladly accept anything you're willing to share, but I only want what is freely offered."

Max chuckled. "Willingness is a little hard to determine when you're a walking aphrodisiac."

Oscillating waves of hot and cold buffeted Colette's composure. "Are we safe here? Should we wait until --"

"I'd rather pay the piper and send him on his way," Max insisted.

"We're perfectly safe," Teladorian told her. "The shields are still intact. I only deactivated them long enough to let us pass."

"This place still reeks of vampire," Max said. "If I hadn't seen Taerok's body with my own eyes, I'd be less inclined to believe you."

Beyond the charred wood and stone rubble was a dense forest and starlit sky. She supposed the setting could be worse. A cool breeze tugged at her hair and teased her nipples. The floor was littered with debris and they had no blankets. Where would they...

Max turned her to face him and stroked the side of her face. "This is up to you, doll. How far are you willing to take it?"

"If we're going to indulge my wicked imagination, I want it all."

Without shifting his gaze from her face, he asked Teladorian, "Can you conjure some sort of lubricant? My mate is in the mood to be very naughty."

My mate? She liked the sound of that so well, she didn't notice Teladorian moving. He pressed in close behind her, his tantalizing scent making her head spin. "I won't hurt you, Colette. I can make sure you feel only pleasure."

Max claimed her mouth in a passionate kiss and the night exploded with sensation. Heat surrounded her, making her feel secure and safe. Max's big body

pressed against her front and Teladorian's lean chest supported her back. Teladorian caressed her arms and her shoulders, allowing her time to grow accustomed to his touch.

Drawing her leg up against his hip, Max stroked her thigh and squeezed her bottom. She moved against him restlessly, anxious and hungry, overcome by a sudden surge of primal need.

Max tore his mouth away from hers and pulled her dress off over her head. She shivered in the cool night breeze, naked except for her thigh-high boots. Spreading her arms to the side, she lifted her face to the moonlight and reveled in the freedom of her sexuality.

The men watched her, their hunger fueling her boldness. She turned and pressed her back against Max, offering her front to Teladorian. He looked at Max, understanding the dynamics of the situation far better than she realized.

"Go on," Max said. "You're hers to do with as she pleases."

Teladorian gently cupped her breast, his gaze gleaming through the night. "So delicate. So beautiful." His thumb stroked over her nipple and his other hand touched her face.

Max pulled her head back until it rested against his shoulder. "Kiss her. I want to watch your mouth move over hers. Don't keep her waiting." Ever the Dom. Colette reached back and squeezed his hip.

Teladorian's face lowered slowly, despite Max's urging. His lips pressed over hers then brushed across them. She felt his tongue tip trace her lower lip, a bare hint of a caress. She parted for him, inviting him inside. His fingers pushed into her hair and he deepened the kiss, finally slipping his tongue between her lips.

Warm and possessive, Max's hands wandered over her body. He squeezed her breast and blazed a trail across her quivering abdomen. Teladorian touched one breast and Max fondled the other. The difference in their approach was glaring. Max firmly rolled her nipple, pulling outward before he released. Teladorian's fingers plucked as if she were a precious instrument. The combination was playing havoc with her senses.

Max pushed Teladorian lower and rotated her to the side, so he could reclaim her mouth. She looped her arm around Max's neck and abandoned herself to his kisses while Teladorian suckled her breasts.

"Do you want his mouth or my cock?" Max's lips moved against hers as he asked.

"I want one and then the other, silly man."

He chuckled. "Greedy wench." With a playful pinch to her bottom, he bent her knee, opening her wide as Teladorian knelt in front of her.

She sensed Teladorian's desperate hunger in dizzying spikes. He controlled it as often as he could, but the urgency got away from him from time to time. Taking her leg from Max, he positioned it against his shoulder and looked up at her.

Moonlight silvered his features, making him seem surreal. "Don't hold back," he pleaded. "The more often you come, the more completely you will fill me."

His lips pressed against her slit and she sighed. The tip of his tongue delved between her folds and she buried her hands in his long black hair. Loose and flowing, the soft strands caressed her fingers while his tongue explored her sex.

Max stroked her breast with one hand and rubbed her ass with the other. His long fingers curved into the deep crease between her ass cheeks, teasing her, reminding her of their final destination.

A finger pushed into her feminine core and another penetrated her ass. Pleasure crawled up her spine and burst behind her eyes. So many sensations, so much stimulation, and it all felt incredibly good!

She wasn't sure if they were communicating telepathically or if instinct alone guided their movements, but the fingers slid in perfect sync. Max found her mouth again, adding his tongue to the sensual dance. It was simply too much to bear. Her orgasm burst and swelled outward, flowing from her and into the men. Max groaned against her mouth and Teladorian rocked back on his heels, panting harshly.

While Teladorian recovered enough to stand, Max frantically freed his cock. He turned her and lifted her, impaling her fully in one brutal thrust. Her cry rang through the night and she wrapped her legs around Max's waist.

The pleasure never waned. His forceful entry triggered another spasm and then Teladorian was there, pulling her ass cheeks apart. True to his word he felt cool and slick as he pressed against her back opening.

Max insinuated his hand between their bodies, his thumb locating her clit. He stroked her gently, his other hand on her ass, holding her open for Teladorian. Her anus spread, reluctantly accepting Teladorian's flared cockhead. She couldn't move, could only surrender to their strong arms and their demanding bodies.

Her body ached, the blissful calm before an explosive storm. Teladorian shifted his weight, his cock pressing deeper into her. Max lifted her, dragging her body along their twin lengths. Then he lowered her, leaning in, until she was stuffed completely again.

She let them take her, fill her, fuck her, as she surrendered to unbearable pleasure. Her pussy clasped Max so firmly he groaned, which in turn made her ass grip Teladorian that much tighter. They moved together, or rather they moved her, up and down, nearly off then utterly full.

One orgasm overlapped the next until she couldn't tell where one ended and the next began. The intensity built to pain each time Teladorian drew energy from her. He never fully withdrew, but his power was nearly unbearable unless he consciously controlled it.

"Now!" Max shouted. "I can take no more."

They pulled her down as they pressed in close. Max came first, his roar echoed immediately by Teladorian's groan. Their pleasure rushed through her, sweeping her along with them. They clung together, clasping her tightly between them as she soared.

Teladorian drew on her being one last time, prolonging her release as he saturated his energy levels with her sizzling pleasure. Too weak to move, she pressed her face against Max's damp skin and closed her eyes.

After a long moment, Teladorian carefully pulled out. "Thank you. You have no idea how important this has been to me."

Max didn't say anything, but she sensed his contentment. Not only had they enjoyed the fulfillment of her fantasy, but they'd likely saved a life in the process.

"Would you like me to stay and help you search?" Teladorian asked.

"No, thank you. It's either here or it's not. This shouldn't take long."

His underlying message was clear. His generosity was at an end. It was time for their temporary third to make a trail.

"Take care of her."

"I intend to."

Max waited until Teladorian left before he lifted Colette off his cock. "I guess you better get dressed, though I like this outfit much better."

She laughed, in no hurry to leave his embrace. "This has been one hell of a first mission. Aren't you glad I twisted your arm?"

He snatched her dress off the floor and shook it out for her, feeling deprived as she covered her beautiful body. "You were amazing. There's no doubt about it." He let his gaze soften, revealing the depths of his devotion. "Regrets?"

"Not even close." Her gaze was equally tender.

"Good." He shook away the poignant moment. They had the rest of their lives to explore these feelings. "Let's find what we came for and get the hell out of here." He refastened his pants and reached for her hand.

"I have a better idea."

Max shoved Colette behind him as the vampire materialized a short distance away. That smell! He hadn't imagined it. They had been following a vampire around all night. "Darius, I presume." Even as garbled as Payne's mind had been the likeness was unmistakable. "How did you get inside the shields?"

"How do you know my name?"

A good operative knows when a battle is better fought with diplomacy.

Colette knew enough not to speak, but her thought was amazingly shrewd. This was an ancient vampire, the head of one of the twelve remaining bloodlines. Keeping his body between the vampire and Colette, Max inclined his head. "I can sense your power, sir. I have no quarrel with you."

The vampire's stance relaxed, though his gaze remained watchful. "You are responsible for killing an organic vampire, which should necessitate your death. Taerok was not my progeny, however, so I have no quarrel with you."

It took Darius a while to get there, but apparently he was willing to negotiate. "I'm glad to hear it." Even fully prepared with a team of his best fighters, it would have been tough to take out an ancient. "What brings you to my half-brother's lair?"

"I have a proposition for you, but I need you to answer one question before I explain."

"I'm listening."

"Did Payne help Taerok murder Damara?"

The puzzle pieces snapped into place. This had nothing to do with Taerok's obsession. Darius was searching for Payne. "By his own admission, Payne drained her blood while Taerok took her life."

"Do you understand our laws?"

"I do." Payne was dead. He'd killed an organic female. Darius would not rest until Payne paid the price for his actions.

"Then I propose an even exchange," Darius told Max. "You give me Payne and I'll give you this." A large leather case materialized in his hands. "It contains the remnants of Taerok's research. This is the real reason you were searching for his lair. Is it not?"

Darius had been a step ahead of them all night. Max chose not to think too much about where the vampire had been while they paid their debt to Teladorian. "Is that everything? Where did you find it?"

"I'll let you search below -- or blow it all to hell -- as soon as I've departed with Taerok's toy."

It was the easiest decision he'd made all night. "Give me a few minutes to make the arrangements."

"Take your time."

The vampire's gaze settled on Colette and Max opted against discretion. He pulled out his cell phone and called Lukas Mandalay.

"What's going on?" Lukas asked. "Any luck finding the lair?"

"We're there now, but we've run into a snag. Sedate Payne, and bring him to this location ASAP." He didn't bother with elaboration. If Lukas couldn't scan through the shields, he'd use the GPS chip in the phone to pinpoint their location.

"How long will it take them to reach us?" Darius asked as Max snapped the phone closed.

"Not long. Lukas can teleport."

"Then I'll show you around downstairs."

The lair was much as Max had pictured it, a windowless hovel, forgotten by the modern world. Darius was civil and oddly inquisitive. Colette remained at his side, though she did nothing to draw the vampire's attention.

Lukas arrived with Payne a few minutes later. Darius used his incantation, creating a small gap in the shields, and they made the exchange.

"Darius means to kill him. You realize that, don't you?" Lukas asked after the vampire had departed.

"According to the Charter, Payne's life was forfeit as soon as he took the life of an organic vampire," Max paraphrased.

"Should Rebecca and Katsu be looking over their shoulders? Wasn't Taerok considered organic too?"

"The leader of his bloodline banished Taerok years ago, so he no longer fell under the protection of the Charter."

"Why was he banished?" Colette asked.

"They considered him unnatural. He despised what he was and tried to mutate his genetics. Samcillian found that intolerable. He actually sanctioned the hunt."

"Vampires and their Charter." Lukas shook his head. "I'll never understand it all."

"Darius would have found a way to get to Payne. That's all that matters. I saw no reason to endanger anyone else." He looked at Colette and Lukas shrugged.

"You're the boss."

"I think Darius had the right idea," Colette said. "We should incinerate the lair."

"I agree. I don't even want his notes in the archive. The information is too dangerous."

"I'll assemble a demolition team," Lukas offered and teleported out of sight.

"Damn," Colette muttered, her gaze lingering on the spot where Lukas had just been. "And we still have to drive back."

"I don't mind the drive, but I'm going to hate returning the Ferrari."

She stepped into his arms and smiled. "So, Commander Brigham, was my first mission acceptable?"

"Your first mission was an undeniable success."

"Then do I get the job?"

"Sweetheart, you can have anything you want from me." He brushed his lips over hers, savoring the softness and her scent. "I thought you'd figured that out already."

Her brows raised in playful challenge. "I thought that was a one-time offer."

"Playing with Teladorian is not going to happen again, but I'm willing to explore your other fantasies."

"I have no desire to play with Teladorian again, but I am worried about him."

"I'll see what I can find out. See if there's any way we can help him, other than feeding him that is."

She laughed. "Relax. I've moved on to my next fantasy."

"Which is?"

"I've always wanted to have sex in a Ferrari."

He laughed, his hands sneaking under the hem of her dress to cup her ass. "I think we'll have to fuck on the Ferrari, not in it, but we've probably got time before Lukas gets back."

"And if we don't" -- she offered him a saucy wink -- "I guess they'll just have to watch."

Aubrey Ross

Multi-award winning author Aubrey Ross writes an eclectic assortment of erotic fiction. From power struggles between futuristic clans, to adventurous Mystic Keepers, her stories are filled with passion and imagination. Some of her recent awards include an EPPIE finalist, Passionate Plume finalists, and a CAPA nomination from The Romance Studio.

With a pampered cat curled on the corner of her desk, Aubrey dreams of fascinating worlds and larger than life adventures -- and wouldn't have it any other way! Visit her website at <http://www.aubreyross.com>. Join Aubrey's news group at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Anything-but-Ordinary/>