



Night Raven

By

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Cover Art by Eliza Black, Sept 2009

ISBN 978-1-60394-352-9

New Concepts Publishing

Lake Park, GA 31636

www.newconceptspublishing.com

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Chapter One

Nika was halfway between her surveillance position and the airshaft that was her goal when the god damned sprinkler system activated. With her employer's threat ringing in the back of her mind that she wouldn't be getting another assignment if she screwed this up like the last two, she poured on more speed, but there was no outrunning the damned water—which intelligence had failed to mention! Who the hell watered their god damned lawn in this day and time, Nika thought furiously, just before she stubbed her toe on one of the damned sprinkler-heads and flew headlong toward the ground?

The air was punched from her lungs with a grunt as she hit the ground. There was already enough water puddled on the grass to send her skidding another several yards. Fortunately, the next sprinkler-head slammed into her shoulder and stopped her hydroplane. Leaping to her feet, she dashed the last few yards to the side of the building and plastered herself against the wall behind the air ventilation unit just as the sprinkler system shut off and the night patrol rounded the building.

Sucking in a breath, she ducked and checked her watch. Right on time! At least that much of the data the Bio-H Tech agents had collected was right!

She hoped to hell they hadn't neglected to note anything else that might be important when they were gathering the intelligence she needed for the job!

Not that they'd been gathering it for her, specifically, she thought irritably. Whitaker had made that clear—that he wouldn't have called her in at all if he could've gotten somebody else for the job—the dick!

She'd be the first to admit she wasn't perfect, but she usually managed to complete her damned mission and get out in one piece, and there were plenty of agents in the morgue who couldn't say the same!

Not that *now* was a good time to be thinking about that! In fact, she generally made it a point not to think about that aspect of the job at all and wouldn't now if that dick-wad, Whitaker, hadn't put it in her head!

Bad karma!

Releasing a relieved breath when the guards and their hounds had moved around the side of the building and disappeared, she checked her utility belt to make sure she hadn't lost anything important in the minor accident. Relieved that everything seemed to be there, she opened the pocket flap on the lower section of her suit and removed her scanner.

It hadn't actually been designed to be waterproof. She punched the power button twice and glared at the black screen when it remained black. The pocket had kept it relatively dry, but her hands were so wet she could hardly hold on to it and, unfortunately, she was soaked to the skin. There wasn't a dry patch on the damned suit she wearing.

Unless ...?

Discovering the crotch of her suit was still relatively dry, she wiped the excess water off of her hands and ran the scanner back and forth between her legs a couple of

times. When she checked it again, it came on.

Hallelujah! She was in luck! No motion detector!

Shoving the scanner back into her pants leg pocket, she took a laser cutter from her utility belt and cut a hole in the ventilation shaft big enough to climb into it. The damned thing was still hot when she climbed through. She heard a sizzle as she shoved her head and shoulders through the opening. The smell of burned hair wafted to her.

Ignoring it for the moment, she focused on getting her ass through, but it had snagged on the edge of the shaft.

“Shit!” she mouthed, reaching behind her and feeling around until she found what it was that had caught.

The utility belt! Damn it! Hell! Shit!

Ducking out again, she checked her watch and quickly unfastened the belt. After a brief debate, she shoved it into the shaft and climbed in behind it. That time it was definitely her ass that snagged, but after a little wiggling and grunting, she managed to get through. There wasn’t enough room in the shaft to turn around and grab the piece she’d cut out, although she’d planned to do just that and try to hide her escape route.

Abandoning that part of the plan immediately, knowing she was running out of time if she was going to get to the control room between security checks, she began to crawl along the shaft. Actually, crawling wasn’t really the word for it. She had to *undulate* along it more like an inchworm. It seemed a hell of a lot smaller than the damned schematics had indicated and she wondered with a touch of panic if she’d gotten the wrong shaft.

But how many fucking ventilation shafts could they have?

The wet suit might’ve helped if her job was to slide *down* the shaft, but climbing horizontally in it in a wet suit was a bitch and that was just until she reached the junction and started up! Fortunately, she’d had the presence of mind to wear sneakers that had a special feature—suction! Using her heels to activate the suction cup feature that she’d invented herself once she’d fastened her utility belt around her waist again, she planted the toe of one shoe on the side of the shaft and drew her other knee up as high as she could before she planted the second one.

It worked like a charm, she thought, pleased!

The sucking noises unnerved her, though, not nearly as badly as the squeaking her wet suit made as she slithered up the shaft, but still

She paused to catch her breath and listen. The building was dead quiet.

A little too quiet, she wondered?

She waited a few more moments and began moving again. Relief flooded her when she reached the first junction. Only ten more floors to go!

She decided she really needed the gloves, too, though, and paused at the junction long enough to pull them out of the other pocket on her pants leg. Just to be on the safe side, she took the scanner out again and checked the intersection for motion detectors. When it gave her an all clear, she switched modes and searched for any motion outside the shaft in the room beyond.

Either there was no one there, they weren’t moving, or the signal wasn’t strong enough to penetrate the material the shaft was constructed of. Hoping the first was the case, she shut the scanner off and pocketed it again. Pulling her gloves on, she began climbing again.

The suction on the gloves needed work, she decided when she reached the next junction. She had to keep rubbing them along her pants leg to collect moisture to make them cling.

Damned good thing the sprinkler had caught her, she thought! If not for that, she'd be dehydrated from having to spit on the damned things!

It worked for cooling, too! She was sweating by the time she reached the fourth junction and had to stop to rest and wipe the sweat off her face. Panting for breath, she glanced up and down the shaft and then checked her watch.

Fuck! It had taken her ten minutes to climb four floors! She had six more to go and only ten minutes to make it. She narrowed her window of opportunity for every minute more that it took her. Taking a few last cooling breaths, she started climbing again, faster. By the time she reached the floor that was her goal, her suit was nearly dry and her body saturated, but she'd done it in ten!

Pausing in the junction, she pulled the scanner out and checked it again—still no motion detectors and no motion. She frowned. It seemed to her that there should be a guard on the floor by now.

She could see why they wouldn't bother putting anything in the shaft. It was a straight drop and too narrow for most men to get through—they wouldn't have considered the company might hire a woman, hah! She didn't think she would've managed it herself if she hadn't dropped fifteen pounds for the job. As it was, her ass was a definite liability.

Of course, it might be wide enough to catch her if she slipped.

Pulling the schematics out, she studied them the best she could with the little light on her night vision goggles. The sound of a flushing toilet close by startled the shit out of her. She dropped the fucking schematics. Staring down the shaft in dismay as the damned thing disappeared, she heard a door slam and realized she discovered where the guard was.

Men's room, tenth floor.

Eeew!

Good thing she'd decided to stop and study the schematics! It was even better, under the circumstances, that she'd committed it to memory ... mostly. When she heard another door open, she began moving as fast as she could, inchworm style, toward her goal—the control room—counting in her head. According to the Intel, the control room was almost dead center of the building. She'd practiced inching through the airshaft in her own apartment over and over until she was certain she had the timing figured to get her when she needed to be.

Also according to Intel, the guard would be checking each room, starting at the elevator—beside the men's room—and it should take him twenty minutes to reach the control room.

She hoped to fuck that much was right! It was going to take her a few minutes to boot up the computer and download the data even if the codes she had were the right ones.

Pulling her laser cutter out when she reached the spot she was sure was inside the control room, she used it to cut a small hole, blew on it until she thought it was cool enough and put her eye to it. The room below was pitch black.

Frowning, she put her goggles back on and peered down again.

Utility closet!

Fuck!

She considered whether she'd gone too far or not far enough and finally decided to go a little further and check. The second hole revealed a room filled with electronics!

Jackpot!

Cutting a hole big enough to accommodate her was a real bitch when she had to lie down in the shaft to do it, but she finally had a hole. Fortunately, she'd had the presence of mind to clamp one of her suction gloves to it, because it nearly fell out when she cut the last little line.

Oh! She was good! Her boss was going to be tickled shitless this time!

Pushing the piece she'd cut out of the way, she looked down. To her dismay, she discovered the laser had been set just a little too high. It had cut a hole in the ceiling tile, too!

"Shit!"

Well, there was no hope for it. She was going to have to get the goods and get her ass out before the alarm sounded or she was going to be up shit creek without a paddle. Grasping the edges of the hole, she allowed herself to slip through.

The intention was to use her grip on the edge and reverse as she went through, so that she could land on her feet. As she went through, though, she abruptly remembered her utility belt—too late. It didn't snag, but it emptied, every tool she had in it hitting the floor below her one after the other and creating a hell of a racket.

Dropping to the floor, she froze, listening intently for any sound that might indicate that she'd alerted the guard. When she didn't hear the sound of running feet, she quickly collected her tools and dashed toward the mainframe near the center of the room.

Booting it, she dug in the pockets of her pants for the list of codes and finally unearthed it.

It was one of those rare occasions when she discovered her propensity for antiques wasn't always a good thing. The paper itself was limp from the water and the codes were smeared because they'd been written in actual ink with an antique writing pen.

Smoothing it out carefully, she narrowed her eyes, trying to decipher the codes as the virtual screen came on. A bright red button, shielded with a clear cup-like cover caught her attention as she placed her fingers on the virtual key-pad.

Emergency only! Do not press!

She stared at it for a long moment, feeling a nearly irresistible urge to break the seal and punch it. Shaking the impulse, she focused on the keypad and punched in the series of codes at each prompt. Luckily, she got most of them right the first time in spite of the smeared writing.

She's just punched the last code in when she abruptly heard a swish of sound that almost made her piss her pants. Her head jerked upward. She stared at the door blankly for a moment, but it was sealed and remained sealed. Glancing around, she discovered a door she hadn't noticed behind her had just opened.

Her heart nearly leapt into her throat. Clapping a hand to her sidearm, she leaned over enough to peer inside and discovered what looked like a long, wide corridor. There were large tube-like containers lining the walls, though. After frowning at them for several moments, she glanced at the console display.

“Fuck!” she mouthed under her breath, realizing it was the last code she’d punched in—wrong—that had opened the door. Peering at her paper again, she tried punching the code again.

It brought up the data stream she’d been looking for. Uttering a triumphant cheer under her breath, she pulled her data storage device from her pocket, looked around the console until she found the place to plug it in and keyed the code to copy.

Checking her watch, she discovered she was running out of time. The guard was going to reach the outer door to the control room any minute and she still had to get the info she’d broke in for and get out again. She was searching the room for something she could climb on to reach the ceiling when she heard another sound—hissing.

Freezing in the act of moving the stool she’d found, she listened intently as the hissing seemed to go on and on. It seemed to be coming from the corridor she’d opened.

It hit her then. The cyborgs! That must be where they stored them! She didn’t know why she hadn’t realized that right off!

My god! Was she lucky or what? The boss was going to cream when she brought him back pics of the actual borgs! She might even get a bonus for bringing him all the data on development and pics of the product at the same time!

Searching her pockets a little frantically, she dragged her trusty little camera out and headed toward the corridor to capture a few quick images while she was waiting for the data to finish copying.

She skidded to halt when she reached the door, staring at the ... things that had just stepped out of the tubes—were still climbing out!

“Oh my fucking god!”

Jerking her camera up, she began snapping a little frantically and backing away. She stopped when her ass made contact with the console. Thankfully, she realized then that the cyborgs were simply staring at her blankly.

Whirling at the sound of the chime that told her the download was complete, she snatched her data device from the computer. She was just about to leap up onto the stool when her gaze was snagged by that red button again. She hesitated, but when it occurred to her that it was probably an emergency data dump, glee filled her.

She could get the data, the pics, *and* sabotage their competition all at the same time!

Shoving the data device in her pocket, she opened the safety cup and pressed the button. The instant she did, all hell broke loose. The lights in the room started flashing. An alarm went off that nearly deafened her and she could hear the loud thud of security doors locking down all over the place. It galvanized her. Jumping onto the stool, she leapt up to the hole she’d cut without a pause and slithered through it, heading frantically for her escape route.

The utility belt had been a royal pain in the ass. It needed work, but she was damned glad she had it! With the rope and pulley, she could repel down the airshaft to the ground floor a hell of a lot faster than the security guards could make it up to the floor she was on.

* * * *

It wasn’t the first time Raven had attained awareness while the sustainer tubes were still inside him, but it still disturbed him to feel them withdrawn, sent a dollop of panic through him as his body reacted to the removal of the foreign object by producing a

choking sensation. His heart rate, already climbing from the slow cadence typical of the hibernation state he was kept in when not in service, fluctuated a little erratically in reaction. Since the fluctuation was almost simultaneous with the shot of synthetic adrenaline introduced into his bloodstream, however, it didn't set off an alarm as it might have otherwise.

Not the pod alarm, at any rate.

Internally, it was a different matter, an unusual enough occurrence to send his brain into a frenzy of activity and expand his senses to try to understand what had caused the event.

He opened his eyes, blinked several times until his vision cleared, and scanned the pods around him. His teammates were awakening, as well. That would've calmed the confusion except that he discovered everyone within his sight had begun to awaken and that was more cause for alarm.

He'd been sent out with his micro-squad on only a scant handful of practice missions, but the commander had never sent more than one micro-squad at the time. Nothing they'd dealt with preciously had required more than the four that made up a micro-squad. His mind was reeling with possible scenarios that might require the entire platoon even as the pod slid open silently and he stepped out.

Disconcerted when he discovered a stranger in the control room instead of the commander, 'Rae' Raven merely stared uncomprehendingly at the small figure gaping at him in horror until it broke and ran. He turned to glance at his squad mates questioningly even as the alarms denoting a security breach suddenly went off.

He wasn't certain whether to feel more uneasy or less disturbed by his own reaction when he discovered the others were as frozen with indecision as he was.

"What was that?" Bull asked blankly.

"A woman," Lynx retorted absently.

Bull glared at him indignantly. "I know it was a woman, smart ass!"

'Cham' Chameleon had just dragged in a deep lungful of air, struggling to recapture the intoxicating scent that had set the blood to surging throughout his body in a fiery tide, when he caught a whiff of something far less thrilling. Almost the instant he did, he saw the doors that separated the storage room where they were kept begin to move. "Fuck! Gas!" he yelled in warning, racing toward the door. "Out! Everybody out!"

The others, just awakened and confused by the situation, were slow to respond, but Bull charged past Chameleon. Planting his back against the door and both hands against the frame, straining every muscle as he countered the mechanics of the closing door, he held it. Coughing as the deadly gas continued to fill their containment, the members of the platoon surged toward the door and squeezed past him one by one.

Uttering a growl of exertion, Bull pushed harder when the men still within the containment room bottle necked in their effort to pass between him and the frame. Finally, he managed to break the track and crumple the door behind him. Stumbling out when he felt the door halt its progress, he looked around for his own squad members and found them working to get the outer door open since the gas continued to escape their containment and had begun filling the main control room.

"Out of my way!" he bellowed, charging across the room full tilt and slamming against the door with his shoulder. It buckled at the blow, but held. Raven, Chameleon,

and Lynx began alternately battering at it themselves.

Clearly, it had been designed specifically to contain them. Despite their strength, the four of them had to slam against it repeatedly before the door abruptly gave and fell outward. When it did, a volley of laser fire cut through the poisonous cloud that preceded them out of the room, but the burst was short. The men firing at them whirled and raced down the corridor away from the rolling, deadly fog of gas.

Bailing from the room, Raven halted in the corridor, staring at the guards as they were enveloped by the toxic cloud where they stood waiting for the elevator to arrive. Almost instantly, they began to cough and convulsive. "They'll have men waiting for us downstairs!" he bellowed. "Everybody head for the roof!"

"We can't *all* fly!" Bull growled.

"The drop ships should be on the roof!" Raven shot back at him.

Lynx, Bull, and Chameleon charged after him.

"This isn't a mission," Lynx pointed out.

"If we don't escape this gas, we'll be as dead as the fucking guards!" Raven bellowed back at him, finding the stairwell he was looking for at last and battering against the door when he found it locked down.

The gas chased them up to the roof, but once they'd beat the door down at the top, the entire platoon piled out on the rooftop and sucked in their first breath of fresh air. They collapsed, coughing and gagging, rolling around in agony until their nanos began to repair the damage of the gas, collecting the poisons that had entered their systems and expelling it through their esophagus.

Raven was mortally pissed off by the time he finished puking.

"Fucking bitch tried to kill us!" Bull growled.

Raven glanced at him sharply. He wanted to know what the woman had been doing in that secured area himself, but he'd had plenty of time while he was trying to escape to figure out the lay of the land. "The fucking *company* meant to exterminate us! I'm guessing she didn't have a fucking clue about the gas or she wouldn't have hit that button. I didn't see that she was wearing a mask."

"Bastards! What the fuck for?"

"Cover up," Raven, Lynx and Chameleon answered at almost same moment.

Bull frowned at them curiously, but after a moment his brow cleared ... and then snapped together again in anger. "We don't know that for sure. If the woman hadn't been screwing around, we'd still be in the pods."

The others shrugged.

"And maybe the gas wasn't pumping directly into them. It came from some-fucking-where, though," Raven responded. "Anybody notice?"

Lynx glanced around the group of men. "You think it's likely the security guards didn't know who we were?"

"I don't think it's likely at all, but it is possible. I'm thinking, though, that we might want to pull back and consider this situation," Raven said.

"I'm thinking I want to find that woman," Chameleon retorted. "That's where we'll find our answers."

The other team leaders moved closer. "I don't know what's going on myself," Condor said slowly, "but this doesn't feel right to me. We know the woman didn't belong there, and we also know the company seems a lot more interested, so far, in

covering their tracks than anything else—and that says to me they've got something to hide ... and we're expendable.”

“He's right. And it's been almost fifteen minutes since lock-down. We need to take this discussion somewhere else until we figure out what the situation is,” Eagle said tightly.

The men turned to survey the transport. There was only one, no great surprise when the company rarely activated more than one micro-squad at the time. It certainly wasn't going to carry the entire platoon even though they numbered only about a quarter of the men of a typical military unit.

“Even without equipment eight is going to be stretching it,” Hawk said musingly. “We've got four strong flyers, four maybes ...”

Chameleon sent him a hard look. “I think we chameleons can manage,” he said dryly. “It'll be mostly gliding from here anyway.”

Raven nodded and turned to Lynx. “We need a rendezvous point.”

“There's an abandoned warehouse four blocks south, southwest of our location,” Lynx said promptly.

The men all glanced at each other. “You know if we go AWOL there probably won't be any coming back,” Puma said pointedly.

“I'm guessing here, but I think we were AWOL the minute we left the pods,” Raven said tightly. “Let's get going while we still have a chance of leaving without fighting our way out of this.”

Chapter Two

Repelling ten floors down a narrow shaft wasn't Nika's idea of fun, but it was effective. She reached the point where she'd started up less than five minutes after the alarm sounded. By her calculations, it should take the security guards at least ten to converge on the scene of the crime and she thought she could count on all or most of them rushing immediately to the control room to try to block the escape of the intruder.

Kneeling, she squeezed herself into the horizontal shaft and worked her way back to the point on entry. There were two hard faced security guards waiting for her when she emerged. Lifting her hands palm outward at their barked demand, she scanned the two, noted their weapons were set to kill and focused on reading their body language.

It wasn't comforting to see that both men were tense, but she saw them relax fractionally once they'd assimilated the fact that she was a woman.

Mistake!

Launching into attack mode, she swung a round house kick at the closest to disarm him even as she went for her own pistol. She miscalculated the distance. Her foot cleared the pistol aimed at her by a hair. Fortunately, the movement was enough to make the man jump back and throw his aim off. He fired. She could feel the heat of the blast as it zipped past her shoulder. She caught the other man full in the chest with her stun blast, though, and whipped the gun toward the first before he could correct his aim, popping him right between the eyes. His eyes rolled back into his head and he fell backward. The man she'd hit in the chest doubled over, crumpled to his knees and hit the ground.

She didn't wait to see how badly stunned either man was. The moment she saw her second blast find its mark, she charged across the lawn toward the cover of the trees where she'd waited before. Her bike, thankfully, was where she'd left it. Bounding onto the seat, she kicked the stand up with one heel at the same time she turned the ignition. The electric engine purred to life with barely a sound, and she gunned it. The bike hit its top speed of 40 mph as she zipped down the narrow woodland trail she'd followed to Bio-H-Tech. She'd almost reached the paved road when she heard the hum of an engine above her. Braking, she tipped her head back and stared up at the craft as it cut a wide arch and headed south. There were dark shapes moving around it, but it was too dark to tell much about them.

The blast lit the sky, though. She couldn't see what had blown up—couldn't hear for several moments after the blast—but the direction and the closeness seemed to indicate it was Bio-H Tech. "Holy shit! What the hell?"

Her heart, which had only begun to cease hammering like a knocking engine, surged into overtime after a brief halt of shock. She stared at the broadening plume of fire and smoke rising above the trees in disbelief for several moments, trying to wrap her mind around the explosion. The fear that it was the culmination of the alarm system she'd set off sent a wave of cold over her.

Her gaze flickered from the ball of fire and smoke after a pregnant moment and

she scanned for the craft she'd seen. She caught a glimpse of what looked to be huge winged things.

Birds?

It was the biggest fucking birds *she* had ever seen!

Dismissing it with relief since it didn't appear that they were searching for her, she gunned the engine again. Just as she hit the pavement, though, it dawned on her that it might be the cyborgs, but she decided that didn't actually make sense. When she'd inadvertently released them, they hadn't moved beyond emerging from their pods. Even if someone had shown up to give them orders it didn't make sense. Surely, they would've sent them after the intruder?

Unable to unravel the puzzle at the moment, unwilling to think about the explosion, she focused on her surroundings, listening and watching for any sound of pursuit. It seemed incredible that she didn't hear anything and it unnerved her, but a check of her power gauge assured her she didn't have a lot to waste and she dropped the evasive maneuvers fairly quickly, heading back into the city by the shortest route.

Still damp from her earlier drenching, the air rushing past her chilled Nika, but she was only peripherally aware of the discomfort. Her mind was churning with a myriad of anxieties, the thrill of success, and fantasies about what she would do with the money she was going to get for the job.

Not surprisingly, she drew some attention when she reached the downtown area. There were still quite a few people on the streets, but even at the height of activity, there were never many vehicles on the streets these days. The bike alone was enough to draw attention to her.

She slowed her speed, partly to reduce power consumption and partly to draw less attention. As she'd hoped, once she slowed down, the pedestrians tended to ignore her.

Chances were that even the ones that had noticed her wouldn't remember it by the time anyone got around to questioning them. Most people, it seemed to her, went around in a fog these days. There'd been rumors that the water supply was so contaminated with the drugs of generations past that most of the population was sedated. She knew it was possible despite the government's avowed efforts to filter and clean the water supply, but she thought it was just as possible that the government was either solely responsible or partially responsible for the sedation.

Nobody got excited about the latest disasters when they were 'fogged' with drugs, not excited enough, at any rate, to do more than mutter about it.

She managed to make it back to her apartment building before the bike ran out of go juice, but she had to push it into the building and onto the elevator. A couple of tenants climbed on the elevator with her, eyed the bike disapprovingly and then ignored her and it and punched their level. Setting the kickstand, she moved to the panel and punched her own level—six.

It sucked a hairy one that she hadn't been able to get a ground floor apartment, but she supposed it was probably for the best all things considered. At least twice a year the city flooded since the sea levels had risen and the ground floor apartments usually flooded when it did. Then, too, they'd had a tidal wave only a couple of years earlier. That had wiped out the tenants on the first two floors. To the good, it had also opened up some apartments for rent and those were at a premium when the coastal cities—the new coastal cities—were sinking beneath the ocean, but she doubted the tenants occupying

those floors had seen it that way.

When the elevator settled on her floor, she pushed the bike down the hall to her apartment. Setting the stand, she bent down to check the 'security' monitor she'd placed on her door. She'd gotten the idea from one of the old vids she watched to stick a hair across the door and frame. It was a habit now, placing the hair to alert her to the possibility of intrusion and checking it when she got back. A little disappointed to see that it hadn't been tampered with, she unlocked her door and pushed the bike inside.

When she'd bolted the door again, she pushed the bike to one wall, set it up on the stand again, and plugged it in to recharge. She was going to have to walk to Robo-Tech if she went tonight, but she didn't think she could contain herself to wait for the morning!

Removing her utility belt, Nika unloaded all of her pockets of tools, equipment, and weapons. The data storage device, she took with her into the bathroom. Setting it in a safe place on her vanity, she touched the media screen, summoned a secure line and hit the auto dial for her boss, Raymond Whitaker.

The fact that he appeared on the screen almost instantly made it clear that he'd been waiting for a report.

"Got it!" she responded to his expectant look.

Excitement flickered in his eyes, but he tamped it. "You're sure? You've checked the data?"

Nika bit her lip. "I just got back. I haven't had the chance."

His lips tightened. "So you don't know for sure?"

Nika glared at him. "Unless the Intel you gave me was faulty, I got it, god damn it!"

Something flickered in his eyes. "What the fuck was that explosion about?"

Nika shrugged uncomfortably. "Don't know. I was halfway home when the building blew—but I didn't set it if that's what you're asking!"

He didn't look convinced. "You weren't followed?"

"Not so far, but I don't want to have this here if I get company," she responded pointedly.

He frowned, considering options. "I'll meet you at the all night coffee shop on Bridges St. in an hour."

Nika considered that. "Better make it an hour and a half. I'm going to have to hoof it."

"What?"

"Walk," she said dryly.

He pursed his lips. "I'll send a car for you."

"If you're trying to distance yourself, just in case, I don't think that would be a good idea."

"Fine! An hour and a half."

Cutting the connection, Nika switched to the news stations. Opening all four major stations, she listened to the first reports about the disaster at Bio-H Tech while she stripped down and set the shower to 'favorite temp' and 'wash cycle'. Information was sketchy, but it was suspected to be the results of a power station explosion.

Nika rolled her eyes and shook her head, wondering if that came directly from the company spokesperson or if it was purely speculation.

Pushing the data chip into a port, she set the computer to decrypt and climbed into the shower, positioning herself as the countdown started. The soak down cycle was only supposed to last for three minutes, but she'd tampered with the computer until she'd managed to reset the cycles to five minutes. Illegal or not, it was damned near impossible to get wet down in three fucking minutes!

Grabbing her soap as soon as the water cut off, she scrubbed her hair and then everything else and stood waiting with her back to the showerhead for the rinse cycle. She managed to get most of the soap out of her hair during the first rinse, but it took a second before she was free of soap.

Sighing tiredly now that most of her adrenaline rush had petered out, she got out and moved to the drier, grabbing a comb and raking the snarls out of her hair while she waited for it to kick on.

The computer had managed to break the encryption by the time she got out of the drier. She studied the scrolling data for a moment, discovering without a hell of a lot of surprise that she couldn't make heads or tails of it. Shrugging, she hit copy, turned off the media center, and headed back into the other room to grab a change of clothes out of her locker.

* * * *

Raven's thoughts were grim when they reached the abandoned warehouse Lynx had located for them as a rendezvous. Since he and the other squad leaders reached it first, however, he fell back on his military programming and did a thorough search before he relaxed even fractionally. The squad leaders met up with the Chameleons when they reached the entrance again.

"The parameter is secure," Cham, his own squad mate, announced.

"The building's secure, as well."

They watched as Bull brought the transport in for a landing.

When the men had bailed out and joined them in the warehouse, he marked the time. "Fifteen minutes, mark, and we're out of here."

Several of the men sent him a startled look, but no one argued.

"What's our status, in your opinion?" Condor asked him.

Raven shook his head. "I've seen nothing to revise my original assessment of the situation—AWOL and targeted for termination."

"Fifteen minutes isn't much time for coming up with a plan," Lynx said tightly.

"Fifteen minutes is a luxury we can't afford at the moment," Raven retorted.

"They'll have us located before that. We'll be lucky to have fifteen. Suggestions?"

"Split up?"

"By squad," Raven agreed. "Top priority—we need to find somebody that can help us ditch the locators. As long as we've got them there'll be no hiding. Communications. Rendezvous points. Think outside the box. As long as we stick to standard military protocol, they'll anticipate every move. My squad and I are going after the woman."

Condor, Eagle, and Hawk exchanged speaking glances. None of them challenged him, however.

"I thought you said ditching the locators was top priority," Condor said neutrally.

"We need answers ... fast. She's the most likely one to have them. And her pheromone signature is fading as we speak. We'll have to go after her now or lose the

opportunity.”

Accessing their city maps via their CPUs, they settled on rendezvous times and points and a location to post emergency contact signals.

“What if we’re also packing kill switches?” Chameleon asked.

Raven studied him for a long moment. “There’s nothing we can do about that until we can find someone who can find and remove the locators. Maybe we can do something about that, too, maybe not”

“We’re going to be noticeable if we take to the streets,” Bull pointed out. “The wings, the horns, and the eyes. The company won’t need the fucking locators.”

“Keep your heads down, wings close, and stick to the shadows. That’s about all we can do right now,” Raven said grimly.

Raven was a little surprised that nobody argued against him taking the woman. Granted, it was the shit detail in a way. They were going to have to backtrack to the company property to pick up her scent. His blood was high—still—from the whiff of pheromones he’d gotten in the control room, though, and their easy acceptance made him wonder if he was the only one that had been effected the way he was. He’d cooled enough he was reasonably confident that his decision was a logical one and their best bet for figuring out where they stood. He was aware, though, that he wanted to go after her and would’ve had a hard time convincing himself not to even if it hadn’t made any damned sense at all.

It disturbed him. He knew the pheromones were a security measure for tracking infiltrators. The minute any unauthorized person entered the control room they were coated with a mist of the chemical. He knew it had been a calculated move by the company to not only make it easier to locate their quarry, but build their aggression toward the enemy. He wasn’t exactly feeling aggressive toward the woman, however. Pissed off, yes. She’d brought this shit down on them whether she’d intended to or not, but it wasn’t thoughts of breaking her in half that had him itching to get his hands on her until he could barely think of anything else.

It was almost worse that he knew, instinctively, what it was that was making his blood boil in his veins. He shouldn’t be operating on instincts, was pretty sure he shouldn’t actually *have* them regardless of the predator DNA that had been added to his makeup. It had been included strictly for the purpose of making flight possible and increasing his hearing and sight. *None* of his biological side was supposed to interfere with his robotics and that included his logic circuits. He’d been designed as a cybernetic unit strictly for the benefits of speed and coordination of muscle and tendon over gears and lifts, and for the added benefit of ‘creative’, autonomous thinking.

Something definitely wasn’t right, but maybe he’d get those answers, too, when he found the woman.

* * * *

The night air was humid enough Nika was sticky from rushing by the time she reached the rendezvous. She found Raymond Whitaker pacing outside and irritation flickered through her. The man had no sense of subterfuge!

“I thought we were going to meet inside?”

He grabbed her arm as she reached him and hustled her around the side of the building. She saw his car was parked in the alley. *My fucking god! Why didn’t he just make a public fucking announcement while he was at it!* She might just as well have met

him at the damned office!

Opening the door for her, he practically shoved her in and then climbed in behind her while she was still trying to shuffle across the wide backseat. He put his hand out imperiously for the data chip.

Containing her irritation with an effort, Nika pulled it from her pocket and slapped it into his palm.

Whitaker brought up his media screen and popped the data chip into a port. "You decrypted?" he snapped the moment he opened the file.

Nika slid an assessing look at him at the accusation in his voice. "You expressed doubt as to whether or not I'd gotten the right file," she reminded him. "I used the code you furnished me with. I downloaded the file named Night Raven—just as I was told, but I decided to check to make sure it wasn't a dummy file. I'm no scientist. I couldn't make heads or tails out of it. But it looks like the right file."

Whitaker frowned, reading, scrolling and then pausing to read again. "Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! This is garbage! Useless!"

"What?" Nika exclaimed, alarm, doubt and suspicion instantly warring inside of her. "I used the code I was given, damn it! I downloaded the file I was told was the right one. You're saying this isn't what you sent me for?"

Whitaker's lips tightened with disgust, but there was a tautness about his face that made Nika more suspicious. "It might be something I could have used against Bio-H Tech ... except you broke in to get it and it won't be admissible in court. There's nothing here that'll do us any good in developing our cyborgs. I can tell you that." He shook his head. "Some sort of bio weapon. A human/animal cross, but it's useless to me. We sure as hell can't go there."

The dismay churning in Nika's belly was so profound she felt like throwing up. "But ... I saw them! I've got pictures."

He sent her a sharp look and held out his hand. "Let me see them."

Nika had already handed them to him in response to his demand before it occurred to her that she might ought to have negotiated a price for them. After all, that wasn't part of the deal.

On the other hand, it looked like the bastard was trying to screw her out of the deal they had. She'd gotten the files he'd sent her for, and risked life and limb to do it, damn it! The file was intact and readable! Was it her fault he'd been wrong about the damned file? No! But she was the one that was going to get screwed. She could feel it in her bones.

"I need you to bring me one," Whitaker said abruptly, breaking the silence that had held him while he studied the pictures she'd taken.

Nika gaped at him blankly. "Bring ...?"

"We'll need one to have a look at it."

"One of *those*?" Nika exclaimed in outraged dismay. "Bring you one? Just like that?"

"Of course if you can't handle the job"

Nika glared at him, her lips folded tightly as she struggled with the images in her head.

Whitaker shrugged. "I guess we're done here, then."

That brought Nika out of her ruminations. "Wait a minute! You owe me."

"I don't owe you shit. You fucked up ... again! You didn't bring me what I asked for. Consider the money I paid you up front as severance."

Fury displaced the doubts and anxieties. "I brought you what I was sent to get. If there was a fuck up, it was on your end. Your moles gave you faulty Intel."

"Nevertheless," Whitaker said grimly. "The offer was for information that would help me beat out my competition. This will only get me in jail. This is serious stuff here—experimenting with humans!"

"Fine!" Nika said angrily. "Give me my data chip back and we'll call it even. I'll find another buyer."

Whitaker glared at her. "This stays with me. I might get some use out of it, and I've already paid for it!"

"You didn't pay for it! You *half* paid for it!" Nika said, pulling her pistol and leveling it at him. "Hand it over! You can keep the pictures and we'll call it even."

Not that she needed it when she had her own copy, but it was the principle of the thing! If she let him think he could fuck her over, she'd have to deal with it with her next employer. Besides, it was more valuable if there was only one copy of the file floating around.

Whitaker paled slightly, but his expression only hardened. "Bring me one of them and I'll pay you half of what we agreed on."

"That's another job. If you want me to bring you one of those *things*, we'll have to negotiate a new deal. It won't be easy and I'm sure as hell not risking my neck for the piddling sum you're talking right now ... and you'll pay me what you *still* owe me, you thieving son-of-a-bitch!"

Whitaker studied her assessingly for several moments and finally used the keyboard to pull up the accounts and transferred the money he owed her.

* * * *

Raven was fairly certain their quarry had already left even before they got inside her quarters and he was still thoroughly pissed off when he found out he was right.

"What now?" Lynx asked in disgust.

Raven scanned the room. "We wait. We might as well see what we can find out while we're waiting."

Chameleon and Bull exchanged a glance.

"What about the global positioning locator?" Chameleon asked.

"It's worth the risk. She won't be gone long. She left on foot."

Bull shrugged inwardly. The way he saw it, they were going to have a confrontation with agents from the company sooner or later ... unless they did manage to ditch the locators and this seemed like as good a place as any for it. At least it was only six floors up.

Moving to the fire exit, he checked it. Satisfied when he saw it was useable, he turned his attention to the woman's quarters, feeling curiosity fill him. It didn't exactly tap the turmoil roiling through him, but it gave him something to take his mind off of it ... a little.

Her scent was driving him up the wall. He was as jittery as if he had a livewire up his ass.

She wasn't military, he thought as he assessed her quarters, wondering if she shared the place with someone else considering how cluttered it was. Spying a narrow

bunk and a locker in one corner, he strode toward it. To his surprise, it wasn't locked. He supposed that meant she either didn't share the quarters or she trusted her companion or companions. The clothing he spied inside completely distracted him. Picking up one of the strange looking pieces he sniffed it, verified that it was her scent on it and then held it up to study it.

"What's that?" Lynx demanded sharply, striding toward him.

Bull frowned at him, resisting the urge to inform him that it was his find, whatever the fuck it was. Some sort of undergarment, he finally decided. There wasn't much to it. He couldn't imagine anyone wearing anything like it as outer wear.

He was damned if he could figure out how it was worn at all, he thought irritably after he'd examined the series of straps that held two cupped pieces of material together.

Someone snatched it out of his hands and he looked up to glare at the culprit. Raven, he discovered, had joined him and Lynx. Ignoring the glare Bull bent on him, he held it up by the two even length straps that was attached to the contraption at both ends and examined the cups curiously with his fingers. "Breasts," he finally said decisively.

Bull felt his cock get a little harder. His throat tightened and his mouth watered. "Breasts?" he asked a little hoarsely.

Raven flicked a look at him. "Her breasts didn't look like ours. They're soft. I guess she needs these to strap them down."

Bull blinked at him rapidly for a moment while he tried to assimilate the information.

Instead of handing his prize back, Raven began plundering the locker himself, dragging out what was clearly shorts ... although they sure as hell didn't look anything like his. "There's no legs—no back—or maybe it's the front that missing. What the fuck is the strap for?"

Sniffing them, Raven's face went slack. He blinked Bull back into focus. "What?"

Bull frowned at him.

Raven met his look with a blank one and finally tossed the clothing back into the locker. "Keep looking. Examining her clothes isn't going to tell us anything."

Bull glared at Raven's back as he turned and stalked across the room. Reluctantly, Lynx and Chameleon moved away, as well.

He didn't want to keep fucking looking! He wanted to examine the smell of her clothing longer. Realizing he was beginning to feel a little lightheaded from huffing her scent, though, he closed the locker and lifted his head to look around the room for something else to examine.

A box that looked a lot like a refrigeration unit caught his eye and he strode quickly toward it to see if he was right. Disappointed when he discovered it was, but it was virtually empty, he closed it again and studied the lockers around it, opening one after another and studying the contents.

"I found her media center. Let's see what kind of data she's collected," Raven said grimly.

Chapter Three

Nika could hear the moaning, groaning, and panting when she stepped off the elevator. She stopped, listening and trying to decide if it was real or a recording. It sounded too loud to be the real thing, though, and she finally decided somebody was up awfully late watching porn.

Shrugging, she headed toward her apartment. She noticed the hair immediately. It had been disturbed and the volume of panting and groaning had increased as she made her way to her apartment.

At least she had plenty of noise for cover, Nika thought wryly as she pulled her pistol and very carefully checked the door. It wasn't locked.

Had her company come and gone, she wondered? If they had, they hadn't bothered to cover their tracks. They couldn't have known about her little hair trick, so could she surmise that they were sloppy? Or that they wanted her to know they'd paid her a visit?

She thought whoever it was must have come and gone, but she decided to err on the side of caution. Grasping the knob firmly, she very carefully disengaged the catch, braced herself, and then leapt into her apartment, pistol at the ready. Someone grabbed her in a chokehold almost before she stopped moving. The meaty arm around her neck blocked most of her view of the room, but she felt her heart drop to her toes as she stared at the three grim faced *whatevers*.

"Drop the pistol," a deep, rumbling male voice said in her ear.

"I can't," she croaked, staring at the huge fist coiled around her gun hand.

"You're crushing my fucking hand."

She had the sense that she'd startled him. He seemed to hesitate, as if trying to decide what to do next.

If the thick, hard rod digging into her buttocks was any indication, it seemed pretty clear what he had on his mind.

"Take your finger off the trigger."

She complied with an effort and the man holding her removed her pistol, easing his hold on her enough that she ducked beneath the arm he'd had around her shoulders, neck, and face, whirling on him. A jolt of shock went through her when she met his gaze ... or rather when her gaze connected with the pair of horns protruding from his forehead.

She could hardly tear her gaze away. She managed it when it sank in that she had three more 'whatevers' behind her.

She summoned offense, collecting her wits with an effort. "What the fuck are you doing in my apartment?"

"Waiting for you," the one with wings responded after a prolonged hesitation that further unnerved her.

Nika licked her lips, struggling to draw moisture into her dry mouth, her mind working frantically. "Why?"

“We have questions. We want answers.”

That sounded really ominous!

She flicked a glance around and discovered the source of all the moaning and groaning she’d been listening to. They’d been whiling away the time while they waited for her watching porns!

What the fuck? Confusion over that discovery just created more chaos of her thoughts.

The winged one seemed to notice her focus on the video. Flicking a look at the threesome frolicking on the screen, he turned it off.

Ok, so she supposed that explained the erection she’d had digging into her back. They all seemed to be sporting one.

She dragged her gaze from that perusal with an effort and discovered the ‘whatevers’ looked even more grim than before. Maybe it wasn’t anger and determination like she’d thought? But this was just too fucking weird!

A single sweep of the room told her two things. They’d turned her place upside down searching for whatever they were looking for—the data chip, she didn’t doubt!—and there was no way in hell she was getting out. She had one behind her that was built like a bull and three between her and the window and the fire escape.

She was going to have to brazen this one out.

Piece of cake, she thought weakly!

“I’ve got a question of my own,” she snapped. “Just how long have you been watching porns on my damned TV? Those things are expensive, you know! And who the fuck told you to make yourself at home?”

“What were you doing in the command center?”

“What command center?”

His black brows lowered over his eyes. His lips tightened. “Before we get too far down that road, I think I should tell you one of the security measures is to douse the intruder with pheromones. We tracked you here.”

Nika blinked at him, trying to assimilate that and figure out what the fuck he was talking about. “Chemicals?”

“Artificial scent.”

She went back to blinking at him while she digested that. Scent? They’d followed her like ... bloodhounds? “You’re bluffing.”

“Even if I had been—which I wasn’t—that response would be a dead giveaway,” he said dryly.

Nika studied him frowningly. He didn’t sound like a cyborg, she realized now that she’d had enough time to calm down a little—not like any cyborg she’d ever had the opportunity to interact with anyway. Even the best had an oddly stilted way of talking because they were programmed with correct English. They didn’t use contractions and they didn’t use slang. Those two things were dead giveaways of what they were even if they looked human enough to pass.

“What are you?” she asked curiously.

He looked briefly startled and then, strangely, angry. He shared a speaking look with the others—another oddity about them. It made her wonder if they were capable of communicating via some radio frequency.

“Cybornetic unit Raven,” he said in a clipped voice.

A jolt flickered through Nika. The file she'd taken had been named Night Raven. Was it just about him, then? If it was, then it was either bogus as Whitaker claimed and he wasn't a cyborg at all, or ... well, he wasn't human! That was for certain!

"And the others?"

"Lynx," the tawny haired one with gold-green eyes responded.

"Chameleon."

"Bull."

She glanced at each of them as they responded. Despite the fact that none of them looked entirely human, she discovered with a jolt of surprise that they were damned fine looking male specimens—toned, tall, and heavily muscular from what she could see—which she thought was pretty much everything but skin. They were wearing military-type one-piece suits that seemed molded to them.

Their faces weren't hard on the eyes, either, if one overlooked the eyes and, in bull's case, the horns, and Raven's wings.

"They didn't give you names?"

They exchanged another look.

"We're wasting time here, and none of us have a lot a spare—including you. We're outfitted with trackers. They'll have a fix on us now. Grab whatever you want to bring with you. We have to move."

The temptation to argue immediately assailed Nika, but two thoughts kept her tongue firmly between her lips.

She was supposed to bring one in for Whitaker's goons to dissect.

And then leaving wasn't going to do her a bit of good. He was right on all counts.

Instead, she glanced around her apartment, feeling a surge of anger. It had taken her a hell of a long time, and a lot of credits to accumulate the little she had. Most of it was tools and weapons of her trade and she knew she didn't have time to gather it all up.

Moving to the TV, she checked the charges against her account and nearly passed out. "My fucking god! Just how many porns did you guys watch?"

"Everything on the 'wish' list," Lynx responded.

Nika shot a quick look at him, feeling her face heat. So she liked to fantasize about climbing into bed with wall-to-wall men, damn it! There were weirder people out there! "I wasn't gone that long, damn it! You've just about wiped out my credits! This shit is banned and that means it's expensive!"

The look he gave her wiped her mind blank. When she managed to break eye contact, she discovered the others were giving her similar 'undressing' looks. Strike that. 'I could gobble you up' looks. They might be 'whatevers' but they were really good at giving the 'signals' of 'I'm horny and I want to hump you'! "Why would you be interested anyway?" she said testily, turning away and heading into the bathroom to retrieve her copy of the file. "You're cyborgs."

"Why do you watch it?"

Nika glanced jerkily at Bull, whom she discovered had followed her into the bathroom. "I don't," she lied.

"Why is it filed under favorites?" Lynx asked.

She frowned at the pair. "I liked the titles," she retorted coldly, daring them to challenge her.

“Two hot hunks and one voracious female?” Raven asked, reading out the top title on the list.

Nika felt her face flash with heat again. “Jesus! You guys are as single minded as men! Can we just fucking drop it?”

“We are four hunks,” Chameleon pointed out when she pushed past Bull and Lynx.

“If you’re suggesting what I think you’re suggesting,” Nika snapped, “forget it! I don’t do cyborgs! You’re military anyway. Why would you be anatomically correct?”

Of course, she already knew they were. She also knew they’d gotten erections, but she hadn’t had time to consider the implications and she sure as hell didn’t want to at the moment.

In fact, *at all*, when she didn’t know what they had in mind—beyond fucking!

Trying to dismiss the jitteriness that had taken hold of her the moment she noticed they were aroused and not at all hard on the eyes, she grabbed her utility belt, fastened it around her waist and collected the tools she thought most important and hardest to replace.

She paused when she finished, surveying her apartment and trying to think of anything else that was ‘must have’. Clothes! She discovered when she opened her locker that the guys had been rifling through it. Her lips tightened, but she didn’t bother to say anything. Grabbing a couple of changes of clothes and underwear, she looked around again.

That was when she noticed that all of her cabinets were standing open and they’d cleaned out most of the food.

Anger flickered through her, but before she could complain about that, she heard the pounding of running feet in the hallway outside and that was definitely a bad thing under the circumstances!

The men/cyborgs evidently heard the sounds of imminent company before she did. They leapt toward the door she’d left unlocked and formed a barricade against it with her furniture.

“Fire escape!” Raven said grimly.

Nika flicked a glance of surprise at him, although she supposed she shouldn’t have been surprised at all. They were military. They would’ve checked out all entrances and exits immediately—before they settled down to eat all her damned food and watch all the porns on her wish list!

“There’s an old trash chute, or something, that connects with the fire tube on the first floor—or does now, anyway,” she said, rushing toward the fire exit.

Ordinarily, she wouldn’t have divulged her emergency escape route, but this wasn’t an ordinary situation!

She’d already climbed onto the ledge when Raven grasped her and hauled her back into the apartment. She gaped at him in disbelief and dawning anger.

“Police! Open up! Now!”

Raven nodded at Chameleon, whom she saw had gathered up her pitiful collection of weapons and distributed them—among them! Before she could say anything, he fired three shots through the wall next to her door. There were three ominous thuds on the other side. She was still gaping at him in disbelief, when he charged across the room and went through the chute opening like a diver—head first, arms extended in front of him.

Raven jerked her up and shoved her into the tube even as bullets began to fly through the wall of her apartment. Bracing her hands and feet on the tube, she controlled her slide, but she was in a hurry. She didn't try to slow herself down much. Chameleon caught her as she reached the opening she'd cut between the fire escape and the alternate chute, dragging her inside with him and sliding the remaining distance with her locked against him. They landed together in the cart she'd parked at the bottom and filled with padding.

She glanced at Chameleon, but he found his bearings faster than she did and rolled out of the cart, reaching back to snatch her out just as Lynx fell through the shaft and into the cart.

"Where are we?"

"Basement—below street level. This way!"

Chameleon caught her arm before she could dart away and she threw an impatient glance at him, anxious to make it through the basement before the cops realized where they'd gone.

She'd just had time to wonder if the chute was wide enough to accommodate Bull or if he was going to plug it up when he dropped into the cart behind Lynx. Raven took up the rear, diving out head first as Chameleon had—a gun in his hand and at the ready.

She felt a flicker of admiration.

Damn they were good!

The moment Raven touched down and rolled out of the cart, Chameleon jerked on her arm to get her going. It irritated the shit out of her, but she was in a hurry herself. She ran as fast as she could with him tethered to her. "We'll need a pry bar to remove the sewer cover," she said, trying to jerk away from Chameleon and grab the bar she'd left for that purpose. He released her but by the time she'd grabbed the bar and turned, he'd leaned down, shoved his fingers through the holes in the top and lifted the heavy son-of-a-bitch without even a grunt of exertion.

So, were they cyborgs or not, she wondered, stunned that he'd lifted the heavy thing, with his *fingers* no less, when she knew it must weigh close to a hundred pounds!

Setting it aside, he stared down into the black pit.

"Where does this go?" Raven asked sharply.

Nika glanced at him when he spoke, thinking about it. "Everywhere, actually. I had an escape route marked, but this honeycombs the city. It's for drainage. It connects to the old underground train system that isn't used anymore."

The men exchanged a look she took to mean they were pleased. She wasn't certain of why until they'd climbed down. Grabbing the bag of supplies she'd left at the foot of the ladder, Nika dug out a flashlight and switched it on as they waited for Bull to pull the manhole cover back in place and join them.

"This depth will interfere with the tracking signals," Raven said, a note of satisfaction in his voice. "We'll need to leave a signal and get the others down here until we can get rid of the locators."

Nika had mixed feelings about that. On the one hand, it was good to know that, as long as the cops didn't tumble to the direction they'd taken, they could elude them. On the other ... well, she'd been on her own since they'd showed up at her place but it sure as hell didn't make her feel any better to have that emphasized. Or to realize she was the only one that knew they were in the sewers.

She didn't think they would like for that information to get out, which didn't bode well for the thoughts of escape flickering through her mind.

They didn't seem hostile ... not toward her, anyway, which she took to be a good sign considering they had to know that she was the one that sabotaged their company.

She wasn't actually sure of *what* to make of them. She hadn't had a lot of interaction with cyborgs, but they seemed too 'realistic' to her mind to be cyborgs and Whitaker had suggested the possibility that they weren't—if she accepted his tale about the file being a diversion.

Was it even possible, she wondered, that they were human/animal hybrids rather than cyborgs? And which would be worse, she wondered? Cyborgs that were part machine, part human, and part predatory animal? Or human/animal hybrids?

Tough call. She thought if they were humans crossed with something warm and cuddly she might have felt better about that, but she was pretty sure their names were their DNA contributors and the techs at Bio-H Tech seemed to have gone out of their way to pick the most dangerous predators.

Ok, so bulls weren't predators—they were just big and mean and she supposed bull's DNA was chosen to produce a unit capable of acting as a tank. Chameleon—well, she wasn't certain what to make of that.

Ravens were birds of prey, though, and so were cats—any kind.

She was still having trouble wrapping her mind around the possibility that they were lab grown human/animal hybrids, though. That was *so* against the law! And not just in the US. That kind of genetic manipulation was totally forbidden by the London Convention of 2012 regardless of the constant warring that went on over territory and resources.

It seemed impossible that they would've done such a thing without government sanction—and Bio-H Tech *was* the primary government contractor for war machines—so if the company was in to human experimentation the government was backing them. They had to be. They couldn't *not* know, could they?

That was why Whitaker had sent her in to start with—the possibility of grabbing government contracts. His company hadn't been able to perfect the cyborgs the government seemed to prefer. They built some damned scary robots but when the name of the game was capturing usable territory and resources, she could see why Robo-Tech wasn't selling nearly as many units to the government. The robots were a little too inclined to destroy everything in their path and there didn't appear to be any way to program them *not* to. If it moved, they killed it, and that included food on the hoof, and by the time they'd rolled through a place it was barely standing. It was almost as bad as dropping bombs like they'd done in the old days except they didn't leave it radioactive and completely uninhabitable—just mostly uninhabitable.

One thing she couldn't doubt. They had capabilities ordinary humans didn't. The displays of strength and agility she'd already seen went beyond professional gymnast/sports abilities or even military training. Plus, none of them really seemed to be having that much trouble in the dark sewers and she was the only one that had a light and it wasn't that great. She couldn't begin to guess what else their mixed DNA might have given them and she wasn't sure she wanted to know.

That brought the data chip to mind and she felt a shiver skate through her.

"How well do you know this system?" Raven asked, breaking into her thoughts.

She glanced at him uneasily. "I haven't spent a lot of time exploring, if that's what you're asking. I brought a scanner down with me when I found it and used that to help me find an egress. I marked out a couple of escape routes in case of need, but otherwise I don't know much about it."

"We'll need food and a dry place to rest."

Nika felt irritation surface. "You can't still be hungry when you cleaned me out," she muttered.

"Our metabolism requires a good deal of food to provide the energy we need," Chameleon responded.

"We'll have to surface for food. I didn't put a stash down here because I hadn't planned on spending any more time down here than necessary," Nika said tartly.

"A dry place to rest, then, would be sufficient for the moment."

"Dry is about all you can hope for. The sewers run past the old subway stations. They should be dry since there haven't been any floods in a couple of years, but there's nothing there but concrete."

She led them to the closest platform that she could remember. They were in luck. Some of the old solar powered lights were still working. It was dim, but it wasn't as cave-like as the passages were by a long shot ... at least not at the moment. A couple of those that were still lit were flickering and likely to expire at any time.

When they'd climbed through, Raven nodded at the men and they dispersed, checking the platform from end to end and the restrooms. "Now," Raven said when the others left, "what were you doing in the command center?"

Chapter Four

Nika stared at him for a long moment, realizing she'd been debating her situation in her mind ever since she'd discovered the objects of her recent job camped out in her apartment—watching porns and getting ideas they shouldn't. Ordinarily, she wouldn't have considered spilling her guts. She guaranteed her employers discretion. To her mind, though, all bets were off now that Whitaker had tried to screw her over, showed every intention of doing so if he could manage it. Moreover, the situation these guys were in almost certainly guaranteed the information wasn't going to go any further.

"I was hired by my employer to infiltrate Bio-H Tech for technological secrets in the development of cyborgs for government military contracts."

He frowned. "About operation Night Raven?"

She nodded.

"You weren't ordered to bring one of us back?"

A jolt went through Nika, but a very little consideration convinced her that it probably wasn't the best idea to divulge that newly negotiated clause. It might make it easier to get one of them to Whitaker and it might make it impossible. "That wasn't part of the plan, no."

"You weren't sent in to sabotage?"

Nika shrugged a little uneasily. This was getting really uncomfortable, really fast. She didn't exactly want to admit that part had been mostly accidental because it made her sound incompetent. "My Intel was a little sketchy," she hedged. "I'm guessing something I did set it off, but I don't know that for sure and it wasn't part of the plan, no. I was told to get in, grab the specs, and get out without detection if possible."

"Where's the data chip now?"

The question caught her completely off guard although she supposed it shouldn't have. She felt her color fluctuate as the copy she had in her pocket flickered through her mind. "I passed it off to my employer."

His eyes narrowed. "But you made a copy."

She glared at him. "What the hell makes you think that?"

"Your body language, heart rate, and blood pressure are indications that you're lying," he retorted dryly.

She gaped at him. "You're trying to tell me you can detect changes in heart rate and blood pressure? Without even touching me?"

The look that flickered through his eyes made her heart rate and blood pressure fluctuate all over again because it was clear the moment she mentioned touching her that the temptation to do so went through his mind.

The others returned, thankfully interrupting the interrogation. "All clear," Lynx announced.

Raven dragged his gaze from her with an effort. "Take first watch. Chameleon, I want you to see if you can make contact with the others and lead them down here until

we can do something about the locators.”

Both men stared at her for a long moment but finally nodded and left. She discovered that Raven was studying her speculatively when she turned her attention to him again. “Get some rest while you can.”

Nika gaped at him. “You mean to hold me?” she demanded, outraged.

His gaze flickered over her speculatively. “I wouldn’t mind.”

Nika felt her face redden. “I meant as a prisoner!” she said testily.

Amusement flickered in his eyes. “If you want to look at it like that.”

“Exactly how else am I supposed to look at it!”

“I didn’t see you refusing when we took the fire chute down here. You seemed anxious to lead the way.”

“Because the cops were beating at my door!”

He shrugged. “Nevertheless”

“So ... does that mean I’m free to go?”

“No.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. After a moment, she turned to study Bull assessingly and discovered he was studying her with an intensity that sent a mixture of heat and alarm through her. “Don’t get any ideas! I’m sure as hell not going to cooperate with what you have in mind.”

To her surprise and amusement, the big man blushed. Maybe she was a little ditzy, but she couldn’t help but think it was cute. “You guys aren’t really cyborgs at all, are you?” she said without thinking.

Both of them stiffened. A mixture of confusion and amusement flickered across Raven’s face. “Why would you think that?”

Nika debated briefly. Although she had no intention of telling any of them that she’d looked at the file, she was damned curious to know if, like Whitaker thought, it was a decoy file and not the real file at all. She shrugged. “You aren’t like any of the cyborgs I’ve been around before. There was no question that they were robots. You guys ... well, you don’t act like cyborgs and you don’t talk like cyborgs.”

“We are superior to every other cyborg on the market today,” Raven said.

“Not that you’re bragging,” Nika said dryly.

“It is a statement of fact,” Raven said coolly, although he flushed faintly.

“Cyborgs don’t brag.”

Nika snorted. “They usually aren’t focused on their dicks, either—and you guys have been since you watched my porn.”

Raven’s skin darkened, but he tilted his head curiously. “Your porn? I thought you said you had not watched it? Maybe it’s you that’s focused on it?”

“Right!” Nika retorted uncomfortably. So it had been on her mind! She was human! Anybody would’ve had a hard time putting it out of their mind if they’d come in to that kind of situation—anybody that was human, and certainly any red blooded female! The air had practically reeked with testosterone! “Focused on my credit expenditure, maybe! It’s going to be damned hard to replace what I lost without any damned credits!”

“You did not get paid for the theft?”

Irritation flickered through Nika as she turned her attention to Bull. There was clearly disapproval in his comment, and since when did Cyborgs make judgments? “It’s

called industrial espionage, for your information, and it's a job. It isn't like there's a lot of them these days ... not with robots doing just about every damned thing! The way I look at it, the damned companies *owe* us some sort of living when they're the ones that ruined the economy!"

Bull looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"Robots are designed to do the dangerous work so that humans are protected. Considering how decimated the population has become, that's more important than jobs," Raven said tightly.

Nika snorted in disgust. "Well, I see they thoroughly indoctrinated you with the propaganda they feed everybody else these days!"

Both Bull and Raven looked suspicious.

"This is not the truth?" Raven demanded.

Nika shrugged. "Only part of it."

Bull struggled to focus on what she was saying, to make sense of it, but the truth was he was having a great deal of trouble concentrating on what she was actually saying. The sound of her voice fascinated him. He was aware that it pleased him in some way, although not entirely sure why.

Their prime directive was to ensure the protection and safety of women, children, and men—in that order—but only insofar as their 'own'. Females were their hope for the future, the breeders of a new generation, the nurturers of the young. That made them vitally important to every nation and their off-spring, naturally, was important as the new generation, although they could be replaced so long as the breeder was protected. They hadn't been specifically ordered to target the females and children of other nations, but they had been told to disregard the prime directive except when it pertained to their own.

He had been given what he needed to identify them when he was programmed, but he'd discovered it wasn't the same as actually seeing one at close range, even though, for the most part, he'd found that his virtual programming was pretty much the same as experience.

The same was true of the actual breeding process, he suspected. The instructional vids they'd watched in her quarters certainly bore little resemblance to those that had been programmed into him. He hadn't gotten the impression, before, that it was something that gave humans a great deal of pleasure. He'd thought it was merely an act necessary for procreation.

That thought led him to wonder about some of her earlier comments. He hadn't wondered, before, why they were anatomically correct. He'd simply assumed that it was purely for functionality. They were part biological material and required the intake of food for energy and the expulsion of waste once the energy had been derived from it. The pheromones she had been tagged with had had an unexpected side effect on him—and the others, he knew—however. And it went beyond the reaction of his phallus.

"You're really starting to make me nervous," Nika said, jolting him out of his meditation.

He blinked at her, wondering how merely looking at her made her nervous, feeling his face heat uncomfortably when it occurred to him that she might have noticed something about his attitude that made what he wanted to do clear to her. A brief search of his programming, thankfully, brought something to mind to distract her—he hoped.

"Are you incapable of breeding?"

She turned so red and looked so angry, he was immediately regretful that he'd asked.

"I don't think that comes under the heading of *your* business!" she snapped.

He threw an uncomfortable glance at Raven.

"The primary directive of females of child bearing years is to bear young—not spy for rival companies," Raven said. "That is your job—and pertinent to the conversation since you brought up the fact that robots have taken over jobs previously held by humans."

Nika's lips tightened. "I have a brain! Some of us like to contribute more than our reproductive capabilities!"

"There is no higher calling."

"Oh *please*! If all you two can do is spout government propaganda, let's not talk, ok?"

Bull watched her hungrily as she strode angrily away and plopped down with her back against a wall. "She does not fit my programming on female behavior," he muttered.

Raven snorted. "No. She did not scream when she saw us. She behaves like a male."

Bull frowned. "Do you think she is? Uh ... it is?" He considered it. "She has breasts."

"We have breasts," Raven said pointedly.

"Yes ... but I've noticed hers are soft. They bounce when she walks."

Raven frowned. "There is that." After considering it a moment, he strode toward her, knelt, and cupped his hand over her genitals, examining the area as thoroughly as he could through her clothing. "No balls," he announced to Bull. "No cock either."

Nika slapped at his arm until he withdrew his hand, gaping up at him with a mixture of outrage and disbelief when he stood. "What the hell was that about?"

"She does not talk like a female—except the voice," Raven observed.

"How the hell would either of you know a damned thing about how a female is supposed to behave, or talk?" Nika snapped indignantly.

"We were programmed with the prime directive," Raven and Bull answered at almost the same time.

"Which is?"

"To protect the breeders."

"We have to be able to identify them to protect them," Raven said pointedly. "If you would show us your genitals, we would be greatly appreciative."

"Fuck you!" Nika snapped. "I'm not showing you mine! I don't care whether you want to look at it or not!"

"It isn't a matter of wanting," Raven said. "The question has arisen as to whether you are a breeder or not. We need to ascertain this to know how much emphasis to place upon protection."

That made her uneasy. "You'll have to take my word for it. I'm a girl—woman!"

"Humans lie, cheat, steal ..."

Nika narrowed her eyes at Raven. It occurred to her, though, that she was badly outnumbered. If assuring them that she was a woman and thus 'untouchable' would guarantee that they didn't decide to get ugly with the interrogations, maybe it wasn't such

a bad idea? Releasing a huff of irritation, she surged to her feet and stripped.

Their gazes went instantly to her pubic area, which was bare per the orders of the CDC since hair was a breeding ground for germs. Sitting down on the cold concrete, she lifted her legs, spread them wide and ‘fanned’ it at them for good measure—partly to prove she wasn’t hiding anything and partly from sarcasm.

Ok, so it was also because she was curious about their reaction. “See? No balls, no cock. Satisfied?”

Both of them swallowed a little convulsively, moving closer. “I didn’t see it well,” Bull mumbled. “Rae was in the way.”

“Look quick,” Nika said tartly. “It’s cold in here. I’m putting my clothes back on.”

She couldn’t help but notice that they looked immensely disappointed when she’d shoved her arms and legs into the suit again. It sent a frisson of sexual awareness through her, but it also convinced her that they weren’t cyborgs. Cyborgs programmed as sexual partners might fake the sort of reaction she’d seen in them, but *they* hadn’t been programmed for it. They were strictly for military usage.

She didn’t know what they were, but she knew what they weren’t.

The curious thing was that they seemed to believe they were cyborgs.

Or maybe that wasn’t so curious? The penalties for experimenting on humans were harsh—a fortune in credits and jail time—ten years at the least and it could be far more if the judge was in a foul mood at sentencing.

Far be it from her to point out that they weren’t cyborgs, though. As long as they thought they were, they would be constrained by the prime directive! If they began to think differently

It created a whole new problem, though—for her.

Whitaker expected her to present him with one so that his scientific team could examine it. She was no scientist, but she had a bad feeling that they weren’t going to be satisfied with merely looking one of them over and maybe taking a few samples for tests. Aside from the fact that she doubted she could trick one of them into going, and she didn’t see much possibility of rendering one of them unconscious and hauling them in, she had to consider the ethics of it.

She *had* ethics, regardless of what they thought!

It was a little hard, these days, to keep things straight, but she didn’t consider anything she did to any company unethical for the simple reason that all of the bastards were enemies as far as she could see. They hadn’t just fucked the ‘little people’ over to get where they were. They *continued* to fuck the people over to stay on top of the heap now that they’d fucked up the entire world!

* * * *

Raven’s mind was racing when he finally moved away from Nika and that wasn’t all that was racing. His heart was racing and his breath was rushing in and out of his lungs until he felt lightheaded even as he settled and stared up at the dark, shadowy ceiling above him. He had no need of rest, which was probably a good thing, he thought wryly, because it seemed unlikely he was going to get it. He’d moved away from Nika and lain down primarily because he needed a little distance from her and the images she’d flooded his mind with.

He discovered he was reluctant to push the images from his mind, as disinclined

to banish them as he was to overcome the rush of his senses, which was almost equal parts pleasing and disturbing—disturbing because he'd never felt anything quite like it before.

He didn't have to wonder what it was. He knew. The urges were too pronounced even to pretend he had no notion what his body, his entire being was urging him to do.

What confused him was that he felt it at all. Anger and aggression were powerful emotions he'd felt before. He'd never questioned them, had considered it must be part of his programming to react to threat in such a way. By doing so, it stimulated natural drugs in his biological brain, which injected them into his system to aid him in battle.

There couldn't be any possible use for what he was feeling at the moment, however, which meant he shouldn't be feeling it.

He was a superior unit, clearly better than anything any of the other robotics engineers could produce or Nika wouldn't have been hired to steal the technology, but he was still primarily a machine. He shouldn't feel a desire to ... fuck!

He thought it might be possible that his animal side had somehow taken precedence and produced the effect upon him, but procreation *wasn't* what had been tumbling through his mind.

The human side?

There shouldn't be enough to override his programming. It hadn't happened before—not unless he counted the sense of aggression, but then that was primal. It required only the sub-brain.

Perhaps what he was feeling was also primal? Maybe it actually was the urge to procreate—as poor as the timing was and as completely useless to him? But if that was the case, why was he far more focused on pleasure than spawning?

He shook it off and got up after a few moments, realizing that he needed an outlet of some kind.

Nika appeared to be sleeping.

Bull was alternately pacing and pausing to stare at nothing in particular.

Clearly Bull was in no better state than he was, but it didn't make him feel any better.

"I don't think I can handle being down here for very long," Bull growled after he'd paced a while and finally settled on the edge of the platform.

Raven dropped down beside him. "It's the inaction. We aren't accustomed to it."

Bull sent him a look. "Like hell. It's *her*."

Raven's lips tightened with irritation. He thought Bull might at least try for a pretense of having something else on his damned mind! "You might be able to get your mind off of her if you had something useful to do."

Bull considered it. "I don't think so. And I don't think it would help if she wasn't wearing pheromone perfume either. In fact, I can't smell it anymore."

"She bathed. As soon as she'd gotten her place. She got most of it off."

Bull stared at him for a long moment and licked his lips. "I don't think that image is helping worth a fuck."

It wasn't helping him train his thoughts elsewhere if it came to that. He struggled for a few minutes to think of something else. "We need to get rid of these gods damned locators."

"You think Nika would know where we could get it done?"

Raven shrugged instead of grinding his teeth about the fact that Bull had turned the conversation right back to Nika. “Could be. She doesn’t seem to fall into the range of ‘typical’. If she knows the people that hire spies, she probably knows a lot of unsavory people and that’s what we need.”

Bull merely grunted a response. “What do you suppose she meant when she said we weren’t cyborgs?”

Raven frowned. Loathe though he was to admit it, that had been bothering him, too, particularly since she had pointed out that the company wasn’t to be trusted. “We know we are.”

Bull frowned. “How do we know we are?”

Raven turned to stare at him, feeling a coldness creep through him. “I don’t remember anything before waking in the lab.”

“Nika suggested that the company had indoctrinated us with propaganda. If they did, they could’ve done anything to our minds.”

Raven considered that. He’d never questioned anything that had been programmed into him except the ‘suggestion’ that they disregard the value of their enemies’ women and children. That hadn’t bothered him unduly, however, because it wasn’t an order.

He shook his head. “And maybe she’s the one that’s playing with our minds? We’ve got no more reason to trust her than the company.”

“And none to trust the company,” Bull said pointedly. “They wouldn’t have had everything set up to be completely destroyed if they weren’t worried about evidence that could be dangerous to them.”

“Maybe. There’s also the possibility that it was simply designed to destroy spies—like her, and we were considered collateral damage, rather than targets.”

“They were guarding the door to shoot us if we managed to break out and evade the gas.”

“That might still have been a precaution to kill the intruder.”

Bull’s lips thinned. “Maybe, but I don’t believe it.”

Raven frowned thoughtfully and finally shrugged. “There’s also the possibility that they thought we might be dangerous. She released us. Ordinarily, we would’ve received orders before we were awakened and been met with the commander.”

“You don’t believe that?”

“I’m just saying it’s a possibility. We might never know ... now. I don’t think we can go back, even if we wanted to.”

Surprise flickered across Bull’s face. “Would you want to?”

Raven frowned. “I don’t know. I was designed to be a soldier. I don’t know anything else.”

Bull considered that, absently scrubbing a hand through his shaggy, tawny hair and, when he encountered a horn, stroking it thoughtfully. “I don’t think there’s much chance either one of us could blend into the general population and not be noticed anyway. Maybe Cham and Lynx could—if they didn’t forget themselves and give themselves away—but not us.”

Raven flicked a glance over him. His personal opinion was that Bull stood a better chance of hiding those horns he was so worried about than the fact that he was almost freakishly huge from the waist up, a by-product of the Bison in him, no doubt, still

human-like in form, but noticeable.

Not that they weren't all freaks by human standards! And he was certainly right about the wings. No way was *he* going to be able to disguise himself and move among the humans, even if they *did* manage to get rid of the damned GPS. Bull stood a better chance of that than he did.

The bottom line was, he, Hawk, Condor, and Eagle were going to be a liability to the rest of the group.

Chapter Five

Lynx was in an unaccustomed state of turmoil as he and Cham made their way back to the point where they'd left the drainage system. They both paused to listen for any sounds indicating pursuit and, when they heard nothing, climbed through.

Nodding at Lynx, Cham continued down the sewer line, making no real attempt to be particularly quiet. He knew he was the designated decoy if the cops had followed them down and it would be best for the others if he was heard.

They hadn't heard anything at the junction to indicate the cops had figured out their escape route—yet. He thought it was unlikely that they would any time soon since it appeared they'd been diverted by a search of the basement and its exits. He focused half his mind on listening, though, just in case. If they were following, he didn't want to lead them to the rendezvous point.

Fortunately, his programming allowed him to follow military procedure without devoting a lot of thought to it, because there was no getting around the fact that his first actual encounter with a human female had thrown him for a loop.

Lynx watched Cham until he was out of sight and finally looked around for a position to stand watch. There weren't a lot of choices. The channel was virtually featureless. After studying the pipes overhead for a few minutes, though, he decided that they looked as if they were secured well enough to hold his weight and that there was enough space between them and the ceiling to accommodate his bulk. The space was narrow enough it might take critical moments to unwedge himself if the need arose, but he decided to try it. Standing in ankle deep water sure as hell wasn't to his liking.

Fortunately, they were considerably lighter than most of the robots/cyborgs on the market. Their chassis was titanium clad for strength, but basically hollow except for the internal bridging that stabilized it. It helped them move faster and with more dexterity than the clumsier, heavier models and, in Raven's case, made it possible for him to actually fly. He had the wing span to glide anyway but, if he'd been heavier, gliding would've been pretty much the limit of what he was capable of.

Bounding up, he extended his claws for a better grip, caught a hold and used his arms to lift his body high enough to throw a leg over one of the pipes. An ominous sound of strain tickled at his ears, but when it wasn't followed by more than a groan, he finished his climb and flattened himself out on his belly on the pipes, staring down the darkened tunnel.

As soon as he'd settled, however, his mind began to churn once more.

He felt strangely off kilter. In some ways, the situation was no different than others they'd experienced—in actuality. It almost had more of a feel of the virtual world than the real world, though, a training mockup—one that was seriously fucked up at that because there was no specific target or instructions and the lines of enemy and friend had been all but obliterated.

He'd never expected to find himself on the wrong side of the company, an enemy

of the state, and that was a big part of his turmoil. On top of that, he was still seething with anger about the company's betrayal.

Regardless of what the others thought, he didn't see it any other way. They'd tried to destroy them and that would only have come from the top. His gods damned stomach and throat were still burning from the gas he'd inhaled. He still felt like shit all over as far as that went. God only knew how long it would take the nanos to completely repair his system, but in the mean time he was operating well below his peak and knowing it was enough to piss him off more.

He realized after a time that he felt ... inadequate and unprepared for the situation he'd found himself in and that was the main source of his anger. Added to that was the growing suspicion that he'd been fucked all the way around.

Something sure as hell stank to high heaven and it wasn't just the fall from grace, the discovery that he wasn't nearly as important to the company as he'd been led to believe if they were willing to destroy him due to circumstances. They'd passed all of the trials with flying colors. The government had been on the verge of settling a massive contract with the company for more cyborgs. The company would have to have some kind of serious incentive to destroy them considering what it was going to cost them.

He hadn't questioned, before, why it was that they were kept in stasis until the need arose for them. He'd accepted without question ... just as he'd accepted everything that had been programmed into him during development. Now he wondered if there weren't reasons beyond the simple one that they weren't needed. The pods assured that they were sustained in peak condition—at least that was what they'd been told, but clearly it was another control. It gave the company the option of terminating them at any time.

Maybe it also kept them from learning things the company didn't want them to know?

Ordinarily, he might have dismissed that even if the thought had occurred to him but between the company's actions and the comments Nika had made, he decided it wasn't paranoid to consider it—especially because of Nika.

The others might still be wondering what the fuck was going on with them, but he trusted his instincts and his instincts were telling him he wanted that woman and exactly what he wanted her for. He supposed it was possible somebody had fucked up somewhere along the line and it was pure accident that he had instincts he shouldn't have, but he didn't believe it. He was pretty sure that was one of the reasons the company had kept them under wraps—in stasis and in their 'cages' whenever they didn't need them for a mission—maybe the main reason.

He wasn't entirely human. He wasn't entirely Lynx, but he had serious doubts that there was enough cyborg in him for him to be considered a cyborg either. At least he did now. He hadn't questioned it before. He'd had no reason to. Aside from the programming, he had an internal CPU that monitored the status of his cyborg components, so he knew he had them. He would have to be at least fifty percent cybernetics to be considered a cyborg, though and, if he was, it seemed unlikely to him that his biological components would be sufficient to supersede or interfere in any way.

And right now, he was running far more on instincts, emotion, and his biological senses than electronics. If he hadn't been, he wouldn't have been in conflict. He wouldn't be struggling with the urge to try out all the things he'd watched on Nika's vid.

He wouldn't have images running through his head that transposed himself and Nika in the places of those he'd watched. He'd have his mind firmly on figuring out the problem of survival and nothing else.

A faint scraping sound far in the distance came to him on the heels of that thought and he tensed, listening intently and trying to discern the direction. He knew, though, that it hadn't come from the old subway terminal where Raven and the others were. He'd listened to the faint murmur of their voices until they'd grown silent and he knew the sound hadn't come from that direction. It also hadn't come from behind him, which ruled out the possibility that it was Cham returning with or without some of the others.

The question was, was it nothing more than rodents scurrying about in the tunnel, or something more dangerous? The question didn't linger in his mind long. The noise escalated and before many moments passed, he was certain the cops had figured out the hole they'd gone down and entered the sewer system.

His mind instantly focused entirely on the problem while he listened intently to see if they would merely explore the area immediately around the entrance or intrude deeper.

Apparently Cham's marksmanship had provoked rather than discouraged them. Lynx discerned at least a dozen individual smells and sounds moving stealthy, but steadily, along the passage toward him. Briefly, indecision flickered through him as to whether to stay where he was or leave his post to warn Raven, but he dismissed it after a moment, realizing he didn't have time to do so without the risk that he'd lead the men to Nika and the others.

It occurred to him fairly quickly that the only way he could insure that the men bypassed their hiding place was to lead them away. Before he'd decided whether it would be best to simply drop to the floor and make enough noise to draw them off, or wait and see if he could diminish their numbers before leading them away, he discovered that the men were moving faster than he'd realized.

He saw why the moment the first pair came into view, or at least how they'd managed it. They were wearing night vision goggles. With them, the men could see nearly as well in the subterranean tunnels as they could.

The operative word was nearly, though. Even while the goggles improved their ability to see things they wouldn't ordinarily have been able to see, the frames also limited their range of vision, acting like blinders. As they advanced, the men flicked glances from side to side ... but not above them.

Mentally, Lynx assessed his position and calculated his odds. If he waited until the men had passed, he would either have to lead them back in the direction they'd come from, which might take him into more. Or he would have to plow his way through all ten men to lead them in the opposite direction.

He knew his limitations as well as he knew his abilities. Four or five men, he could handle. Taking on ten well armed men would be suicide.

Discarding that possibility, he opted for a frontal assault. Just before the first pair reached him, he rolled from his position. Extending his claws even as he dropped, he landed directly in front of the two men and attacked without pause as they halted abruptly, their mouths dropping open in stunned surprise. Swiping at both simultaneously, he shredded the masks from their faces with his five inch, razor sharp, titanium claws and cut deep gouges along their cheeks and throats. Both men screamed

and fell back even as Lynx leapt toward the two men behind them and drove his fists into their midsections. Whirling even as he retracted his claws, he bounded away from the men. He'd managed to put several yards between himself and the men before they recovered enough from the pandemonium he'd thrown them into to fire. Three shots followed him. One plowed into the wall, a second into the floor. The third narrowly missed him. Hunching lower, he ran faster. A bullet from the second barrage caught him in the back. Fortunately, his shoulder blade deflected it, but pain seared through him and the force of the blow itself nearly sent him sprawling. He staggered forward several steps trying to regain his balance, slammed into the wall, and finally righted himself even as another volley of shots rang out, pinging off the sides of the tunnel.

Sucking in a harsh breath, ignoring the pain the best he could, he managed to outstrip the men racing after him.

* * * *

Despite her exhaustion from her night's activities, Nika wasn't just surprised when she woke. She was thoroughly rattled that she'd let her guard down enough to fall asleep in the first place. Her instincts for self-preservation should have made dropping to sleep impossible.

Those instincts redeemed themselves to an extent, however. The moment she heard shots nearby, she scrambled to her feet—drunkenly, too disoriented to have any clear idea of what to do or where to run or even if she should run. Before she could manage any more than that, Raven slammed into her. Catching her around the waist, he locked her tightly against his form with one arm and clamped a hand over her mouth.

Under any other circumstances, she might have taken exception. She might have tried to fight him off. She was just alert enough to realize that he wasn't the source of the threat, however, and just disoriented enough to feel inadequate to the situation. The tight hold he had on her, rather than anger or frighten her, seemed protective rather than restraining. Instead of trying to push him away or struggling with him, she grasped two fistfuls of his suit to cling more tightly, to find her balance. She would've moved closer if his hand cupped over her mouth hadn't prevented it.

She was hardly even aware that he'd gagged her with his palm beyond feeling the warmth of her breath reflected back at her as she panted with fear, wondering if, any moment, the men firing would burst into the room where they stood. Straining to hear, though, she finally realized that the sounds seemed to be moving away from them.

She relaxed fractionally when she realized that, her focus moving from the sounds of pursuit to the man holding her.

He felt like a man, every hard inch of him that was pressed tightly against her, especially the rod like inches digging into her belly. It flickered through her mind, briefly, that, whatever he was, he wasn't a man. As she met his gaze, though, that dim thought fled her mind.

The look in his eyes was unmistakable and all male, his golden eyes dilated until they were almost completely black with desire. He bent his head toward hers even as he slipped his hand from her lips to grip her jaw instead and settled his mouth over hers. She didn't think to protest. She sucked in a gasp of air, parting her lips even as his settled against hers. The raw passion of his touch sent a veritable wall of fire roaring through her, sweeping everything before it—thoughts, muscle tone, even consciousness. Darkness descended over her in a dizzying wave that almost made her knees buckle. The

muscles of her sex spasmed frantically in response to the heat that poured through her, lighting up every nerve ending in her body as if he was pouring raw electricity through her.

Her world narrowed to a focus of his body and her own and nothing beyond. It was as if they'd become cocooned, insulated from everything else, but internally, chaos reigned in a glorious barrage of sensations. She was so drunk with the feel and taste of him she didn't think she would've even thought to protest if he'd carried her to the floor right then and there, stripped her naked, and fucked her brains out.

In point of fact, she'd begun to desperately hope he would carry it to the next level when he broke the kiss almost as abruptly as he'd begun it. It took an effort to make her eyeballs stop rolling around in her head. When she'd managed to regain some control and lift her leaden eyelids, she saw that he was staring at her face, his expression enigmatic.

He dragged his gaze from her after a moment and looked directly at something behind her. When he did, it drew her attention and she discovered they weren't cocooned or invisible or alone. She'd completely forgotten Bull was with them.

The expression on his face might have unnerved her if she hadn't still been reeling from Raven's kiss. As it was, it sent a fresh wave of heat through her.

"They're gone," Raven said.

His voice was still hoarse with passion. Nika felt another frisson of heat skate through her, making her shiver in reaction. He might've been speaking Swahili, though, for all she understood. She stared at him blankly. "Who?"

He sent her a sharp look but then his lips quirked upward at one corner. "The men shooting."

Nika felt her cheeks flame. "Oh."

Realizing that Raven had released her and she was still standing like stone, she stepped away from him, trying to gather her wits. "What were they shooting at?"

Raven's lips tightened. "I'm guessing Lynx provided a decoy."

A jolt of horror went through Nika. "God! Oh my god! Do you think he's ok?"

He sent her a strange look and glanced at Bull.

Nika glanced at Bull questioningly before it occurred to her that he couldn't possibly know more than Raven did. He seemed to shake his trance-like state and glanced around as if searching for the information himself. "He would've attacked first to throw them into disorder," he finally said slowly. "They were still running when I lost track of them, so they either killed Lynx and rushed after the others they thought in front of him or he was able to run and lead them away. I guess we'll know when and if Lynx comes back."

Nika gaped at him in shock at his calm assessment, feeling her belly clench. Knowing it was useless to pursue that line of questioning, however, she merely glanced at Raven and then moved back to the wall where she'd been sitting before and slumped against it weakly.

She was certainly wide awake now! Her mind was still sluggish with fatigue, however, or maybe a combination of fatigue and unrequited desire. Her body, loathe though she was to admit it even to herself, was still firing madly and cooling slowly despite their revelations.

She didn't know what to think of their calm demeanor.

Were they emotionless cyborgs after all? Or merely monsters that they could so callously dismiss the possibility that one of their fellows had fallen?

Allowing herself to slide weakly to the floor, she sat pondering it and trying to reconcile the passion she'd felt with these cold blooded ... creatures.

* * * *

Cham was surprised to find two of the other squads waiting near the signal point when he finally emerged from the sewer and backtracked to it. The chameleons of both squads met him before he could even leave the signal mark.

"I hope you have someplace to go," Cham-Two said grimly.

"They've figured out we weren't in the building when it blew," Komodo added. "I think they've taken Night Raven Three."

"Shit!" Cham exclaimed. "We have a place—but it isn't going to do us any good if we lead them directly back to it. Nika showed us a way into the old abandoned subway system via the sewers. We'll have to split up and meet up again underground."

The other two nodded and departed. Cham hesitated, but Komodo had said he *thought* they'd taken the other squad. If he wasn't certain, he sure as hell wasn't going to leave them out in the cold to be captured. Leaving the mark plus an arrow pointing downward in the hopes they'd figure it out if they did manage to make the point, he headed back to the manhole he'd emerged from and climbed down. Squad Two joined him shortly after he passed the second intersecting tunnel. He was beginning to think Squad Four had run into trouble when he caught their scent wafting along another bisecting tunnel.

The group halted to wait for the other squad to join them. "The best chance we have," Cham said when they'd met up, "is to keep them from discovering we're using the old subway system. I don't know if they've figured out we took to the sewer yet, or not, but if they do they'll bring canines down to track us."

"So we need to lead them off," Condor said grimly.

Cham nodded. "I only know one way into the subway system—the one Nika showed us. When you've marked all the other tunnels, return to this one and follow it about five clicks. There's a broken wall with a hole just wide enough to get through. Double back about three quarters of mile along the tracks to reach the station."

The distant sound of gunfire made them pause just as they reached the next intersection where they'd intended to split up. "Gods damn it!" Cham growled after listening intently for a moment. "Either they've found us already, or Lynx is in some deep shit!"

The two squads hesitated. "Well, I guess we'll find out," Condor said grimly. "I was already pretty fucking sick of running."

"No weapons," Cham said pointedly. "I got this from Nika's place, but one isn't going to do us much good."

"So we'll have to handle hand to hand—then we'll have weapons," Puma growled. "How far are we from the next intersection up?"

"I think we can reach it and take cover before they get to it," Cham responded, surging forward at a run.

It was a near thing. They caught sight of Lynx just as they reached the intersection and split up, leaping from the main tunnel into the side tunnels for cover. Fortunately, Lynx had enough of a lead they were fairly certain the men chasing him

hadn't seen them.

Relief washed over Lynx when he caught a glimpse of the men ahead of him. For a split second he hadn't recognized them and had feared he'd run head on into another group of cops. Gritting his teeth, he gathered his strength, passed the intersection where they'd taken cover, and kept going until he heard the battle roars behind him that told him the men on heels had fallen into their trap. Stopping, he stood perfectly still for several moments, huffing for breath and trying to decide if he had enough strength left to return and join the others.

Not that he thought they needed his help. He'd blinded two of the men when he'd ripped off their masks. The two others he'd wounded with his claws hadn't been in any condition to follow him either. By his count, there'd been two full squads with Cham. Unarmed or not, they wouldn't have trouble with the handful of men who'd still been on his heels.

In any case, they'd managed to wound him in the back, the calf of one leg, and his side. Despite the nanos, he felt lightheaded from the blood he'd lost. When his knees buckled, he decided he'd just rest where he was until the others had taken care of his pursuers.

Cham and Condor joined him a few minutes later.

"You wounded?" Cham asked.

Lynx nodded tiredly. "I caught three rounds."

"This isn't the best place to recover," Condor said pointedly. "Can you make it? Or do you need help?"

Lynx considered it. "I think I need help."

"I'll carry him," Brahma said, pushing past Condor and Cham. Leaning down, he hoisted Lynx to his feet and then bent over to settle him across one broad shoulder.

"Anymore behind you besides them?" Condor asked.

Lynx shook his head and was sorry he had. It made him dizzy. "I wounded two. Ripped the night vision goggles off two others."

"In that case, we might meet up with more company," Condor said. "I think we'll stay with you until you reach the hole."

"What do you think we should do with the bodies?" Cham asked when they reached the battle ground.

Hawk and Condor exchanged a glance and shrugged. "I guess this is as good a place to leave them for collection as any. They're going to be all over the sewer system before long."

Cham was disgusted. He'd hoped they'd be able to convince the company and their goons that they'd merely used the sewer system and emerged again. It didn't look like their ruse was going to gain them much time.

"We're sitting ducks with these fucking locators," he muttered as he led the way back along the tunnel. "If we don't get rid of them soon, we're going to run out of places to hide."

Chapter Six

Nika had thought Raven and Bull didn't care anything about Lynx. She was still trying to decide whether the anger and tension she sensed in them were signs that they actually *were* worried or if it was only anxiety that the cops would backtrack and find them when she saw both men tense. She pricked her ears, trying to decide what they must have heard when she saw their gazes move to focus on the opening they'd used to access the subway tunnel.

She couldn't see or hear anything, but when Raven and Bull began to move in that direction, she felt some of the tension leave her. She didn't get the sense that they were rushing to meet a foe, but rather to welcome someone and she got up and followed them. Before they reached the opening, men began to climb through. The military uniforms threw her for a moment until she recognized them as the same special forces uniforms the group with her were wearing. It was obvious they were more of the Night Raven group.

Consternation filled her, though, as soon as she saw that they were all blood spattered. It deepened when one of the men climbed through and turned, pulling an unconscious man through. She saw almost at once that it was Lynx and her heart skipped several beats.

"Is he ...?"

The question, or her voice, caught the attention of the men who'd joined them in the tunnel and for a few minutes she was taken aback to discover herself the center of attention of so many damned unnerving men.

"He caught three rounds, but he'll live," a man with golden colored wings responded.

Nika hesitated, struggling with the urge to rush forward and offer to help. She didn't know the first thing about attending wounds, though. She was sure she'd be in the way, certain she shouldn't even have felt the impulse when he was virtually a stranger and she still wasn't certain of her status among them. Instead, she trailed them anxiously as they carried him back to the platform and lifted him up onto it.

"Your squad ran into trouble, Con?" Raven asked, drawing her attention once she'd climbed up on the platform herself and stood hovering behind him as he knelt to examine Lynx.

She glanced at the winged man he'd spoken to, tumbling the name around in her mind as she studied the man.

He looked down at himself. "Most of the blood isn't mine, but, yeah. You could say that," he retorted. "The city's working alive with the company's men—and the cops on the company's payroll—all looking to take us down. They didn't seem interested in discussing it."

Raven lifted his head and flicked a look around. "Where's Eagle group?"

"Don't know. We met up with Hawk and his group at the mark sight. I was

hoping you'd found a place to light for a little while, but as promising as this looks I don't know how long we're going to be able to stay put." He looked down at Lynx. "He had almost a squad in behind him when we met up with him in the sewers. We took them out, but they'll be back with tracking dogs, mark my word, before we can spit. We did what we could to spread the scent around and I figured we'd go back and try to lay out a few more false leads once we met up with you, but" He shrugged.

Raven frowned, but Nika couldn't decide if it was because of Con's report or his focus on Lynx. He began pulling at Lynx's clothing. Seeing his intent, Nika knew she ought to retreat. "I'll go see if I can find anything in the restroom to clean him up," she said on sudden inspiration, turning and rushing off before anyone could say anything.

Raven frowned, watching her until she disappeared through the door at the back of the platform and finally returned his attention to his task.

"You get anything useful out of the woman?" Condor asked.

Raven flicked a look at him. "This seemed pretty useful. We had a shitload of cops in behind us when we headed in ... unfortunately. It would've been nice to find this place without the bastards breathing down our necks. We might've had a command post of sorts."

Condor lifted his head and glanced both ways along the darkened tunnel. "We might still. It looks like this goes on for miles."

"Nika said it was a subway station in the old days, so undoubtedly it runs under a good bit of the city—the old city, anyway," he added thoughtfully. "It might still prove useful if we can get rid of the locators."

"Anything besides that? Like what she was doing there?"

"Thieving for a rival company that wanted the schematics on us."

"You think the sabotage was deliberate?"

Raven shook his head. "I didn't then. I haven't seen anything about her to make me change my mind. That was entirely the company's doing. It makes me uneasy on too many levels to count. They had to have powerful motivation to scrub the project when they were on the verge of landing that contract."

Condor snorted. "You're aren't surprised they were up to their necks in something illegal?"

"You think it might not be us in particular? That it could be something else?"

Condor shrugged. "I suppose it's possible they had something else in there they were dead set on hiding, but I doubt it."

"That's what I figured. So, the big question is, what is there about us that could cause them enough grief they'd be willing to blow millions in credits?"

Condor shrugged. "Bio-H-tech is just the tip of the iceberg for them. You have to figure they've got billions, maybe trillions. Stacked against their assets, maybe it seemed like a small loss."

"I never got the feeling that any kind of loss was insignificant to them," Raven said dryly.

"Still, it must have seemed small next to the fines they were looking at, the possibility of jail time."

Nika overheard the last of the conversation as she returned with dripping paper towels and crouched next to Raven. She suspected she knew what Bio-H-tech was willing to go to such lengths to hide, but she wasn't so sure she wanted to be the one to

tell them. Especially when it was only a suspicion anyway. They didn't look like the type of men that would take disappointment well.

"I found these. I'm surprised it didn't fall apart when I wet it, but at least it's something."

Raven glanced at her blankly.

"To wash the blood off so we can get a better look at the wounds?" Nika said a little testily.

Raven glanced at Condor and shrugged. "His nanos will heal the wounds."

A jolt of horror went through Nika. She surged to her feet abruptly. "He has nanos?"

Both men looked at her in surprise for a moment. Raven's face hardened. "The nanos are genetically linked to each of us," he said coldly. "They aren't going to contaminate you."

Nika felt her face heat at his obvious disgust over her reaction, but she wasn't convinced. "You're sure?"

"If you're worried about it, you might want to keep your distance," Condor said, equally cold. "We all have them."

Nika licked her lips as it leapt into her mind that Raven had kissed her.

And she'd thoroughly enjoyed every moment of it.

She could see it in his eyes that he knew exactly what was running through her mind.

She hesitated and finally knelt down again, leaning past Raven to wipe at the drying blood on Lynx's back. She was still unnerved enough about the presence of the nanos that her hand shook, but it didn't seem right to simply refuse to touch him when he was hurt.

She didn't have any open wounds, she reminded herself. Of course the damned things were almost like viruses. They could slither through the pores of her skin, but Lynx was wounded. It seemed unlikely they would abandon him when he had wounds if that was what they were designed for and attack her even if Raven was wrong.

"We need a medical kit," she said more to herself than them. "Better yet, a medic. He lost a lot of blood."

"Which is why he is unconscious," Raven said dryly. He reached past her hand even as he spoke, however, and grasped something protruding from the wound on Lynx's back. When he pulled it out, Nika saw it was a flattened bullet. Her stomach lurched.

"The nanos have pushed this one out."

Nika stared at the bullet he dropped. "Why's it flattened?" she asked blankly.

He flicked a look at her. "Titanium chassis."

Nika sent him a sharp look, but she didn't argue with him. It was hard to argue with that in any case. It sent her into confusion again, though. Every time she'd convinced herself they weren't robots it seemed something gave that the lie.

He didn't feel like a robot. He didn't act a robot. None of them did. She just didn't know what to think. It made her belly cringe with sympathetic pain, though, to scrub the dried blood off of his back.

He had to feel pain, regardless. He was part flesh and blood. Didn't that mean nerves had to go with that?

Maybe it didn't, but she still felt sympathy for the pain she thought he might be

feeling. The wounds looked god-awful. She saw he had another one through his side near his waist and a third in the calf of one leg. How the hell had he managed to keep running with that, she wondered?

She was glad to see the wounds had stopped bleeding. She hoped that was a good thing. She could tell Raven and Con both thought she was a little off her rocker to be bathing his wounds, but she found it made her feel better to think she might be doing something to make him feel a little more comfortable.

That lasted until he began to come around and she glanced at his face to discover that he was looking at her strangely. She felt her cheeks flush with color. "I thought it might feel better to get the blood off," she said lamely.

He studied her a long moment and finally rolled onto his side and glanced at Raven and Con. "How long was I out?" he asked in a voice roughened with pain, Nika thought.

"Long enough for a bath," Raven said dryly, straightening abruptly. "If there's water, I think I'll make use of it."

Con stood and followed Raven. Nika watched them, discovering in the process that half the men who'd come in were standing around naked or half naked. Jolted by the discovery, she simply stared at them for several moments until it finally sank in that they'd used the men's room to clean up.

She'd never seen so much beautiful male flesh in her life!

And that included the flesh lying in front of her although she'd tried really hard not to notice. It seemed ... wrong to have her mind in the gutter when the poor man was wounded so badly.

She discovered she still had his full attention when she dragged her gaze from the others to look at him again. "Feeling better?" she asked since she felt uncomfortable and couldn't think of anything else to say.

His lips twisted wryly. "I would feel better if I hadn't gotten my bath while I was unable to enjoy it."

It took a moment for that to sink in. Nika couldn't decide whether to be amused or irritated when it did. "I guess all my worry about your wounds was wasted," she retorted tartly.

He frowned. "Why were you worried?" he asked curiously.

Nika was taken aback. "You were hurt ... are hurt. Seriously."

"You mean, if I was human you would've worried?" he asked slowly.

Nika felt a flash of anger, not at him, but at the company. Even if he was a cyborg, didn't that make him almost half human? Part human? And didn't that warrant treating him with humanity? Evidently, not to those bastards! "You're wounded. You were unconscious, bleeding. Common decency, my *own* humanity, demanded a recognition of your needs! No, I didn't mean *if* you were. You're a living being! You felt pain. I was worried you were hurt badly and needed attention. Obviously, the nanos took care of it and I'm glad ... even though those things scare the shit out of me and make my skin crawl!"

He looked surprised, confused, privately pleased, and then amused. "I'm a cyborg. I was born in a lab."

The comment made Nika feel abruptly nauseated. She still didn't know if he actually was a cyborg or not, but even if he was, it suddenly seemed horrible to imagine

waking up for the first time, ever, and finding oneself in a lab. If he wasn't ... well, that was almost inconceivably heinous. She was inclined to think the men in power, filthy, stinking rich big business men, were the worst of mankind—self-absorbed, self-serving, greedy, sociopaths with god complexes and it was still hard to comprehend how they could think such a thing was alright. “And it’s alright with you that you’re treated like ... nothing?”

Anger flickered in his eyes. She realized she’d insulted him. “We are elite fighting machines—the best on the market.”

The obvious pride in his voice made her feel worse. She supposed he had reason to feel that pride. It was clearly true. Robo-tech certainly seemed to think so, and the government, and yet it was a hell of a thing that he had nothing else—didn’t even really have that anymore! And it was awful that he’d never had anything else and that sympathy was something he’d clearly never experienced, any kind of empathy at all. “Obviously, but doesn’t it bother you that you have nothing else?”

“There are plenty of humans who don’t have that much,” he said coldly.

Nika sighed irritably. “Never mind. I didn’t mean to insult you. I just ... think what they did was wrong.”

He caught her hand when she started to rise. She saw his face was grim when she glanced at him sharply. “What did they do?”

Nika felt a wave of cold wash over her. She’d gotten too wrapped up in the ‘wrongs’ she thought Bio-H-tech had committed to think about what she might be giving away. “I doubt I know as much as you do,” she said finally. “Why don’t you tell me? Don’t tell me they blew up the whole building just because they detected an intruder! That’s a little overkill, wouldn’t you say?”

“How do you know they blew up the building?”

“I saw it blow. I sure as hell didn’t plant explosives in it, or set a fire that could’ve set off a chemical explosion or *any* kind of explosion. I went in, grabbed what I was sent for, and got out as fast as I could. And I’m not buying the rigmarole they gave the media about a power station just suddenly, coincidentally blowing up right after I was there.”

Of course she had pressed that button, she thought guiltily, but she couldn’t believe it was anything more than a data dump. It would be insane, and suicidal, to put a total destruct button on the console of the control center when it was at the heart of the complex. Something like that would, surely, be situated at a safe distance from ground zero?

He didn’t look convinced, but, to her relief, he let her go. She retreated to the spot she’d picked for herself and settled again, trying to convince herself that it was just paranoia that she seemed to have the attention of most, if not all, of the men. It was probably just her own acute awareness of them that made it seem that way to her.

She hoped.

Raven distracted her when he came out of the men’s room a few minutes later. He was bare chested, his tunic tied by the arms at his waist and his trousers rode low enough to give her a view of his belly that made her insides quiver.

How bizarre was it that she could look at a man with black feathered wings growing out his back and have fucking on her mind?

Alright, so her job and the trials of life in general dominated her time and she

hadn't been around anything attractive of the male persuasion in a long, long time! Especially not anything that looked half as good as these guys did!

She would've liked to think it was also because she was used to being around people that seemed half-stoned and in a fog and that their obvious intelligence and alertness had caught her interest. She couldn't recall that there was anything about either that she'd found particularly pleasant, intriguing, or refreshing, though. It actually unnerved the hell out of her that they were so quick to notice every little slip of the tongue when she wasn't used to that at all! True, she did have to watch herself closely around her employers, but she spent as little time in their company as possible and kept chitchat to the bare minimum.

She supposed she would have found it more enjoyable to be around such intelligent, alert men if she didn't have something to hide, but she was really uneasy about them finding the file copy on her and learning what was on it.

Maybe Whitaker was right and hadn't been lying about it being garbage, but she couldn't imagine Bio-H-Tech trying to erase all the evidence if it wasn't the real deal. It had been stolen. They couldn't exactly present it as evidence without implicating themselves. If it was bullshit and they pointed the authorities toward Bio-H-Tech, then the company would have everything in order and the authorities would come down on Robo-tech.

The more she thought about it and observed and interacted with the men, the more convinced she was that they weren't robots at all. They were very likely enhanced with robotics—a dangerous thing by itself! They were clearly not entirely human—another unnerving prospect! They were going to want to kill somebody when they found out they were hybrids and she didn't especially want to be the bearer of that kind of bad tidings.

They appeared to be surprisingly well-adjusted considering they'd been conceived and grown in a lab and completely programmed, without any sort of interaction with other living beings until they'd emerged from their growing pods and been sent out to kill. She had the uneasy feeling, though, that all of that was already breaking down. They hadn't been designed to interact. They hadn't been prepared for it. She was no scientist, but she knew a pretty good bit about human nature. She thought they were rather like walking time-bombs. Sooner or later, they were going to completely understand and they were liable to blow. She thought she would be more amazed if they didn't than if they did.

She sure as hell didn't want to be the closest to hand when that happened!

The men settled together in a group when Con and Raven emerged. They didn't make any attempt either to include or exclude her so she didn't feel any discomfort about listening in as they discussed possibilities.

It did occur to her, though, that the very fact that they weren't worried about her hearing was clear evidence that they had no intention of letting her go. She didn't believe for a moment that they trusted her. Maybe they thought she wasn't actually in a position to go to the authorities? She certainly didn't think so. She might have brazened it out if they'd just left her there when the cops showed up. They'd dragged her into it with them, though.

She might still be able to talk her way out of it and convince the cops that she'd been a victim, that they'd abducted her—which they had. It would put her on cop-radar, though.

It was dismaying to realize her latest escapade had ended her career even if she hadn't lost most of her equipment, but she didn't think she could go 'underground' deep enough to stay below radar after this.

Raven interrupted her dismal thoughts.

"What do we know about Eagle squad?"

Everyone turned to look at Con. He shrugged. "Nothing for certain, not even if they survived the attack. There's a possibility that they eluded the net thrown out for them and a possibility they were wiped out. None of us had weapons and, as far as I could see, they'd walked into a trap. We heard the fire fight, figured it was one of the squads in trouble and headed over to see if we could help them out. We managed to come up behind the men that had them pinned down and did a blitz assault and retreated when it got too hot. It might've been enough of a diversion to get them out, but we were all too busy trying to fight our way out once we got in to see what happened.

"Hawk and his men, fortunately, showed up and helped cover our retreat. We lost track of Eagle's squad. I suppose whether or not they were taken depends on if the assault team planned to take them, but I didn't see anything to make me think they had any intentions beyond wiping them out. Like I said, none of us had weapons. I doubt Eagle squad launched the first strike. We were all trying to keep a low profile."

Shock and outrage erupted in Nika when she heard that. She'd been wavering between sympathy for Lynx and the feeling that Cham had actually provoked the decision to use deadly force when he'd shot and killed or at least wounded the men outside her apartment. It what Con said was true, though, it sounded like the decision to use deadly force to contain these men had been made before their first encounter.

Maybe Cham and the others already knew that and that was why he'd fired on them to start with?

She wondered, briefly, if she was trying to make excuses for them because she was inclined to take their side in the situation. She realized almost immediately, though, that the company had probably panicked when they discovered their deadly army was loose and no longer under their control. Maybe they'd thought attacking them would drive them back to the company. Maybe they'd thought they were too dangerous once they lost control of them. She didn't know that, but she didn't doubt what Con had said.

"I think we're going to have to stay on the move until we can get rid of the locators," Raven said.

"I left the signal for them and a sign I think will give them a general idea of where to find us."

The men glanced at Cham when he spoke. Raven studied him a long moment, his expression grim. "I don't like it, but I still think we need to move. We're likely to have another confrontation if we stay here long."

Nika hesitated, but it seemed to her that it was probably better all the way around if she helped the men. "I know of a guy that could do it," she volunteered. "I don't know that he'd be willing to help, but he could if we could convince him. He used to be a surgeon—well, I guess he still is. He was replaced by a robot, so he isn't really inclined to like them. He got rid of my locator chip, though."

Raven, she saw, was looking at her dubiously. She wasn't certain if it was because the man she'd mentioned was human or not, but irritation flickered through her. "He's not young anymore, but he was considered a good surgeon in the old days and, like

I said, he did me.”

Raven frowned. “You had a locator?”

Surprise flickered through Nika. “Everybody gets one at birth. You didn’t know that?”

She could see from the way the men were looking at one another that it was not only news to them, but they were having a hard time believing it. That irritated her more. “They’ve been doing it for years. All they had to do was convince everybody that it was a security feature to help locate them if they were in an accident or whatever and they voted the law in. Not that it hasn’t been used for that—finding people trapped in buildings that had collapsed, locating children that have been abducted—but the government doesn’t actually give a shit, you know. They wanted it so that they always knew where everybody was at all times—to protect themselves, not the citizens.”

Chapter Seven

Nika didn't see much point in objecting when the platoon got up and moved on. She knew Raven was right anyway, that they were bound to have another unpleasant confrontation if they stayed where they were. Very likely the cops had fallen back to regroup and form another battle plan. They might be waiting for reinforcements, but they *were* going to come in again and they'd be ready to shoot first and ask questions later—always assuming that hadn't been the attitude to begin with.

In any case, she didn't want to make her own weaknesses any more obvious than she had to. She hadn't had much sleep before she'd taken on her assignment, though. She'd tried, but she'd been too wired to rest while she could and she hadn't had much chance for it since.

She was still wired, too uncertain of their intentions to really rest, but she thought dropping to sleep in the middle of a kidnapping was probably telling.

It made it rougher that the light she'd brought with her began to dim after the first mile and went out halfway through the next. The darkness surrounding them only increased the urge and desire to curl up somewhere and sleep and when the light went out and she was completely blind she had to add that to tiredness.

Raven had been keeping step with her like a guard dog. She didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing. When her light went off and she froze, too blind even to want to try to keep going in the darkness, he caught her arm and tugged at her. She didn't know what his intentions were until she felt him curl an arm beneath her knees. She grabbed blindly for support when she felt herself lifted, managed to catch him on the end of his nose, and finally found his shoulders.

"Sorry. I can't see," she muttered.

He sniffed. "Remind me next time to put your hands where I want them," he said dryly. "I think you bloodied my nose."

"I didn't!" Nika said doubtfully. "I didn't hit you that hard."

He grunted. "Good thing it was an accident. It hurt like a son-of-a-bitch. If you'd meant to punch me I don't think you could've caught me more squarely."

It was impulse that made Nika follow the curve of his shoulder and neck to his face and find the abused member. It wasn't until she had that she became self-conscious about what she'd done. She swallowed a little convulsively. "It doesn't feel broken," she murmured.

"It isn't. It's just throbbing."

The comment made her imagination run wild. She quashed the urge to ask him if anything else was throbbing, deciding it was probably not a good idea to remind him of that kiss.

Although

She shouldn't have enjoyed it so thoroughly, she told herself sternly. She was in a hell of a predicament and they were behind it. Of course, she supposed it could be

argued that it was entirely her fault. She'd set off the chain of events that had led up to it, but that didn't change the fact that these were very dangerous cyborgs, made more so by the fact that they seemed to have so many human traits. She didn't know if it would be worse if they behaved completely like humans, or machines. Either way, they were programmed killers and probably cold blooded enough to kiss her, or fuck her, and turn right around and twist her head off if they decided she wasn't of any use to them.

Luckily, she'd thought of a carrot to dangle for them. Surely they wouldn't do anything unpleasant when she'd offered to take them to someone who could rid them of the locators? Of course, Dr. Madison was probably going to refuse and then they'd do something horrible to him, but he wasn't an idiot. He wouldn't provoke them, she assured herself. Once he realized just how dangerous they were, he'd do what they wanted and then

Maybe the cyborgs would kill both of them. They weren't human, though, she reminded herself. She didn't think they would kill without reason. They hadn't shown the tendency to do so yet, and they'd been provoked.

Of course, she reminded herself, they'd thought they were outnumbered and outgunned back in her apartment and from what she'd overheard the men that had chased them in to the tunnels hadn't fared nearly as well against the two squads they'd met up with.

Nika's unwillingness to get too cozy lasted until she couldn't keep her eyes open any more. The moment she closed them to relieve the burning, she began to sink toward exhausted slumber. After nodding off a couple of times, she shifted in his arms and settled her cheek on his hard shoulder and dropped into oblivion.

The flickering lights as they approached the next station roused her sometime later, but she was still too tired to give up the little comfort she had just to show her independence.

"What do you think? Stop here or keep going?" Con asked.

Raven hesitated and she sensed that he was studying her face. "Let's see what's available. "Bull—you and Cham check out the facilities and see if we at least have water."

"We need rations. We aren't going to hold out down here for very long without any kind of supplies even if water seems to be available."

"I know. I've been trying to decide if it would be better to lay low until things quiet down some or send out a scavenging crew. Every time we pop up, though, it's going to increase our odds that they'll catch up with us."

"I don't think we can lay low long enough for things quiet down without any supplies at all," Con said grimly. "It would be different if we had even a little. We could ration it, but thanks to the poison gas we're weak as be damned. I'm feeling hollow already."

Raven nodded. "You're right. We managed to get something from Nika's place, but she didn't have much. So we aren't in much better shape than the rest of you. I guess we need to camp here a while and send somebody for supplies."

Bull returned. "We've got facilities. I checked out that car at the end of the platform, too. It's dusty like everything else, but most of the seats are still in pretty good shape. It'll be more comfortable than the platform. Why don't you let me take Nika down there to rest?"

Raven tensed, but after a moment he handed her to Bull. “Stay with her and keep an eye on her.”

So much for thinking they were actually pretty nice fellows, Nika thought sleepily. She’d roused enough, though, that she wasn’t particularly comfortable about being carried. “I can see to walk now,” she said.

“If you did that I wouldn’t get to carry you,” Bull responded.

“I didn’t figure it was a treat,” she retorted wryly. “I must weigh a ton.”

He held her out as if trying to judge. “A shade less than that. About one fifteen, I’m guessing.”

Discomfort wafted through her. “One ten,” she said irritably.

He cocked a tawny eyebrow at her and she felt her face heat. “Alright, damn it! One fifteen.”

He chuckled. “Why would you want to lie about five pounds?”

Because she weighed one twenty and that was ten pounds more than she ought to weigh!

He set her down on the steps of the car. She felt like she’d just climbed out of a swimming pool after floating for an hour, so heavy it took an effort to climb the steps. The car was dark, but there was enough illumination from the platform to find her way. Dust tickled at her nostrils even though she couldn’t see well enough to determine how heavy a layer coated the inside. She was too tired to care, though. In any case, he’d said there was water and she’d brought a change of clothes. She didn’t have to *stay* filthy even if she had to sleep in the dirt.

She discovered almost as soon as she settled across two seats that she was too chilly to be comfortable even after drawing up in a ball to try to conserve her heat. Bull settled across from her, stretching his legs across the seat and propping his back against the wall of the car. Deciding she wasn’t particularly comfortable with her butt turned up to him, she sat up and turned around.

“There’s a longer seat across the back where you could stretch out,” Bull said after a moment.

Nika considered it, but she didn’t think she really needed a longer seat. She was too chilled even to want to stretch out. “I’m cold.”

He got up. “Come on. Let’s move to the back.”

Shrugging, Nika got up and led the way. He was right. There was a longer seat across the back, but it wasn’t any warmer. When she’d lain down, though, he told her to move over and settled beside her, sandwiching her between himself and the seatback. She should’ve objected, but he was warm and almost the moment he settled against her thaw set in. After a little shifting, they managed to get relatively comfortable, although she suspected Bull was probably hanging half off the seat despite the fact that she was plastered tightly between him and the back of the seat. “Warmer?” he asked huskily.

She was, but she wasn’t exactly comfortable. “Better,” she murmured, deciding to try to feign sleep before he got any ideas. She didn’t have to fake it long. She hadn’t slept nearly long enough and as soon as she got warm and relatively comfortable, she dropped off again.

* * * *

Bull hated like hell asking, for a host of reasons, but it had been driving him up the wall since he'd seen Raven kiss Nika. "What was it like?"

Raven glanced at him absently, a frown of confusion knitting his dark brows. "What was what like?" he asked blankly.

Bull felt his face heat. He glanced around to make sure nobody was close enough to hear them. "You know. When you ... uh ... " He stopped, floundering for the word for it, if indeed there was a word specifically for that. Unfortunately, if there was, it eluded him. "When you ... uh ... sexed her mouth."

It lightened his own discomfort a little when he saw Raven's face darken. He thought part of it was anger that he'd asked, but he could see Raven wasn't a lot more comfortable about it than he was. "I've been trying not to think about it," he muttered, his gaze zeroing in on Nika where she sat resting with her back against the wall.

Surprise flickered through Bull. It had happened three days ago. He knew why it was still on *his* mind. *He* hadn't experienced it. He didn't know what to think of the suggestion that it had been nagging at Raven all that time, too. Disappointment flickered through him, though, since he couldn't help but wonder if Raven had been trying to forget it because he'd found it unpleasant in some way.

It sure as hell hadn't looked like anything *he* would want to forget. "How come?"

Raven glanced at him sharply, making it clear he'd been thinking out loud. He frowned. "It isn't something I want to share," he said tightly.

Anger flickered to life. "I wasn't asking you to give me a detailed report," Bull said stiffly, although he'd hoped for an analysis. "I was just curious about what it felt like ... putting your mouth on hers."

"If you want to know then try it yourself," Raven growled. The moment he suggested it, though, he regretted it, because a wave of resentment rolled over him and a strange uneasiness. He'd spent almost every moment since reliving it and wanting to repeat it and a lot more.

Bull reddened. "I don't fucking know how," he muttered.

"You just think you don't," Raven retorted, but then his own doubts surfaced. Truthfully, he'd had the uncomfortable suspicion that he hadn't done it right. He'd been guided by his instincts, but how did he know they were urging him accurately? He wasn't used to attempting things he hadn't been completely instructed in, and, although he'd found the vids he'd watched helpful, there hadn't been any actual instructions in the damned things. He'd seen the men put their mouths on the women, but he hadn't seen or really been able to tell what they did once they'd made the connection. He'd simply done what he'd wanted to do, taste her and explore her mouth with his tongue. She'd seemed more than a little dazed when he'd let her go. At the time, he'd thought she must have enjoyed it as much as he had, might even want more as he did, but she'd stared at him uneasily ever since if he got too close. The uncomfortable suspicion was growing that he'd done something wrong.

Or maybe she just didn't want *him*?

She'd made it pretty damned clear that she didn't *do* cyborgs! He hadn't been certain of what she meant by the comment at the time, but it had been born in upon him when he had 'sexed' her mouth. Sex. That was what she'd meant. He knew it and it pissed him off that she didn't want him just because of what he was. He almost thought it wouldn't have been as bad if it had been him in particular.

Maybe, and maybe that would've made him feel a hell of a lot worse, he thought wryly.

"I didn't mean that," Bull said stiffly, although he wasn't sure he would know what to do if he could maneuver her into allowing it. "I meant I don't know how to convince her to let me."

"I can't help you there," Raven said dryly. "I just grabbed her to make sure she didn't give us away. I went with the impulse."

Bull knew that, or he'd at least suspected it. It wasn't helpful. It seemed to him that she'd been a lot more skittish since. He hadn't been presented with a similar opportunity and he hadn't been able to concoct one that seemed even slightly reasonable to him. Somehow, he felt that it wouldn't work to just ask her outright, although he'd been wrestling with the urge to do just that.

Mostly, he'd been wrestling with it because there was something about her manner that made him suspect she would rebuff him and he discovered he was really reluctant, as badly as he wanted to get his hands on her, to risk being rejected in front of the other men. It would amuse them, he didn't doubt.

Ordinarily, that possibility wouldn't have bothered him. He supposed that was because, even when he fucked up and they laughed about it, he didn't feel any real doubts about his abilities. This wasn't the same. He already had way too many doubts that he was adequate to do what he wanted to do. If he tried and fell on his face, he didn't want every-fucking-body to know!

Frustrated, he finally left Raven, moving away to consider the situation yet again and see if he could think up a way to try it or to convince her to let him try. When he saw Lynx approach her and settle on the floor beside her, though, he decided to approach her himself. If anybody was going to get to sex her, gods damn it, it was going to be him!

She looked surprised and uneasy when he settled on the other side of her and sent Lynx a challenging look.

Lynx looked annoyed—thoroughly pissed off actually.

It made Bull feel a little better.

After a brief pause, Nika turned to Lynx, making it clear what ploy he'd used for approaching her.

"I've never gone this way," she said. "I don't know how long it'll take to get there ... could be a while if we run into another cave-in and have to find a way around or dig through like we did the other one."

"Well, at least we don't have to worry about an attack from the rear," Lynx said.

"There is that." She hesitated. "I know you guys don't trust me. I get it, believe me. I still think it would make things a lot easier if you'd let me go up top and find the doctor and talk to him. Maybe I could bring him here."

Lynx frowned. Seizing the opportunity, Bull pointed out the obvious problem with that. "He wouldn't have the facilities to do the operation. Anyway—like Raven said, they're after you, too. It isn't a matter of trusting you or not trusting you."

"Which you don't," Nika said dryly.

Which was true and Bull couldn't deny it.

"Why do they call you Bull, anyway?" Nika asked, changing the subject abruptly.

Bull looked at her in surprise. "Because I am. Actually, Bison. I guess Bull's easier to say. I don't know. I never thought about it."

Nika stared at him for a long moment. Slowly, anger began to gleam in her eyes. Surprised at it, he considered what he'd said, but he couldn't think of anything he'd said she could take offense at.

"They didn't bother to name any of you, did they?"

He discovered he was both surprised and offended at the question. He glanced at Lynx. "They did name us," he said stiffly. "Our squad is Raven, me—Bison, Chameleon—we call him Cham for short—and Lynx.

"Condor, Komodo, Grizzly, and Panther are squad two. Hawk, Chameleon Two, Brahma, and Puma are squad three and the missing squad, four, is Eagle, Kodiak, Croc or Crocodile, and Jaguar."

Nika studied him for a long moment and looked away, curbing the temptation to inform him that those weren't names. She swallowed against the knot of pity that rose in her throat. He'd already been insulted at the suggestion that he wasn't considered important enough to be given a name. She thought he'd probably take a lot more exception to her pity.

Not that she thought they were in need of it. In a way, they'd been far more 'blessed' than cursed. They had strengths and abilities no human did, and they'd been derived from the very animals they were named for. Bull was literally as strong as a bull, clearly more powerful, strength-wise, than most of the others—except maybe Brahma, the other bull, despite the fact that all of them were probably twice as strong as a human if not more. The bird men—Raven, Condor, Hawk, and, she didn't doubt, Eagle—she supposed since they had DNA from birds of prey—had keener hearing and sight besides the ability to fly—She was guessing the wings weren't just for show! She didn't know exactly what exceptional abilities the Chameleons or the other reptiles had, but she was sure the DNA had been used for some particular abilities it could add to them. And the cat-men—well, she'd seen the five inch titanium plated 'claws' Lynx could extend and retract. She thought they were probably useful for more than climbing, but they certainly worked exceptionally well for that!

The scientists playing gods, she thought with disgust! Not that pretty much everyone alive today didn't owe their very existence to the scientists! She was deeply appreciative of their efforts to keep mankind from going extinct once the discoveries of earlier scientists had been corrupted by the companies profiting from them to the point that it had brought the world crumbling around them.

She didn't *blame* the scientists. She didn't believe most of them had ever had anything but the best of intentions. It wasn't their fault that nearly every discovery they made could be corrupted to cause harm by the greed of men who didn't know how to do anything but turn a profit.

It was still horrible to her that these men had been created purely for profit, with no consideration for what was being done to living, sentient beings.

Maybe it was just a fluke and they actually *had* set out only to design superior cyborgs and had succeeded beyond anything any of them had thought possible. She still didn't understand the clear indication of cybernetics in the men. But she was less convinced that they were cyborgs at all and more convinced all the time that they were pure hybrid humans, without any more claim to being cyborgs than any other human that had been given a cybernetic limb or organ to replace something lost.

"You can call me Bison if you'd rather," Bull said after a long moment, breaking

into her thoughts.

She flicked a look at him and paused to study his face. She'd been at pains to keep her distance since it was abundantly clear that all of them had fucking on their minds. It wasn't that she didn't find them physically appealing. She felt like she was in a seriously precarious position, though, and encouraging any of them seemed like a really bad idea.

She'd been with them a few days now, though, and they didn't seem inclined to simply throw her down and take what they wanted and she'd begun to think she'd misjudged them.

They weren't animals, regardless of their genetics or their programming.

Bull, she saw without a lot of surprise, had a nice face—appealing even if it wasn't entirely human. She couldn't actually pinpoint what it was about his face that didn't look quite human, in point of fact, and wondered if it wasn't just her imagination that had made her think that because she knew what he was. “You don't really look like a Bison either,” she said smiling faintly.

He looked surprised and more than a little confused ... and suspicious that there was a hidden insult in the remark.

She decided to ignore it. “I suppose Bill would come closest to what everybody else calls you and lessen confusion, but I don't really like that name and it doesn't seem to fit you either.”

He frowned. “You want to call me something else?”

Identity crisis! He was going to have that anyway once he found out, Nika thought, feeling her heart sink. “I could call you handsome. You wouldn't mind that, would you?” she asked teasingly.

He blushed. It was so cute to see such a huge, brawny man blush that she felt the insane impulse to kiss him.

“You can call me handsome,” Lynx offered, sounding downright peeved.

Nika glanced at him and chuckled. “I'm more likely to call you conceit!”

He frowned as if she'd popped him and she felt guilty for teasing him. “I was just teasing,” she said more gently.

He seemed to wrestle with something but an assessing gleam had entered his eyes that made Nika uneasy. “You think I have reason for conceit?”

She bit her lip. “That's blatant fishing if I ever heard it! You must know you're handsome!”

He didn't, though. She could see that and realized immediately that he wouldn't. How could he possibly know if he had any appeal to women at all? When would he have gotten the opportunity to find out? They'd been in stasis when she went into the lab and since they were a deep, dark secret, she had to suppose they hadn't been *out* of the damned things very many times!

God! The more she found out about them, the worse she felt!

“Does that mean you would or you wouldn't consider doing those things with me that we watched on your vids?”

A wave of shock went through her.

Alright, a wave of heat, too!

She tried to decide if she was also outraged and insulted and realized she really wasn't. She didn't have any problem with sex. She considered herself a healthy female

with a healthy interest in it, and no reason not to indulge when she felt like it.

Except for the potential for danger in this case!

"I was going to ask her," Bull said indignantly before she could think up a response.

Her uneasiness increased, but she couldn't help but be amused, and flattered, despite her earlier realization. It was actually damned appealing to consider initiating them. She didn't think she could handle the entire pack, though! And offering these two was liable to put her in the position of having more applications for sex than she felt like she wanted to deal with!

"I'll think about it," she hedged.

Bull frowned. "With him or me?"

She shook her head at him. "You guys need some practice on flirtation and seduction," she said wryly. "Not that I mind plain speaking most of the time, but there's a lot to be said for spontaneity."

Both of them settled to thinking that over, which made her *more* uneasy!

"You mean like when Raven sexed your mouth?" Bull asked, demanding an explanation she didn't really want to give them.

Nika felt her face redden. She'd actually been trying hard to forget about her reaction to that. She wrestled with her conscience, but she couldn't dismiss what she suspected to be an absolute fact—that none of them had any inkling at all of how to interact with a woman. It wasn't just a matter of no sexual experience. She thought between their natural instincts—and they certainly didn't seem to be lacking there!—and the porn vids they'd studied they probably had a fair notion of what to do and a desperate desire to experience it! Short of flirtation and seduction being a part of their personality, though, they couldn't possibly have had any experience at either.

It made her feel odd. Truthfully, she didn't have that much experience in that department herself! It was weird to think of herself as a 'teacher', to even consider doing it. Yet, it had an appeal she couldn't deny. She thought it was partly because she just felt so badly for them, was angry about the way they'd been treated. That wasn't all of it, though, and she knew it. She thought some of it, oddly enough, was the appeal of nurturing.

She'd never actually felt needed before and she rather liked that.

"Kiss," she said a little absently. "He kissed me."

"That isn't sex?"

Poor baby, she thought, studying the confusion on Bull's face. "It's foreplay."

He looked more confused instead of less. Nika was starting to feel a little uncomfortable. Beyond that, and despite the fact that she was willing to admit it had a certain appeal, the guys still made her really uneasy. Granted, she empathized with their plight—a lot—all the way around, but they could be seriously fucked up in the head even though they didn't appear to be. She certainly hadn't been around them enough to feel complete trust.

Some people might think she was a daredevil considering her line of work, but she hadn't actually gotten in to spying because she was an adrenaline junky or for the thrill of it. She'd gotten in to it because she just damned well didn't feel like living under the government's thumb like the majority of breeding aged women did and because there was pretty much nothing else a woman could do to earn her keep any more. The jobs not

taken by robots were pretty much reserved for men. She wasn't against the idea of having a baby or more than one. She actually wanted to. She just didn't like the government's terms.

The government had decided to subsidize repopulation about twenty years earlier. The super volcano in Yellowstone that had erupted in '12 had depopulated a huge segment of the interior. Between the eruption and the decade long deep freeze it had set off it had cut the population of the US by 25%, global population by 50% because so many people had starved. The earthquake that had taken half of California in '15 and the tsunami that hit New York City just the following year had killed almost as many as the eruption and the little ice age combined.

As awful as that was, the natural disasters hadn't just cut the population. They'd laid waste to a considerable amount of real estate. Beyond that, the seas had risen enough to swallow up everything that had once been ocean front and the ocean front was now considerably further inland than it had been fifty years earlier—which was why the US was one of the countries battling for new territories.

Under the circumstances, Nika didn't think that the US needed to be so worried about repopulating. There really weren't enough places to live, enough jobs, or enough food as it was.

Not that simply passing the bill to subsidize breeding had helped until they broke down and opened up the food reserves. Women who didn't get enough to eat, didn't ovulate, and couldn't get pregnant.

"It's a little complicated," she answered Bull finally. "Sometimes people just kiss because they feel attracted or they like somebody. When they kiss like Raven kissed me, though, it's usually because they want to have sex and ... well, you have to sort of warm up to it. Uh—the woman does anyway. I guess sometimes the guys do, too. I guess you could say it's sort of like getting to know each other. You try the kiss and then you know if you want more."

"What if you know before the kiss?"

Nika bit her lip. She struggled with her amusement, but she couldn't help but chuckle. "Ok, you're talking from the man's viewpoint here. They always know they want sex. Women aren't always that sure, though. They want to be convinced. Sometimes the kiss convinces her and sometimes it convinces her she doesn't want sex at all."

"Maybe we should skip the kissing," Lynx observed.

It took all Nika could do to keep from laughing that time. Clearly he didn't want to take a chance on discouraging her if a kiss might do that! "But sometimes the kissing is the most fun." And, unfortunately, sometimes the least ... and it went downhill from there.

Lynx sent her a disbelieving look that was so totally man-like she began to wonder if she'd been hoodwinked—or maybe convinced herself they had no experience when they had plenty. "I'll think about it, ok? This really isn't the time or place."

Both of them looked angry and disappointed, but to do them justice neither one of them were ugly about it. She gave them points for that!

"That's the part that worries me," Bull said, clearly struggling to keep his voice neutral. "If I get my head blown off tomorrow, I will have missed out completely."

For a moment, Nika thought she was going to cry. "Don't say things like that!"

she said crossly. “It’s bad luck!”

Bull looked amused. “It isn’t more likely, or less, only because I acknowledge the possibility.” He thought about it. “In fact, it’s a good reminder to be damned careful.”

If it had been anyone else, or different circumstances, she would simply have dismissed the comment as a play for sympathy. Unfortunately, she knew better, especially when Lynx had been brought in with so many holes in him. He’d recovered amazing swiftly and well—not that he was completely healed, but he hardly seemed to be suffering any kind of pain and he wasn’t as pale as death like he had been.

The memory was still way too clear in her mind, though, to lie to herself and convince herself it wasn’t likely anything would happen to either one of them.

It wasn’t her ‘job’ to initiate them—or worry about them!

She was pretty sure if she hadn’t already been attracted to both of them she wouldn’t have had any trouble ignoring the broad hint for a sympathy fuck—because she wouldn’t have felt any sympathy.

She was still debating the matter when both men got up to leave. That clinched it. She got up, caught the hand of both and looked around for a possibility of comfort and/or privacy. The dark tunnel that led away in both directions from the station where they were camped would certainly offer privacy, but no comfort and the dark tunnels gave her the creeps. Tugging at their hands, she headed for the lady’s room.

To her surprise, she felt a little resistance in both of them, but they allowed her to lead them away. They looked more disconcerted, to her mind, than eager once they’d entered the dimly lit room, but they dismissed whatever reservations they had when she released their hands and reached up to unfasten the closure on her suit. She had their undivided attention from that moment on.

Truth be told, Nika was more than a little nervous herself. To say she’d never done anything quite like what she planned to do was an understatement, but she reminded herself that she’d fantasized about having sex with two men at once for years. Now was her chance. If she was right and neither of them had any experience, any knowledge beyond what they’d watched on her media center, then it seemed unlikely they would even know that wasn’t the ‘typical’ sort of thing.

Naturally, that thought made her feel a little guilty, as if she was taking unfair advantage, but she dismissed it. It was a favor for a favor, she told herself. They wanted to experience sex with a woman and she wanted to indulge her private fantasy. There was no reason why they couldn’t all enjoy themselves and put it down to at least one pleasant interlude in the middle of a nightmare situation.

And if they died tomorrow

Chapter Eight

Death wasn't something Nika wanted to think about, not in association with them and certainly not with herself.

It occurred to her for the first time as she finished removing her clothes and straightened to look at them that there might have been another reason altogether that she'd felt the impulse for intimacy. She'd been trying really hard not to think about this situation ending with all of them on a slab in a morgue—or any of them.

They were overwhelmingly outnumbered, though. Without any wish to do so, they'd taken on the entire status quo. It was one thing to buck the system and thumb your nose at them quietly. To become the focus of their determination to maintain their world as they saw fit was a death sentence.

Shivering, she shook the thought off, tucking it as far to the back of her mind as she could. She could see from the glazed looks on both men's faces that nothing of that sort was currently on their minds and she didn't want it overshadowing her experience either.

Since neither one seemed inclined to make the first move, she moved closer to Bull, who was the closest to her and looked up at him. Meeting his gaze, she reached up and cupped her hands along his cheeks, drawing him toward her as she went up on her toes and lifted her head.

His hands clamped almost painfully on either side of her waist and for a moment she thought he meant to push her away. Instead, he merely held her, neither pulling her closer or pushing her away. She had to strain the last few inches to press her lips to his. The moment she made contact, however, it seemed to thaw his state of frozen indecision.

His fingers tightened, digging into her and his arms contracted, drawing her against his length in a rough collision. He parted his lips to engulf hers. She sucked in a shaky breath that was more relief than desire and slipped her hands from his cheeks to his shoulders to balance herself, but thoughts and doubts fled at the hungry, demanding pressure of his mouth on hers. His essence flooded her, awakening every nerve ending.

She didn't know what she'd been expecting, if anything, but she didn't think she'd anticipated the flood of pleasure that was the instant response to his scent and taste and touch. Enthralled by the pulse of welcome heat through her, she traced the inner surface of his lips with the tip of her tongue.

It was all the encouragement he needed. He speared his tongue into her mouth the second she withdrew, exploring the tender skin inside, thrusting and retreating in mock intercourse. Her heart began to gallop the moment she felt the penetration, felt the thick muscle thrusting into the cavern of her mouth and his taste and scent was magnified by the intrusion into her body.

She forgot that she was supposed to teach, that she'd more than half expected to derive pleasure only from experiencing his. The hunger she felt in him was contagious. It set fire to her, stole the strength from her muscles, set her mind to reeling in drunken

euphoria. The tremors she felt ripple through his enormous frame thrilled her until she could hardly catch her breath for the frantic hammering of her heart and the struggle of her lungs to pump the air she needed. They also intensified her awareness of his massive size, made her acutely conscious of how small she felt next to him.

For a moment, she wavered between excitement at that realization and uneasiness, but the appeal it had to her femininity couldn't be denied. It took precedence, banished the flicker of uneasiness from her mind. The broad, rippling plain of his chest pressed against hers, the thick muscled arms wrapped around her, increased her pleasure until her only regret was that she couldn't feel his skin against hers.

She thought, briefly, about pulling away long enough to undress him or demand that he undress, but she discovered she was reluctant to stop long enough to do so.

He broke the kiss almost on that thought, his breath a harsh, heated pant that puffed against her skin and lifted goosebumps. Before she could manage to lift her leaden eyelids to look at him, she felt a tug in her hair as he threaded his fingers into it.

He pulled, drawing her head back on her neck and burrowed his face against her throat, sucking at the skin. She swallowed with an effort, her mind instantly leaping away from the disappointment that he'd broken the kiss to the hope that he would continue his exploration of her throat all the way to her breasts. They ached for his touch the moment the thought occurred to her.

Briefly, disappointment flickered through her when he returned to her lips instead, and then it occurred to her that it was too much of a reach for him when she was so much shorter than he was. Searching her mind a little frantically for a means of making everything she wanted him to explore more accessible to him, she discarded the idea of the dirty floor as the lavatory popped into her mind.

It took some doing to persuade him to break the kiss, to loosen his hold on her. He looked perplexed and disappointed when she finally pulled away. It seemed to take a strenuous effort on his part to release her. She caught his hand as his arms dropped away, though, and tugged at him. He looked confused and beleaguered, but he followed her.

He looked more confused when she hopped up onto the edge of the lavatory, but the moment she lifted her legs and coiled them around his hips, pulling at him, he surged toward her eagerly.

Too eagerly. She didn't get the chance to unearth his tool. Damn it!

He used the elevation to his advantage, though, kissing her briefly on the lips again and then bending over to cover the tip of one breast with his mouth. Intent on trying to master the closure of his trousers, irritation flickered through Nika when Bull bent over and effectively eluded her efforts, but she instantly forgot all about her goal when his mouth closed over her breast. Fire shot through her, making a direct hit on her womb. It contracted almost painfully, continued to spasm with pleasure that bordered on torture as he tugged and sucked hungrily on the nipple he'd captured.

She managed to drag in a breath to keep from passing out when he lifted his head to move to the other breast. She lifted her eyelids a sliver and looked down at him as he found her other breast, feeling a thrill rush through her as she stared at the pleasure on his face, watched his mouth engulf the turgid tip of her breast.

Weak from the pleasure, she allowed her head to drop back as he pulled at her nipple, but a jolt went through her as she caught a glimpse of Lynx. She'd been so

wrapped up in the sensations pelting her from the moment she'd approached Bull, she'd completely forgotten his presence.

The look on his face as he watched them made her skin prickle all over with stinging sensation. He lifted his head after a moment and met her gaze and her heart seemed to stutter to a halt at the blazing heat in them, the hunger.

She swallowed with an effort, unable to break from the intensity of his gaze.

Bull straightened abruptly, blocking her view and recapturing her entire focus. Releasing his hold on her so suddenly that she almost tipped into the sink behind her, he grasped his trousers in shaking hands and unfastened them.

The long, thick shaft that fell out of his trousers and slapped heavily against her thigh caught her entire attention. She stared down at it open mouthed. "Oh my god!"

He froze.

She lifted her head with an effort and met the mixture of uncertainty and desperation in Bull's gaze. Swallowing convulsively a few times, she managed a crooked smile, tried to look more confident than she felt, struggling against the sudden impulse to leap from the lavatory and run. "It's ... beautiful," she said weakly.

The tension that wilted from him was so profound she felt her heart lurch. She lifted a hand to his cheek, leaning closer to kiss him. The eagerness of his kiss soothed her, built her anticipation once more. Try though she might, though, she couldn't completely close her mind to the unnerving discovery that his cock was as massive as the rest of him or the doubts that had instantly risen that she could climb that mountain of flesh.

Luckily for him, he didn't give her a lot of time to dwell on it. The moment he covered her lips again, he caught her buttocks in his hands and dragged her hips forward. His cock seemed to know the way and it flickered through her mind to wonder if it was prehensile, or heat seeking. Unfortunately, the rise of doubts in her mind had sucked up a lot of the slick, lubricating juices her body had produced for him. It didn't help that he somehow managed to pinch a fold of her skin between himself and the hole. It created an insurmountable barrier that he seemed unaware of but she was keenly, painfully conscious of.

Shoving her hand between them, she used her fingers to spread her opening for him, which was when she discovered she'd been mistaken. There was no skin in the way beyond the skin that was supposed to be there. It was simply a matter of the gateway being about half the damned sized as the battering ram trying to push through the doors.

She was still debating whether or not she could convince him to desist at this point when he managed to wedge the head inside of her. She was of the opinion that it still wasn't too late to back out. He didn't seem to share her view. In point of fact, the moment he managed to make contact, he seemed to lose his mind.

She fought her way free of his lips. "I don't think ... ooph!"

He didn't seem to notice the reluctance in her voice or the unlovely grunt he punched from her when grabbed her hips and drove her down over the post he was determined to mount her on. She held her breath, expecting to feel something tear any second, felt a flicker of relief when he lifted her slightly and then it vanished again when he thrust a second time, burrowing deeper.

"Oh god!" she gasped in a litany of distress as he jogged her up and down and her mind filled with the frightening expectation of a blowout at the unnerving expansion she

felt. It took her a few moments, under the circumstances, to realize that although he stretched her to the point of pain, she didn't feel the burn of tearing flesh. Instead, her body lubricated itself and eased his passage until he was burrowed as deeply inside of her as he could get and then anticipation flooded her and her flesh erupted with goosebumps.

She hadn't realized that she'd been digging her nails into his shoulders until he stopped, gasping for breath and she met his gaze for a long moment with a wide eyed one of her own. The ache of cramping in her fingers finally penetrated her mind as a hard wave of pleasure flooded her. The muscles along her channel fluttered around his thick flesh in response.

Bull uttered a choked sound and squeezed his eyes closed. His face twisted with the agony of intense pleasure. "Gods!" he whispered hoarsely, his voice ragged with his struggle for breath. "It feels so good inside you, Nika."

He felt wonderful inside of her, so good she could feel her body rising toward climax, felt the need to urge him to move. She moved closer, tightening her arms around him and lifted, squeezing her eyes as intense pleasure wafted through her with the movement. He released a shuttering breath, caught her hips and pushed her down over his flesh again. Her body quaked, threatening to peak, but it felt too good to let go.

He allowed her to move slowly up and down his shaft for a handful of moments and then caught her, held her still for a handful of heartbeats and then began to drive in and out of her faster and faster. She discovered she couldn't stave off the climax more than a few moments. The tension built inside of her so rapidly that she could barely catch her breath. Went it hit her, her mind went black. Shudders rippled through her. Her focus narrowed to the quakes each thrust set off. She groaned, burrowing her face along the side of Bull's neck, sucking hard at the little patch of flesh she captured with her mouth in an effort to muffle the sounds she was dimly aware of.

She felt the jerk of his cock as his own body exploded in ecstasy, felt the deep shudders that went through him and heat of his seed as it bathed her womb, and a profound sense of bliss enveloped her. She felt herself sinking against him as her own climax waned, taking consciousness to the brink of nothingness.

He seemed in no rush to release her even when she felt the last of the shudders raking him cease, felt faint tremors of weakness begin to shake him. Reluctant herself, she finally lifted her head and studied his face for confirmation that he'd enjoyed her body as much as she'd enjoyed his.

The look in his eyes shook her.

"Give her to me," Lynx said, his voice hoarse and at the same time grim with possessiveness and determination.

The intrusion jolted both of them. Nika glanced at Lynx and back at Bull. She saw dawning anger in his eyes. Uneasiness flickered through her at the aggression she abruptly discovered in both of them.

She pulled away from Bull, struggling to force her sluggish mind into producing a way to head off an unpleasant confrontation. It hit her forcefully, though, just how badly she'd blundered when she'd invited them both.

With an effort, she shook off the reluctance she felt to release Bull and go to Lynx, the dismay that filled her that she'd felt something she'd never expected to feel and that she was destroying something fragile and precious. "I promised him," she reminded Bull, reminding herself at the same time. "I offered the same to him that I offered you."

Something flickered in his eyes. Nika tried to tell herself it wasn't really hurt she saw, but disappointment.

That was bad enough, but he released her and moved away. Whatever doubts she'd entertained that she could give Lynx her undivided attention vanished within a few moments, though. Lynx commanded her entire attention almost the moment he kissed her. Her awareness and discomfort that Bull was still watching faded beneath the heat of Lynx's mouth.

It flickered through her mind to wonder if there was something wrong with her or if it was just something about these men that affected her so profoundly, but the doubts were lost in the heat that instantly rose for Lynx.

She couldn't even lie to herself and claim she couldn't tell the difference. Lynx's touch and taste and scent was as different from Bull's as night from day. He was big, strong, and hard with muscle just as Bull was, but she was completely aware of the differences between them. He was taller, not as broad across the chest and shoulders, and yet just as appealing to her senses. He brought out her sense of femininity just as strongly, pandered to her need to feel womanly in his arms.

There was more surety in his touch. He didn't confine himself to merely holding her tightly against him. He stroked her, explored her body thoroughly with his hands, drawing more and more heat from her. Instead of breaking the kiss when they both reached the point where they could no longer wait to feel a deeper connection, he reached between them.

Eagerness washed over Nika despite the hard climax she'd experienced only a few minutes before the moment she recognized his movements for what they were and she shifted to offer herself to sheathe the flesh he aligned with her body. She hadn't expected to have as much trouble mounting him as she'd had with bull, but she discovered she couldn't tell that he was any less endowed. There was less resistance purely from the fact that she hadn't suffered the doubts that had dried up her body's moisture before.

The stretch of her flesh to accommodate his cock was still unnerving and exciting at the same time and when he'd finally managed to sheathe his flesh in her, she felt the fullness with almost excruciating pleasure. It felt glorious, wonderful, brought her body to the precipice within a few moments. His thrusts held her there for what seemed like forever and still wasn't nearly long enough, teasing her with completion.

She'd begun to worry that she wouldn't actually reach her climax before he did. Abruptly, even as she felt the jerk of his cock that threatened an explosive release before she could attain hers, he threaded his fingers in her hair and dragged her head back. Almost the moment he covered her mouth and thrust his tongue inside, she came, shatteringly. She groaned into his mouth as it hit her, sucking on his tongue. A shudder went through him. His arms tightened and he began thrusting hard and fast to expel his seed. It drove her climax to a higher peak. She tore her mouth from his, gasping sharply as it flooded her with rapture so intense she nearly blacked out.

She was barely conscious when he drove deeply inside her a final time and held her tightly. She allowed her head to fall weakly to his shoulder, trying to catch her breath and finally managed to fill her lungs.

A jolt went through her when she finally managed to open her eyes. It took a moment to get her eyes to focus, but when they did she discovered that Raven and Cham

had joined the three of them in the room. Lynx, feeling the sudden tension in her, whipped his head around.

Raven's face, Nika realized uneasily, was a mask of rage. "This was a gods damned stupid idea. I'm not even going to ask whose. If the three of you are done," he said coldly, "I'd suggest you join everyone else. We're moving."

Embarrassment joined Nika's uneasiness. It hadn't occurred to her that anyone had noticed when she'd led Bull and Lynx into the lady's room. She supposed it should have, but it hadn't because she'd been too focused on her own intentions.

Lynx eased away from her, catching her and steadying her as she slipped off the edge of the lavatory until she'd caught her balance. She was grateful for several reasons, primary among them the fact that she lost sight of Raven the moment she slipped to the floor. Her knees felt rubbery, but she managed to brace herself.

Lynx tucked a forefinger beneath her chin, forcing her to look up at him. When she did, he leaned down and kissed her briefly. She met his gaze when he straightened, but she couldn't tell anything about his thoughts.

When he moved away, she saw to her relief that Raven and Chameleon had left. Bull flicked a hard look at Lynx, but he moved toward her when Lynx moved away, adjusting his clothes. She looked at him a little anxiously as he handed her her clothing. His smile was a little lopsided, but she didn't see anger in his eyes—for her.

Dragging her close, he kissed her a little more lingeringly than Lynx had. "I'll wait outside."

She hadn't realized how reluctant she was to join everybody else until he offered and she felt relief flood her. She smiled back at him tentatively and nodded.

When he and Lynx had left the room, she turned to the lavatory, leaning weakly against it and staring at her reflection in the cloudy mirror above it. Her mind felt curiously blank, though, and a strange sense of depression settled over her as she finally turned the faucet on and scooped up water to bathe herself off.

The milky mixture of semen and water sobered her. She stared down at her hand uncomprehendingly for several moments and finally rinsed her palm off.

Two things jostled for dominance despite her efforts to maintain the odd sort of emptiness in her mind while she cleaned up. Right up until that moment, and despite her efforts to convince herself the men weren't cyborgs, she realized she'd still believed, deep down, that they were. And she hadn't used anything to prevent pregnancy.

There *was* nothing beyond abstinence or condoms—not anymore. The government claimed the companies that had once produced such things had been destroyed in one of the frequent climate disasters. She hadn't paid it that much attention, hadn't really cared since she didn't feel like it affected her. On the few, rare occasions, when she did indulge in sexual recreation, she used condoms, but she'd never had sex frequently enough for it to become a habit and, frankly, it hadn't crossed her mind from the moment Bull had planted the idea in her mind.

It should have. She thought it would have if she hadn't still been harboring the notion that they were cyborgs.

"Shit!" Panic wafted through her for several moments. She managed to bring it to heel with the realization that, if they weren't cyborgs, they were certainly hybrids and since they'd never been intended to breed very likely they'd been made sterile even if the hybridization hadn't naturally made them that way.

Just because there was seminal fluid, she told herself, it didn't follow that there was actually semen in it.

She wasn't convinced, but it still made her easier in her mind, allowing her thoughts to fasten on other unpleasantries.

Raven's anger, for instance.

She wasn't certain why he was angry, but she was pretty sure it wasn't something she wanted to dwell on at the moment. With an effort, she focused on cleaning up and dressing. As reluctant as she was to emerge from the restroom and face the others, she realized that the longer she put it off the harder it was going to be.

She decided to brazen it out. She hadn't done anything wrong. Maybe Raven was right and it hadn't been one of her brighter ideas, but she wasn't going to let his damned disapproval ruin it for her! She had a perfect right to offer, damn it! She wasn't sorry.

She'd enjoyed it too thoroughly to regret having done it.

Being caught was a different matter! She *really* regretted being caught at it!

Well! To hell with all of them! She'd done it for Lynx and Bull ... and herself. It was no else's business why or even what they'd done.

Despite her bravado, it was a relief when she emerged and discovered that Bull and Lynx were waiting on either side of the door like unmatched bookends. It lessened her sense of discomfort considerably, even when it hit her like a ton of bricks why Raven had been so thoroughly pissed off.

Testosterone washed over her like a tidal wave, making it abundantly clear that there wasn't one of them that hadn't noticed her disappearance into the restroom with Lynx and Bull or nursed any doubts about what had happened. She felt her face heat up until it felt like fire and then the blood rushed away almost as quickly as the danger of being surrounded by so many horny men hit her.

Trying not to be too obvious about it, she sidled a little closer to Bull, who was closest. The faint smile on his lips when she looked up at him was as reassuring as the angry determination and possessiveness in his eyes were disconcerting. She glanced toward Lynx when she sensed he'd moved closer and saw a similar expression on his face.

It should've been reassuring to sense that they meant to protect her. It was ... in a way, but unnerving, too. She wasn't actually surprised when both of them had already shown a degree of possessiveness that had caught her completely off guard and dismayed her. What did surprise her was that Raven and Cham moved in front of her, blocking her view of the other men and vice versa.

It unnerved her to think they felt the need to form a protective wall around her, but when they'd left their camp and started down the tunnel it occurred to her to wonder if it actually *was* necessary.

She didn't think she'd been mistaken when it occurred to her that her activities had spawned similar urges in the other men, or that it was powerful enough they all tensed like bloodhounds that smelled their quarry.

They seemed to have themselves completely under control, though, either because of their military discipline, or their own character.

She thought if she could see that that there was no reason Raven and his men couldn't. That made her wonder if they actually were guarding her to protect her or if

they'd decided she belonged to them and they weren't protecting her so much as they were making their ownership clear.

If that was the case Well, she wasn't certain how she felt about it. Something had happened between her and Bull and Lynx that seemed a lot more significant, to her at least, than scratching an itch or experimentation. She couldn't begin to guess if it had affected them the way it had her, but it seemed almost as if her frame of mind in offering to begin with had opened her to something unexpected.

She wasn't particularly happy about the discovery that she felt more than pleasure when she glanced at Bull and Lynx and saw that they seemed different—relaxed, happy even though they were also bristling with possessiveness and stiff with aggression toward the other men.

Maybe she was just imagining the affect on them, though? Maybe she was seeing what she felt, not what they felt.

That didn't make her any happier, because she wasn't even sure why she felt that something had changed.

She dismissed it after a while, deciding she was putting way too much into way too little. It had been just sex, great for all concerned, and a bone of contention for all not concerned, but still just sex.

She wasn't going to allow everybody else to make her feel guilty about it, or that she'd done something she shouldn't have. It hadn't been 'wrong' even if it had made the others feel left out. She hadn't intended it that way. She'd gone out of her way to keep it as private as possible and she wasn't at all sorry that she'd made Bull and Lynx happy and given them pleasure, even if it wasn't anything that was going to last.

Whatever happened, at least she'd given them that much—a little pleasure in a life, she knew, that had been completely devoid of it.

She was just sorry it seemed to have caused hard feelings among the others.

Chapter Nine

Nika discovered two of Cham's abilities when they reached the end of the line they'd been following for almost a week. Despite the condition of the tunnel, which had several areas that had caved in, she thought they could probably have made it in less time if they hadn't stopped to allow her to rest.

They didn't say that was why they stopped, or even that they'd just decided to take a break, but she didn't think they needed to stop to rest nearly as often as she did.

She supposed, though, that there'd been enough delays even without her holding them back that it would've taken nearly as long anyway. The first group to go up to gather supplies had come back wounded and followed by the missing squad. They'd managed to gather enough on the run, though, to feed everybody twice. It had been divided into one meal per day and on the third day they'd had to send another scouting party. The second group had fared much better for the simple reason that they'd emerged from the sewers almost on top of a grocer. Still, it couldn't have been easy running three blocks dodging bullets and burdened with makeshift knapsacks filled as full of food as they could hold. Naturally enough neither the food or the men were in the best of shape when they returned, but it was enough for two meals a day for four days, Raven decided, or one a day for twice that.

They opted to go for the two meals which was enough of a morale boost to shift everyone's attention from Nika's indiscretion earlier that day.

"How far do you think we are from this doctor you told us about?" Raven asked her when they'd checked out the station and settled down.

"I don't have a clue of where we are. I couldn't say without going up to look."

He didn't look especially pleased to hear that, but he merely nodded at Bull and Brahma. "You two check out the exit and see if there's any way up from here."

"Who's going with her?" Hawk asked.

"Cham and Lynx," Raven responded promptly enough that it was clear he'd already given it a great deal of thought.

His decision wasn't received that well. "I can see Cham," Condor said, "but I think it would make more sense to send Cham-two with them than Lynx. He doesn't look any more human than the rest of us."

Nika felt downright indignant on Lynx's behalf. She decided against defending him, however, since she could see that doing so wouldn't make them change their mind. "It would be better if I went to talk to him by myself."

"Except you aren't going to," Raven said tightly. "Aside from the fact that I don't trust you to come back, they're looking for you just the same as they are us. It'll be safer for you to have an escort."

Nika glared at him indignantly. "I didn't have to tell you about Dr. Madison at all," she pointed out.

"No, you didn't," Raven agreed pleasantly, "which makes me wonder if there

actually is a Dr. Madison.”

Nika gasped in outrage. “Why would I make it up?”

He sent her a wry look. “Because you’re human and they’re inclined to lie even when the truth would serve them better?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “That is *so* bigoted! You’re part human,” she added. “Maybe I shouldn’t trust you either!”

“I never said you should,” he responded coolly then turned and fixed both Hawk and Condor with a hard look. “She’s our woman. Cham and Lynx will go with her.”

Nika blinked at him, feeling her jaw slide to half-cock. Before she could think of anything to say, though, Hawk interrupted.

“This isn’t the time for a territorial dispute among us. It’ll be better—for everyone—if the Chameleons go.”

“Territorial ...!” Nika gasped. “Now, wait just a damned minute ...!”

“I considered the risks, otherwise I wouldn’t allow Nika to go at all, or I would be going with her myself. Lynx can pass. It’ll have to be a quick run regardless because of the locators. Lynx has more speed on the ground, and climbing, than anyone else. Cham’s abilities will only take him so far and no further—because of the locators. He can’t ‘ghost’ when they can track him by that—neither of them can.”

The last comment distracted Nika, briefly, but although she was intrigued by the suggestion that Cham could move like a ghost, she was still too outraged that Raven seemed to think they had some claim on her to allow herself to be distracted long.

Even so, it unnerved her when Raven got to his feet, grabbed her arm and hauled her down the platform and into the lady’s room.

“That was almost as stupid as what you did the other day!” Raven growled the minute the door shut behind them.

Nika felt her face heat, but she discovered she’d lost all of her outrage and most of her anger in the face of Raven’s. “You’re saying, because I ... uh ... because me and Bull and Lynx”

“Mated,” Raven supplied helpfully if somewhat grimly.

Nika narrowed her eyes at him. “Had sex,” she said tightly. “It was purely recreational, damn it! Nobody expects a damned commitment just because you agree to have sex with them! People do it all the time, believe it or not, have sex, I mean, just for fun!”

“Do you see any humans out there?”

Nika was taken aback. “So, you’re saying ...?” What the fuck was he saying?

“I’m saying there isn’t one of them that doesn’t have mating on his mind and you just happen to be the only available female.”

Nika gaped at him. “Oh! That’s just low! So you’re saying nobody would have any interest in me at all if I wasn’t the only female around?” That didn’t just sting a little. It hurt!

Raven caught her upper arms, waltzed her back against the wall, and planted his mouth over hers in a kiss of raw passion that was more punishing than anything else ... and it still made her weak all over. “Multiply that and the ‘just sex’ you had with Bull and Lynx the other day by sixteen, Nika, because that’s what you’re looking at if you’re determined to refute my claim on you. Unless you just want to have sex with all of them, you *pretend* you’re ours as long as you’re with us. Got that?”

Ok, well that was really to the point! “Don’t gloss things over on my account!” she snapped, struggling with the hurt. “Fine! I get it!”

He released her and stepped back and she lifted her hands absently and rubbed at the throbbing places on her arms where he’d gripped her. Something flickered in his eyes, but after studying her for a moment he merely turned and left.

Nika slid weakly down the wall and settled on the floor, struggling with the hurt and anger the encounter had left her with, fighting the urge to weep. She hadn’t cried in so long she couldn’t even remember the last time she’d felt the need or the urge. She didn’t why she did now.

It wasn’t as if he’d actually hurt her.

But he had. He’d told her didn’t want her and that he was only trying to be noble, damn his hide! He could shove his nobility up his ass! She didn’t care if he didn’t want her, damn it! She didn’t want him either.

That was why she turned to mush every time he kissed her!

She couldn’t say that she was really all that hurt to discover the same could be said for Bull and Lynx. Truthfully, she’d figured as much herself—that they only desired ‘a’ woman, not her in particular. She hadn’t gone into intimacy with them blindly, or with any sort of illusions about it. She’d desired them. More than that, or at least as much, she’d wanted to give them something, something no one else ever had—a gentle touch, pleasure.

She still wasn’t sorry she had, even though she knew Raven was right and that she should have seen it herself.

Maybe her motives hadn’t been altogether unselfish, but she really had *meant* to be generous.

Ok, so maybe in the back of her mind she’d also thought it wouldn’t be a bad idea to be on somebody’s good side, all things considered. She suspected that that was why Raven was so pissed off, because he thought she’d only done it to play them against each other. So what was wrong with trying to protect herself by offering sexual favors when she didn’t have anything else to use?

She shook it off. The longer she thought it over, the worse she felt. She almost felt more like she’d used Bull and Lynx, even though she really hadn’t meant it that way, because she could see that was what Raven thought.

She was still sitting on the floor with her head in her hands when Lynx and Cham came in a little later. Lynx crouched in front of her and caught her chin, tipping her face up and studying her intently. Anger flickered in his eyes. “What did he say?”

Nika swallowed against the knot of misery that rose in her throat at the sympathy. “Nothing really,” she muttered. “I just have a headache.”

He didn’t look like he believed her. “Lack of food, I don’t doubt,” he said grimly. “You’re sure it wasn’t something Raven said?”

She shook her head, pulling away from him and getting to her feet. “You might be right, but I think it’s being underground so long—not much light and too much dust.”

“Bull and Brahma cleared the rubble from the exit. We’ll take you up,” Cham said, keeping his voice carefully neutral.

Nika nodded and followed the two of them out, but she took care not to glance at any of the others as they crossed the platform. As luck would have it, it was dark when they’d finally picked their way around the rubble still littering the exit. The stairs were

broken and tilted and in several places great chunks were missing, but whenever they encountered the holes, either Cham or Lynx would scoop her up and leap the chasm with her. She wasn't particularly happy about it. Each time, she felt her belly fall out from under her, but eventually they made it to the top.

The air seemed strange. It only took her a few minutes, despite the darkness, to understand why. They were completely beyond the city dome. She turned to scan the landscape until she spotted it.

"I still can't tell. I've never been this far out." She paused, considering it. "I don't suppose either of you have any idea whether we're north, south, east, or west of the city?"

Both men lifted their heads and studied the sky. "Southwest," Lynx said after a moment.

Nika glanced at him in surprise, but she didn't challenge him on it. "At least we're on the right side of town," she said dryly. "I figured we were. I just wasn't sure we'd continued to travel in the same direction. We aren't going to be able to get in to the city from here. We'll have to backtrack and come up inside the dome, but he isn't far from the dome wall, maybe two to six blocks. It depends on where we come out of the sewers."

Lynx sniffed the air. "There's water nearby. Where do the sewers empty?"

Nika stared at him blankly. "I don't have a clue."

He considered for a moment. "Wait here. I'm going to check out the water. If it's the city water supply, or the reservoir where the sewers empty, there should be sewer lines."

Nika didn't particularly want to follow the sewer line all the way back to the city, but he was gone before she could object. Sighing, she looked around for a place to sit and finally settled on the ground. It was curiously light considering there weren't any lights. She could make out shapes in the darkness. After a few moments, she lifted her head to study the sky as the guys had. She sucked in her breath when she saw a huge star overhead that seemed to be shedding most of the light. "That looks really close," she said a little uneasily.

Cham glanced up. "The moon? It is."

"That's the moon?" Nika repeated blankly. "It doesn't look like that in pictures. You're sure that's the moon?"

Cham studied her curiously. "You've never been outside the city, have you?"

Nika shrugged. She had when she was a child, but she didn't remember a lot about it. "Never needed to."

"I guess there isn't anything worth stealing out here," he said dryly.

She sent him a resentful glare. "I don't steal from people. I steal from companies," she said angrily.

"People run the companies," he said pointedly.

"They aren't people! They're leaches. They suck everybody dry and I don't consider taking from them stealing. I consider it taking back what doesn't belong to them to start with."

He studied her curiously. "The plans you took from Bio-H-Tech were developed by Bio-H-Tech."

"They were developed by the *people* that work for Bio-H-Tech," Nika said

tightly. "And they barely make enough to live on. The company sucks up all the credits."

"So ... you consider yourself a crusader?"

Nika sent him a resentful look. "I'm not a rebel, if that's what you mean, not exactly anyway. I get paid for what I do and if it isn't me, then somebody else gets paid. It isn't like it wouldn't be done if I didn't. Companies have been stealing from each other as long as there've been companies competing for the market. They just use people like me to do it. You wouldn't see them risking their hides to get it."

"You like taking risks?"

"I like eating," she said dryly.

He was silent for a moment. "The government subsidizes breeders. Are you ineligible?"

"Not that I'm aware of."

"You don't know?"

"Nope. I haven't been checked because I'm not interested in being subsidized."

She wasn't against the idea of having children. She just didn't like the government's stipulations for subsidizing families. She didn't have a problem with the fact that they carefully screened a woman's genetics before they approved them. She didn't really have a problem with them *also* screening the sperm donors. It seemed like the best thing to do to insure healthy offspring.

What she had a problem with was that the women didn't actually get to choose their donor and that was particularly unpleasant if a woman happened to have a man of her own and he was declined as the donor. She was against eking out an existence on the credits the government paid out for that, and she was even more against the idea of having the government's nose up her ass.

She supposed it wasn't unreasonable that the government wanted to keep tabs on the women in their program. They were footing the bills after all, but they could and did remove children if they decided the woman wasn't doing a good enough job in nurturing her young. Sometimes, after they'd sent the woman through a parenting program and/or an emotional adjustment program, they got their children back ... and sometimes they didn't, though, and she had a bad feeling they wouldn't approve of her.

She wasn't easy enough about it in her mind that she felt like risking it even if the idea of having social workers camped at her door and spying on her didn't totally piss her off! She'd decided building up credits to live on while she nurtured her children had far more appeal to her.

Of course, that plan was shot to hell now!

"It seems an easy enough life and it's considered the patriotic duty of breeding aged women."

Nika snorted. "More propaganda. I'll tell you what, there's a government breeding facility on the south side. If we get the chance, I'll show it to you and then you tell me if you see any damned thing about it that appeals to you."

Cham fell silent for some time. "You mentioned rebels. The doctor you told us about, he's a rebel?"

Nika stiffened and sent him an uneasy glance. "Could be," she hedged. "I never asked him. It isn't actually safe to ask."

"You know some rebels, though."

This was really getting into dangerous territory! “Knew. My parents were.”
“But they aren’t any more?”

“Nope. They’re dead. That’s what being a rebel gets you—dead.” To her relief, she heard thrashing in the brush in the distance that seemed to indicate Lynx was returning.

Cham clamped a hand over her mouth before she even realized he’d moved close enough to her to do so and a jolt went through her. She didn’t move, however. She knew he wouldn’t have silenced her if there wasn’t a reason. She hardly dared to breathe as she listened to the thrashing move closer and closer.

He put his lips to her ear. “Bear,” he said on a breath of sound. “Don’t move.”

His warm breath sent a shiver through her. Nika nodded jerkily, but he’d already released her and stepped away. She glanced toward him and saw that he was shrugging out of his uniform. Stunned and confused, she gaped at him. She was staring directly at him when he simply became something else.

She was so shocked she couldn’t figure out what had happened. It was almost as if the bear had appeared and ... absorbed him. Luckily, she was too frozen with terror to move or make a sound until he let loose a roar and charged directly toward the bear that was approaching them through the brush.

Emitting a whinny of fright, Nika charged off in the direction where Lynx had disappeared the moment the two bears collided in combat. If she hadn’t completely lost her facility for speech, she would’ve been bellowing his name. The only real thought running through her mind was ‘Lynx’.

He loomed out of the darkness so suddenly, cloaked in shadows, that her mind couldn’t identify him, though, and she veered away with another squawk of terror.

“Nika! It’s me!” he growled when he caught her and she tried to fight loose from him.

It had penetrated her mind that it was Lynx even as he spoke, however, and she ceased fighting to free herself and locked herself around him as frantically as she’d been trying to pull away.

“I need to help Cham,” he said gruffly, peeling her off despite her resistance and setting her aside. “Stay here.”

He took off in the direction of the bellowing snarls before she had time to agree or object, leaving her standing where she was, shivering uncontrollably. Wrapping her arms around herself, she glanced furtively at the landscape around her, more than half expecting another monster to jump out at her. It didn’t relieve her much when she didn’t see anything. Every shadow that moved sent a fresh jolt of fear through her. She didn’t see any place to hide. She didn’t even see the opening to the subway where they’d emerged.

It didn’t calm her when she heard sounds that seemed to indicate the battle had broken off. Her mind instantly leapt to the likelihood that Lynx and Cham had chased the bear off and she was afraid it might be heading in her direction. A few moments later, though, she saw two shadowy figures striding toward her and recognized Lynx and Cham. The adrenaline surging through her drained away so fast she thought she was going to faint. She certainly didn’t have the strength left to race to them, although she wanted to, badly.

Cham, naked but at least looking like Cham, stopped when he reached her.

Catching her chin, he tipped her head back to study her face. "Are you alright?"

Nika felt her chin wobble in the aftermath. "No," she said in a wailing voice, shaking as if she'd just stepped from a freezer, *feeling* as if she'd just stepped from one. "I'm scared!"

He studied her face. "*I* frightened you," he said, his voice strangely cold. "I can cool my core temperature to prevent detection by infrared, too. Does that repulse you?"

Nika met his gaze with a startled look. She hadn't really grasped anything he'd said, though, beyond the question and she couldn't fathom why he was asking such a thing now.

Her confusion seemed to drain the tension from him. He leaned closer. Pressing his lips over her mouth, he sucked at her lips lightly, tentatively and then lifted his head to study her face. Nika clutched at him, seeking the warmth and reassurance of his touch. When he covered her mouth again, there was nothing tentative at all about his touch. It was voracious, consuming.

Nika responded greedily, welcoming the heat that poured through her, thawing her frozen limbs, digging her fingers into him a little frantically in an effort to pull herself closer to his warmth and the security of his strength. He dragged her arms from around his neck and began pulling at her clothing. Nika fought to get her arms around his neck again until it finally penetrated her mind that he was trying to get rid of the barrier of clothing between them. There was a wildness and urgency in the way he tore at her clothing that might have frightened her if she hadn't been too mindless with it already to feel threatened.

She didn't feel threatened at all. She wanted to rid herself of it so that she could feel the heat of his skin against hers, felt a desperation for it. The moment he'd peeled the top from her arms and shoulders, she dove at him, plastering herself against him chest to chest, locking her arms around his neck.

It was more of a battle than akin to love-making. Cham was completely absorbed in stripping her and exploring her with his mouth and Nika was completely dedicated to clinging as tightly to him as she could get. She fought him a while and fought to free herself from the entanglement of her clothing a while. Relief flooded her when she finally kicked her loafers from her feet and the clothing from her ankles.

He caught her buttocks as she levered herself up with her arms and coiled her legs around his waist. Confusion filled her for a split second when she felt the probe of his cock, but it was fleeting. She wanted to crawl inside of him where she could be safe. She'd settle for having him inside of her.

Fortunately, the heat generated by his kiss had thawed her core and brought her body to readiness for his possession. She felt the silken glide as the head of his cock entered her. Her moisture eased the tightness of the fit, allowing him to fully penetrate her after only a few moments of struggle, of sawing shallowly in and out of her. She gasped, shuddering in delight when she felt the fullness of his complete possession. Her senses, scattered by the fright that had gone before, gathered to focus on their connection and she felt a rapid rise toward her peak that made her gasp and groan with pleasure.

She'd lost all touch with her surroundings. She scarcely noticed when Lynx settled his hands on her from behind except for a momentary confusion that there seemed to be more hands on her than there should have been. The heat of his nearness behind her as he shifted closer banished her confusion, though, shot her excitement through the

stratosphere. She shuddered as she felt him lower his mouth to her shoulder and suck a love-bite, felt his rapid breath against the side and back of her neck as he pushed her hair aside and explored the tender skin. She knew it was Lynx's hand that skated along her cleft and stroked the bud of her rectum.

She felt the burn of his penetration just as the first quake of her climax hit her. It should have distracted her, should have thrown her off-kilter enough to kill the climax. Instead, it seemed to magnify the release into a shattering explosion of sensation as he drove into her. It tore a sharp cry from her. He caught her head, twisting her face to meet his mouth and swallowing the cries she couldn't seem to contain as her climax ripped through her.

She lifted one arm from Cham and looped it backwards around Lynx's head, struggling to meet his kiss. Cham seized the opportunity of her exposed breast to suckle it, sending more quakes through her, harder spasms that nearly ripped consciousness from her. She was barely even aware of the moment when they reached their own peak and came, only realized they'd come when they ceased to plunge inside of her and leaned against her, panting for breath as she was.

She shivered as the heat slowly left her. Lynx stirred, easing his cock from her with a sharp hiss at the sensation. "I found the lake," he murmured huskily. "We can bathe there."

Cham withdrew, allowing her to slide to her feet. She wobbled weakly when she tried to stand and Lynx scooped her up. "Grab her clothes."

Too weak to object and assert her independence, Nika draped her arms limply around Lynx's shoulder and nuzzled her face against his neck in gratitude. She wasn't sure herself whether it was appreciation that he was carrying her when she didn't think she could manage three steps on her on, or for the intense pleasure.

She'd always fantasized that it would be a fabulous experience to have sex with two men at once, but her imagination hadn't done it justice, she thought dreamily. It was beyond anything she could've conceived!

She was enjoying being held by Lynx so much, she was almost sorry when the moment ended at the lake and he set her on her feet. She braced her knees when he released her, searched the shadowed plains of his face for some sign that he'd felt as transformed by the experience as she had and finally gave up. She couldn't see well enough to tell what might be going through his mind.

She didn't find the darkened waters of the lake particularly inviting when she turned finally to look at it. Instead of diving in as Lynx and Cham did, she made her way carefully to the water's edge, crouched in little more than ankle deep water and gritted her teeth as she sloughed the cool water over her heated skin.

"You didn't want to come in?" Cham asked, disapproval in his voice.

"I can't swim," Nika said a little testily. "And the water's cold."

He grabbed her before she could escape, or realized his intention, and dragged her deep into the water. She panicked when she discovered she couldn't find the bottom with her feet, cursing and slapping at him and then clinging so frantically she nearly drowned both of them. Lynx pried her off of Cham and carried her back to the bank. "Gods damn it! What the hell?"

She stared at both of them furiously for a moment and burst into noisy tears. "I can't swim, damn it! I told you I couldn't!"

Cham dropped to his knees in front of her and drew her tightly against him despite her efforts to shove him away. After a moment, she stopped fighting and clung to him instead, weeping until she was exhausted from it.

She discovered when she finally calmed down that Cham was stroking her soothingly. It did sooth her. She was still angry with him for scaring her, but too tired to feel like fighting with him. "You scared me," she said accusingly. "The bear scared me, and then you tried to drown me!"

He chuckled. "I wasn't trying to drown you."

"It felt like it to me."

His amusement waned. "I wouldn't hurt you and I wouldn't let anything happen to you, Nika."

Nika swallowed a little convulsively, lifting her head to search his face. Nobody had ever offered to take care of her before. It eased something inside of her, an unnamed fear she'd carried around so long she'd ceased to be aware of it. "You swear?"

Something flickered in his eyes.

"None of us would hurt you or allow you to be hurt if we can prevent it," Lynx said gruffly.

They meant it. She felt the truth of it, felt a warmth bud inside of her despite the fact that it churned up unwelcome memories. Her parents had promised her that same thing and then they'd died and left her alone. Somehow, though, the very fact that Lynx had said 'if they could prevent it' made it seem more real, something she could believe in.

Chapter Ten

Despite the fact that she'd seen what Cham was capable of, Nika was still disconcerted when they reached the shaft to the street above them and Cham began to undress. She glanced at him in surprise and then looked at Lynx questioningly. Lynx had already begun to climb up the ladder set into the walls of the shaft, though. When she glanced back at Lynx, she saw that it was only the skin of his body that was changing. Within moments, he appeared as if he was fully clothed again, except this time as a civilian.

She smiled a little weakly when he met her gaze. "That's handy."

He grinned abruptly, caught her face between his palms and kissed her thoroughly.

"Not that I'm complaining, but what was that for?" she asked when he released her, bemused and more than a little warmed.

He searched her gaze and smiled a little crookedly. "Do I need a reason?"

Disappointment flickered through her, but she smiled back at him. "No."

"You ready?"

She nodded.

"You go first. I'll follow you."

"In case I slip? Or just so you can watch my butt?" she asked teasingly.

He chuckled, swatting the part under discussion. "So I can watch your ass."

His playfulness eased some of her tension, but she felt it mount again as she climbed the ladder. Lynx, apparently deciding it was clear, lifted the manhole cover and climbed out just as she reached him. Reaching down, he caught her hand and pulled her out. She scanned their surroundings while Cham climbed out and replaced the cover.

The alley where they were wasn't familiar to her but once they'd moved to the street, she recognized the area. They moved with a purpose when they stepped out and headed along the sidewalk, but without the appearance of rushing.

"I wouldn't worry too much about anybody paying us any attention. Everybody is stoned or half-stoned most of the time," she said wryly under her breath.

Lynx and Cham both sent her startled looks and then studied the people they were passing more keenly.

"Why?" Lynx asked finally.

Nika shrugged. "I don't know. I've just noticed they are. Either the city filtering system broke down and nobody noticed, or it's deliberate. Couldn't say for sure and I don't suppose it really matters. It makes them ... content and they sure as hell wouldn't be content with their lives if they were more aware of what was going on around them."

"What do you mean, the filtering system?"

Nika shrugged again. "Supposedly it was designed to clean the water up and remove the drugs. People over-medicated themselves for years. It was inevitable that all those drugs would make into the aquifer and the Earth wouldn't be able to filter them out

naturally any more. From what I hear, it's worse in some places than others. Believe it or not, this is supposed to be one the cleanest cities. Anyway, like I said, either the system broke down or they just shut it off. Or they're putting drugs in the water."

"Or your hatred of the government has made you paranoid. Which do you hate worse, the government or the companies?"

Anger flickered through Nika. "It's same thing. There isn't any difference. The politicians *own* the companies, or the companies own the politicians. Half the politicians own shares in the big companies. The rest are on their payroll. All of them are either directly or indirectly connected," she said tightly. "And before you call me paranoid, check it out. They don't really make any effort to hide it, certainly not anymore."

"How is it that you aren't stoned or half-stoned?" Lynx asked, more curiosity than accusation in his voice.

"How do you know I'm not?" she asked with amusement. "Maybe I'm a wild woman when I'm not sedated like everybody else."

Lynx's eyes gleamed with memory. "You seemed pretty wild a little while ago," he murmured.

Nika felt her cheeks redden. "I have my own filtration system—had. In my apartment. They'll know that by now and that'll make them even more anxious to find me. It's a rebel trick and sure to paint me as one, even though I haven't been active in any of the efforts to bring the government down."

"That's why you brought your own water," Lynx said neutrally.

"And a test kit. The water underground is fairly safe, though—still pretty high levels of ridalin, valium, and so forth—commonly prescribed drugs back in the early part of the century to 'calm' people—but not enough to alter your perceptions. The rebels found that out a long time ago. Which is why I suspect they're lacing the city water after it's left the filtration plant. With enough 'don't give a damn' in your system, you don't give a damn.

"Don't get me wrong! Despite my paranoia, I'd really like to think its accidental, but I'm having a hard time swallowing it." She paused as they approached a tall building. "Care to take a little detour?"

Both men looked at her in frowning question.

"Cham was wondering why I didn't want to take the government up on the offer to subsidize my children. That's a facility up there if you two want to take a look at my 'paranoia' at work."

Lynx exchanged a questioning look with Cham. "I'm not sure it's a good idea to risk it."

"There won't be any risk in looking around beyond the few minutes it'll take," Nika said confidently.

They still looked uneasy, but both men capitulated. "Make it quick."

Nika nodded and led them to the door, punching a button at random. A woman's voice answered. "Social worker," she responded to the woman's question.

They heard a buzz and the door opened. Lynx and Cham looked around at the narrow hallway they entered. The plaster was cracked and about half the paint peeled off, but it was clean ... almost antiseptic. Pausing at the first door she reached, Nika knocked. "Social worker."

The door opened and a hollow cheeked woman who looked to be about nine

months pregnant stood in the opening, staring at them with eyes wide with anxiety. "I'm training these two," Nika said soothingly. "Can we come in and look around?"

The woman looked vaguely relieved, but still unnerved. She stepped back, though. Nika gestured for Lynx and Cham to precede her. They moved inside with obvious reluctance and stopped before they'd hardly cleared the door. Nika squeezed past them. The 'apartment' was about half the size of hers.

A toddler sat in the floor, chewing on a plastic toy. An infant stared at them wide-eyed through the bars of its crib. The woman rushed to the toddler and scooped him up. "I just put him down to play for a few minutes and exercise. The toy was sterilized," she said hurriedly.

Lynx, Cham, and Nika scanned the apartment from where they stood and then Nika stepped to the door that led into the bathroom and pushed it open. They leaned through the door and peered inside.

"Everything looks clean and the infants well cared for," Nika said briskly. "How is the toddler's progress going?"

"He was just evaluated," the woman said nervously. "He's in the 60th percentile for growth and the 80th percentile for development," she said a little defensively. "I've been giving him his growth hormones."

"And the infant?"

"She's in the 88th percentile for growth and the 90th percentile in development," the woman responded proudly.

"Good! Very good! Keep up the good work!" Nika said urging Lynx and Cham toward the door. "We won't take up any more of your time."

The woman followed them to the door and studied them anxiously. "They told me they'd move me to one of the larger apartments before the new baby came," she said a little plaintively.

"I'll check on that for you," Nika said.

The woman didn't look like she believed her, which was just as well, Nika thought wryly since there was no way she could.

"You want to see another one?"

"No," Lynx said tightly, heading for the door at a brisk walk.

"It looks exactly as described and nothing like I expected," Cham muttered.

"It's called a lie of omission. You tell nothing but the truth, but you leave out critical details. 'Every woman accepted into the repopulation program will be given a completely modernized and private efficiency apartment for herself and her off-spring and provided with food and health care. Parenting classes and birth classes are provided and women accepted into the program are encouraged to participate.' Believe me, you don't want to see what the clinics that provide health care look like!"

"They can't all look like that," Cham said tightly when they'd emerged.

"I couldn't honestly say they do," Nika retorted. "This is the one they brought me to look at when I checked in to it, though. It looks pretty much the same except there's less paint on the walls than there was then. I guess when it all falls off, they'll repaint. I thought it was kind of depressing myself, but that's just me. Plus, I'm not sure I could live in that small a space with babies without going off the deep end. It was kind of neat they way they managed to fit everything in such a tight space, though, wasn't it?"

Both of them glanced at her frowningly, but they held their peace.

Truthfully, it looked worse than she remembered. She was sure it was a good thing that everything was kept so excruciatingly clean, cut down on germs and sickness, and yet it was sterile and plain to the point of deeply depressing to her. There were almost no personal belongings in any of the apartments she'd seen herself, either because the tenants couldn't afford them, there wasn't room for them, or they weren't allowed. It gave the entire place a sense almost prison-like, though, reminded her far too strongly of the institution where she'd grown up after her parents had died.

Maybe her own apartment had been over-cluttered and chaotic, but that appealed to her. *Disorder* appealed to her. As filthy and dusty as the tunnels were, they didn't depress her spirits like bare walls and floors and the smell of antiseptic.

Lynx and Cham had both become increasingly anxious the longer they were exposed in the streets and she could see both of them relax visibly when they finally reached their destination. She led them into the alley beside the building. "He's underground, literally," she said quietly after glancing both ways along the alley. When she saw no one was near enough to observe them, she hurried to the metal door about halfway down and rapped on it.

They waited anxiously for several minutes. Just when she'd decided to rap on the door again, she heard the scrape of metal against metal and a bloodshot eyeball was pressed to the tiny viewer in the door. "What do you want?" a man growled.

"I need help."

"You're in the wrong place!" he snapped. The cover of the viewer slid closed again.

Nika was about to rap on the door again when Cham grabbed her and set her aside. Lynx grasped the handle and pulled. The door creaked, groaned, and then buckled around the lock on the inside. Cham stepped closer and slid his fingers through the opening Lynx had made. The lock clicked and he stepped back, pulling the door open.

Dr. Madison stood gaping at them in shock on the other side. He whirled as the door opened, though, and began to hobble toward the stairs lit by the light outside and the dim bulb in the ceiling.

Lynx caught him before he could descend, wrenching him around. "Are you the doctor?" he growled.

"You're scaring the shit out of him, Lynx!" Nika snapped.

"I'm going to wring his god damned neck!"

"That'll help! Cut it out!"

Lynx released his grip on the man angrily.

"We aren't cops!" Nika said. "You removed my locator. They need the same thing."

"I'm not a doctor," Dr. Madison blustered. "Not anymore."

"We need help! I can pay!"

That caught his attention. He glanced from Nika to the two men, narrowing his eyes suspiciously as he studied Lynx's uniform. "Government militia?"

Nika had known that uniform was going to be a problem! That was the main reason she'd wanted to approach the old man alone.

"Not anymore," Lynx said grimly.

The man's eyes sharpened. He examined Lynx more carefully and then studied Cham. "You them cyborgs they're looking for?" he asked coldly.

“Do they act like fucking cyborgs?” Nika interjected before Lynx could respond. Madison glanced at her assessingly. “I remember you, little girl. Still got a mouth on you.”

Nika glared at him.

“You vouching for them?”

“I am. All we’re looking for is somebody with the skill to remove the locators.”

He nodded. “I guess you might as well come on down,” he said, turning, but then paused. “Fix my fucking door before you do, though. I don’t want any more company!”

He was setting up his surgery when Nika, Lynx, and Cham reached his lab in the basement. Nika glanced uneasily at Lynx and Cham. He was going to know the minute he scanned them that they were cyborgs—if they were—and he hated robots as badly as he hated the government that had had him removed and replaced.

“Let me see those credits,” he said without looking at Nika.

Uttering a sigh, Nika fished her card from her pants pocket and slapped it in his palm. “Who ever’s going first needs to get undressed and get up on the table,” the doctor said, turning with the card and running it through his scanner to check the balance.

Lynx and Cham exchanged a look. Shrugging, Cham abandoned his ‘camouflage’ and settled on the table. Madison sent him a startled look and then frowned, studying him speculatively.

Nika didn’t particularly like that look. Madison was old, and he didn’t get around as well as a younger man, but there was nothing wrong with his mind—far from it. He was a brilliant man and observant. He didn’t miss much and he didn’t have any trouble figuring things out.

“I went up on my prices since you were here,” he said after a moment. “It’ll be three hundred ... each.”

Anger flickered through Nika. She did a mental calculation and realized she wasn’t going to have enough at that price for everybody. Raven wasn’t going to like it. “I don’t suppose we could get a group discount?” she said as meekly as she could.

“Two ain’t a group.”

“How about sixteen?”

Something flickered in his eyes. “That’s a lot of locators to pull.”

“Can you do it for what I have there?” Nika asked irritably.

He frowned. “Will it piss the government off?”

“Probably.”

“I’ll give it some thought. Let’s just see how determined they were to keep it from being removed.”

Nika held her breath as he moved the scanner over Cham.

“Most likely, it’s in your back, next to your spine,” the doctor told Cham, “but we’ll see.”

Nika tried to hide her uneasiness as the scanner moved slowly over Cham, but she didn’t think she was completely successful if the look Madison sent her was any indication.

“Any of you care to explain what the fuck I’m looking at?” Madison growled when the scan was complete.

Nika glanced at Lynx, but she could see he was content to let her do the talking. He was tense, though, as if ready to spring.

“What does it look like?”

“Nothing I’ve ever seen.”

Startled, Nika moved around the table and looked at the screen. Unfortunately, she didn’t know what she was looking at either. Madison didn’t leave her in the dark. He lifted a hand and stabbed a finger at the old fashioned screen. “That ... that’s titanium. Ordinarily, that would mean cyborg ... but that ... that’s bone. His entire skeletal structure is wrapped in it. It’s the damndest thing I’ve ever seen. I would’ve guessed it was to make sure nobody could get to the locator—which is here—if it wasn’t all over him. I guess it would pass most scanners as robotics—anything but a medical scanner like this old clunker. They don’t make them like this anymore. How the hell did they do that? *Why* would they do that?”

To give men that weren’t cyborgs the appearance and weight of cyborgs? Nika’s mind leapt from that to the intelligence that they had nanos and the suspicion that that was how the techs at Bio-H-Tech had managed to form titanium around their entire skeletal structure, but she wasn’t about to mention that to Madison. He wouldn’t touch them if he knew they were carrying nanos.

She discovered that both Lynx and Cham looked to be in a state of complete shock. Lynx was noticeably pale. He met her gaze. “You knew.”

It was said accusingly. “I didn’t. I suspected. I didn’t know.”

“Know what?” Madison demanded.

Nika shook off the uneasiness that had invaded her at the look of betrayal in Lynx’s eyes. “Can you get the locator out?” she demanded impatiently.

Madison sent her a hard look. “What else didn’t you tell me?”

“Damn it! I don’t know anything! Can you get the god damned thing out or not?”

“I don’t fucking know!” Madison snapped at her. “Didn’t I just say I’d never run across anything like this before? I could kill him trying!”

Nika felt a wave of cold roll over her. She dismissed it. They had regenerative powers like no human. “They’re dead men if you don’t get the damned things out! The company wants them dead! The government wants them dead!”

He looked mollified by that, still uncertain. “Roll over, young man. I’ll do an exploratory. If it looks like I can get it out without damaging anything, I will. If not ... I’m a doctor. I’m not going to take a chance on killing him!”

He moved away from the table and came back pushing a tank. “I’ll have to knock you out.”

“Use a local,” Lynx said grimly.

“I don’t think that’ll do it. It’s pretty deep.”

“Use the local,” Cham agreed. “I can’t afford to be out.”

Madison looked even more reluctant, but he moved away again and came back with a syringe. Using the scanner image to guide him, he carefully injected a deadening agent all the way around the area.

Nika felt nausea well inside her when he made the first cut and blood welled to the surface. Turning quickly, she moved to the other side of the room. Silence fell over the room while the doctor worked. Nika could feel Lynx’s angry, accusing gaze, but she refused to look at him. She tried not to look at Cham either, but she couldn’t seem to prevent herself from casting anxious glances at him. It made her more queasy when she

saw the tension in him and the sweat that popped from his pores. He could feel it and he was in pain.

Her stomach clenched in sympathy. The need to do something for his pain was nearly overwhelming and filled her with frustration because she knew there was nothing at all that she could do. She jumped when the sound of metal striking metal cut through the silence, her gaze whipping toward the sound. To her relief, she saw that Madison was closing the incision.

“Did you get it?” she asked sharply.

“I got it,” Madison said grimly. “Easier than I thought it would be. It wasn’t tied into his spinal column like it looked.”

When he’d finished with the last stitch, he patted Cham’s shoulder. “Just hold still and I’ll put a sterile bandage on that.”

Nika thought for a moment that Cham had passed out, but as soon as Madison had bandaged the area, he began to slide toward the edge of the table. “Careful, now, son! You might think you’re ok, but you need to take it easy for a bit. Otherwise, you’re liable to pass out.” He glanced at her and Lynx. “Help him over to that couch. He can rest while I take care of the other boy.”

A completely unexpected prickle of amusement went through Nika. She supposed she could see it from the doctor’s perspective. He was old enough they probably didn’t look like much more than kids.

Truthfully, she supposed they weren’t much more than kids as it dawned on her abruptly that they’d been grown in a lab and probably hadn’t been in the world more than a few years at the very most.

It was mind boggling, to say the least, though, and impossible for her to look upon such dangerous beings as boys, regardless of their physical appearance of youthfulness.

She rushed forward to help Cham and was rebuffed. She knew they didn’t really need her help but it hurt to be pushed firmly aside. Chewing her lip indecisively, she watched Lynx help Cham to the couch, wondering if she would be rebuffed again if she went to him. She discovered she couldn’t resist the urge, even expecting it.

He didn’t welcome her when she settled carefully beside him on the couch and smoothed his damp hair back from his face, but he didn’t push her away. She stared down at his pale face, wishing there was something she could do beyond merely trying to sooth him with her hands, but she couldn’t think of anything at all. “Does it hurt?” she asked sympathetically.

“Yes,” he said shortly.

Uncertain of whether he was so terse because of the pain or because she was bothering him, Nika desisted. She was distracted in any event by the discovery that Madison had started on Lynx. Feeling weak, nauseated, useless, and unwelcome, she settled on the floor beside the couch, drew her knees up and covered her face with her hands.

She hadn’t expected to be so disturbed by watching the procedure. She’d been sedated when she’d had it. She’d hurt like hell when she woke up, but at least she hadn’t felt anything while it was happening. It bothered her more to see their suffering than she would’ve thought possible.

Madison’s gaze was sympathetic when he approached her. “He should rest a little

bit before you try to move him, but I'm thinking neither one of them are going to want to stay long."

Nika nodded numbly. "Can we bring the others back?"

He frowned. "I can take four or five at the time, I think, but don't be showing up at my god damned door in broad daylight again! And don't bring any more than that. I can't risk having that much activity outside my door! Send five tomorrow night, wait a night and then another four, then three nights and the last of them. Tell them to use your name."

Nika nodded, relieved. At the same time, it made her stomach churn thinking about all the others going through what she'd just seen.

They didn't need to bring her, though. Cham and Lynx knew the way.

They actually didn't need her at all anymore, she realized in dismay.

As Madison had predicted, Cham and Lynx didn't linger long. She could see that neither one of them was recovered, but they got up and ushered her toward the door. It wasn't until they'd made their way back down into the sewers that they confronted her.

"Don't lie to me, Nika," Lynx snarled. "What are we?"

Nika stared at him in dismay, but it was shadowy enough in the sewer where they'd stopped that she couldn't see any sign of gentleness in his expression at all, only determination, anger, and a sense of betrayal. "I never lied, damn it!" she said defensively. "I told Raven I didn't know and I didn't!"

He studied her for a long moment. "You suspected all along, though, didn't you?"

Nika swallowed a little convulsively. "Not at first. I took the chip to Whitaker as soon as I got back. He opened it and looked at it and said it was a decoy file, that it was about hybrid human/animal experiments, *not* the development of cyborgs. I believed he was right ... at first. But none of you acted like cyborgs. And even then, everything we'd heard emphasized that you were state of the art—light years ahead of all the other manufacturers. Whitaker sent me in to get that technology. We *expected* you to be the most advanced cyborgs ever designed! Nobody expected to discover you weren't cyborgs at all! I didn't! And every time I thought about it, I realized that I still couldn't dismiss the possibility that you were cyborgs."

"Because we *also* aren't human!" he snarled. "And you noticed that, didn't you?" He released her so abruptly she stumbled back. "So we're ... what? Freaks of nature? Not cyborg, not human? You didn't think we might want to know what had been done to us?" he demanded angrily.

"I knew you'd be angry!" she said a little pleadingly. "What was I supposed to do when I didn't know positively myself? None of you would've believed me anyway! You all made up your mind that I was a liar and a thief and distrusted everything I said and everything I did!"

"Leave it!" Cham said sharply. "This isn't the time or place for an argument, and it isn't getting us anywhere anyway."

Lynx sent him a brooding look, but seemed to force himself to relax. "Let's go. The others are waiting."

Chapter Eleven

The trip back to the station where the others were camping was way less fun than the trip out. Cham and Lynx were still seething with resentment when they reached the camp site. Neither one of them had spared more words than necessary and she strongly suspected they would've simply abandoned her if they hadn't been ordered to keep up with her. They took turns carrying her at least part of the way, when they got to areas that were so littered with debris that she couldn't maneuver through it blindly even holding one of their hands.

She'd hated having to be carried at all, partly because it was pretty damned miserable being carried by somebody who obviously didn't want to touch you and partly because she worried about their surgery. She certainly hadn't been in any kind of shape to walk so far afterward let alone carry anybody.

The unusually excited reception they got upon their return was evidence enough that those who'd had to wait had grown increasingly unnerved by their prolonged absence.

As *if* she didn't feel guilty enough!

She reminded herself that their little 'interlude' couldn't possibly have delayed them more than a few minutes, but it didn't really help her feelings. Nothing did once Lynx and Cham had related their discovery.

She'd almost begun to hope they wouldn't tell the others, a sign of just how upset she was that it didn't occur to her that they would find out anyway! It almost made it worse that everyone was so relieved and excited that they'd successfully ditched the locators.

She knew the minute Cham and Lynx glanced at her that they were about to divulge the rest. Ordinarily, she would've tried to brazen it out and at least pretend she wasn't worried that they might want to choke the life out of her. She felt severely outnumbered, though, and guilty, no matter how fiercely she defended herself in her mind. When she saw that look, she retreated as far from them as she could get. She would've taken off and headed back toward the city if Raven hadn't pinned her with an 'I dare you' look.

She decided she liked the idea of being chased down even less than having to endure their accusing looks.

She *hoped* that was all she had to worry about!

She was too far away to hear what was said, but she didn't need to. The news shocked everyone as badly as it had Lynx and Cham. For so long that she felt sick to her stomach, everyone merely stared in disbelief at Lynx and Cham, struggling to wrap their minds around it and then everyone began trying to talk at once.

Acceptance finally began to sink in and when it did, the same sense of betrayal Lynx and Cham had felt, and then she studied her fingers and pretended she was completely unaware that everyone was glaring at her as if she was the devil incarnate.

It was so unfair! *She* didn't do it to them! Maybe she should have told them, but that wouldn't have changed anything as far as she could see. They wouldn't have

believed her.

Maybe it would've been better, she thought unhappily? At least then she would've been vindicated as a liar when Dr. Madison scanned them and they wouldn't be looking at her like she'd deliberately misled them.

Which was unfair! She hadn't, not deliberately. True, she'd suspected and she supposed she could've mentioned that, but how did you tell someone you suspected someone had done something horrible to them, unthinkable? What was the point of upsetting someone when you only had suspicions?

The men dispersed after a bit, moving in to their own groups. It was almost sad, really, that they did that, she thought forlornly. She didn't think they were even aware of it, that tendency to separate themselves by squads. Sometimes, they would mingle with the others. Sometimes one or another would separate himself from everyone else, but mostly they stuck together by squad—the way they'd been programmed to behave.

In a sense, she thought they actually *were* cyborgs just as they'd been programmed to believe they were. They might not have enough cybernetics to actually constitute robots, but they'd still been programmed. They hadn't *learned* as humans normally did. They hadn't gotten the chance to learn from experiences, from interacting with other human beings.

She suspected if they hadn't been 'trained' in the protocol of dealing with prisoners of war and refugees they wouldn't have known how to act around her at all or what to say.

Of course, she had to admit that they were fast learners! A couple of hours with her porns and they could fuck like porn stars! Having been the delighted recipient, she could testify to that!

And she didn't suppose that was anything that she would have to look forward to anymore.

As if it wasn't bad enough that Raven had pointed out that she was the only female available to them! Now she was in the position of being the only one and still not wanted!

She sighed dejectedly, trying to think back in her mind and reconstruct everything she'd said and done and decide where she'd gone wrong, what she might have done instead that would've made things turn out better. It was useless, of course. Short of keeping her ass at home instead of taking on the assignment, she didn't think she could've done any better.

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she hadn't had but one meal that day. She resented it. She was in the middle of an emotional crisis for god's sake! She discovered when she peered at the men, though, that they were heating food and decided that was probably what had set her stomach to rumbling, the smell she hadn't really noticed.

Not that it mattered! As hungry as she discovered she was, she didn't feel up to facing them to get food. It was bad enough to feel their angry, accusing stares from a distance! She didn't want to risk being drawn into another unpleasant argument like the one with Lynx!

Deciding to ignore them, she got up and headed into the lady's room for privacy. It wasn't lit as well as the last one. The lights had burned out and the only illumination came from the glass transom over the door. The gloominess fit her mood, though.

After staring around for a while at nothing in particular, she finally moved to the ragged couch along the wall in the lounge area. When she'd examined the seat carefully for any sign of vermin and decided it didn't seem to have any current residents, she settled on the lumpy surface. Her feet and legs ached the moment she took her weight off of them.

She'd thought she was physically fit before she'd been kidnapped, but the trek had been grueling and she was sore all over. She tried not to think about how much of her soreness might be from 'other' exercise. She didn't think it was a good idea to dwell on it anymore than her interlude with Bull and Lynx.

It was just sex. She'd thoroughly enjoyed it, but it was over with. There was no sense in making it 'bigger' in her mind than what it was. None at all, especially since she didn't think they liked her at all anymore—if they'd liked her before—and she thought that was pretty doubtful.

They were contemptuous of her trade, had been from the start and that didn't suggest that they'd been inclined to view her kindly. She supposed she could see their point, even though she didn't agree with their point of view. She still thought one bad turn deserved another and if she could make money doing it, so much the better. There was nothing the 'bigwigs' hated worse than somebody getting into their pockets. It made her earnings that much sweeter.

Of course the bigwigs hated her because they couldn't buy her loyalty like they did everyone else's. She worked for whoever paid the most and that pleased her, too, that Whitaker was well aware she'd done a job for Bio-H-Tech only a few years earlier. Not that she'd told him! But he had spies everywhere and a lot of them on his permanent payroll. Like the others, he only hired outsiders like her for extremely sensitive things that were likely to get the spy killed. They didn't care anymore about their own spies. They just didn't like having to clean up if one of them got killed.

* * * *

Raven was too stunned to think for a time. It was as if the words were fists flying at him hard enough to stun him physically and his entire brain had shut down from the concussion. Slowly, his mind began to function again, but it was almost as bad, almost as impossible to think since the moment it did thoughts seemed to fly at him from every direction and it was impossible to make connections. When some of the random thoughts finally did take enough precedence for him to grasp them, it set his stomach to churning.

They weren't super soldiers. They weren't cyborgs. They were ... monsters.

And Nika had known all along.

The nausea and anger became more pronounced with that thought.

He'd found her interest in them, her seeming willingness to befriend them, suspect all the time, he told himself. They'd captured her and taken her prisoner and they were cyborg soldiers designed specifically as killing machines, not humans groomed into soldiers. The circumstances alone, he knew, precluded the possibility that her behavior was honest, that he could allow himself to trust her, even though he'd found himself wanting to ignore the logic and simply seize the opportunity as they others had.

Someone had to keep their head and as squad leader he knew that someone had to be him.

Gods! But he had wanted to take her so badly it ate at him like acid! The little he had allowed himself, because he just hadn't been able to resist, had only made it worse.

Knowing the others had been inside her made it worse! She'd accepted them, even after she'd flatly refused to because they were cyborgs, allowed the others to hold and kiss her and appease their needs on her.

She'd told him she'd enjoyed it. It had felt like a slap in the face that it was purely for her amusement, but as angry as that had made him, it had also fired his imagination until he could hardly think straight.

The others didn't know she was merely entertaining herself with them to pass the time—or worse. It hadn't actually occurred to him that there was any sort of risk—to them—in it until he'd seen the way Bull and Lynx were afterward. It was as clear as day then that it had left them as vulnerable as if she'd somehow switched off every defense mechanism they had.

He couldn't make himself believe she wasn't completely aware of the effect it would have on them and that was when he'd realized both the danger of it as a weapon and the possibility that she meant to use it against them.

He supposed he should have told her that they had no intention of doing anything to her beyond holding her until it was safe to let her go. She might not have felt forced to try to defend herself, to plot against them. She might have any way, but leaving her with the sense that her life was in danger hadn't been a wise decision at all.

She'd defeated them without striking a single blow, cut their hearts out.

He dismissed that thought. He hadn't allowed her close enough to use her wiles against him, but the others He had only to look at them to see they were more devastated by the discovery because of what it meant about Nika's perception of them than because it completely annihilated their perception of themselves. The way they kept glancing at her was evidence of that, particularly when he knew their minds almost as well as he knew his own.

They felt betrayed ... with good reason. She'd welcomed them, made them feel like men, made them feel like she thought of them as desirable men, and she'd known all along that they weren't. They were abominations, monsters—animals. How could she possibly see it any other way? And if she didn't, then everything she'd told them with her body, with her smiles, with her frank looks of admiration had been a lie.

He felt betrayed and he hadn't even mated with her!

"Nika knew?" Bull asked, his voice sounding hoarse, gravelly as it did when he'd been wounded and was trying to master the pain.

Lynx looked torn. "She wasn't surprised when the doctor told us. She said she'd only suspected, that she hadn't known for certain."

"Then why would she ...?" Bull stopped and flicked an uncomfortable glance at Raven.

"It was just sex," Raven said harshly. "She made it clear it was something they consider recreation. It didn't mean ... anything beyond that."

Bull's face tightened angrily. "You asked her?" he growled.

Raven immediately felt defensive. "I told the others she was our woman to keep them away from her," he said tightly. "If you know anything else that would've made them keep their fucking distance after the three of you made such a fucking display, I'm open to hearing it!"

All three of them looked furious and guilty at the same time and Raven felt his belly clench. Clearly Cham had also decided to mate her or he wouldn't look as damned

guilty as Lynx and Bull!

Gods damn it! He was the *only* one that hadn't had more than a taste of her?

"And she said that?" Bull demanded in outraged disbelief when he recovered, clearly disbelieving, maybe because he couldn't figure out how he'd missed it? "In front of them?"

Raven shook his head. "Almost that bad. She refuted my claim. When I took her aside and explained the situation, that I'd claimed her as ours to protect her from the others, she told me she didn't belong to us just because she'd had sex with you two. It wasn't a commitment. It didn't *mean* anything. It was just for fun."

* * * *

To Nika's consternation, just about the time she decided to settle down and sleep, the door of the lady's room opened. She didn't have to see that well to recognize Bull. His shoulders were so broad he had to lead with one to get through the door.

"I brought you something to eat."

Warmth instantly chased her uneasiness, but she was wary. "That's alright. I appreciate it, but I'm not really hungry."

Her stomach growled an angry denial and she glanced at Bull uncomfortably. Apparently he heard it and took it as an invitation. He moved inside, allowed the door to swing closed, and approached her. "Try to eat anyway. It'll make sleeping easier."

Nika took the container he held out to her. The food inside was still hot enough to warm her fingers. "Thanks."

He looked undecided but finally settled beside her. Her throat immediately closed and it took all she could do to swallow the mouthful of stew she'd just taken. "You aren't pissed off at me, too?" she asked tentatively.

He frowned, clearly searching for words. "You didn't do it to us," he said finally.

Relief flooded her. "I'm so sorry ... about everything!"

"Not everything, I hope."

She stared at him blankly before she realized what he was talking about. "I meant about not saying anything and about what the company did."

He was silent for several moments. "Why didn't you tell us?"

She thought it over. "I thought everybody would be angry with me for telling them. It isn't the sort of thing anybody wants to hear and people tend to take it out on whoever's handiest. I didn't know how anyone would react, but it seemed possible that it wouldn't be a good thing for me. Anyway, I didn't honestly know for sure. I suspected, but I didn't know. I still thought it was possible that Dr. Madison would discover that Lynx and Cham were cyborgs and he'd refuse to help. That was why I wanted to go and talk to him alone before I took anyone there."

He frowned. "You thought we might kill him if he refused," he said neutrally.

She nearly choked on her food. "I didn't honestly know what to expect."

"But you thought that because of what we are ... designed killers."

"None of you had hurt me, or even offered to. Scared the piss out of me, yes, took me hostage, yes, but not hurt me."

"You're afraid of us."

She sent him a look. It was hard to reconcile in her mind what they were with what she'd come to know of them, but she didn't think anybody that wasn't a complete moron would've *not* been afraid in the beginning.

“We weren’t designed to make war on women,” he said, his voice harsher than before.

Nika digested that in silence. “But you’re still”

“Killers.”

“I didn’t say that!”

“It was what you were thinking, though, that we don’t know anything else.”

Nika swallowed unhappily when he stood up jerkily. “I know you know *something* else,” she said, trying to divert him.

He paced to the door, but he didn’t leave. Nika was relieved for a moment. Then a suspicion began to rise. “They sent you in here to make sure I wasn’t listening in, didn’t they?”

He sent her a sharp look, but he neither denied it or admitted it. He didn’t have to. His reaction was enough.

She focused on her food. “I thought you’d come because you were the only one that understood I hadn’t meant to cause any harm. You’re as bad as the others.” She set the half eaten food aside, feeling almost as nauseated now as she had been hungry when she’d started. The food she’d swallowed lay in her stomach in an indigestible lump.

“Why would we trust you?”

She stared at him with a mixture of hurt and anger. “Why not? Why not at least give me the benefit of a doubt? Because you think I’m a liar and a thief? Or because I’m human and you figure they’re all out to fuck you over?”

“It’s the same thing, isn’t it?”

It was like a slap and it made her reel from the blow. “You’re human.”

“The problem is, we aren’t. We can’t even expect the little consideration you humans have for each other, can we?”

“Exactly what have I done *to* you? Accuse me if you’re going to! Don’t beat around the bush and make me guess! I freed you from those damned ... coffins they kept you in when they didn’t need you! Granted, it was purely accidental. I didn’t even know you were there and I fucked up the codes or it wouldn’t have activated the damned things, but I still did it! I didn’t tell any of you what I suspected, because it was too horrific even for me to believe, although I suspected. Otherwise, I haven’t done a damned thing but help! I told you about the subway. I told you about Dr. Madison. I gave myself to you!”

“Why?”

The question took her aback. “What?”

“Why did you?”

She realized the moment he barked the question at her why he was so angry. Raven had told him what she’d said ... and she thought he was more hurt than angry.

He expected her to lie. She could see it in his expression. Even if she tried to explain, he wasn’t going to believe her.

It might be worse if he did believe her, she realized. She’d done it, ultimately, because she wanted to, but the reasons behind it weren’t simple or straightforward. She wasn’t even sure herself of her exact motives. “Because I’m an idiot,” she muttered.

Getting off of the couch, she moved to the row of lavatories and tested them until she found one that worked. When the muddied water ran clear, she scooped up handfuls and splashed the cooling water on her face. It helped to calm her, but it didn’t bring her

any closer to an answer, not one she could give him without hurting and angering him more.

She'd desired him. She didn't think, with all the sympathy in the world, that she could've brought herself to allow intimacy if she hadn't felt drawn to him. He wouldn't be satisfied with that, though, not when Raven had told him she considered it pure recreation.

How ironic was it that men, in general, were delighted at the idea of sex without strings and she'd managed to find the only ones who thought differently? She didn't doubt that that was part of why Lynx and Cham were also angry with her, because now that they knew, they didn't believe desire had had anything to do with it.

If they weren't idiots they'd *know* just from her reaction to them that it wasn't 'nothing' to her either, she thought angrily! She didn't like them because they'd given her the best sex she'd ever had! The idiots! It was because she'd been drawn to them in the first place that it had been the best sex ever!

She supposed it wasn't fair of her to expect them to understand that given their limited experience, especially when men with a great deal of experience couldn't figure that out! A woman had to *feel* something first! Otherwise, a man, no matter how damned good he was, wasn't going to blow her mind with sex!

She drank and then shut the tap off, returning to the couch.

"Why did you tell Raven that it was just ... recreation?"

Nika looked at him angry. "Because I don't want to be *owned*, damn it! If I fucking wanted to be owned, I'd sell myself to the fucking government!"

He stalked across the room and crouched in front of her. "Tell me it meant something, gods damn it! Anything! Even if it was just 'for fun'!"

"Why? So you can call me a liar again?" she said angrily, feeling her throat close.

He caught her abruptly and dragged her close. She'd expected him to shake her in his anger. She hadn't expected him to kiss her and a jolt of shock went through her when he settled his mouth over hers. For a few moments, she teetered between her own hurt and anger, but she didn't want to fight. She wanted to sooth.

She twined her arms around his neck and tried to pull him to her. He resisted, making it clear that he hadn't actually intended to do anything more than kiss her punishingly, to exert his power over her.

She caught him in his own trap, however. Uttering a groan into her mouth, he yielded abruptly, pushing her down on the short couch and settling heavily on top of her.

Their damned clothes were in the way! Beyond that, it was a cramped, awkward love nest. She ignored the irritants, focusing on the heat, the pleasure.

It was everything she remembered—better. His essence was drugging to her senses, created a dizzying euphoria and aroused an urgent desire for more. She pulled at him, trying to twist beneath him to bump her mound against the ridge his erection had formed in his trousers. Somehow, he managed to wedge his hips between her thighs, but it was almost more frustrating than enjoyable. The pressure as he rocked against her cleft was pleasure and torture at the same time. She felt her cleft grow warm and moist for him and no surcease from the torment.

She was gasping for breath when he broke from her lips and dove for her throat. The sound of rending fabric rattled her ears and it flickered through her mind, briefly, to

wonder if he'd torn her suit open or merely ripped the closures free. She discovered she didn't care which when she felt the heat of his breath between her breasts, the nibble of his lips up from the valley to one peak and then his mouth on the tip that was aching with fullness.

She gasped sharply when she felt the tug of his mouth on her nipple, felt heat sear all the way through her. She curled her fingers in his tawny hair, dug them into his scalp ... and then found his horns. Gripping them, she pushed at him until she managed to guide him to her other breast, but even that wasn't enough fast enough.

Releasing her grip, she began to pat him in search of the opening to his clothing.

He reared up onto his knees abruptly, grasped the front of her suit and opened it to the bottom. When he discovered it didn't open low enough to expose her sex, he stared at it in frustration. Nika was in no mood for delays, however. As soon as he reared upward and was no longer pinning her, she began shrugging her shoulders from the suit and pushing it down her hips.

Instead of undressing himself, he grabbed her suit once it reached her hips and yanked it down her legs. Pulling at the opening in his trousers until his cock fell free, he fell over her again, catching himself with his palms.

The clothes, Nika discovered, were *still* a barrier. She hadn't managed to get her suit much past her knees. They bound her legs together at the ankles, making it impossible for her to wrap her legs around his hips like she wanted to, and when he finally managed to plow into her, his trousers prevented him from grinding his belly against her cleft.

It didn't matter. Nika was so ready before he even entered her that she couldn't catch her breath. By the time he'd managed a connection with a series of short jabs that were almost as much pain as pleasure, she felt like she was teetering on the precipice.

She fought it, squeezing her eyes closed and hugging the sensation to herself as she felt the glide of his flesh along her channel, summoning a mental image of the movements that nearly swept her over the edge. She struggled a few moments more as he set a jarring pace, allowing the tension to build to explosiveness before she finally sought culmination.

The power of the convulsions that seized her tore the air from her lungs in a keen cry of sound. She clutched at him tightly to anchor herself as the next wave hit and the next, groaning, gasping, luxuriating in the rapture that engulfed her in waves.

Her climax set off his own. The heat of his seed and the tug at her flesh from his ejaculation sent a fresh wave of pleasure through her even as she began to drift toward earth. She held herself tightly to him as he shuddered and finally leaned heavily against her, enjoying the momentary sense of closeness in the aftermath of shared pleasure that was like nothing else.

He pushed himself up after a few moments, studying her face a little doubtfully. "Did I hurt you?"

"Not until you put your elbow on my hair," she muttered a little drunkenly, refusing to open her eyes and look at him for fear of what she'd see in his eyes. He jerked his arm off her hair as if he'd been scalded.

She waited, expecting him to push away from her. When he didn't, she finally nerved herself to look at him. She saw his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. She could see he was searching for something to say. Finally, he merely got off of her and

straightened his clothes.

Disappointment flickered through her, but she knew she hadn't really thought sex was going to magically solve everything.

She'd hoped. There was no denying that. Maybe it had even improved things a little and not made them more of a mess, but it was no fix-all.

She discovered when she finally pushed herself up and looked at her clothes around her ankles that he was still watching her. A little embarrassed, now, about the wildness of their coupling, Nika stared at her clothes and then the semen all over her cleft and finally decided to finish removing her clothes and wash up before she dressed.

"I shouldn't have done that," Bull muttered.

She glanced at him sharply, feeling a flicker of hurt and anger that he was going to apologize—now—that he was already regretting the impulse. Nothing made a person feel more like shit after a round of great sex like 'I'm sorry'! She saw him scrubbing his hand over his face.

"Don't, ok? I don't especially want to rehash it! I sure as hell don't want to hear why you're sorry. I think I can figure it out without help!"

She got up and moved to the lavatory a little jerkily to clean up.

She knew he was studying her in baffled anger, but she didn't care.

"I might've impregnated you," he ground out.

She sent him a sharp look even though she'd promised herself she wouldn't.

"Well, if you're sorry, that makes it ok," she said with biting sarcasm, more because it stung that he was worried about it than because she was.

"Gods damn it, Nika," he growled, grabbing her arm when she looked away from him again. "Just tell me if it's a possibility!"

She narrowed her eyes at him. Maybe it was mean to leave him dangling, but fuck it! She felt like being mean! "Damned if I know!" she snapped. "Don't sweat it, though. I'm a big girl. I think I can deal with it ... either way."

He released her arm, but she could hear him grinding his teeth. "I want to know."

Finished bathing as well as she could, she shut the water off and turned to face him. "What difference does it make? Do you think it hasn't occurred to me that none of you want to leave me behind in case the authorities question me? If you're planning on breaking my neck, it isn't going to matter either way, is it?"

He paled. "You don't believe that. Is that what that was all about?" he ground out in the next moment. "Trying to convince me to protect you from the others?"

"You are *such* an ass! You got me! That was it! Did it work?"

He looked like he wanted to strangle her for several moments. Dragging in a deep breath, he let it out slowly.

"I couldn't help but notice you weren't worried about it the first time! I guess that was before you decided to dispose of me?" she asked, completely aware that she was going out of her way to provoke him, but she'd discovered a burning desire to fight with him.

"It was before I discovered I wasn't a cyborg," he ground out, turning abruptly and heading toward the door.

Nika felt her shoulders slump. "What happened to the sweet man that made me She broke off, startled by what she'd almost admitted, which was a complete revelation to her.

He swiveled to look at her sharply. "Made you what?"

She shook her head.

His lips tightened. "He found out he was a freak," he growled, turning away and yanking the door open.

She felt like crying when she'd succeeded in driving him off, but she was too stunned by what she'd almost said to give in to it. Beyond that, the implications of his question hit her squarely between the eyes almost as soon as he left.

He was afraid he might've gotten her pregnant because he was worried about what she might have.

Chapter Twelve

Nika discovered she was more concerned about the possibility that she might have developed an attachment than she was at the possibility that she'd gotten pregnant, which she supposed just showed how screwed up she was in the head.

She realized she didn't actually think she could've gotten pregnant. For one, she doubted they were capable of bearing off-spring. It seemed unlikely that the company would've overlooked such a possibility and they would've taken steps to ensure that they were sterile, she was sure. For another, she didn't honestly think she was capable of getting pregnant. She'd done her best to avoid considering it, but the truth was she'd never been nearly as careful as she should've been.

She supposed she'd been unconsciously playing Russian roulette with her fertility for years. She certainly hadn't done it consciously, but there was no getting around the fact that she forgot to use protection as often as she remembered. She'd told herself it was because she so rarely indulged, but she didn't believe it any more.

She'd been hoping to have her doubts disproved, and they hadn't been.

That made it easy to dismiss Bull's anxieties and focus on what she saw as a real problem.

Maybe it wasn't though? There was something about the guys that just lit her up like no one ever had before. Surely, the very fact that she was almost equally attracted to all of them nixed any possibility that she could form an emotional attachment—to any of them? If she cared at all, it was that they'd been so horribly abused, and she did care about that, deeply.

It made her angry every time she thought about what those bastards at Bio-H-Tech had done! She hoped somebody caught up with them and made them pay! She hoped the bastards lost every credit they'd wrung from people over the years and rotted in prison for the rest of their lives! Even that wouldn't compensate the guys, but at least the bastards wouldn't get away with it! They deserved to be punished!

And she still had the means to see to it, she realized abruptly. She had a copy of the files they wanted to make sure were destroyed!

She frowned at the thought, wondering how she could use it to expose them without going to jail herself. She wanted revenge, but did she want it badly enough to spend the rest of *her* life in jail?

Did she want to risk the possibility that she would be the *only* one that went to jail?

Because that could happen, easily.

She decided she would have to think about it. Surely, something would come to her?

Something did. It occurred to her, forcefully, the minute she considered contacting someone about the violation of the London Convention on Genetics and Human Rights that the guys would be considered abominations. If she did anything,

there was a frightening possibility that it would only succeed in making them the target.

The thought of what they might do to rectify the situation made her cold. Realizing she was still naked and getting colder by the minute, she retrieved her clothes and shoes and put them on. After glancing at the food she'd ignored several times, she decided to finish it.

It was cold and not nearly as good as it had been when it was warm, but she finished most of it and discarded the container. She discovered she was still upset enough that it didn't sit particularly well on her stomach.

Curling up on the couch after a while, she tried to dismiss all the thoughts running around and around in her mind. She had very little success. She slept fitfully and felt almost as bad when she finally gave up as she had when she'd lain down.

She could hear the men stirring around, though, and realized it must be morning. They seemed to have a better internal clock than she did. Getting up, she did what she could in the way of grooming. There was water, but only cold water came out of the faucets and it was *really* cold. It wasn't comfortable enough to encourage her to linger over a bath even if she'd had something besides a small basin for bathing.

She wasn't any more inclined to join the guys than she had been the night before and she didn't really see the point. She was pretty sure none of them actually wanted to chat with her, or even wanted her close by, listening, while they talked among themselves. And there was nothing else to do but wait. Lynx and Cham ought to be able to move around with some freedom if they felt up to going to the surface, but everyone else was still trapped, including her, although not for the same reason.

She sat down and stared at the floor and the walls for a while and finally decided to have a try at doing laundry. She'd never washed anything by hand in her life, but she figured she could manage it. She'd worn everything she'd brought with her at least once or twice. Anything she could do was bound to be an improvement.

She was tired enough after she finished the first to decide to give it a rest. Dragging the dripping thing from the sink, she looked around for some place to hang it and finally draped it over the only stall door that was still hanging from rusty hinges. Lying down on the couch again, she listened to the steady dripping until she dozed off once more.

The smell of food woke her sometime later. She dragged in a deep breath of appreciation and finally opened her eyes. Lynx was crouched beside the couch, she discovered, waving the container under her nose. "You planning on hiding in here until we move on?" he asked dryly.

She resented the suggestion that she was hiding. Deciding to ignore him, she stretched and finally sat up. "Is that for me? Or did you just bring it in to torture me?"

He sat down in the spot she'd vacated when she sat up. "I guess I brought it to torture you. If you want food, go get it."

"I'm actually not that hungry." Her stomach growled. Damn the thing anyway! She drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, hoping it would prevent her stomach from grumbling.

Lynx nudged her, holding the container out. She studied it and then his face suspiciously. "I thought you said it was yours."

"Eat," he said irritably.

She took it, discovering without much surprise that it was the same stew she'd

had the night before and the day before that. She took a bite instead of voicing her resolution never to eat stew again if she ever got out of the subway.

"I guess they're having another discussion and sent you to make sure I didn't overhear anything."

His expression tightened. "Something like that," he drawled coolly.

Nika cleared her throat after she'd eaten several more bits while he watched.

"Who's going to see Dr. Madison tonight?"

Lynx shrugged. "Condor's squad ... and Raven."

Nika felt her belly clench at the mention of Raven. She merely nodded, however.

"Are you taking them? Or Cham?"

"Why?"

She sighed. "I was just making conversation. It makes me nervous having someone stare at me while I try to eat."

"That makes you nervous or me being here makes you nervous?"

She studied him for a long moment. "You're spoiling for a fight, too, aren't you?" she said abruptly.

He studied her in tight-lipped silence for several moments. "You going to give me one?" he growled. "Or would you rather fuck the meanness out of me?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Contrary to what you seem to believe, picking a fight with me doesn't turn me on to fucking!" she snapped.

"It worked for Bull."

She felt like throwing her dinner at him. She restrained herself for two very good reasons. She was still hungry, damn it! And she didn't like to think what he might decide to do in retaliation.

Jolting to her feet, she stalked across the room from him and sat down on the floor with her back to the wall.

"Lost your taste for animals? Or just felines?" he growled when he'd surged to his feet and followed her to stand over her.

She glared up at him. "I *liked* the men I was with before. I've never had a taste for assholes! If you're fucking pissed off about what you found out, you've got a right to be. I understand that. I understand the frustration of not being able to do anything about it, and not being able to get your hands on the people that did it and avenge yourself! But I didn't do it to you! So you can take your nasty temper somewhere else!

"I didn't *fuck* Bull because we had a fight, you idiot! I was *trying* to make up with him, but he's as pig headed as you are! As you *all* are! If you guys just *need* to make war, I understand that, too! It's all they gave you to work with. But you can do it with somebody else! I wasn't built for war! I'm not predisposed to want to fight, damn it! I *prefer* to avoid it whenever possible."

He looked furious enough to pound on something, but, to her relief, he left instead.

* * * *

Bull had been seething ever since Lynx disappeared into the room where Nika was holed up and it had built to explosive proportions by the time he emerged, his mind feeding him images that drove any rational thought far into the dim recesses of his brain. He shot to his feet the moment Lynx emerged and stalked toward him with every intention of beating him to a pulp.

Fortunately, since Lynx was so much faster than him it didn't bear thinking on, Lynx was distracted. He stalked right up to him and planted his fist in his face, felling him, before Lynx even realized his intention. "Get up!" he growled, not even close to satisfied.

Lynx was on his feet again before he'd finished the sentence. Bull heard the distinctive scrape of metal against metal as he instinctively unsheathed the deadly five inch blades that were his claws and then another scraping sound as he rethought it and sheathed them again. Lynx had slammed his fist into his jaw and hammered his belly with four more blows before he could swing again, however.

Fortunately, he'd had time to tighten his stomach muscles. Lynx still managed to knock the breath out of him in a grunt, but he didn't manage to paralyze his solar plexus.

Sucking in a breath, he bellowed with rage and swung at Lynx again. It took him a moment to figure out why he couldn't land the blow. He swiveled a look of rage around to see who'd grabbed his arm and Lynx caught him in the side of the head, slamming him into Raven and sending them both reeling.

Catching his balance, he let out a roar of rage and charged Lynx again. Cham had grabbed Lynx from behind by that time and was wrestling to restrain him. It barely registered. He dismissed it even when it did. The bastard had hit him when he'd turned his head. If that wasn't a low fucking blow, nothing was!

He plowed into Lynx hard enough to drive both Lynx and Cham into the wall behind them. The plaster shattered and dust rained down on all of them, blinding him momentarily.

Lynx recovered and slammed his fist into his face three times in such quick succession that it rocked his head back and forth dizzily and then followed with two hard jabs to the solar plexus that succeeded in knocking the breath from him, paralyzing the muscle so that he had to fight to drag in air.

It made him more furious, but he felt the weight and grip of the other men piling on him before he could retaliate. When he finally managed to blink the debris from his eyes, he discovered that Brahma had pinned both arms behind his back and Raven and Condor had gripped his shoulders. He tried to shrug them off but discovered fairly quickly that that wasn't likely to happen.

"Enough!" Raven bellowed.

Bull stared at him blankly for a moment until it finally penetrated his mind that Raven was squad leader and had issued an order. Still furious, he glanced toward Lynx. Cham, Komodo, and Kodiak had restrained him. He'd figured there must be a reason the bastard hadn't tried to blindside him again!

"You finished?" Raven growled.

Not by a long fucking shot! Bull scowled at him, but he knew they weren't going to let him go until he yielded. He nodded angrily. When they released him, he glanced toward the room where Nika was and finally turned and stalked off when Raven planted himself in front of the door.

Lynx worked his jaw gingerly when Cham and the others finally released him, testing it for breakage. He'd been too stunned when Bull had attacked him to grasp what it was about but it hadn't taken him long to figure it out.

Well, fuck the son-of-a-bitch! Nika didn't fucking belong to the bastard! It was none of his business whether he'd fucked her or not and, truthfully, it gripped his ass that

he couldn't claim he had.

Giving Bull a wide berth in case he decided to take up the battle again, he wandered down the tracks a ways and settled to considering why Nika hadn't wanted to fuck him. If what Raven had suggested was true, shouldn't she have tried to placate him like she had Bull? Or was Bull more to her taste?

He hadn't really believed she was more inclined to like Bull because he was a bison and not a feline. He'd just flung that at her in anger, but maybe there was something to it?

He shook that off. She hadn't seemed to imply that. She'd pretty much said, flat out, that she'd had sex with Bull to try to appease him and it hadn't worked so she wasn't inclined to try it with him.

In point of fact, she hadn't seemed to have any problem with them at all beyond their predisposition to fight.

He frowned angrily at that. He'd been *designed* as a war machine, gods damn it! He didn't *know* anything else!

Nika didn't want anything to do with him if he couldn't learn, though, he thought a little sickly. The question was, could he? Could any of them?

What did the future hold for them, assuming they had one, if they couldn't, he thought abruptly? They'd been cut off from the one thing they knew, the only thing any of them were any good at. They weren't soldiers any more, of any kind.

As that settled fully inside of him for the first time, he felt something he'd never really felt before—fear, inadequacy, uselessness.

* * * *

Nika was so relieved when the sounds of battle finally ceased she was too weak to move. Anxiety flickered through her that Bull or Lynx or both of them had been seriously hurt, but she couldn't nerve herself to peer out and see if she could find out. The sounds of battle when they'd started had drawn her to the door to look, but one glance was enough to send her fleeing as far from the scene as possible, particularly when it occurred to her that she was going to be blamed for it.

She would've hid if there'd actually been any damned place to hide! As it was, she huddled in the far corner by the couch until everything got quiet, fully expecting Raven to fly through the door in an accusing rage the minute he got the men under control.

After a while, when she began to notice her cramping muscles, she got up stiffly and moved to the couch. Guilt trickled in behind the shock as it waned. She wasn't sure, she told herself, but she strongly suspected there wouldn't have been a fight at all if she hadn't decided to play with fire.

It was like every other impulse she'd ever yielded to—stupid, reckless, and dangerous! Raven was right, as much as she hated to admit it. It had been stupid to have sex with Bull and Lynx. She hadn't thought it through or she would've realized she was opening a can of worms that should be left closed.

She was still resentful that something innocently intended as 'good' had turned out so badly. What was the old saying? The road to hell is paved with good intentions?

She'd never actually understood what that meant before.

Enlightenment was so helpful!

The worst of it was, she'd only succeeded in making Bull and Lynx hate her and

making herself miserable. Who would've thought something as basic and natural as breathing could turn out to have such ... devastating consequences? She certainly hadn't had an inkling!

Not until afterwards anyway, which wasn't the least fucking bit helpful!

She still didn't understand why having sex with them had made her feel ... connected. It wasn't as if she'd never had sex before herself, damn it! She had and she hadn't cared one bit more about the men she'd had sex with afterwards than she had before. She supposed it was possible that that was because her previous sexual encounters hadn't been particularly satisfying. She'd enjoyed it well enough. She'd climaxed, but afterwards she'd felt almost awkward, uncomfortable, and she'd been as eager for them to leave as they had been to go.

She'd wanted to cuddle with Bull afterwards, though, more even than she had with Lynx, although she'd felt a similar urge with him, hadn't wanted to simply disconnect and wash to get the sticky and the scent off. Oddly enough, she realized, thinking back, she hadn't found that part the least bit offensive although she always had before.

She wasn't certain whether that had anything to do with it or not, but she finally decided it must ... somehow.

How could she have mistaken her feelings as nothing but empathy, though, she wondered? Or was that all it was after all and she just felt hurt because she'd felt like she was giving them something they needed and now they seemed angry about it? Was the hurt in the nature of a rejected, unappreciated gift?

Maybe that was part of it, too. Maybe she was just mistaking a lot of random things as caring and it really wasn't?

Why had it popped into her mind and nearly out of her mouth to say she cared about Bull, though?

Because she was confused, she decided. She did care in the sense that she was outraged about what had been done to them and what was to become of them. There was nothing wrong with that. People were supposed to feel empathy toward others. That should come naturally unless there was something bad wrong with them.

She'd just allowed herself to get too wrapped up in their plight and had decided it was more than that. It was probably the situation as much as anything.

Of course, she hadn't actually considered herself a captive at first. She'd wanted to run, had needed to, as much as they had. She'd felt like they were on common ground. They were just running together in the same direction and helping each other out. It wasn't until a good bit later that she'd finally accepted that she actually was a prisoner.

She still felt that way more than she felt like a prisoner, regardless of what she'd said to Bull when she was angry. It had occurred to her, finally, that they didn't seem to have the same view of the situation as she did and to worry what they might ultimately have in mind for her. She didn't really believe they meant to harm her, though. They had no reason to, even if they were on the run. She wasn't likely to go to the authorities, and they had to know that. They weren't short on intellect.

She'd flung that at Bull because she'd wanted to wound him. He seemed to think the worst of her and she'd decided to show him her worst side!

Smart move, Nika!

There might be something to that study that suggested intelligence points dropped when people allowed their anger to gain control of them!

Feeling restless as soon as she'd calmed down and decided there weren't going to be any repercussions for her part in the fight, Nika decided to have a go at the laundry again. It was harder than she would've ever thought to try to get dirt out of cloth by hand and she wasn't especially happy with the results.

Sighing when she decided she was too tired of working on it to try any more, she pulled the suit out and carried it to the same stall where she'd hung the first to dry, flinging the second one over the divider wall. Contrary to what she'd hoped, the first one wasn't even close to dry. The water seemed to have run down to the legs. Grasping them, she squeezed as much of the water out as she could and then opened the door and checked the top half. Discovering it was holding water, as well, she squeezed as much moisture out of the sleeves and top as she could and returned to the couch.

Her stomach and her nose told her when the second meal of the day rolled around. She sat up a little straighter and listened intently, but she didn't hear anybody approaching her 'cell'. She waited hopefully for a while and finally gave up. Raven had probably forbidden anybody else to take food to her after the fight, she thought a little resentfully.

Well! She hadn't wanted food badly enough to mingle with them and get nasty looks *before* the fight! She sure as hell wasn't going out after it!

It wasn't going to hurt her to miss a meal or two! She wasn't sure she could make it through an entire week, but she was sure they'd get over being pissed off with her in a day or so.

Raven entered the room just about the time she'd completely given up hope. He dashed it, though, immediately. He was empty handed. "If you want to eat, you'll have to come out here and get it like everybody else," he said tightly.

Nika glared back at him. "I'm not like everybody else, though!" she snapped. "I'm an outsider and it's *your* fault they're all pissed off at me!"

His lips tightened. "Exactly how do you figure that?"

"You told Bull and Lynx what I'd said!"

He studied her angrily for a moment. "I don't recall that you said it was supposed to be a secret. Are you pissed off because I didn't give you the chance to lie to them?"

"You wouldn't know the truth if it smacked you in the face!" she snapped. "You don't know me! You sure as hell aren't in any position to judge how I feel or what I think!"

"No. I can only go by what you say!" he snarled.

"Well! You decided I was lying about every-fucking-thing else," she said tartly, using the feminine logic that completely baffled men. "Why the hell did you decide I was telling the truth *that* time? That's what I'd like to know! You're just determined to make me a villain, aren't you?"

He looked taken aback and thoroughly confused. "So ... you're saying you were lying when you told me it didn't mean a thing to you to have sex with them?"

"I'm saying try minding your own damned business for a change! If I'd wanted to tell them that *I* would have told them!"

He glared at her. "If you didn't sit in here like a god-damned spider spinning her web and making trouble I might not have to try to clean up the mess you make!"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Asshole!"

He glared back at her. "Bitch!"

“Kiss my ass!”

“Don’t tempt me,” he growled. “I’d rather stick my cock in you and fuck the hell out of you!”

Nika stared at the door blankly when he stalked out. The sense that she’d lost that battle settled in her, and confusion, and hurt. He didn’t even *like* her! Why did he want to fuck her?

Because he was a *man*, she thought with loathing.

How dare the bastard liken her to a spider! She’d *known* that was what he thought about her, the asshole!

And she wasn’t a bitch! Nobody else thought so! Just him, because he was determined to think badly of her! He looked for evil motives in every damned thing she said and did!

Somebody had really given him a shitty outlook on life!

She fumed for a while about his ultimatum about the food and finally decided to spite him by staying put. Maybe he could order everybody else around, but he damned well couldn’t order her around!

Or maybe she’d just wait until she heard him and the Condor squad leave?

Too angry to sit still, she got up and paced for a few minutes and finally decided to check her clothes since she didn’t have anything else to do but think. There was a puddle under both suits, but she couldn’t tell that they were any dryer. Disgusted, she worked at squeezing water from the legs of both and then pushed the door of the stall open to work on the other side.

There was a monster as big as her head with whiskers, horrible beady eyes, and two really big teeth perched on the toilet. Letting out a scream of pure terror at the sight of the furry beast, Nika whirled and ran toward the exit.

Chapter Thirteen

Raven burst through the door, white faced, just as she neared it. It didn't occur to her to try to squeeze past him. She took a flying leap at him and landed in the middle of his chest, coiling her arms around his shoulders and her legs around his waist. He staggered but managed to keep his feet.

"What is it?" he bellowed, trying to pry her loose.

"A monster rat!" Nika screeched, glancing behind them to see if it had chased her out of the stall. "Kill it! Kill it! Don't let it get away!"

"A rat?" Raven echoed angrily. "You scared the fatal shit out of me because you saw a rat?"

"Kill it!" Nika growled.

"You want me to shoot a damned rat?" he demanded as if she'd lost her mind.

"I don't care how you kill it! Just do it!" she snapped, refusing to let go when he tried to pry her loose again. She discovered, though, that Bull was directly behind him and when Raven managed to untangle her legs from his waist, she dove at Bull, trying to climb up him. Fortunately, he helped her. She didn't think she could've managed it if he hadn't. Her entire focus was on the rat, though—beyond making sure her feet weren't on the floor where the damned thing could run up her leg.

She saw a flutter of movement under the stall. "There it goes! Get it!" she said, pointing imperiously. Lynx and Cham squeezed past her and Bull and entered the room behind Raven. All three of them merely stood in the room, though, looking around, their hands on their hips.

"There it is!" Cham said abruptly, surging forward. Raven and Lynx leapt forward, as well, and Nika craned her neck to see if they managed to catch it.

"Did they get it?"

She discovered Bull hadn't even been watching them, though. He was staring at her, although she couldn't decipher his expression.

"Did you get it?" she called to the others as she saw them moving away from the wall where they'd converged.

Raven glanced at the others. "It ran into that hole."

Consternation filled her. "You didn't kill it?" she demanded unhappily. "What if comes back?"

Lynx chewed his lower lip, but she could see his lips were twitching and he was trying hard not to smile. "I guess we'll try again."

She didn't see what he thought was funny, damn it! Glaring at him, she turned to look at Raven. "I guess it was drawn by the food you've had in here," he said neutrally, although she could see a gleam of amusement in his eyes.

"Poor thing," Cham seconded him. "It was probably starving."

"It didn't look starved to me!" Nika snapped, indignant that they obviously all thought it was funny. "That damned thing was as big as a house cat! Anyway, it wasn't

anywhere near the trashcan!”

Raven shrugged. “It’s gone now.”

“It isn’t gone!” Nika said crossly. “It’s hiding in that hole! Just waiting for you to leave to run out again!”

“We’ll try to catch it next time. We’re running low on meat anyway.”

Nika stared at Raven, but she couldn’t decide if he was serious or not. Realizing finally as they filed out of the bathroom that she was coiled around Bull, she looked at him uncomfortably and finally disentangled herself and slid down him. “Sorry,” she muttered. “The rat was after me.”

“You might as well come eat since you’re already out,” he said quietly.

She wasn’t especially hungry *now*! She also wasn’t anxious to return to the bathroom since they hadn’t slain the rat. Some warriors, she thought irritably! Not that they’d really tried that hard that she could see!

The suspicion arose that they’d deliberately let the damned thing escape because they knew she wasn’t going to want to lock herself up in the room with it, but she couldn’t decide whether they had an ulterior motive or not.

Clearly, she’d amused every-damned-body! When she followed Bull to the fire they’d built to heat the food, she noticed everybody she passed was either grinning openly or trying to pretend they weren’t. Feeling abused, she sat down to eat.

As soon as the commotion she’d caused died down, Lynx, Raven, and Condor and his squad headed toward the exit Bull and Brahma had cleared. Nika watched them leave, feeling her stomach drop from under her. At the very least, they were facing potentially dangerous surgery to remove the locators. At the worst

She didn’t want to think about the worst. She was still pissed off at Lynx and Raven, but she couldn’t bear to think of them being hurt.

“It wasn’t that bad,” Cham said quietly. “We may not be cyborgs, but we were still designed to withstand battle conditions. They can handle the surgery.”

Nika flicked a look of surprise at him. “It felt pretty awful when I had it done,” she said. “They took the guns, right?”

Cham exchanged a look with Bull. “The objective is to get in and out without detection if possible. We’re good at what we do,” Bull said a little defensively.

Nika frowned. “*They* weren’t tracking any of you before,” she said pointedly. “Not with the intent to make sure you didn’t make it back.”

“We know the exact location of the doctor now, though. They can get closer underground and not risk as much exposure as we did.”

That relieved her. Nodding, she returned her attention to her food. When she’d finished, she got up and disposed of the trash and then headed toward her ‘quarters’. After pushing the door open wide enough to peer inside, though, she decided she didn’t really feel up to another encounter with the rat at the moment. Instead, she settled on the floor beside the door with her back to the wall.

Despite her lingering anxiety about the men that had left, she found her eyes getting heavier and heavier. She debated whether she felt up to braving the rat for the dubious comfort of the lumpy couch and finally decided she didn’t. After nodding off and jerking awake again several times from trying to sleep sitting up, she finally lay down on her side on the concrete and curled into a tight ball.

Bull woke her up trying to slide his hands under her. She jumped instinctively

and looked around a little wildly in confusion. "You'll be more comfortable sleeping on the couch," he said gruffly, hoisting her against his chest and straightening.

Nika put her arms around his neck to hold on. "The rat," she reminded him.

"I won't let him get you."

She didn't know how he meant to prevent it, but she knew he wouldn't if he said so. He lay down on the couch with her, pinning her between himself and the back as he had in the subway car. It flickered through her mind that it must be miserably uncomfortable for him as long as he was, but she was too grateful for his warmth and the protection he offered from the rat to object. She snuggled closer instead, finding as comfortable a spot for her head on his hard bicep as she could.

"Thank you, Bull," she murmured sleepily.

He nuzzled his face against hers, but he didn't respond or if he did, she didn't hear it. Lulled by his warmth and his scent, feeling his broad chest and thick arms surrounding her like a stone fortress, she dropped into the abyss beckoning to her.

* * *

Raven's skin prickled the moment they emerged from the sewer system. He hesitated, scanning the alley where he'd emerged keenly, tilting his head to listen for any sound that seemed out of place. Finally, he signaled for the others to emerge.

Condor sent him a long look. When Raven nodded, he crouched and then launched himself into the air, flapping his great wings with difficulty in the confined space. Fortunately, an updraft caught him, filled his wings, and he soared abruptly faster upwards until he cleared the roofs of the buildings that bordered the alley. The others emerged, moving into the shadows.

Condor was back in a few moments. He shrugged.

Scanning the alley one last time, Raven signaled for the others to follow. They'd emerged a block west of their destination. The streets were almost empty so late, though, and they moved briskly along, arriving at the door they sought only a few minutes later.

Raven's rap on the door unnerved him as the sound echoed with stark loudness along the alley. Everyone tensed. Raven divided his attention between listening for sounds of approach within the building and scanning the alley where they stood.

He didn't like it. Something felt wrong. He couldn't put his finger on it, but he tended to trust his instincts ... which was what bothered him. He hadn't been able to detect anything out of place.

He didn't like to think it might be nothing but nerves, although that was certainly preferable to being right and discovering they'd walked into a trap.

He glanced at the door again after a few moments, hesitant to knock again, wondering if the man's hearing, or lack of it, had prevented him from hearing the first knock. He was on the point of knocking again when he finally heard the scrape of a shoe on concrete. Relief trickled through him.

After what seemed an unconscionably long time, he heard the scrape of metal against metal and a bloodshot eye stared at him through a hole in the door. "Nika sent us," Raven said on a breath of sound.

The eye continued to stare for several moments, as if the owner hadn't heard. Finally, Raven heard the click of a lock, though, and the door was pulled wide. With immense relief, Raven scanned the interior cautiously and strode inside. "I told them no more than five!" the old man greeted them.

"I was here last time!" Lynx growled. "If your eyes are that gods damned bad, I'm not sure we want your services."

The old man glared at him. "I can see well enough to do what I need to. Get moving! We don't have all night!"

Raven sent a skeptical glance in Lynx's direction, but led the way down. The uneasiness hadn't vanished. He scanned everything he passed, sniffed the air, listened, but he couldn't detect anything to account for the prickling along his skin that had begun from the moment they emerged.

"Who's first?"

Raven considered and finally decided to take the first surgery. The doctor looked his wings over blankly. "You're going to have to do something with those," he finally said testily.

Raven lifted them. "Now you're blocking my god damned light!"

Turning his head, Raven glared at the man and adjusted his wings again.

"Well, I guess that'll have to do," the doctor said irritably, grabbing the scanner and moving it into position.

When he'd set it to scanning, he moved to a metal cabinet and opened it, removing a tray full of instruments covered in sterile cloth and set it on a cart close to hand. "Good," he said more mildly when he'd checked the scanner readout, "at least it looks like yours is in about the same place. I guess you don't want anesthesia either?"

"No."

The doctor sighed and took up a syringe. "It's still going to hurt. Just so you know. I can't deaden it that well with a local."

Raven gritted his teeth as the man inserted the needle. It seemed to him to take a hell of a long time, but finally the doctor announced that he was done and he could get up and move to the couch to 'recover' a bit.

Raven felt lightheaded when he stood up and that alarmed him. The doctor sent him an irritated look when he asked him about it. "I just did surgery on you, young man! Yes, it's to be expected. I imagine it'll pass pretty quick, though. It didn't seem to take the other two very long to decide they were ready to go."

The dizziness had actually passed before the old man stopped rattling and focused on Griz. He still felt weak when he got up to give the couch to Griz, though, and that was almost as alarming as the dizziness considering the sense that something just wasn't right that had been plaguing him.

He moved to the door of the surgery after a few moments, listening intently to the sounds he could detect, faintly, from the outside. The doctor was finishing up on Komodo when it finally dawned on him that he shouldn't be hearing any sounds at all from outside. A wave of cold washed over him. He sent the doctor a hard look. "You expecting anybody else?"

Dr. Madison froze, lifting his head. The color drained from his face. "No!"

"Wrap it up. I think we might have company!"

Jerking his head at Lynx, he left the surgery and made his way up the stairs again. Con, he discovered, had followed them. The three of them moved to the door and checked the bolt although they'd seen the doctor lock it behind them. After listening intently at the door for several moments, Raven motioned for Lynx to turn the light off and eased the peephole cover back to scan what he could see of the alley. He dropped it

almost at once.

“Company,” he mouthed. Signaling for the others to stay put, he leapt the stairs between him and the first landing, and then leapt the second flight.

“Militia or cops. Tell me you have a backdoor, old man!” Raven growled. “I’m going to be really pissed off if I find out we’re cornered.”

Madison turned white faced. “Behind the old furnace,” he said shakily, dropping the syringe he’d been preparing for the next surgery and hurrying across the room to a narrow door at the back. “There’s a vent that drops to a sub-basement and access from there to the sewer system.”

“Grab what you need to take care of the rest. We’re about to move!”

Madison gaped at him just as they heard a barrage of gunfire above them.

“You’re taking me?” he demanded angrily.

“You want to stay here?”

Madison thought about it a moment and dashed back into his surgery. Grabbing a large black bag, he began stuffing instruments and medicines into it.

“You need all that?” Raven demanded impatiently.

Madison glanced at him. “If I can’t come back, I’m sure as fuck not going to leave it!”

Lynx called down to them from above. “They’re going to be inside in five minutes. What’s the plan?”

“Back door. Keep returning fire until we get the doctor down. He’s going to need a head-start.”

He turned and scanned the room. “Griz! You up to moving that safe over there?”

Griz moved to it and tested the weight. “Where do you want it?”

“At the door. We need to slow them down as much as we can. Panther, you grab that cabinet over there!”

When they’d hauled everything that had some weight to it up the stairs to pile it in front of the door, Panther took Con’s place trading gunfire with the men outside and everyone else headed to the sub-basement the doctor had told them about.

“Give us five and follow,” Con threw at him before he followed the others.

* * * *

Bull roused Nika the moment she felt him tense. She surfaced drunkenly from a deep sleep. “What is it?”

“Trouble, I’m thinking,” Bull growled, surging up from the couch abruptly and abandoning her. “Stay put!”

He was gone so fast, Nika had barely managed to struggle upright and stare with burning eyes after him before he disappeared through the door. The moment he opened the door, though, the sounds he’d obviously heard filtered to her and she realized he was right. The sounds coming from the tunnel, although she couldn’t readily identify them, were too loud not to mean trouble.

Stumbling from the couch, she wove a slightly drunken path to the door. She’d already grabbed the handle and jerked on it before she remembered Bull had ordered her to stay put. She debated, briefly, whether to follow them or not, but when she saw the first of the group that had left stride into the light, she dismissed her qualms and rushed outside.

Men were pouring from the darkness of the tunnel by the time she’d taken a step

outside. The men who'd been waiting had leapt to their feet and moved to meet them. Nika froze a few steps from the room she'd just left, staring at the men, unconsciously counting heads.

It was a relief to see that all of them had returned, but even from where she stood she could see they were shot to hell, moving in pairs to help support each other.

"Oh god!" she gasped, rushing toward the edge of the platform even as the men helped the wounded up onto it. "Oh god! What happened?"

"Ambush."

Nika wasn't certain who'd answered or even if they had answered her or someone else, but she felt her heart sink as she glanced around at the men fearfully and finally zeroed in on Lynx and Raven. She discovered when she reached them that Dr. Madison was with them. Gray faced, he settled tiredly beside one of the wounded men and opened a large black bag with shaking hands.

"What happened, Dr. Madison? What are you doing here?"

"I don't know," he said tiredly. "I was just finishing up with one of the boys when this young man right here asks me if I'm expecting more company. Next thing I know we're running through the sewers with cops trying to shoot us in the back! You know, I may be old, god damn it! But in my day that was considered the lowest thing you could do—shoot an unarmed man in the back!"

Nika gaped at him in horror. "They didn't have weapons?"

"I didn't!" he snapped, stabbing a finger at his chest. "I'm a civilian! For all those sons-of-bitches knew, I was a hostage! Did they give a fuck? No! Bastards!"

Nika glanced down at Raven, who was lying with his eyes closed. "How badly is he hurt?" she asked shakily. Unable to resist the urge to touch his face, she pretended she was brushing the damp tendrils of black hair from his cheeks and forehead. "He feels feverish."

The doctor grunted. "Well, he just had surgery," he said angrily. "And he's got at least two holes in him that shouldn't be there!" He shook his head. "Hell of it is, they did way more damage to those bastards than vice versa. We ran like hell until we came up outside the dome. I was in favor of keeping on running—not that I was in any shape to run!—But he says we can't afford to lead them back here, so they set up a trap.

"I guess the cops got a little overconfident, figured they had them on the run and they were just going to chase them down and shoot them like dogs. Didn't happen that way, though." He grinned tiredly. "These fellows—they're something else!"

Nika smiled with an effort. "Yes, they are." Noticing Raven's hand was lying on the concrete beside her, his fingers curled inwardly toward his palm, she slipped one of her hands into his palm and clasped it, lifting it from the dirty floor and stroking the back with her other hand. The skin was broken in several places, making it clear that a lot of the fighting Dr. Madison had spoken of had been hand to hand.

"What the hell?" Madison exclaimed abruptly.

Nika glanced at him sharply and saw immediately what had caused his shock and consternation. She felt a flicker of relief that he hadn't discovered something more, or worse than the two 'holes' he had in him, but dismay washed over her, as well. She debated whether to tell him about the nanos, but even she could see that the bullet that had made the hole the doctor had just cleaned and probed was working its way out of him. She bit her lip, watching Madison's face, trying to think up some other way to

explain it.

“Nanos!” he said, abruptly making the connection.

“They’re genetically coded to the men that were given them,” she said hurriedly.

“They won’t invade a foreign host.”

Madison sent her a furious look. “You knew they had nanos and you didn’t warn me?”

She glared at him. “I didn’t see the point. I just told you you don’t have to worry about them!”

He looked unconvinced.

“I’ve been with them for ... weeks,” she said, deliberately exaggerating since it hadn’t even been two full weeks.

He studied her for a long moment and finally shrugged. Returning his attention to Raven, he pulled the bullet out and tossed it toward the tracks. “They seem to have the bleeding under control,” he said neutrally. “Guess it’s a good thing they have them. I’ll just disinfect and bandage it. I guess it’ll close itself.”

She almost smiled at the irritation in his voice, knowing it was because he was both disconcerted and outdone that he seemed to be unnecessary. Not that he was!

“What can I do to help?” she asked, more to distract him than anything else.

He shrugged. “You check the others and see if they have any wounds that actually need my attention,” he said dryly. “And get some water to bathe them. That’s never a bad idea.”

Nika bit her lip. “We don’t have much. I’ll see if I can find something to carry water in.” Reluctantly, she lowered Raven’s hand to his side. His fingers tightened on hers before she could release him and she glanced quickly toward his face. His eyes were still closed, to her relief, but she felt her face redden anyway.

Deciding it was merely a reflexive action, she squeezed his hand back and then carefully disentangled her hand from his. A search of the few supplies they’d managed to gather turned up a fair sized pot and a few cloth napkins or kitchen towels. Since they were still in the package, she thought they were as clean as they were likely to get. Grabbing them, she tucked the package under her arm and dashed toward the lady’s room for water.

Dr. Madison had examined Lynx and moved on to the next man by the time she got back. Raven was awake. She couldn’t tell anything from his expression, though. “Are you thirsty?”

He swallowed a little convulsively. “Yes.”

She set the pot down and went back to the supplies, returning with a cup. He’d pushed himself into a sitting position by the time she’d scooped water into it and held it out. She watched him for a moment and turned to Lynx. “How about you? Are you thirsty, too?”

He nodded and she started to get up again. “I’ll get you a cup.”

He caught her wrist. “I’ll just use the one he has when he’s done. There aren’t enough cups to go around anyway.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “That is so ... germy!”

He stared at her a moment and chuckled, then winced, holding his side. “I’ve drank out of mud-puddles, woman. I’m not worried about his germs.”

“Gross!” Nika said, horrified. “You’re not serious?”

He shook his head at her and reached for the cup Raven held out. Dipping it into the pot, he emptied the cup and handed it to her. Realizing they probably all needed water more than anything else, shrugging over the cup, she straightened with the pot and cup and moved down to Con to give him water. The men looked surprised and disconcerted, confused and vaguely insulted that she'd brought them water, but they drank it greedily enough she knew they were parched from their race and the battle if nothing else. The water was gone before she reached the end of the line and she had to go back for a refill.

Dr. Madison had settled with his back against a column by the time she'd finished giving all the men something to drink and she crouched beside him, looking him over worriedly. "You ok, doc?"

"I've been better," he said tiredly.

He looked a little better once she'd given him water, but he still worried her. He wasn't ancient, but he certainly wasn't a young man and not physically up to what he'd been put through tonight. "There's an old couch in the lady's room," she said. "It's lumpy and short and there's a rat in there as big as a cat, but it would be more comfortable than where you are. Why don't you let me help you in there so you can rest a little?"

He chuckled. "You make it sound so heavenly, how can I resist?"

Nika laughed. "I didn't think it was right not to warn you. Come on. It really is better and I think you need the rest."

"We'll need him to finish removing everybody else's locators as quickly as possible. I don't know how much time we bought, but it won't be much. We have to move."

Nika glanced at Raven when he spoke. She knew he was probably right and she didn't like the idea of lingering, under those circumstances, longer than necessary, but she could see the doctor was in no shape to do anything at the moment. Frowning at him, she shook her head slightly and turned back to Madison to help him up. "You can rest for a little while at least," she told him when he'd managed to get to his feet. "It's this way."

He pushed her away when she tried to put her arm around his waist to help him, so she looped her arm determinedly through his and helped to support him across the platform. Thankfully, Raven didn't say anything else. When she'd shown Madison the couch, she returned to where the injured men were resting.

"I know it's probably hard for you to understand when you're so strong and young, but he isn't. He's old. His body's worn out with age and he just can't do what you want him to do, not without resting first."

Raven frowned at her, but it was more curious than angry. "We can't allow him much time."

"I know," Nika said worriedly. "I understand that, but it isn't going to help anyone if the poor old guy drops dead! I'm surprised he made it this far, all things considered. This isn't a matter of will power, Raven. He just doesn't have the strength!"

Raven studied her for a long moment and finally nodded. "I can give him an hour—no more. We can't risk it. They've got an endless supply of men and arms. We don't. If we don't move soon, they'll surround us."

"We can do the cuts ourselves if he shows us how," Cham said abruptly.

Nika glanced at him, horrified. “My god! Have you got any idea how long that man had to study to become a surgeon? And then practice? It isn’t something just anybody can do!”

“It’ll have to be,” Raven said grimly. “We’re dead if we stay here much longer, and it isn’t going to do us any good to move if they can fucking track us every step of the way!”

“We’ll let him rest a little while and then he can show all of us who’ve had it how to do the procedure. We’ve all seen it done at least once. We have the skills to use knives with precision—to kill. We can handle it.”

Nika could see he was determined. She wanted to argue, but it was hard to think up any argument that trumped the possibility of being overrun with men trying to blow their heads off.

Madison was outraged and furious. The dire circumstances didn’t appease him at all, but although he grumbled all the way through, he carefully instructed the men standing around and watching while he removed Kodiak’s locator. Nika didn’t think she could stand to watch without passing out or puking. She retreated when the men settled to carving at each other. Sitting down weakly with her back against the wall as far from the scene of massacre as she could get, she drew her knees up and covered her face with her hands, trying to tune out the sounds of suffering. It didn’t help that they endured stoically, trying to preserve their masculine dignity, she supposed, in front of the others. She’d seen the pain on Lynx’s face and Cham’s when they’d had surgery and those images rose in her mind. She knew it had to hurt and she didn’t know what bothered her most, the fact that they were in terrible pain, or the fact that they’d endured so much in such short lives without anyone to care that they were hurt.

Not that she’d had a great deal of affection herself growing up, not after her parents were killed, anyway, but at least some of the women that worked in the shelter were good hearted and loving. Their affection was often brusque, but she could tell the difference between those who cared and the ones that were only doing their jobs and didn’t want to. She supposed it was the hurt she’d felt at the hands of the callous ones that made her ache for them so much. She was relating her own feelings and maybe they didn’t feel that way at all.

She thought it was almost worse that they didn’t seem to expect any kind of empathy for any reason. That could only mean, to her mind, that they’d never encountered it before. She didn’t think she’d misinterpreted the looks the men had given her when she was trying to make them comfortable. They were suspicious that she was insulting them, implying they were weak.

Dr. Madison settled on the floor beside her with an effort, drawing her attention. He still looked angry. “I guess they’re doing well enough,” he muttered grudgingly. “Don’t know why they dragged me along when it’s obvious they don’t really need anybody.”

Nika could relate. “I don’t suppose they do.” She grimaced. “They do have a way of making ‘ordinary’ people feel pretty useless and unnecessary.” She studied Dr. Madison’s face for a long moment. “There are plenty of ordinary people that do need you, you know. I don’t know what I would’ve done all this time if you hadn’t helped me.”

He relaxed fractionally, but he sent her a sarcastic look. “The robo-surgeons do a

hell of a lot better job than I ever did.”

She winced. “Maybe. They wouldn’t have removed my locator, though,” she said pointedly.

“It isn’t that complicated ... as you can see. A first year intern could handle it.” He was silent for several moments. “I never thought I’d see the day robots replaced trained medical personnel.”

They hadn’t, not all of them anyway. There were still practicing nurses and doctors. There just wasn’t as much need for them as before—a good thing, too! They weren’t impervious to disaster themselves. If anything, they’d probably lost more medical professionals to disasters than any other segment of the population unless it was emergency personnel. “They don’t replace the human touch,” she pointedly. “Most of us still need someone to care if we live or die. It goes to morale, if nothing else, you know?” She was silent for several moments, thinking. “Just a suggestion—but have you considered working with the rebels? I’m sure they could use a good surgeon.”

He snorted. “I’ve been working with them for years.” Guilt flickered across his features. “The truth is, although I’d like to blame you and these fellows, it’s probably that connection that led the bastards to us. I’d like to think it wasn’t, but I’ve been uneasy for a while now that they might be on to me. I should’ve moved my surgery. I’ve been in the same place way too long, but I’m old. I’m tired of moving and the truth is I’m just not really up to it any more. I guess I should just retire.”

She nudged him playfully with her elbow. “You’re too young to talk about retiring! And there can’t be too many people with your experience!”

He smiled wryly, but he looked thoughtful. “I don’t suppose living among the rebels would be any more hazardous than trying to treat them when they sneak into the city,” he said thoughtfully. “It might be less dangerous. I certainly don’t think it’ll be good for my health to hang around the city any more. Is that your plan? To join the rebels?”

Nika sighed. “I hadn’t really made any plans, but I suppose that’s as good as any. I’m in pretty much in the same boat you are—not that I regret it, you know! I guess I haven’t really helped the guys out that much. I’m sure they would’ve gotten along just fine without my help, but I’m glad I helped at least a little.

“I just wish something could be done about those bastards that fucked them over, you know? I guess that’s about as useless as railing about the government, though. You bitch and complain, but nothing ever really changes.

“I suppose the rebels might consider me useful. Not that I was ever that great. I was always the last one they called when they needed someone to break in for them!” she said, chuckling ruefully. “But at least I managed to get in and out without getting my ass shot off—and usually with the ‘prize’ I went in for!”

“Is that where these guys are headed? The nearest rebel stronghold?”

Nika bit her lip, reluctant to admit they distrusted her too much to tell her what their plans were. “I doubt it. We were going to split up once they got rid of the locators,” she said, deciding it wasn’t exactly a lie since she was pretty sure that was what they had in mind. “I’m not sure they’ve really had time to make plans for the future. They’ve been too busy trying to stay alive. They’re great soldiers, though. I imagine if they decide to be mercenaries they could just about name their price. Let’s just hope our government doesn’t decide to hire them and send them to clean out the

rebel nests,” she added as the awful thought abruptly occurred to her.

Madison frowned. “You’re too young to throw your life away for the rebel cause, especially when you and I both know they’re never going to change anything. You should find a peaceful spot somewhere and settle down to have babies—the old fashioned way. Find yourself a nice fellow and let nature take its course.”

Nika felt her throat close, but she couldn’t help but chuckle. “You *are* a rebel at heart! It’s a nice fantasy, doc, but I’m not sure there is such a place. Anyway, I probably can’t have babies. Not that I ever tried, mind you, but I never *didn’t* try either! I think if it was going to happen ‘naturally’ it would’ve.”

“Been playing Russian roulette, huh?” he asked with amusement.

“Something like that.”

“Well, conception is a strange and wonderful process. It usually happens when it’s least convenient and most unexpected—the natural way. You look like a healthy young woman. I could examine you and see if there’s any problems. I was a doctor before I was a surgeon. Not that I’m qualified as a gynecologist, but I have the basics. If there was anything wrong in there, I’d know it.”

Nika felt her face heat. “Thanks. Maybe I’ll take you up on it when and if we get someplace where I feel like I could get examined without having to worry about somebody shooting me with my pants down and your hand up my ... sex!”

Madison reddened at the mental image, but he laughed. “Good point! Dignity in death, at the very least!”

Chapter Fourteen

The suspicion flickered through his mind that both Madison and Nika were well aware that they could hear every word of the conversation, but it occurred to him forcefully after a moment that they assumed their conversation was private. They couldn't hear nearly as well as he and the men could.

He wasn't particularly comfortable overhearing, but he was too curious, he discovered, to even attempt to tune them out. It was a lot of food for thought and a lot of it was downright confusing. The turn of the conversation to their plans and the rebels set his mind to racing.

She was right—to an extent. They really didn't have a plan beyond surviving another day, and then another, until they had time to assess their situation. He'd been struggling ever since their escape to figure out what to do when soldiering was all he knew, all he'd been designed for.

He toyed with the idea of working as a mercenary for a while and working with the rebels, but he realized he couldn't work up a lot of enthusiasm for either. Unfortunately, the hard truth was that they'd hadn't been designed, or given the skills, to live, only to die when and if necessary. And if they didn't die in battle, sooner or later they'd be like the doctor, they would realize they'd outlived their usefulness, except it would come a lot sooner for them than it had for him. War was a young man's game. As soon as age began to take its toll, their days were numbered. They would either become too slow to perform or too slow to survive and either way, it was over.

He supposed they could continue the fight for a while. Maybe some or all of them wanted to, but the possibility of finding something else had an appeal, the suggestion of having a family.

He didn't suppose he was actually cut out for it. For all he knew, he couldn't produce and even if he could there was no fucking telling *what* he'd produce considering what he was. Did he really want to chance producing another monster like himself? Or worse?

Was that more risky than dodging bullets?

He had a suspicion it might be more devastating, both for him and

He tried to shake the thought, but the plain truth was he couldn't imagine being with anyone but Nika. It irritated him. She wasn't the only woman in the world even if she was the only one in his. He discovered he couldn't envision himself with anyone else, though.

Chances were he was going to have to, he thought wryly. Nika had made it pretty clear that she didn't care for the idea of being their woman, which included him.

He nursed a lot of doubt that any woman would accept any of them, not like Nika seemed to have, though—especially him. The others might pass and find acceptance among the humans. Their freakishness wasn't as obvious as his and the other birdmen—and Bison and Brahma, for that matter. They could get rid of the horns, though, hide

what they were. He couldn't.

It pissed him off to think of trying to hide what he was. Was that his options? Fighting until he couldn't anymore and then spending what was left of his life alone?

Disgust filled him. For all he knew, any of them, the fucking company had fitted them with a kill switch, obviously nothing with a remote activation or they would've been dead before they got this far, but their nanos could've been programmed to destroy them after a given time.

If that was the case, there wasn't much point in worrying about a future of any kind. They were just going through the motions of living.

"What *are* we going to do with them?" Con asked quietly. "We can't leave them here when we move on. You know what they'd do to them if they catch them—when they do."

Raven flicked a look at him. "I hadn't gotten that far."

"It's decision time," Con said tartly.

"And I think they've made theirs," Raven retorted tightly. "So, we escort them to a rebel camp."

"I thought it was settled that Nika was your woman," Komodo said suspiciously.

"She is!" Bull growled. "Don't be getting any fucking ideas!"

"Seems to me she has her own ideas."

"Yeah, well until we part ways, she's ours," Lynx snarled. "She's made that pretty clear, hasn't she?"

The other men looked at each other, but they couldn't argue that point when she hadn't invited any of them to mate with her.

Con glanced at his men. "There'll be women at the rebel camps," he pointed out. "We'll see what we see."

"Yeah," Panther said. "We'll see their backs when they run the other way."

Komodo shrugged. "So we chase them down and convince them. It can't be that hard if Raven squad managed it."

Except they hadn't, Raven thought sourly.

"How did you two convince her, anyway?" Con asked Bull and Lynx curiously.

Bull turned red faced and shifted uncomfortably. "I asked her. I figured all she could do was say no."

Con frowned. "You're sure that was all there was to it?"

Bull glanced at Lynx uncomfortably, squirming inwardly. "I told her I hated missing out on trying it—sex, you know—if I got my head shot off. That seemed to convince her."

Lynx rolled his eyes and shook his head.

Raven felt his own face heat with discomfort. "Gods, Bull! You could've kept that to yourself! In fact, you should've!"

"What?" Bull demanded irritably. "He asked." He thought it over and turned redder. "Well, she likes it when I hold her close to me when she's asleep, too. Keeps her warm. Of course, I suppose if there were blankets around that wouldn't work. She said I was sweet ... or at least that she'd thought so before I pissed her off."

"Shut up, Bull!" Lynx growled.

Bull glared at him, but he decided he'd shared all the information he really had. He thought it over. "She's got a mean streak," he added. "She called me names when I

pissed her off.”

Con stared at him in fascination for several moments and finally turned to his men. “We’ll play it by ear. I’m sure we can figure it out.”

“In the meantime,” Raven said dryly, “I think we need to implement our evacuation plan.”

* * * *

They managed to make it out of the subway without incident, which seemed almost too good to be true. Not that they weren’t long overdue for a little luck, but for the first couple of hours they walked Nika expected armed men to leap out at them from the dark and mow them down.

It was almost too easy, as if there was a trap laid for them somewhere in the darkness ahead of them. Granted, Madison had said the guys had put the cops in full retreat before they’d returned to their campsite, but Nika was still having a hard time accepting it.

She wasn’t the only one either. She could practically smell the tension of the men around her. They didn’t take a step that they didn’t scan their surroundings thoroughly and they walked with their weapons up and their hands on the triggers.

Eventually, weariness wore down the tension in Nika at least. She hadn’t slept but a handful of hours before Raven and Con’s squad had returned and it didn’t take much walking before she began to feel like she hadn’t slept at all.

She was ready to drop where she stood when Raven finally called a halt just before dawn and told everyone to get out of sight. They would wait there for the group that had gone back into the city to try to get supplies. The poor doctor *did* drop, simply allowed his knees to buckle, and plopped heavily on the ground.

Abandoning her search for a place to take cover, she went back to check on him. He was breathing heavily and sweating profusely. He insisted he’d be alright once he’d had time to catch his breath, though.

Raven strode up to him, hauled him over one shoulder and told her to take cover before there was enough light to see her. Uttering an irritated huff, she started to follow him, but Bull scooped her up before she’d taken more than a few steps and strode off with her without a ‘thank you, ma’am!’.

She decided not to comment on his highhandedness. Their last fight was still too sharp in her mind and she knew there was a strong possibility of resurrecting the last one or starting a new one if she opened her mouth and she, frankly, didn’t feel up to it. She discovered he’d found a cave-like shelter beneath a thick bush—or made it. Once he’d set her on her feet and she’d crawled beneath the branches, she saw that a thick pile of leaves covered the ground and it looked like too much to be natural shedding. Besides, the bush still had plenty of leaves.

He crawled in beside her, carefully arranged the hanging limbs of the bush to cover the ‘entrance’ and tucked her against his length like he had before. Shrugging inwardly, she wiggled until she got comfortable, closed her eyes and worked at shutting down her mind in search of the sleep she felt like she needed so badly.

It wasn’t as easy as it should’ve been given how little sleep she’d had and how tired she was from walking. Unlike the night before, though, she was conscious of Bull in a way that brought all of her senses to high alert rather soothing and comforting her.

“Are you still pissed off at me?” she whispered after a few moments.

He was silent so long she couldn't decide if he just didn't want to answer or if he hadn't said anything because he was. "I wasn't really pissed off," he said finally.

Because he was hurt, she thought miserably, and she'd known that was what it was at the time. Nuzzling her face against him apologetically, she worked her way up his throat to his chin. He dipped his head to meet her questing lips, covering her mouth in a kiss heated enough to make it clear she wasn't the only one that had been more aroused by their close proximity than lulled toward sleep.

The parting mesh closure of her suit as Bull sought new territory sounded like a cannon shot in the dead silence surrounding them. Nika jerked in response.

"Do you think you two could keep it down so that the entire fucking US Army doesn't hear us?" Raven growled from the bush next to them.

Bull's head shot upward guiltily, slamming into the branches directly over his head and rattling them, then his dark brows descended in indignation. Nika couldn't help it, between Raven's snide comment, the discovery that they didn't have as much privacy as she'd thought they did, and Bull's expression the urge to laugh rolled over her. She clamped her lips together, but the laugh emerged as a snort anyway.

Bull sent her a confused look, but that only made the urge to laugh that much harder to restrain. She covered her mouth and snickered again and finally burrowed her face against Bull in an attempt to muffle it. "Sorry," she whispered when she thought she'd mastered the temptation to laugh. She cleared her throat. "I was just trying to get comfortable."

"Can it!"

Nika thought for a minute she was going to start laughing all over again, especially when Bull clamped a hand over her mouth big enough to cover most of her face and glared at her threateningly. She sucked in a deep breath and held it, though, and managed to kill the urge. When Bull finally removed his hand, she leaned up and kissed him lightly on the lips. "Later," she whispered, settling again and trying to compose herself for sleep.

He studied her for a long moment and finally settled next to her, dragging her up against his length. Sighing, Nika rolled over and planted her butt against the raging erection that had been digging into her belly. Bull seemed disconcerted at first, but when he discovered the new position allowed him to grab a handful of breast, he settled to playing with it until she popped his hand and told him to behave before Raven got on to them again. That effectively dampened his ardor and she fell asleep before he recovered enough from the rebuke to try again.

* * * *

Nika wasn't sure if it was the sound of an engine that woke her or Bull's hand clamping over her mouth to keep her quiet, but she aroused to both with a jolt, instantly flooding with fearful tension. It increased when she determined from the sounds that the vehicles she could hear, already moving slowly, stopped altogether.

Bull removed his hand abruptly. "It's Eagle squad."

Shoving the limbs out of the way, he scrambled out and then paused to help her. Disbelief filled her when she saw that the vehicles she'd heard were clearly military vehicles. She wasn't the only one stunned.

"How the hell did you manage this? And how many and how close?" Raven said.

"None that we know of," Eagle said cheerfully. "We lucked up on a supply detail

heading for a detachment sent to set a trap for us at the end of the old subway system.”

Everyone had come out of hiding and was looking the vehicles over with varying degrees of skepticism and dawning pleasure.

“You questioned them?” Raven asked sharply.

Eagle shrugged. “They weren’t actually very talkative. The orders were on the console computer. I went over everything before we took it apart and the tracking system for the vehicles—full of hydro and ready to go.” He frowned turning to look at the troop transport behind the three smaller all terrain vehicles. “I figured we’d probably want to ditch the truck. It’ll be easy to spot, but it’s loaded down with supplies.”

Raven lifted his head and scanned the skies. “Let’s get it unloaded and see what we want to take with us. Con, you and Hawk go up and take a look to see if we’ve got any company coming this way.”

As eager as Nika was to see what they’d brought, the order distracted her. Turning, she watched as Condor and Hawk raced a short distance and then lifted up into the sky with their wings. She caught her breath at the sight. It was the most awesome thing she’d ever seen. Within a few moments, they’d climbed so high into the sky they looked like two enormous birds in flight, soaring, dipping with the wind currents.

“Amazing.”

Nika glanced at Madison when he spoke almost beside her and saw an expression on his face that she didn’t doubt mirrored her own. “Yes, and beautiful.” She discovered when she finally tired of watching them that Raven was studying her. Smiling at him before she thought better of it, she hurried to look at the supplies they were unloading. “Wow!” she exclaimed happily when she saw that there were crates of food, tents, blankets, even inflatable beds. “My god! They weren’t planning on having it too rough! Just look at this!” She laughed. “I guess some officer is really going to be pissed off. I know this isn’t for the regular army.”

Eagle grinned at her. “A general, no less.”

That sobered her a little, the fact that they’d called a general out to lead an army against the guys. Maybe they were just out on maneuvers, though, and had decided to help the city militia ‘clean up’? She smiled back at him with an effort and focused on helping to sort the supplies. Surveying the bounty once Kodiak and Bull had finished unloading, she frowned. “How are we going to get all this in the ATV’s and still fit?”

“We’ll put what we can on the roofs, starting with most essential,” Raven responded. When she glanced at him, he frowned. “You know how to reach one of the rebel camps?”

The question took her off guard and completely deflated her excitement over their treasure. She swallowed a little convulsively, trying to shift gears. Finally, she nodded. “We won’t have to find them. They’ll find us. We just have to go to the right area.” Trying not to think too much about it, she looked the supplies over in search of something to make a mark with. “I’ll find something to mark the trucks,” she said, leaving Raven to direct the men while she searched the trucks. She’d begun to think she would have to use mud when she found a can of day-glow orange spray paint.

Deciding she must have been right about the maneuvers, or it was left over from another such exercise, she shook the can and moved to the door of the vehicle where she’d found it. Spraying a rough circle on the door, she then drew a Y in the center.

“Peace?” Madison said in bemusement.

Nika glanced at him but relaxed when she saw there was no sarcasm in the comment. “There was a movement about a hundred years ago to bring peace and freedom to the world. They liked a lot of the things they’d learned about the movement and adopted them.”

Madison’s eyes danced with amusement. “I heard about it—before my time before you ask, young lady! From what I heard they were more interested in ‘free love’ than anything else,” he added with a chuckle.

Nika grinned at him. “They liked that part, too. More importantly, they embraced the right to be different.”

“And ‘to do your own thing’,” Madison agreed. “You do yours and I’ll do mine, or something like that.”

Nika shrugged. “In a world where conformity is the only thing acceptable, having the right to do or say whatever you want, to be as different as you feel like being, is like heaven, especially to the people that were born different to start with and can’t help it.”

She hadn’t actually been thinking about the guys when she said it, but the moment the words were out she glanced around self-consciously. Relieved when she saw they were focused on packing the supplies, she left Dr. Madison and finished painting the doors.

“It’ll be visible a mile away,” Raven said a little testily.

She frowned at him. “That’s the point.”

He gave her a hard look. “Except we don’t want to be seen. Any military personnel that gets close enough to spot those symbols will know immediately that we aren’t part of the army.”

Nika gaped at him in dismay. “Well! Why didn’t you stop me?”

He shrugged. “You were busy ‘doing your own thing’,” he said dryly.

Nika felt her face reddening. Amusement flickered in his eyes. “FYI, I can hear a mouse squeak from a quarter of a mile away.”

Patting her cheek, he pushed her chin up with his finger and walked off.

She glared at his back, trying to think what else she might have said that he’d overheard, but dismissed it as it abruptly occurred to her that the men had probably *heard* her and Bull the night before when they’d enjoyed rousing good sex and a fight—every word of it and then some! Trying to cool her burning cheeks with her fingers, she looked around until she found a cask of water and filled her palms, splashing it on her cheeks and then cupped some in her palm to drink.

Hawk and Condor returned about the time the men had finished loading the trucks with the information that they’d seen a long convoy along the road that wound around the city and had followed it until it had turned north.

“They still think we’re in the subway system,” Raven said with satisfaction. “If our luck holds, it’ll take them a while to comb it and discover they’re wrong.” He turned and sent Nika an amused look. “We need to head south.”

She frowned, trying to remember things she’d spent years trying to forget. “What month is it?”

Raven looked taken aback. “February.”

Nika nodded. “That’s what I thought. They used to head south during the winter where it was a little warmer. I remember Mom saying it was south-east of the city, though.” She hesitated and finally shook her head. “We can head south for a few days.

If they don't contact us, we could try heading east."

"That doesn't sound like a very efficient network for contact," Raven said dryly.

"They don't want to be found," Nika said tightly. "Making it easy, for anybody, leaves them open to attack. These are families. There are children with them."

Raven's gaze sharpened, but she turned away.

It was cramped in the ATV's. They'd been designed to carry eight passengers, but not men as bulked up as the Night Raven group. Even splitting up into three vehicles no one was particularly comfortable. Of course, the vehicles hadn't been designed for comfort to start with!

As glad as Nika was to have something carrying her besides her two feet, her butt had begun to feel the pain by the time Raven found a place to his liking and signaled for everyone to stop and make camp. Mostly because they drove through their first night on the road, almost twenty hours straight with only a short stop from time to time to ease cramped legs and take care of necessities. The supply truck had been filled with battlefield rations, which meant they didn't need fire to be heated. They heated themselves when activated, which made it possible, if not entirely desirable, to eat without stopping.

Nika had completely forgotten her promise to Bull by the time they stopped near dawn on the second day out. All she could think about was stretching out on something that wasn't moving and when she discovered they'd stopped at an old abandoned warehouse of some kind, her heart leapt with joy—flat, not moving, *and* inside! She was too stiff and sore even to feel like offering to help set up, but no one seemed to notice.

The men piled out of the vehicles, stretched as they looked the place over, and then unloaded supplies from the roofs of the trucks. The tents weren't needed and there hadn't been but a couple of inflatable mattresses. All the other sleeping gear had been sleeping bags. She saw the inflatable mattresses had made the cut, though, and watched covetously as the men filled them with air.

When they'd finished, Raven took one up, looked around and finally headed toward a stall of some kind against one wall. Lynx took the other and, after looking around as Raven had, headed toward the far end of the building with it.

Nika divided her attention between them, trying to decide who they were intended for. Disappointment filled her when she saw Raven stride toward the doctor and point him toward the stall he'd just left. She saw that Lynx seemed to be heading straight toward her, though, and her heart leapt hopefully.

Bull intercepted him.

She frowned uneasily when she realized, just from the tension in both of them, that they were arguing. The little doubt that lingered as to whether they actually were arguing vanished when they abruptly snarled at each other and grabbed each other by the throat. Nika gaped at them in horror, too frozen to move for several moments. Even as the other men rushed toward the pair to separate them, though, Cham appeared beside her and grasped her arm. "Come on. We set up the other mattress for you to sleep on," he said, walking her briskly across the building.

She glanced at him and then craned to look for Bull and Lynx in the middle of the men crowded around them. "They're fighting."

"No. They're just discussing something."

Nika looked at him doubtfully, but she was so tired her brain was only working at

half-power ... or less. "You're sure?"

"Yep," he said cheerfully.

"They looked like they might fight," she said, turning to look back as they passed the group.

"Well, Raven will break it up. It's nothing for to worry about," he said, guiding her into the last stall and pointing out the bed they'd inflated for her. "I brought a pillow."

Nika gasped in pleasure. "I didn't even *see* the pillows! Wonderful!" she exclaimed, grabbing the pillow and hugging it to her.

He settled his hands on her waist, turned her and pushed her toward the mattress. "Rest. We'll be loading up and leaving at dusk. Raven figured it would be better to travel at night."

Surprise flickered through her when Cham settled on the mattress with her. It really wasn't wide enough for two to sleep comfortably, but she didn't like to object.

She didn't actually get the chance to. The moment she settled, Cham rolled over on top of her, meeting her gasp of surprise with his mouth. She groaned, more from reluctance and exhaustion than desire, but Cham seemed too intent on peeling her suit off to notice. She wavered, too tired to have much interest in sex until it dawned on her suddenly that Raven was herding them toward the rebel compound as fast as he could to dump her.

She'd been mostly successful at pushing that far into the back of her mind, mostly because the trip had been too grueling to allow for emotional misery. Physical misery had taken precedence.

The moment it occurred to her, though, that she might never again get the chance to make love to Cham, she dismissed her weariness. Unfortunately, the realization also produced a memory. She'd promised Bull 'later' and she hadn't kept that promise, hadn't had the chance.

Her eyes flew open on that thought, bringing the scowling object of her thoughts into focus. Bull, Raven, and Lynx were all standing at the opening to the stall, their bedrolls under one arm, matching scowls on their faces. Nika planted her palms on Cham's shoulders, skittering out from under him when she managed to lever him up far enough to elude him.

Cham frowned at her and then rolled onto his side to scowl back at the trio watching them. "You couldn't have waited a few minutes?" he growled.

Raven's eyes narrowed, but he flung out an arm to stop Bull when he uttered a snarl and started forward. "We stopped to rest," he snapped, emphasizing the last word and glaring at Nika pointedly, "not fuck." He flicked a glare at Lynx and Bull. "Or fight. Got that?"

Bull and Lynx both eyed Cham and Raven balefully as Raven strode inside and unrolled his sleeping bag directly beside the air mattress. Releasing an irritated huff after a moment, Bull focused on opening his own bag. "Why does he get the gods damned ... mattress is what I'd like to know," he muttered.

"Because he grabbed it while you two knuckleheads were trying to choke each other," Raven snarled without opening his eyes.

Lynx and Bull exchanged a killing glare.

"If you start that shit again, you can take it outside," Raven growled.

Heaving an angry breath, Bull straightened his bag and settled on it. After staring at him a moment, Lynx unrolled his own and settled down beside him.

Nika was wide awake by that time. Resentment flickered inside her at the accusing look Raven had sent her, the *verbal* accusation, but she was too unnerved by the entire exchange for it to find a spark. Settling back again when everyone lay down, she rolled onto her side and put her back to Cham. The discovery that she was lying face to face with Raven didn't do anything to settle her nerves. She clamped her eyes shut, but the fact that Cham had decided to hump her from behind didn't do anything to help her compose herself for sleep.

Turn over and risk encouraging Cham, who was busy trying to find an opening in her suit that would allow him to shove his cock in her? Or try to sleep with Raven's eyes burning into her?

"Weren't there some blankets?" she whispered finally, turning her head to look at Cham hopefully.

His gaze flickered toward the other men and then settled on her face. "I'll keep you warm."

"I think I'll get a blanket."

He frowned at her, releasing a huff of irritation, and sat up. "I'll get it."

Bull sat up.

Cham glared at him and lay back down again. "They're in Raven's ATV."

Chapter Fifteen

Nostalgia swept over Nika when they reached the valley she remembered from her childhood. It had changed surprisingly little in the intervening years. The memories were bittersweet, though, and her current situation only depressed her more.

In a way, she felt like she'd come home when she'd never thought to see it again, but her parents, the people who'd made it feel like home, were gone and the people she'd come to care about would be gone before long, too.

She was sorry that the circumstances of their trip hadn't allowed her any opportunities to be private with any of the guys—though god knew they'd done everything they could think of to try to arrange it—and, at the same time, relieved in a way. She knew it was probably for the best.

What would one last chance to be with them change? Nothing, beyond a few more memories to make her sad when they were gone.

She still held out some hope that they might decide to stay within the rebel community, but she had mixed feelings even about that. Staying would mean that she would get the chance to see them, but it would also mean they'd be taking part in the rebel efforts.

She'd seen her parents gunned down. She didn't want to see it happen to any of them. If they left, at least she could comfort herself with the belief that they were alive and well.

Shrugging her thoughts off, she leaned forward and touched Raven's shoulder lightly. "We should stop here."

He took his foot off the pedal, allowing the vehicle to slow, but he glanced at her doubtfully when he'd looked around. "There's nothing here."

"They're close by, though. They'll know we're here."

Raven still looked skeptical, but he guided the truck beneath the bows of a tree and shut it off. Nika got out as the two vehicles following them pulled beneath the shelter of other trees and stopped.

The sun was just beginning to lighten the sky in the east. Mornings had never been her favorite time, but she remembered seeing many sunrises in her childhood very close to this place. She remembered picnicking beneath the tree directly across from where Raven had parked and she walked over to it to see if she was right.

The carving in the tree had almost grown up, but she could still read the letters when she ran her fingers over it. She glanced at Raven and his group, who'd followed her. "This is the place."

Stepping away from the tree, she lifted her head and called out 'hello', listening to her voice echoing across the valley. "I'm Nika, daughter of Zeke and Elizabeth Phoenix," she said, using the name her parents had chosen for their family. "I've come with friends."

She discovered when she glanced around that all of the men were looking at her a

little doubtfully and she chuckled. "They'll be wondering who we are and whether to trust us," she said.

"I doubt that," Raven said dryly. "I imagine they heard you on the other side of the valley."

She gave him a look, but before she could think of a suitable set down, she caught a glimpse of movement in the trees about a hundred yards from where they stood. Ignoring the provocation, she moved away from the men. "I lived here with my parents when I was a little girl. My initials are carved in this tree."

A man holding a gun trained toward the ground stepped from behind the trees. "Nika?"

Nika felt her heart skip a beat. She didn't recognize the voice. She didn't even recognize the man, but there was something about his tousled blond hair that looked familiar. She took a step toward him. Someone grabbed her arm, but she shrugged it off and began moving faster as he moved from beneath the tree and she began to think she knew him. "Joshua?"

Even with the distance that separated them, she saw him grin. "It's me."

Laughing with excitement, she began to run toward him. "Joshua? *My* Joshua?" she demanded.

"The same."

Nika paused and glanced back at the others. "It's Joshua!"

They didn't move. She saw when she turned back that a dozen men had shown themselves among the trees and for a moment uneasiness flickered through her, but it was Joshua! Ignoring the vague sense of alarm, she hurried toward him, flinging herself at him when she reached him and he opened his arms to her.

"My god! You're all grown up!"

He grinned at her. "You too ... and damned fine, I might add."

She felt her face reddening. "I brought friends. Actually, they brought me." She glanced uneasily at the other men. "They're friends, Joshua."

"They look like army to me," one of the men in the woods called out.

Nika met Joshua's gaze worriedly. "They aren't—not any more. You know I wouldn't have brought them if I didn't trust them completely. You know me, Joshua!"

His smile was a little lopsided. "I knew you when we were children, Nika," he said gently. "That was a long time ago."

"I haven't changed! My parents died right here! In front of me! Do you think for one minute I would stop hating the people that did it? I brought them with me because the company that developed them was trying to destroy them—and the government! We spent weeks in the underground trying to elude them!"

Joshua frowned. "What do mean 'developed' them?"

She shook her head. "It's a long story. At least give us the benefit of a doubt and listen!"

"They're cyborgs," one of the men in woods said abruptly.

"They aren't. The company told them they were, but they aren't." She glanced around. "Dr. Madison!"

The doctor surveyed the men in the trees and finally started toward her, his movements stiff from their long drive. "They think they're cyborg soldiers sent to infiltrate the rebels," she said when Madison reached her.

Madison shrugged. "I don't know anything about that except that they're not cyborgs ... not actually human either. They're hybrids."

Nika glared at him. "They *are* human! They're just enhanced, damn it!"

"And dangerous," Joshua said grimly.

"Not unless attacked," Raven called out abruptly. "We didn't come to fight, but if that's what you want, we could take out all fifteen of the men you have concealed in the woods faster than you could cock that rifle."

Joshua paled, sending a startled look in Raven's direction. "Holy shit!"

"Threats won't win you any friends here!" one of the men in the trees bellowed back at him.

"Shut up, Gabe!" someone else snapped. "Let Joshua handle it."

Joshua rolled his eyes. "Well, I guess we should head back to camp and sort this out."

Raven started toward them. When he did, his men fell into step around him and the other three squads fanned out behind them. Watching them, Nika felt her heart trip over itself, but only part of it was fear that there might yet be a confrontation. She realized the rest was pride, admiration.

She wasn't nearly as happy when they reached the compound and she saw the women staring at the men with equal admiration. A sense of possessiveness and jealousy washed over her that made her feel vaguely nauseous.

Struggling to dismiss it, she scanned the camp. It hadn't changed a lot either. The cabins that had been built in the woods were half underground and covered with dirt and grass and brush.

"Nika?" a woman holding a toddler on one hip with an older child clutching her leg called out disbelievingly.

Nika stared at the woman hard and finally recognized the child the woman had been. "Lisa?"

Beaming, Lisa surged forward, reaching to hug Nika with her free arm. "I can hardly believe my eyes! When they took you away Have you been in prison all this time?"

Nika smiled wryly. "It felt like it. They put me in a juvy center, but I got out when I turned eighteen."

Lisa shook her head at her. "And you stayed? Why didn't you come back?"

Nika swallowed with an effort. "My folks were dead."

Lisa's smile faded. "But your friends were still here."

"I didn't know that. When none of you ended up in the institution with me, I thought" Leaving the rest unsaid, she turned to look at the men. "These are friends of mine."

Lisa looked bemused as she named them off, but when she introduced Dr. Madison, a look of delight crossed her face. "Doctor?"

"He removed the locator they implanted in me," Nika explained. "And theirs, too."

When Nika looked around again, she saw that the clearing at the center of their little village was filling with hard faced, suspicious men, and curious women. The squads looked like statues in the midst of chaos and, to her eyes anyway, miserably uncomfortable and out of place.

She struggled to drag them into the conversation as everyone settled and began to pelt her with questions, but they might've been mute. The most she could get out of them was an occasional 'yes' or 'no', but mostly nods of agreement.

"But they're not cyborgs?" Joshua asked for the umpteenth time after she'd told her story and then theirs.

She sought patience. "The company said they were. Everyone thought they were, including them—that's why Whitaker sent me in to steal the technology."

"They were still designed and developed as killers and they aren't human," Gabe muttered in a voice perfectly audible to her. She knew the men wouldn't have any trouble hearing it and she glared the man.

"Tell us more about this development process," Joshua said grimly. "Just how dangerous are they?"

Nika shot to her feet angrily. "Did you *miss* the part where I told you they're friends of mine?" she demanded angrily. "Stop talking about them as if they aren't here! As if they're *things*! They're people, damn it and they have feelings! I wouldn't have brought them here if I'd thought for one minute you'd act this way toward them! Caution, I could understand! But this hostility baffles me!" She glanced around at the villagers. "What happened to accepting people for what they were? They don't know anything about it! I don't know!"

She dug into the pants leg pocket of her suit and pulled the chip out. "*This* has everything on it, but it's theirs—their lives, their history. They get to look at it and if they decide they feel like sharing, then you can entertain yourselves with all the lurid details and not unless they invite you to!"

Stalking to Raven, she caught his hand and placed the chip in it. "They have computers. I would've given it to you before if there'd been any way for you to look at it." She hesitated, meeting his gaze. "I don't think you should look at it," she whispered. Lifting her head, she met the gazes of the others. "It won't change anything."

Joshua appeared beside her. "If you want to have a look at that, there's a computer in the council hut."

Nika glanced at him accusingly and he flushed.

"Damn it, Nika! You know it's what we've been looking for for years! I'm not trying to I'm not ignoring what was done to them. That's exactly the point! The powers that be will do anything as long as it will turn a profit for them, no matter how low and despicable! We need something like this to open people's eyes! They're like fucking sheep!"

Nika shook her head at him. "Even if it hurts ... people? Don't you think they've been through enough hell? Now you want to ... parade them in public like a ... fucking banner for your crusade?"

"It isn't just *my* crusade," he said tightly. "Your parents died for the cause. *My* parents died for the cause. This is the chance to win."

"Win what?" Nika demanded angrily.

He studied her in tight-lipped silence for several moments and finally gestured for Raven and the others to follow him. Raven, his face looking as if it was carved from stone, followed him and the others got up to go, as well. Nika watched them until they'd disappeared into the council hut and then glanced around at the villagers. She recognized other faces among them, but she realized the years had changed more than she'd thought.

Turning her back on them, she headed toward the stream where she'd played when she was a child. The log she'd once walked up and down, pretending it was a tightrope, had vanished, probably rotted to dust. Sitting down on the bank, she took her shoes off and dangled her feet in the water.

It was ironic that she'd always thought she had more in common with the people in the village than she did with the people that surrounded her every day and now found that she didn't really belong in either place.

Not that she had a lot of choices. She shrugged. It wasn't as if there weren't other cities. She'd lived under the radar for years. She could make a place for herself in another city.

She certainly didn't see the guys staying when they'd had such a cold reception. Talk about wearing blinders! She'd told herself that she was prepared, that she expected resistance, but she hadn't. She'd thought she would be remembered and accepted and the guys would be accepted, too, on her word and because they'd see that they were outsiders, too.

Hah!

Glancing around after a moment, she gathered up a handful of pebbles from the bank and began to toss them into the water, watching the ripples as they widened and then disappeared.

She didn't hear Raven until he was standing beside her. She sent him a searching look, but she couldn't read his expression. "Was it awful?"

He studied her a moment and finally settled on the bank beside her. "They're still looking at it. I saw enough."

Nika swallowed with an effort. "I knew it would be awful."

He shrugged. "To tell you the truth, I didn't feel anything. It was looking at ... a science project."

Which was what it was.

"You had it all the time," he said neutrally.

She sighed. "I made a copy of it before I took the original to Whitaker. I figured he would try to fuck me over ... and he did."

"What did you plan to do with it?"

She sent him a sharp glance. "Sell it."

He digested that in silence for several moments. "Why did you give it to me?"

She shrugged.

"You could still sell it."

"It could get me killed, too." She wrestled with her conscience and finally confessed. "I suspect the possibility that I had it had a lot to do with the chase."

"We'll never know, will we?"

"I guess not." She tossed the last of the pebbles in the water. "I did that," she mused. "One little pebble and huge ripples. I don't guess it counts for much, but for what it's worth, I never meant to cause you the trouble you've had."

"I know."

She glanced at in surprise. "You do?"

"I know you aren't a bad person."

"You do?" she echoed again and then frowned. "I thought that was why you disliked me."

He released an irritated breath. "I've never disliked you."

Surprise flickered through her. She chewed her lip. "You just don't think I'm pretty."

"I don't. I think you're beautiful."

Nika gaped at him, feeling her face redden. He hooked a finger beneath her chin and leaned close. Nika stared at him, but she couldn't stand the suspense. She lifted her face to meet him.

His lips felt as wonderful as she remembered ... better. Scalding heat flowed through her, setting her on fire. Lifting her arms, she twined them around his neck before he could think better of it and pull away.

To her vast relief, he didn't seem inclined to. Settling a hand behind her back, he carried her to the ground, shifting until he lay half atop her. She was drunk with desire before he broke the kiss, impatient for more.

His hand shook with his own need as he ran a hand along her body in a light caress, but he peeled her clothing away with infinite slowness, anointing every patch of skin he revealed with heated kisses that took her breath. She stoked his hair, his shoulders and his back as he explored her, dragging gasps from her each time he brushed his lips along her skin, sucked at it.

Darkness closed over her when he finally made his way to her breasts and sucked one turgid tip into his mouth. She clutched at him a little frantically as she felt the pull all the way to her core, felt the muscles along her sex clapping together in feverish demand.

"Raven!" she gasped plaintively. "Now, baby! Now!"

He lifted his head to stare at her through fever glazed eyes for a long moment and then dipped to suckle her other breast until she thought she'd lose her mind. She groaned. "I'm going to come without you if you don't come inside me!" she gasped warningly.

He lifted his head jerkily and stared at her, but he moved over her, tugging at the opening of his trousers. Impatience raced through her, disappointment that he was still dressed and she couldn't feel his skin against her own, but the rough brush of his uniform as he moved over her sent waves of delightful sensation through her, bringing her perilously close to climax.

She thought for a moment that she *had* come when she felt the probe of his cock. Quakes traveled through her that made her gasp. "I think I came," she muttered a little deliriously.

He ignored it, pressing against her until his flesh was slowly engulfed by her own and she realized she hadn't come at all. She couldn't possibly have come and still feel so desperate!

Lifting her legs, she coiled them tightly around him when he pulled away again, digging her heels into his buttocks in demand. He shuddered as she pulled him back and his flesh sank into her again, paused for several long moments and then set a deeply satisfying pace. It was heaven just feeling him inside of her, felt so good she fought her climax to the bitter end and then cried out at the shattering ecstasy of it, clutching him frantically as it ripped through her.

She was so caught up in her own ride to glory that she didn't realize that he'd come almost at the same moment she had until he slumped weakly against her. Vaguely

disappointed that she hadn't gotten to enjoy feeling his climax as well as her own, she tightened her arms around him, nuzzling her face against his chest in search of a kiss of reassurance.

He caught the message, dipping to meet her and kissing her lingeringly and finally rolled off of her and lay gasping for breath in the grass beside her. She gave him a few moments to recover, but she couldn't resist the urge to cuddle close to him for long.

He stroked her hair when she settled her cheek against his chest to make certain she could hear his heart racing as hers was as the anxiety that he hadn't come continued to plague her.

As his breath evened out, though, she felt him begin to grow tense beneath her, heard him swallow. "As Bull said," he muttered, "all you can say is no."

Nika lifted her head to look at him curiously. "What?"

"Come with us, Nika."

She blinked at him, completely thrown when he said come.

"You didn't come?"

He stared at her in confusion. "What?"

"Wait a minute. Say that again?"

His face reddened. "I asked you to come with us. What did you think I said?"

A thrill went through her. "Come with you? You mean when you leave?"

He studied her uneasily. "I don't know where we'll go"

"But you'll take me?"

He chuckled abruptly, rolling and carrying her with him so that they were lying nose to nose. "Gladly."

She touched his face. "I was so afraid you meant to leave me behind."

"You're not worried about where we're going?"

"I don't care where we go as long as we're together. I love you."

He studied her face, his expression troubled. "I don't know what love is, Nika," he said finally.

"I know. I'll teach you."

* * * *

Nika stared out over the green valley in awe and disbelief for a long while before she could drag her gaze away. "It's ... beautiful! Who would've thought ...!"

Bull, Cham, Lynx, and Raven looked as shocked as she was.

"They said it was barren ground since the eruption, that it could take a century or more before the land recovered. It hasn't even been fifty years."

Raven looked at her and grinned abruptly. "All the better for us. We've got an entire valley to fill."

Nika glanced down at the rounded mound of her stomach and stroked it lovingly. "I hope you don't think *I'm* going to fill it! Yellowstone is huge!"

The men chuckled. "One babe at the time!"

"Very funny!"

Raven slipped an arm around her shoulders. "I was talking about the others," he said, laughing. "Unless they discover the other 'uninhabitable zones' look better than this, I'll expect them to join us before very long."

"Well," Nika said, "we'll still get first pick of where to build. I like the spot right over there, by the river, close to the waterfall." She peered at the dark shapes she could

see grazing near the water's edge. "It even has bi—uh—cows," she said, glancing at Bull uneasily.

He slid a narrow eyed look at her, but she focused on brushing at imaginary lint on her clothes. "We should probably get going," she said, turning abruptly and heading toward the ATV. "We can make camp there tonight and then tomorrow we can start working on the cabin."

Bull caught her before she could get in and pinned against the vehicle. "You thinking about eating my cousins?" he growled with mock anger.

She gave him a sassy look. "Why not? You chew on me."

He gave her a smoldering look. "Now there's an idea!"

"It isn't your night!" Lynx, Raven, and Cham said almost at the same time.

The End