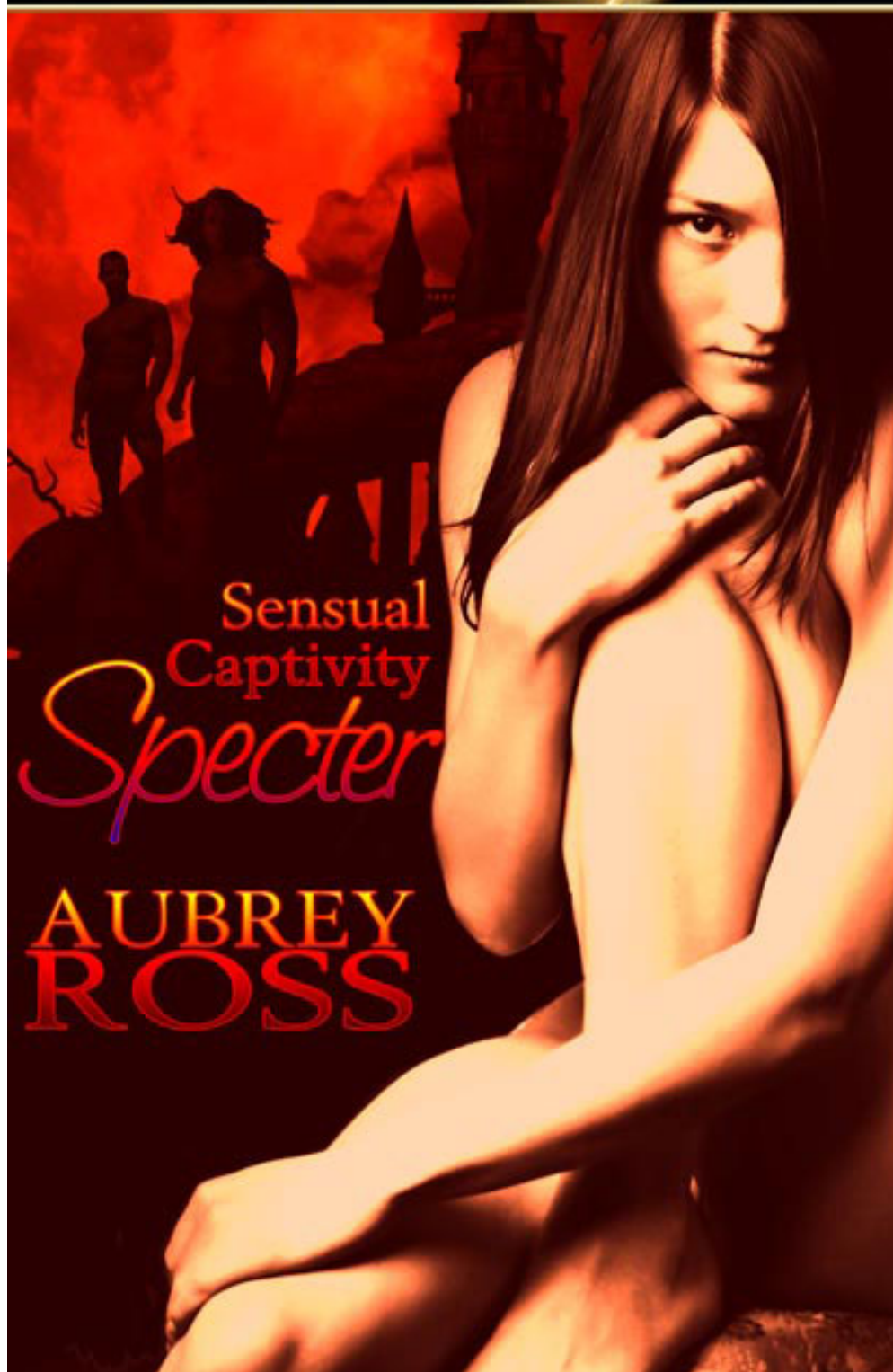


ELLORA'S CAVE **AEON**



Specter
Aubrey Ross

Sensual Captivity, Book Four

Sean left the black zones years ago when his mutation became unstable. He is now a specter, able to manipulate the shadow dimension. He's a loyal soldier in the mutants' battle for equality, but he has never forgotten his home or the charismatic friend he left behind.

Snatched from Earth and dragged to a distant world, Brianna finds herself captive to a brutal overlord. Rather than fear, her captor stirs passion and ignites longings she doesn't trust or understand.

Kellan rules the black zones with an iron fist. He has brought an uneasy peace to his lands and he'll allow nothing to jeopardize his people. Though Brianna claims she's innocent, Kellan suspects she's a spy. All he knows for certain is he wants her pinned beneath him, moaning as he claims her for his own.

As if Brianna were not temptation enough, Sean reenters Kellan's life, awakening unwanted hunger and complications they can't afford. The three must learn to trust each other as danger escalates. Only together will they survive the coming battle.

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Specter

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SPECTER

Aubrey Ross

Prologue

Barely able to contain the joy bubbling up within her, Lorelle San Carlos hurried across the darkened bedroom toward her lover, her mate, her...master? She was still struggling with the last concept, but she didn't let the detail darken her mood.

Mal Ton sprawled on his stomach, his tall body spanning the rumpled mattress. Space was a precious commodity beneath the climate domes of Stilox. Living quarters were carefully arranged to maximize every centimeter. Even high-ranking officers, like Mal Ton, accepted the limitation and made the most of whatever area they were allowed. Survivors. Indomitable and strong. Stilox warriors were all that and more.

She slipped out of her bathrobe and fluffed her damp hair, feeling energized yet relaxed after her long, hot shower. In her wildest dreams, she'd never imagined life with a man like Mal Ton. He was fiercely protective and amazingly caring. Even as he overwhelmed her with passion, he never lost sight of her needs.

The sheet was tangled around his lean hips, leaving his tapered back bare to her appreciative gaze. One arm extended as if he'd been searching for her in his sleep. The possibility made her smile and tingle. Had he missed her as much as she missed him?

How had he become so important in such a short time? She might have been taken from Earth against her will, but life before Mal Ton hardly seemed real anymore. Mal Ton was her present and future. The past was a distant memory. Except for Brianna. Her sister was the one element of her past that had carried over into the present.

She'd been told Brianna was still missing, much to her chagrin. Helplessness didn't sit well with Lorelle. She was far more comfortable with action, with struggle, even combat. It wasn't in her nature to sit back and let others fight her battles for her. But she was still recovering and learning, so much of this conflict was unfamiliar to her.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she ran her fingertips from his wrist to his shoulder. His skin was hot and smooth, the flesh beneath it battle-hardened. "Hey there, lazybones," she said softly, not wanting to startle him from sleep. "Are you going to sleep all day?" With the strength and agility that defined his movements, he sat and swept her into his arms. She settled on his lap and gazed into his eyes as she rested one arm across his broad shoulders.

"Do your doctors know you're here?" His voice sounded raspy, yet his expression was intense as his gaze assessed her from head to foot. "I will not allow anything to interfere with your recovery."

Pleased by the insistency in his reaction, she traced a line from his temple to his chin. "They wanted to monitor me for twenty-four hours after they injected me with the reprogrammed nanites. The observation period was over about two hours ago." She kissed the tip of his nose. "You were sleeping so soundly, I went and took a shower."

"I was exhausted," he admitted.

"Do you feel stronger now?"

His gaze bore into hers for a long, communicative moment. Then he shifted one of her legs to the other side of his body and drew her forward, rubbing her against his rapidly hardening cock. "You tell me. How does this feel?"

Her core warmed and melted, obediently preparing itself for his entry. From the first moment he'd touched her it had been like this with Mal Ton, instantaneous and combustible. "Not bad, but I know you can do better."

He laughed, his teeth starkly white against his gold-toned skin. Desire blazed within his eyes, making the teal appear more green than blue. "Is that a challenge?"

"Would I be foolish enough to challenge you?" She gently rocked her hips, enjoying the teasing slide of cool sheet against her sensitive folds, yet needing his heat even more. It wasn't that their separation had been lengthy, only that every moment without him seemed like an eternity.

"Apparently, you would." He wrapped his arms around her and claimed her mouth in a deep, demanding kiss. *Gods, how I missed your taste.* His hands swept up and down her back, pressing and sliding, molding her curves against the unyielding wall of his chest.

Like flames licking at her soul, Mal Ton's being blazed into her mind. She moaned at the blissful heat and pressed closer to his strong body. *Thank God we're still linked. I was so afraid the treatment would make me completely human again.*

Let's talk after. Even in her mind his voice sounded breathless and urgent. *Just let me touch you and taste you.*

She angled her head and curled her tongue around his as she guided one of his hands to her breast. He pinched her nipple and his cock twitched against her mound. Mutual hunger rolled across their link, scalding them and urging them onward.

After only a few moments, he tore his mouth away and shook his head, panting harshly. "I take it back. We have to slow this down or it's going to be over before it's begun."

Thrilled that his need was as demanding as hers, Lorelle folded her legs beneath her and balanced on her knees. "If we can't make it last this time, we'll go slowly next time." She reached between them and pushed down the sheet, freeing his massive erection. "Wow. You really did miss me."

His fingers tangled in the back of her hair as his mouth captured hers for another breath-stealing kiss.

Let me.

The frantic urgency in his tone said it all. He was on the verge of losing control. He needed her surrender, her submission. The longer he was without her, the more demanding his need became. The more aggressive.

She released his shaft and moved her hands lower, lightly grasping her ankles as a reminder not to touch him, to remain passive unless he gave her a directive.

His lips slowed and gentled, his tongue stroked over hers as one of his hands caressed her breasts. The fingers in her hair remained firm, holding without hurting. He gently sucked her lower lip then whispered, "Give me your tongue."

She pushed her tongue past his lips and he sucked it into his mouth, the action possessive and carnal. Then his lips moved up and down along her tongue, firm and steady, much as hers were when she sucked his cock. The parallel made her shiver and moan.

He growled and nipped her chin. "I suspect my cock is a lot more sensitive than your tongue," he whispered against her kiss-dampened lips.

"Good point." Apparently her thoughts were broadcasting. Mal Ton seldom heard her thoughts unless she intentionally sent them. Still, it didn't matter. She had no secrets from Mal Ton.

"I think it feels more like when I suck on your clit. Would you like me to remind you how that feels?"

Her pussy already ached so bad she could hardly stand it. "I seldom say no to that particular pleasure, but I really need you inside me now. We've already waited too long, if you ask me."

"Lean back on your elbows."

Anticipation washed from her head to her toes, leaving her entire body pulsing and weak. She knew that dark, predatory look, loved the uninhibited pleasure that followed in its wake. Releasing her ankles, she arched her back and placed her elbows against the bed. The position spread her legs, parted her inner folds and displayed the silken passage waiting for him, only for him.

His eyes turned dark and stormy as he gazed upon her. Tension accented each sculpted angle of his features, making him look savage and...ravenous. He trailed featherlight touches along her inner thighs then traced her slit with his middle finger.

"So soft," he whispered, his voice hushed and passion-thickened.

Passion-thickened. The phrase drew her gaze to his cock, arching toward her, flushed and ready to conquer. All he had to do was... He guided himself to her opening and pressed against her, letting her feel the power and the heat. Her folds surrounded him, clinging, caressing, while her core clenched and ached with the need to be filled.

"Please." She bit her lower lip, desperate now, far beyond pride or subtlety. He slid up and rubbed the velvety head around her clit. She trembled, unable to hide the way her legs shook and her abdomen quivered. "Oh God, Mal Ton, please, fill me. Fuck me!"

He positioned himself at her opening and grasped her hips. Then with slow, steady pressure, he pulled her toward him and impaled her on his cock. Her inner muscles

spread around him, taking on his shape as he drove into her. Lorelle held her breath, overcome by the savage beauty of his face and the carnal power of his body.

Mal Ton, her love. Her *master*.

He held her, moving her entire body with the strength of his hands.

When her groin pressed snugly against his, he shifted her legs to circle his waist. Their gazes locked. His expression was every bit as possessive as his penetration. Slowly, allowing her to feel every centimeter of his flesh sliding inside her snug passage, he began to move again.

Mine. The claim was written on his expression and echoed in his posture. She raised her arms above her head and arched her back, offering herself willingly, submissively.

His hips rocked, thrusting his length into her again and again. Emotions flowed between them intense and elemental.

He moved faster, arching over her and entwining their fingers. His chest grazed her nipples and she drew her legs up along his sides as the urgency escalated around them and within them. Without missing a beat with his hips, he sealed his mouth over hers and his tongue swept past her parted lips.

Covered by his strong body, filled with his demanding cock, and infused with the rich intensity of his love, Lorelle let go and surrendered to the wonder of their joining. She soared beyond self, beyond conflict and strife as an orgasm tore through her body. Mal Ton was right there with her, part of her, soaring at her side.

She shivered and moaned as reality gradually returned, intruding on their momentary euphoria. "Wow. What did they put in that shot?"

Mal Ton laughed, his cock bucking deep inside her. "I just gave you the best orgasm of your life and you give the credit to Roark?" Wrapping her snugly in his arms, he rolled them to their sides and drew her leg to his waist, allowing him to remain inside her.

"It's always amazing with you, but that felt..." She couldn't put her feelings into words. They were too raw, too overwhelming. They didn't just have sex. They flowed through each other, melding body, mind and spirit.

"I missed you too." He slipped one arm beneath her neck as he brushed her hair back from her damp face. "Is the treatment working? Do you feel any different, or is it still too soon to tell?"

"I feel strong and energetic and happier than I've ever been in my life. I can still sense your emotions and send my thoughts, and..." Her smile turned wistful and she glanced away. "If I knew Brianna was safe everything would be perfect."

"No one has forgotten about Brianna. We just need to take things one step at a time. The injection was meant to stabilize your condition. It wasn't meant to undo the changes my nanites made to your body, keep them from making any more."

"Works for me. I have no problem with any of the changes they've made." She stroked his chest and canted her hips, keeping their lower bodies tightly aligned. "So run everything down for me. What did I miss while I was in stasis?"

Mal Ton sighed. "Where do I begin? Max was taken back to the Underground."

"Max is the rebel mutant who was trying to overthrow Fane?" She was relatively certain that was correct, but he seemed surprised by the question.

"Our relationship feels so rich, so mature it's easy to forget you're new to these conflicts. Chancellor Howyn was originally responsible for bringing you and the other humans to this star system. Max shot down your ship and intercepted you before Howyn could get his hands on you."

"All of us were rescued by either you or Fane, except for Karris and Brianna."

"There were a few double crosses along the way, but that about sums it up. Karris is here, by the way. Did Roark tell you that much?"

"I haven't seen Roark since they brought me out of stasis. Andrea admitted that Brianna hadn't been rescued, but that's about all she would say. She insisted I rest and told me you would tell me what you thought I was ready to hear."

Mal Ton chuckled and kissed her brow. "She obviously doesn't know you as well as I do if she thinks you'll put up with evasions for long."

"She treated me and Brianna back on Earth, but we're really more acquaintances than friends. So, back to Max. Did Fane take him out? He certainly deserved it."

"Fane was a little preoccupied at the time."

"That's right. Fane was babysitting Cassandra. What's the history there? They obviously knew each other before he snatched her back from Max. How did the leader of the Mutant Underground cross paths with Cassandra Howyn?"

"Long, involved story."

She slapped him on the shoulder. "What a copout! We will come back to that later. Howyn obviously didn't keep up his end of the bargain or Brianna would be free. What went wrong?"

"Another long, involved story."

"Well, I suggest you summarize." She narrowed her gaze and tried to look fierce.

With a wicked chuckle, Mal Ton swept her beneath him and stretched her arms out over her head. He stared into her eyes, his mouth hovering just above hers. *Feel what you do to me.* Even relaxed and sated his cock created a pleasant fullness in her core, but the pressure began to build as his shaft hardened and lengthened inside her.

She wrapped her legs around his hips and locked her ankles. "Finish the briefing, Commander, or we're both going to get mighty frustrated."

Challenge flashed in his eyes then tenderness gentled his expression. "If I don't, you'll be so distracted you'll ruin this for both of us."

He could easily overcome her distraction, and they both knew it, but she was pleased that he took the out.

"Howyn made some modifications to Karris. We're relatively certain he was waiting until the procedures were perfected before he utilized the techniques on Brianna." He used a calm, informative tone, yet his gaze shone with regret and compassion. "Sean has been half a step behind Howyn's team, so he has a pretty good idea of what they've been up to."

"Then Brianna hasn't been mod-dified?" She stumbled over the word, icy guilt rushing through her system. Brianna was her baby sister. In the absence of their mother, it had become Lorelle's responsibility to protect and care for her.

"This isn't your fault."

"I talked her into applying for Andrea's program. I harassed Andrea until she agreed to accept Brianna. My sister followed me every step of the way. Look where it led her."

He rocked back on his knees, taking the majority of his weight, changing the tenor of their embrace from aggression to tenderness. "Howyn is in custody. His second-in-command turned on him. Brianna is out of danger. All we have to do is find her."

Lorelle pushed against his chest, feeling smothered by his size and her own helplessness. "Find her? What does that mean? If Howyn is in custody, where the fuck is Brianna?"

Responding to her anxiety, Mal Ton rolled with her. One moment he was pressing her down into the bed, the next she was straddling his hips, anchored on his considerable erection. He stroked her thighs and squeezed her hips, his gaze caressing her face. His strength never ceased to thrill her, yet overlaying the raw power was unflagging control, carefully measured, disciplined.

"We set up a sort of sting," he explained, willing to postpone fulfillment of his obvious need until her spirit was more at ease. "That's when we recovered Karris and caught Howyn with his pants down. Figuratively, thank the gods."

"Was General Bryson the one who turned on Howyn?" Bryson was the only one she could think of in a position to know enough to bring the chancellor down. Lorelle only knew many of the players by name, but at least the names were becoming familiar. This was her life now, her people. It was right that she understand the forces driving them.

"The very same. Howyn tried to pretend ignorance and blame it all on Bryson. Bryson is nobody's fool. He'd expected he might be thrown to the wolves at some point, so he'd been recording conversations and compiling documentation for years."

"Then it's over? Howyn's scheme to create the perfect weapon, or whatever it was he was trying to do, failed?"

Mal Ton hesitated, his hands settling on her waist. "Is life ever that easy?"

"Not on Stilox." Having him spread out beneath her, hard and waiting inside her, was more than a little distracting. "What went wrong?"

"When the specter team arrived at the lab where they expected to find Brianna and the nanotechnology used to modify Karris, they found a ransacked building and little else."

"Someone beat them to the finish line?"

"The timing was too convenient. It had to be someone very close to Howyn or Bryson."

"You obviously have an idea. Just spit it out."

"Nehalem."

Lorelle stiffened, instinctively drawing away from Mal Ton. His hands tightened on her waist, preventing her retreat. She'd only met Nehalem Bryson once, but once had been enough. Nehalem was the first lesser wife of General Bryson. More importantly, she was an auburn-haired beauty who ruthlessly used every asset at her disposal to get what she wanted. Lorelle had disliked her on sight. The fact that Mal Ton's path had briefly crossed with Nehalem's had nothing to do with her passionate antipathy, at least none Lorelle was willing to admit.

"So the red-haired slut double-crossed her husband while he was busy double-crossing Howyn?"

"That's our best guess. Nehalem was one of several suspects until yesterday morning. Then she shot to the top of the list."

"What happened yesterday?"

"We found Max's body. Someone drained him of mutant energy and then slit his throat. The only person we know of who has an ability anything like that is Nehalem. It's a bit of a stretch for her, but if she used the nanites on herself, there's no telling what she's capable of doing now."

Lorelle tossed her hair over her shoulders and closed her eyes, using the momentary darkness to lock in each piece of information. "I can see why Nehalem would raid the lab. She was always drawn to power and mutant abilities, but why would she need Brianna?" She opened her eyes and searched Mal Ton's expression. When she found no answers there, she accessed their link. The meld was still new and at times intimidating. They blended naturally when their emotions ran high, but at times like this, his being was so much more intense than hers it was almost painful. She sighed and eased out of the link. "What aren't you telling me? Who has Brianna? What else is going on?"

He sat, pulling her close as he wrapped his arms around her. "Sean found her and sneaked her out of the house where she was being held, but at the last moment they tripped an alarm. They were being pursued by Howyn's men. Sean turned long enough to take out the guards, and when he turned back around, Brianna was gone."

"Gone. What do you mean gone? Where would she go? She's on an alien world. She can't even speak the language, for God's sake! Someone must have snatched her while Sean's back was turned."

"We haven't discounted that possibility, but everyone involved in the original project is in custody."

"Except Nehalem."

"You said it yourself. Nehalem has no reason to want Brianna." He took her face between his hands and captured her gaze. "She was terrified. She didn't know if Sean was rescuing her or kidnapping her for someone worse than Howyn. We suspect that instinct took over and she just ran."

"Ran where? Where was this house? Where did Sean lose her?" Mal Ton's expression fell and his mental shields snapped into place. Shit! This was bad. "Tell me."

"They were on the border of Silver Hills and Pine Vista, deep in the black zones."

Fear slammed into Lorelle with physical force. The Protarian government had quarantined the outlying "black zones" and shut them off from all municipal services centuries before. They had since reverted to lawless, brutal anarchies with primitive "only the strong survive" mentalities. Brianna wasn't strong. Brianna was beautiful and kind and tenderhearted. She didn't stand a chance in a place like that.

"We have to find her." Lorelle sobbed.

"Sean knows the black zones. He knows the people and the rules. And he's a specter. We'd just slow him down." Mal Ton sounded convincing, but she saw a flicker of uncertainty in his eyes. "We'll do whatever we can to help him, but going in ourselves will just create additional targets. Sean's the best man for the job. We have to let him work."

"You don't know Brianna. She's not a soldier like me. She been protected and sheltered all her life. She's soft and feminine and... She won't survive. My God, how will she survive?"

Lorelle dissolved into tears, knowing there was nothing she could do to prepare Brianna for what awaited her in the black zones. She clung to Mal Ton's neck and prayed for protection and mercy, hoping God could hear her from the war-scarred isolation of Stilox.

Chapter One

"I don't understand it, sir." Tanner stood before Kellan with his hands clasped behind his back. His features were carefully devoid of emotion and his even tone gave nothing away. "It's almost as if she can't understand anything I've said to her."

Kellan studied his interrogator through narrowed eyes. Tanner was the best. Never before had he failed to extract the information Kellan requested. Of course, few bothered to report their failures, knowing how little patience he had for incompetence. These were harsh times, times that required sacrifice and discipline from everyone.

"Have you tried other languages?" He stepped past the interrogator and started down the corridor. Tanner fell in step beside him, his posture still tense and defensive.

The woman had been found in a laboratory that had been secretly erected well within the Unified Territory. It hadn't been his intention for her to be the only one left to interrogate, but the raid hadn't gone as planned. She was either Protarian elite or one of Fane's mutants. Either way she was going to tell him everything he wanted to know about the illegal operation before he set her free. If she was smart enough to start cooperating while he was still in a generous mood.

He'd only caught a glimpse of her during the raid. The strike had been fast and focused. He'd been shocked by the presence of an old friend and the team had scattered to avoid identification. It had been years since he'd seen Sean Wylie, but his apparent involvement with the woman made Kellan even more certain she was a mutant. And mutants were far more dangerous than the arrogant elite.

"When she wouldn't respond to any dialect of Protarian, I tried Stilox, Semberian, and Frontu," Tanner explained. "Even if she was born in the Underground, she should be able to speak one of those languages."

They descended a staircase then took the hallway to the left. This building had once been a city jail. Its cells had antiquated bars and metal locks that required no power source. Rationing was a way of life in the zones and Kellan led by example, continually finding ways to stretch the depleted resources.

"Was she silent the entire time or did she attempt to communicate with you?" Kellan mused as they neared the higher security areas. A guard snapped to attention and opened a metal gate to let them pass. "Some telepathic species evolve beyond the need for verbal communication. Perhaps she's not indigenous to this star system."

"Her skin is unusually pale, but I figured that was just from living underground. For a while she tried to speak. If those words were a legitimate language, I sure as hell didn't recognize it. Then she just stared off into space, looking all pathetic and dejected."

"Which strategies have you used?"

"The usual. Darkness. Isolation. Auditory deprivation followed by sudden motivational sounds. I didn't see the need to move on to anything painful until I was absolutely certain she can speak our language."

Kellan opened the door to the observation booth and stepped inside. He turned toward the subject of their discussion and an odd tension gripped his gut. The woman stood before him naked, her slender arms raised above her head and manacled at the wrist. There were no bruises marring her ivory skin or any other signs of physical abuse and still he felt agitated.

Humiliation and intensity were standard strategies for interrogation. Tanner had done nothing different with this woman than he'd done with every other person he'd been assigned. It didn't seem to matter. Kellan forced his muscles to relax and dragged his gaze away from the helpless female.

"She is either incredibly crafty or she was in the wrong place at the wrong time." He did his best to sound casual, but his mouth was suddenly dry.

"She wasn't just caught up in this," Tanner objected. "She was sneaking around with Sean. You saw her yourself."

"I know." He paused, rubbing his scruffy chin as he considered his options. Tanner had stripped her naked and left her in chains. Why was that thought so disconcerting? Tanner had been doing his job, nothing more, nothing less. "I'm going to try something different. Go get Ceddrick."

"Ceddrick? Your mystic? I don't understand."

None of Kellan's men knew the true extent of Ceddrick's abilities, or his limitations. It was a mystique Kellan fostered intentionally. Most presumed the enigmatic man was little more than a bed slave, while others whispered of his godlike powers. Kellan used both misconceptions to his advantage.

He made a bland gesture toward the woman. "After two days with you, I think she'll respond best to someone less...aggressive. That's obviously not me."

"I see your point, sir. I'll send Ceddrick to you right away." Tanner bowed his head and backed out of the small room.

Scooting a chair up to the wide console, Kellan situated himself in front of the controls and glanced at the rows of empty screens. Most of the equipment required more power than they could spare. This setup must have been something to see in its heyday. Sensors to monitor every bodily function, every physiological reaction to every question. Talk about lie detection.

A slow, knowing smile wiped away his momentary tangent. All the technology in the world couldn't match Ceddrick's empathic receptors, when Ceddrick chose to open his mind to others. That was their agreement. If Ceddrick said no, Kellan had to accept his refusal and let it go without argument. So far Ceddrick agreed more often than he refused, so Kellan didn't regret the condition. But what was taking him so long?

Kellan drummed his fingers impatiently against the control panel and a light in the interrogation room flashed on. The woman raised her head. She blew a long strand of silky dark hair away from her face and looked around, her expression cautious and filled with dread.

A distinct peak in the front of her hair created a heart-shaped frame for her delicate features. Large violet eyes, a dainty nose, and a mouth both sweet and sensuous. She caught her full lower lip between her teeth and whipped her head toward the observation window. Her breasts swayed with the sudden movement, drawing his gaze to the perfect, rose-tipped mounds.

"Is someone there?" Her voice was soft and tremulous. She spoke Standard, the intergalactic language used by tradesmen and smugglers.

How odd. Few in the zones had ever been offworld. It wasn't surprising Tanner hadn't recognized her words. The real question was, why would a mutant only speak Standard? Or what did she gain by pretending Standard was the only language she knew?

Interested to see how cooperative she would be if he bridged the communication gap, he activated the intercom and asked, "What's your name?"

Her eyes widened and a soft gasp escaped her parted lips. "You speak Standard. Oh, thank God! Can you let the others know I've been trying to cooperate? I've tried to understand what they want, but it's almost impossible when I don't... Are you still there? Where am I? Why have I been brought here?"

She hadn't answered his question. Without even offering her name, she smoothly slipped into her own interrogation. As if suddenly remembering she was naked, she bent one leg and pressed her thighs together. The subtle motion guided his gaze to her mound and the curls she couldn't quite conceal.

Desire stirred within his body, a natural reaction to her nude form. She was lithe and softly rounded rather than lush and overtly feminine like the lovers he generally favored. Still, her legs were long and firmly muscled. They would grip him strongly as her passage stretched to take his length.

Pleasure and pain, orgasm and anticipation, these were all useful tools when extracting information. If Tanner had been able to communicate with her, he would have doubtlessly used them all. The thought sent a shocking burst of anger surging through his mind. Tanner would not touch her! No one would touch her but him.

"Did I say something wrong?" The woman lowered her head, hiding her face behind the fall of her hair.

Kellan wanted to lift her face, to look into her eyes. Was she truly frightened or was cunning hiding behind the vulnerability?

As if in response to his frustration, Ceddrick stepped into the observation booth. *You summoned me, my lord.*

The mystic possessed a variety of skills Kellan had found useful down through the years. His empathic sensitivity allowed him to determine the truthfulness of statements

and the most likely motivation for deception. And when passive empathy failed, he had other, more-intrusive skills.

Kellan turned his head, making sure Ceddrik could see his lips move as he said, "Tell me what you sense as I speak with this woman. Anything could be significant, so tell me everything that comes to you. Do you agree?"

Ceddrik looked at the woman for a moment and then inclined his head. *I agree.* Though both deaf and unable to speak, Ceddrik's skilled lip-reading combined with his telepathic abilities allowed him to communicate. Sending and receiving thoughts, however, required a mental link and Ceddrik found few worthy of such an intimate connection.

Kellan remained angled so Ceddrik could see his face as he reactivated the intercom. "You didn't tell me your name."

She looked up, her gaze wide and luminous, shimmering with unshed tears. Another barrage of emotion assailed Kellan. Lust smoldered beneath the surface while possessive urges combined with an unexpected pike of protectiveness.

Protective? Him? He would not coddle a possible spy.

Forcing the emotions back with a mental snarl, he refocused on his purpose. Information about the lab was all he needed from this woman.

"Are they going to hurt me?" Tears trailed down her cheeks as she lowered her lashes and her harsh sob made her breasts quiver.

Muting the intercom, Kellan asked Ceddrik, "What do you sense?"

Fear and desolation, as if she has lost everything. Accusation hardened Ceddrik's baby blue eyes. How long has she been your captive? This woman is on the verge of emotional collapse.

The corner of Kellan's mouth quirked as a wicked plan unfolded within his mind. "If she is that close to the edge, perhaps she deserves a break. I say we go rescue her."

Rescue her from what?

"From the overlord, of course."

* * * * *

Hating each stinging tear that escaped beneath her lashes, Brianna was simply unable to suppress the emotions buffeting her composure. She'd been brave for so long. She'd been strong and optimistic, and one by one all the others had died!

She'd been transferred from keeper to keeper, place to place, never being told why she'd been taken or what was going to happen to her. She'd been able to piece together some of it on her own, but much still made no sense at all.

This planet was Protaria. The chancellor had originally kidnapped her and the other human females, but a mutant rebel named Max had shot their ship right out of the sky. She'd been recaptured by the chancellor, and just when things looked hopeless, Sean

had appeared, materializing out of the wall like some sort of living ghost. He'd promised he was rescuing her. He'd promised the worst was over.

But the worst wasn't over. She'd been kidnapped again, snatched away from her knight in shining armor before he could escort her to safety. And this last batch of ruffians might well be the worst. They were huge, uncouth barbarians who couldn't even speak a language she understood.

Miraculously she'd survived the entire ordeal without being raped or beaten. Just humiliated and terrified. When the interrogator stripped her naked and chained her hands, she thought for sure the real abuse was about to begin. But all he'd done was scowl at her and grow progressively more frustrated. Well, he wasn't the only one!

"Hello!" She gave herself a firm mental shake. Someone had spoken to her in Standard. She hadn't imagined the voice. The unseen man could translate for her. She had to convince him to speak on her behalf, to explain what the hell was going on! "Why did you stop talking? Please say something. Hello?"

Without warning the door swung open and two men moved into the room. One was tall and dark, the other short and blond. The dark one was so tall and broad she could see him clearly with the blond man standing in front of him. She'd thought the interrogator was intimidating, but he was nothing compared with this new threat.

Long, dark hair flowed past his shoulders in messy waves and his features were rugged, unapologetically masculine. The smaller man moved out of his way as the dark one stalked toward her.

She took a deep breath and met his gaze. If this was her time to die, she would face death straight on, content in the fact she'd done everything in her power to survive. Lorelle would be proud.

"We don't have much time," he said quietly.

Relief washed over her in a giddy rush and a tardy sob escaped her throat. "It's you. Are you going to..." He unlocked her restraints and she swayed, embarrassed by her rubbery legs. "Where are we going?"

He wrapped his arm around her waist, supporting her against him as his night-black gaze searched her face. "Speak honestly. Are you strong enough to walk?"

She wet her lips. Being cradled in his arms was ridiculously appealing, but it would also slow them down. Now was not the time to play damsel in distress. She was a modern woman, not some helpless waif. "I can walk. Forget that. I'll run. Just get me out of here!"

To her astonishment, he tugged his tunic off over his head and handed it to her. "Hurry."

His arms, shoulders, and torso were corded with highly defined muscles. As if the shape of the man wasn't impressive enough, his supple skin was marred by a variety of scars that proved his ferocity was not a fashion statement.

He was a warrior. A bona fide warrior.

"Do you need assistance?"

The teasing question had enough of an edge to snap her out of her stupor. "Sorry." She wiggled into his tunic and fought back a groan. The plush material was still warm from his body and his unique, spicy-fresh musk clung to the fabric. She felt surrounded and a bit overwhelmed as awareness arced between them.

He took her by the hand, his long, strong fingers swallowing her flesh. They rushed down one hallway and then another, pausing at each corner then running with obvious purpose. She heard voices and the clank of metal on metal. How many were imprisoned in this building? She'd been blindfolded when they brought her in.

"Bring the skiff around to this door. We can't risk dragging her through the commons." The blond man looked as if he might argue, but then he offered a sharp nod and hurried off to do as he was told.

The dark one pulled her into a small office adjacent to the exit. A window beside the door allowed them to watch for the blond man's arrival while remaining out of sight. He maneuvered her against the wall beside the door and stood at an angle, his big body half covering hers.

She tried not to touch him, but his chest pressed against her and his shoulder brushed her cheek whenever he shifted his weight. "Why are you helping me?" And what would he expect in payment when and if he succeeded in this escape?

"Would you rather I left you in chains?" He rested his forearms against the wall and focused on her face, his gaze intense and commanding.

He stood so close he eclipsed the rest of the room. All she could see was his harsh features and the endless depths of his eyes. Despite his barbaric appearance, she sensed complexity in him, something far more sophisticated than his first impression. His every touch was careful, controlled. He was aware of his far-greater strength and went out of his way not to hurt her. Why? She was less than nothing to him. Why should he care if he bruised her wrist?

Understanding nonverbal communication had been crucial for a lawyer who thrived on litigation. People often revealed more with gestures and expressions than with words. She'd needed to be able to read witnesses, to know when they were lying and when she was wasting her time. Though her life on Earth seemed as if it belonged to someone else now, certain skills from before had helped her survive.

She'd spent much of her captivity watching her captors, studying their mannerisms and the way they interacted with each other. She could usually tell who was in charge, who took credit for the work of others, and who was a genuine threat.

This man confused her. He was dangerous. There was no denying the menace in his posture and his expression, yet she sensed no imminent danger. "Who are you? What are you risking by helping me?"

"You can't imagine what I'm risking by helping you and all I've asked so far is your name." He collared her throat with his fingers, not hurting, just creating a hot, inflexible presence against her skin. "You have yet to offer me even that."

The motion sent fear racing down her spine, but again his control was impressive. He was threatening her. Sort of. So why did she feel all tingly and hot? As the shock of his aggression receded, his question registered within her sluggish mind. What the hell was he talking about?

"My name is Brianna San Carlos. Does that mean anything to you? I doubt you've heard of my planet, much less my people." She stood perfectly still. She couldn't break his hold even if she wanted to and she wasn't really sure she did. His hand felt good against her skin. So incredibly strong yet even more unbelievably gentle. An intoxicating contradiction. "Whoever took me away from Sean had to have me mixed up with someone else. I'm not important to anyone anymore. This is all a big mistake."

He glanced out the window and tensed. "Ceddrik is here. We'll continue this conversation in my ship."

So the blond's name was Ceddrik. She still didn't know tall-dark-and-deadly's name, but they were making progress.

They rushed across the corridor and ducked into the small ship awaiting them beyond the exit. The unassuming exterior made the luxurious interior all the more shocking. A small cockpit was separated from the main cabin by a sliding panel. Storage compartments and utility access closets were located in the aft.

Brianna stood at the edge of the passenger cabin transfixed by the splendor. Rather than individual chairs or even utilitarian benches, the space was taken up by a pleasure pit. The oval-shaped area had a padded bank that dipped and rose, creating a variety of ledges and angled benches. Within the padded enclosure, pillows and cushions of every conceivable shape and size had been scattered.

"Oh. My. God. This is an orgy ship." She took an automatic step back and bumped into the bulkhead.

"Was, sweetheart, was an orgy ship. I confiscated it from a ruthless pimp years ago. The pleasure pit is really rather comfortable and I don't have the funds to refit it, so here we are." He held out his hand and offered her a smile. A quicksilver expression that faded nearly as fast as it materialized.

The ship vibrated, announcing their departure. "Don't we need to be buckled in or—" A faint rush passed through her abdomen and then she felt nothing at all. If she didn't know she was standing in the passenger cabin of a ship, she wouldn't have known they were moving. "This thing must have serious inertia dampeners."

"Motion sickness doesn't put people in the mood to fuck." He stood near the pleasure pit, his hip resting against the raised embankment.

She was unrestrained and clothed from neck to knees for the first time in weeks. So why did she feel so vulnerable? He'd just rescued her, hadn't he?

"Who are you?" She crossed her arms over her breasts, refusing to cower before him. Strong people seldom responded well to weakness and this man was the personification of strength. Authority emanated off him. He was no guard or foot soldier. Ceddrik followed his directives without argument. And only someone with

authority would be in the position to confiscate a ship, even from a ruthless pimp. "Is this some sort of game?"

His head tilted and his eyes caught the light, making the dark orbs gleam. "Why would you think such a thing?"

The gentle mockery in his tone didn't fool her for a moment. She recognized a predator when she saw one. He was toying with her. There was no doubt about it. "I think the interrogator realized I wasn't just being a pain in the ass, but it took them a while to find someone who spoke Standard. Was this escape plan your idea? It was pretty ingenious. Gain my trust. Let me feel like you're on my side."

He reached back with both hands and grasped the embankment then crossed his legs at the ankle. "Whose side are you on, Brianna?" His tone was as indolent as his stance. "Who built the lab in the United Territories and what the fuck were they trying to produce?"

"I was imprisoned in that lab," she cried. Surely he didn't think she was part of that madness. "I watched them experiment on Karris, knowing each step of the way that I was next."

He pushed away from the pit, the subtle bunch and flex of his muscles mesmerizing. He knew good and well she couldn't keep her eyes off him. He was using that amazing body to distract her!

This was ridiculous. She was a mature woman. She'd seen a well-built man before. Perhaps not quite this well built and perhaps not—

"Who built the lab?" His tone was rough and whisper-soft, drawing her attention as well as any shout.

"They were careful never to use names around me." If she focused on his face it wasn't quite so bad. He had nice features, but he looked mean, reminding her of the danger. If her answers didn't please him, he could snap her neck or motivate her to provide different answers. "I'm not part of it. Honestly."

"What happened to Karris?"

His lips looked soft, almost kissable. It was cruel to put such sensual lips in such a ferocious face. She had to stop this! If she kept gawking at him like a ravenous teenager, he was bound to interpret her distraction as an invitation.

Taking a deep breath, she focused on his nose. Surely her rebellious libido could handle his nose. "They took Karris away for some sort of demonstration. That's why so many of them were gone when you attacked. Sean...appeared in my cell and told me he'd take me to Lorelle."

"Who is Lorelle?"

She hesitated. He wanted information about the lab and the people who operated it. She had no problem telling him what little she knew, but Lorelle was a different story. She would say nothing that might in any way endanger her sister. "She's my sister. We were kidnapped from Earth along with eighteen other human females." She knew why

they had been taken, but sharing the secret with him would be foolish. She had no intention of being treated like a commodity again. And the secret locked within their physiology was valuable, extremely valuable. "There must be something about human biology that makes us unusually receptive to this treatment." That explanation was as good as any.

His gaze snapped toward the cockpit and anger hardened his features. Without explanation he strode toward her, not stopping until he loomed over her. "Do not lie to me again."

How had he known? She lowered her gaze to his chest and tried to compose her expression.

Those long, warm fingers grasped her chin and tilted her head back until she looked into his eyes. "Tell me what you know and you will not be harmed, but I will not tolerate lies. Speak falsely again and you will regret it."

A wicked image formed within her mind. He sat on the embankment with her face down across his lap. The tunic was bunched beneath her arms exposing her lower body as he swatted her ass and caressed her legs.

What was wrong with her? She had never wanted to be spanked, never imagined a man holding her down, warming her skin, igniting her senses, driving his long fingers into her aching pussy!

She licked her lips, feeling his proximity with every cell of her body. "Would you please go back over there?"

"No." His fingers pushed into her hair, splaying against her skull as his face lowered.

She needed to stop him. If she kissed him he wouldn't stop. He'd fuck her hard and fast against the wall. She could see it in his eyes, the consuming heat, the lustful promise. Her core tensed, a slow, rippling spasm, so intense it made her moan.

She didn't want to be fucked by a complete stranger, no matter how stimulating she found his body.

His lips brushed back and forth across hers, his breath warm and moist against her lips. "I've never taken a lover against their will." The tip of his tongue teased her lower lip. "I see interest in your gaze, but there's uncertainty too. I don't think you're ready for my cock."

She'd known him less than an hour, for God's sake! What an arrogant jerk. Before she could find a snappy putdown his mouth settled over hers and his hand slipped under the tunic, cupping her ass. He drew her forward, pressing her against his erection—the long, thick, inescapable ridge of his erection. Another helpless moan parted her lips and he took full advantage of the reaction, slipping his tongue deeper as he angled his head to fit their mouths more firmly together.

Unable to resist the temptation, she ran her hands up his arms and squeezed his shoulders. Hard, hot, smooth skin over sculpted muscle. He was strong, fierce, able to protect her, able to shield and shelter her. She'd be safe in these arms.

Protection. Safety. Shelter.

The concepts extinguished the flickers of desire. She didn't want a lover, she wanted a bodyguard! Someone strong enough to drive away the danger and hold back the night. She had been terrified for so long. She just wanted to feel safe again.

This man is not your champion. He didn't even rescue you. He's your captor, just like all the others.

The kiss slowed and he pulled away, staring down into her eyes. "Has uncertainty won this round?" She nodded and he released her. He took a moment to compose himself then placed his hand against the wall beside her head. "Do you know who brought you here from Earth?" A bit gentler now, but he was the interrogator again.

"I've never heard a name, but some have slipped and referred to the chancellor." He nodded as if the information were no surprise. "It's more complicated than that. There was a mutant rebel named Max who intercepted us before we arrived."

"Really? You're sure this mutant's name was Max?"

"That's the only name I ever heard."

"Then Max is responsible for the lab?"

"No, the lab and everything in it was definitely the work of the chancellor." She closed her eyes and shook her head. "I've been kidnapped from my kidnappers so many times it's almost funny."

"Which brings us back to the original question. Why does everyone want you so badly?" His gaze trailed from her eyes to her lips and lower as he muttered, "Beyond the obvious, of course."

Her emotional shields snapped into place. She didn't really want him. She was attracted to his brawn, his savagery. He was intimidating enough to make her feel safe. That's all there was to it. It was a false sense of security and now that she understood the source she would ignore these irrational longings.

He grasped the tunic and drew it up along her thighs. "What are you doing?" She grasped his wrist.

"If you're not going to answer my questions, then I'll help you make up your mind."

"Make up my mind about what?"

"Whether or not you want to fuck me."

She'd walked right into that one. "I don't."

His brow arched and his fingertips curved inward, skating across the sensitive skin on her inner thigh. "Are you sure?"

"Yes." She tugged on his wrist, her breath trapped in her lungs until he moved his hand. Could she say something that was true yet vague enough to protect her and the others? If there were any others left. She rushed beyond the depressing thought and organized her strategy. She'd tell him what happened while downplaying the result.

Choosing each word carefully, she began her explanation. "We each participated in a genetic resequencing program. The program was meant to correct a defect or disease contained within our genetic code. I had multiple sclerosis, which affects the central nervous system. It's degenerative and robs its victims of the ability to control their bodies. Their minds are still fully functional, but in the most severe cases they are trapped within a useless shell. Anyway, the treatments were successful. We were each cured of our original condition, but there was an unintentional side effect."

"What side effect?"

"I'm not a doctor, but I'll try to explain. The telomere, the very end of a human DNA strand, deteriorates each time the strand reproduces. That's what causes humans to age. Well, with us our telomeres are stable. They are deteriorating at a much slower rate." So slow in fact that it's undetectable, but he didn't need to know that.

"So you'll live longer than most humans?"

"All I can figure is this chancellor was hoping to reproduce Andrea's mishap and stabilize the telomere of his future test subjects. Unfortunately, he's systematically burned through the test subjects he dragged here from Earth."

Her sarcasm drew his gaze back to her face. "You are the only human who is still alive?"

"Over half of us were killed when Max shot down our ship in an effort to steal us from the chancellor. We were separated after that, so I'm not sure what happened to the others. Sean made it sound like Lorelle is alive. Of course that could have been a tactic to keep me calm and cooperative until he had me away from the laboratory complex."

"You had never seen Sean before that night?"

"No."

"Are you a mutant?"

A mutant like Sean or a mutant like Andrea and Lorelle? Her DNA was technically mutated. "I'm human. My homeworld is Earth. I was being held in that lab against my will. I mean you no harm."

* * * * *

Infuriated by yet another wasted day, Sean Wylie reluctantly admitted defeat. He sank into the shadow dimension, which was at the heart of a specter's power. By manipulating the energy barrier that separated physical from metaphysical realities, specters could master a number of useful skills, not the least of which was instantaneous transportation.

He emerged in a secluded corridor deep in the Mutant Underground. On the outskirts of Sanctum, Pretoria's capital city, the Mutant Underground was actually a series of buildings and subterranean complexes connected by abandoned subway tunnels. Sarah's private chamber was just around the corner from where he stood. If his luck improved, he'd talk to Sarah and be gone before anyone realized he'd needed her

assistance. Emotions were running high. He understood the urgency, but he didn't need the additional pressure.

One of the warlords had snatched Brianna. There was simply no other explanation. If Lorelle found out her sister was in the hands of men Mal Ton considered barbaric, there would be no power in the universe that would stop her from racing headlong into the zones. And then they would have two humans to rescue instead of one.

Not willing to risk discovery, Sean sank through the wall as opposed to walking around to the doorway. He paused before emerging, making sure his sister was alone and available for his visit. She was resting, as she should have been. Allen Lansky, a Protarian nanobiologist, who had been defamed by the corrupt government, had recently taken on her case.

Sean gradually separated from the shadow dimension, materializing near the bed. Sarah was curled on her side, her hand tucked beneath her cheek, an opaque veil concealing the lower half of her face.

Frustration and tenderness wrestled within Sean. He wanted to snatch the veil away or better yet burn the damn thing. In the privacy of her own room she should be comfortable enough not to hide her deformity.

Over and over, she'd assured him the situation was not his fault, that she had known what she risked when she exposed herself to the virus. But he knew it was only partially true. Powerful mutations ran all through their family. She'd watched him survive the onset illness and mutate into a specter, the rarest and most coveted of all mutations.

As with most people, Sean's mutation had been spontaneous, but puberty came and went for Sarah and it became apparent she would not mutate. Determined to survive the Underground in any way she could, she had taken matters into her own hands. She'd suffered horribly for her rash decision. Were it not for mutant healers, she would not have survived the onset illness. Yes, she developed prophetic visions, but each vision came with a terrible cost. She was in continual pain and the visions were excruciating.

And that didn't even take into consideration what the mutation had done to her face. Features once delicate and lovely were now twisted, distorted so badly they were barely recognizable as humanoid. Only her rich green eyes remained unchanged. Those expressive eyes revealed all the pain and loneliness of the life she had selflessly chosen.

"Sarah." His voice broke as he whispered her name, so he quickly cleared his throat and tried again. She hated pity, refused to feel sorry for herself and resented the emotion in others. "Sarah, big bro's in trouble here. I need you to bail me out."

A sleepy chuckle assured him she wasn't sedated. "What else is new?" She stretched, slipping a hand up under her veil and scratched her cheek. "What time is it?"

"I'm not sure. Late evening. I'd guess around eight."

"Eight, at night?" She sat up, reached over to the nightstand and flipped on the lamp. "Tell me you're joking."

"Why would I joke about the time?"

"Then I've been sleeping for nineteen hours. This can't be good." She tossed back the covers and lowered her feet to the floor. Her nightgown was simple and modest, as were most of her clothes. Vanity had no place in the life of a powerful seer.

"Is something wrong?" His heart began to pound as her anxiety fueled his. "Should I get Ostan or Allen Lansky?"

"I'm not sure." She hurried toward the lavatory, obviously agitated. "I feel really odd. Something's different. Something..." She flipped on the light and pulled down the veil.

Their gazes met in the mirror and they fell silent, shocked beyond words. Sean blinked and focused on her face again. Surely it had been a trick of the light. But no, her features had reverted to their pre-mutation arrangement.

She was beautiful again.

"What did he do to me?" Her hands pressed against smooth cheeks and a sculpted jawline as panic and fury shredded her expression. "Oh Sean, what did he do?"

Slowly the ramifications cut through Sean's joy. This wasn't a good thing, at least not entirely. Her pain would be gone. She could live a normal life, reemerge from the darkness.

But that was his perspective of this development, not Sarah's. All Sarah saw was a normal face, a useless face, a *powerless* face. She might be physically whole again, but by reversing her mutation they had robbed her of the one thing that had given her life meaning.

Chapter Two

Kellan slid the partition closed and slipped into the navigator's seat opposite Ceddrik. Waiting until the mystic looked at him, he said, "You were suspiciously quiet through all that. What did you sense once she started spouting information? Is she full of shit, or is she really a victim in all this?"

Ceddrik paused to enter an adjustment into the control panel before he turned his full attention on Kellan. *I was certain she was being completely honest until the very end. When you asked if she was a mutant, her emotions spiked and twisted. I couldn't tell what was true.*

"Shit." He leaned back in the chair and glared at the buildings whizzing past. The vast majority were deserted, gutted and abandoned as the population dwindled and resources had to be pooled. They demolished what they could and let the forces of nature take care of the rest.

They were nearly home, if his fortified compound could be termed a home. That was the trouble with power. Wielding it took continual effort and there were always those ready and willing to wrest it away. Fortunately, he'd yet to find anyone *able* to overpower him. He'd stayed true to his beliefs and acted swiftly and decisively with anyone who crossed him. Such was life in the black zones.

Ceddrik transmitted the security code, which was changed at random every few days, and the razor-wire gates were opened to let them pass. The guards saluted with their weapons and he offered a halfhearted wave, feeling anything but friendly at the moment.

He felt restless and feral and hungry. He should have wrapped Brianna's legs around his waist and thrust his cock balls-deep into her dripping cunt. Many women turned talkative in the aftermath of passion.

Would she be wild and aggressive, scoring his back with her nails? Or sweetly submissive? Her response to his kiss had been tentative, but she had responded. Nothing fired him up faster than a challenge and Brianna was certainly that.

She might be an entertaining challenge or she might be a clever spy, Ceddrik reminded. You haven't even told her your name. Some part of you doesn't trust her.

"Get the fuck out of my head," he muttered, annoyed more by the reminder than the invasion.

If you don't want me to listen, raise your shields.

He'd been so distracted by his fascinating captive he hadn't realized his shields were down. Correcting the oversight, he surrounded his mind with an energy barrier

that muted his thoughts and alerted him to Ceddrik's touch. Allowing the link at all had been a risk. So far the benefits had outweighed the disadvantages.

Ceddrik set down by the front entrance and guards surrounded the ship, waiting to escort them into the building. He activated the refuel cycle and large solar panels extended with a resounding snap, automatically angling to optimize intake.

Touching his forearm, Ceddrik drew his attention then pinged his shield, asking permission to speak. *Why didn't you fuck her? I've never known you to be so restrained. If an attractive female offers you a ride, generally you hop on.*

"I might have been a bit...overzealous in my youth, but I've been far more discriminating in recent years."

Perhaps. But that didn't answer my question. Why didn't you accept Brianna's offer?

Kellan couldn't rid his mind of her image, chained and helpless, utterly dejected and alone. He wanted to comfort her, to savor her surrender, awaken her passion slowly until it consumed them both. Not bang her senseless and walk away.

He shook away the temptation. Even a prolonged seduction was dangerous if she was Fane's spy.

"Do you think she's a mutant?" Kellan asked, ignored Ceddrik's question again. If the sly pain in the ass had been poking around in his mind, he understood the situation as well as Kellan did. Ceddrik was just trying to provoke him. "Have we captured a well-trained spy or a human refugee?"

There's one easy way to find out.

Kellan pushed to his feet and scrubbed a hand over his stubbly jaw. Damn, he needed a bath and a shave. Maybe they could bathe together, become comfortable with each other's bodies while they...

Do you want me to scan her or not? It makes no difference to me.

He really did need to know if she was a player or a victim before he indulged these carnal impulses. "Can you scan deeply enough without creating the sort of link we share? Allowing her access to your mind is more of a risk than I'm willing to take."

Wow. That almost sounds like you give a damn. Ceddrik chuckled. *Two things can make a person vulnerable to penetration.* Kellan shivered and Ceddrik rolled his eyes. *I was referring to the mental sort. Get your thoughts out of your pants for half a tick please.*

"Sorry. I've returned from adolescence. What would allow you to penetrate her mind deep enough to determine the truth of her claims?"

Pleasure or pain.

Kellan narrowed his gaze. "Fuck her or flog her? Why not just ask her to cooperate?"

Who are you? I'm not sure I like this kinder, gentler overlord. How will the warlords react when they find out you've gone soft over a female?

The accusation chafed. His reputation was the strongest weapon in his arsenal, intimidation his most dependable strategy. "I assure you, I'm anything but soft over this particular female." He angled his hips, displaying his raging erection.

Ceddrik smiled. *And the answer to your question is also your earlier concern. She will have access to my mind, to some extent, while I scan. There is no way to avoid it. So we must make sure she's so distracted she doesn't realize what I'm doing.*

Desire thrummed through Kellan as he considered his options. Ceddrik had a manipulative streak. His ability to mold circumstances to his advantage was the main reason Kellan had formed an alliance with the secretive mystic in the first place. Kellan didn't trust him, but he saw no reason for Ceddrik to lie about this situation.

"Tell the guards to back off and you stay out of sight. My sudden change of character is going to be shocking enough without adding voyeurs to the mix."

As you wish. If I haven't finished my scans by the time you've finished terrorizing her, I'll let you know.

"Perfect," Kellan grumbled. He summoned his fiercest scowl and reached for the partition.

The divider between the cockpit and the cabin slid open and Brianna pivoted toward the opening. She sat in the pleasure pit, surrounded by a mound of pillows, feeling foolish and restless and annoyed. She'd been cooperative and honest, and her captor had reacted with indifference and impatience. He couldn't get away from her fast enough.

Time was hard to judge without any frame of reference, so she wasn't sure how long he'd been gone. Had they arrived at their destination? Like it mattered to her! She hadn't known where she was since she'd been taken from Earth. She heaved a ragged sigh. One cage was pretty much like another. Though she had to admit this one was rather cozy.

He stooped as he moved through the hatchway then unfolded his tall body and closed the panel with an angry snap. Okay, he looked pissed. Had Ceddrik said something to upset him?

She tried not to panic. The storm cloud building around him might not have anything to do with her. "Are you all right?" she asked carefully.

"Not even close."

He took two long strides toward the pit, spurring her into action. She sure as hell didn't want to be the recipient of his foul mood. He effortlessly leaped over the embankment as she reached the opposite side. The pillows slowed his progress for a moment, but his long arm snaked around her waist and grasped her side. He dragged her backward as she yelped and clawed at the padded bench.

"Wait! Why are you pissed at me? What did Ceddrik tell you?"

He lifted her feet off the floor and headed for the staggered break in the embankment. "Who said this has anything to do with Ceddrik?"

She sent pillows flying with her feet and tugged against his arm, but her struggles were pointless and she knew it. She had no currency, wasn't even sure she could communicate with anyone but her captor. So why was she fighting so hard to achieve "freedom"?

Pride alone fueled her rebellion, pride and a secret thrill at how easily he controlled her struggles. "You don't have to act like such a brute!" She smacked his hip, which sent stinging sensations zinging up her arm. Was the man chiseled out of rock?

He lowered her feet to the floor and shifted his hand to her upper arm. Then he jerked her forward as he leaned down. "It's not an act, little girl. You'd do well to remember."

What was wrong with him? He was snorting and stomping like a stag in rut.

His hold remained firm on her arm as he activated the hatch. She glanced at his lean hips, but the angle of his body prevented her from determining the accuracy of the comparison. Was he just horny, or had something she said set him off?

Her steps slowed and her eyes widened as she descended from the ship. "What is this place?" At some point in the distant past it had been a stately mansion. Gun turrets and strategic barricades now ruined the graceful lines and palatial charm. Armed soldiers stood posts or patrolled everywhere she looked. Not government-sponsored military, more like mercenaries.

What had she stumbled into now?

Each soldier they passed snapped to attention and muttered a word she didn't understand. It had the ring of a title, like commander or general.

The interior of the house was clean and spacious. Bare walls and mismatched furniture couldn't hide the architectural opulence. She tried to imagine the mansion as it had once been, as it was meant to be, while her hostile captor dragged her along one marble corridor and then another.

People ducked into doorways or pressed themselves against walls as they approached. Did he demand such displays of deference, or did they recognize his expression? Neither possibility led to an encouraging outcome for her, so she tried to engage him again.

"Where are you taking me?"

Silence.

He thrust open a door and pushed her into a library, or what had once been a library. Shelves lined the walls but there was not a book in sight. Not an access terminal either for that matter. Didn't these people read? She bristled. A brute indeed.

"Kneel." He crossed his arms over his chest and looked down his nose at her.

"Why?" There was more than one motive for a man to want a woman on her knees, but she was so *not* in the mood for the most common reason.

He grasped her upper arms and shoved her to her knees. "It is customary for guests to kneel in my presence. I will accept no less from a prisoner. You are unaware of our customs, so I will not punish you for your rude behavior."

Her rude behavior?

Her sarcastic reply turned to ashes in her mouth as she glared into his eyes. He was serious. This wasn't a game. Fear skittered down her spine and she said, "I apologize."

Her easy acquiescence seemed to please him. He stepped back and folded his arms over his chest, his stance wide, head held high. "I am Kellan Felix, Overlord of the United Territories. So there is no misunderstanding, that means all seventeen black zones, the Five Points Coalition, Racina, Littleton, and the Foothills Co-op." They stared at each other, his expression expectant, hers cautious. His gaze bore into hers, searching, waiting. Finally, his stance relaxed and a slow smile parted his lips. "You have no idea what any of that means, do you?"

"Sorry. I'm not from around here." She lowered her gaze to her hands and released her breath in a slow exhale. She knew exactly what it meant. She'd been kidnapped by Attila the Hun!

"Come." He turned and left the room, obviously expecting her to follow.

A shiver sped down her spine. He was used to issuing commands and being obeyed. He was an overlord, a king of kings, a warlord's warlord. She was in serious trouble.

Scrambling off her knees, she rushed after him. "Where are we going?" She didn't use his name, suspected the informality would offend him, but finally knowing it made her feel more secure, less disconnected. Kellan. Kell? No, Kellan. He was too damn big for a pet name.

Without explanation, he led her up a wide staircase and across the gallery that looked out over the entry hall. Even stripped of its finery, the house was impressive. Sculpted ceilings and etched skylights had miraculously survived the ravages of time.

He opened one side of the double doors leading into a massive bedroom then waited for her to enter. It was obviously the master bedroom.

Reality paused and Brianna tensed. She had dreaded this day since she was first kidnapped. She'd spent endless hours trying to prepare herself, hoping to perfect her reaction. Yet faced with the actual crossroads, she wasn't sure what she should do. If she didn't submit to him willingly, would he take her by force? He'd said he wouldn't rape her, but that had been before he revealed his identity.

"Do I have a choice?"

His gaze narrowed and wicked amusement flickered within his eyes. "No. You're going to take a bath whether you want to or not."

Relief rushed through her, making her toes tingle. But her chest felt heavy and her core ached. Surely she wasn't disappointed that he didn't intend to... One problem at a time. "Isn't this your room?"

"It is."

"Are there no other working bathrooms in this building?"

"There are several."

"Then why do I need to use this one?"

He chuckled. "Do you really want me to list the reasons you need to bathe? That's rather indelicate."

She glared at him. Wishing she didn't find him attractive, wishing she were more like her sister. Lorelle would have kicked his ass by now, taught him not to mess with San Carlos women. Even on Earth the worst she could have done was sue him, and right now her knowledge of Earth's judicial system was pretty damn useless!

Lorelle. Her heart sank into the pit of her stomach and she quickly averted her eyes. Was her sister really all right, or had Sean been manipulating her like everyone else? She couldn't think about Lorelle right now. She'd start crying and shatter the illusion of strength she was trying so hard to convey.

Squaring her shoulders, she met his gaze and asked, "Am I still your prisoner?"

"For the moment. As soon as Ceddrick confirms the information you gave me, I'll send a message to Fane and ask if your sister is actually in the Underground."

Her heart leapt and she fought back a smile. She didn't want him to know how thrilled she was by the prospect. "I appreciate your generosity. May I please have my own bedroom?"

"No."

"May I ask why?"

His momentary amusement evaporated. He caught a fistful of her tunic and dragged her into the bedroom, kicking the door shut with the heel of his boot. "I don't explain myself to anyone. People abide by my dictates or suffer the consequences."

The wise thing would have been to apologize and go take a bath, but no one had ever accused San Carlos women of being wise. They were rebels, feisty, passionate, crusaders—but never anything as mundane as wise.

"I'm not trying to anger you... Should I call you 'sir'?" She didn't resist his hold, even pressed into the heat of his knuckles.

His grip released, yet his hand remained against her chest, touching without caressing her breasts. "Only if you're ready to submit to my authority."

"Blind obedience requires trust, and I don't know you."

"Then call me Kellan. I detest hypocrisy."

"All right, Kellan. I'll try not to debate your reasons for doing things, but I respond better if I understand what they are. 'Why' can be a manipulation, but it can also be an honest request for more information."

He paused, his dark gaze moving over her face. She didn't think he would answer. It was clear a response would countermine one of his precepts. Then his gaze focused

on her mouth and he said, "There are sixty-three men stationed at this compound, nineteen of whom are housed in this building. I won't force myself on you, no matter how lustfully you look at me. I'm not as certain about some of my men." She gasped and twisted away. His fingers caught in the tunic again, dragging the material off one shoulder. "Do you deny that your eyes have been devouring me ever since I walked into the interrogation room?"

"Yes!" She tossed over her shoulder, refusing to look at him. "My libido didn't start misbehaving until *after* you took off your shirt."

Apparently, he hadn't expected honesty. He let go of her tunic and started laughing, the sound rich and wonderful. Levity transformed his features, smoothing the harsher lines while leaving the distinguished angles. For just a moment she imagined him cleaned up and tamed, dressed in a business suit or an elegant tuxedo, ready to entertain in his fabulous domicile.

He ran a careless hand through his hair and his muscles rippled, shattering the illusion. He was militant to the marrow of his bones. *People abide by my dictates or suffer the consequences.* That pretty much said it all. She better adjust to his way of thinking, not expect him to conform to hers.

"I truly hope you aren't Fane's spy." His gaze was warm and caressing, but the bow-before-me tilt had returned to his head.

"And why is that?"

"You're fond of that question." He grinned and took a step toward her. "If you're a spy, I have no choice but to kill you. But if you're a victim, as you claim, the possibilities are limited only by our combined imagination and your willingness to explore your capacity for pleasure."

Faster than lightning his hands sneaked under the tunic and found her bare hips, pulling her lower body against his. His knee nudged her legs apart and his erection pressed against her belly. Liquid want flowed and curled, leaving smoldering heat in its wake.

He leaned down and brushed his lips against her temple as one of his hands sneaked up to squeeze her ass. "Let's go take a bath."

* * * * *

Sean flew across the lab and slammed Allen Lansky into the wall behind him, ready to rip out his throat.

"Don't!" Sarah grabbed his arm and stopped him from striking, though nothing could have gentled his grip. "He's the only one who can fix this. If you kill him, there's no hope for me."

"What was in the injection?" Sean loosened his fingers enough to allow Allen to speak.

To his credit Allen didn't struggle. He stood statue still, calmly assessing the situation, analyzing each element. His gaze shifted to Sarah and his eyes nearly bugged out of his face, his expression a potent mix of shock and wonder. No lab rat was that good an actor.

"I don't understand." Allen pushed Sean's hand away from his throat, his gaze glued to Sarah. Sean crossed Allen's shoulders with his forearm and angled his body, allowing the scientist an unobstructed view.

"What is this about, Sean? What's going on?"

Reality expanded beyond Sean's fury as Cassie's voice penetrated the ringing in his ears. He had shouldered her aside as he grabbed Allen. Thank the gods he hadn't hurt her. Cassie was Fane's mate and Fane ruled the Underground.

"Look at her," Allen whispered. "There's no trace of mutation. Her features are completely restored."

Sean pushed off the wall and let Allen go. Beating him to a bloody pulp might be cathartic, but it would also be counterproductive. Sarah was right. Allen had to fix this thing.

Allen grabbed a scanner off the shelf above his workstation and slowly circled Sarah. She glanced at him, tears welling in her eyes. He saw the hint of her misery for half an instant then she stubbornly blinked the tears away.

"What was in the injections?" Sean persisted. He moved past Cassie and addressed Allen directly. Cassie and Allen had been working on the project together, but Allen was primarily responsible for programming the nanites. The treatments were supposed to have curtailed Sarah's deterioration, not reversed her mutation. "Why did it do this to her?"

Allen looked up from the scanner, his lower lip caught between his teeth. "This makes no sense. It wasn't supposed to happen. The new parameters should have prevented anything resembling mutation." He adjusted the settings and scanned some more.

"Other than confused as hell and angry," Cassie began with a cautious smile. "How do you feel? Do you have a headache? Is there any pain?"

Sarah glared at her. "I want my headache back. This is not what I agreed to."

Cassie gaped, clearly shocked by the vehemence in Sarah's tone. "Your mutation was killing you. If we hadn't arrested the deterioration, you would likely be dead by now."

Don't even say it. Sean sent the thought to his sister, carefully targeted for her mind alone. *I know you might believe it right now, but you would not be better off dead.* She didn't respond and her mutinous expression didn't change. *Sarah?*

Nothing.

Sean's stomach cramped. Why couldn't she hear his thoughts? Even as children they had —

I can still hear you, asshole, Sarah assured. I'm ignoring you.

Ignore me all you like as long as you know how much this asshole loves you.

She glanced at him and the corners of her mouth turned up with the hint of a smile.

"You did a little more than arrest the deterioration," Sarah muttered.

"Cassie, can you get me an extractor? I need a sample of Sarah's blood, so I can figure out what happened."

Without comment, Cassie handed Allen the extractor and stepped back out of his way. Sarah pushed up her sleeve and he took the sample.

Cassie tugged on Sean's sleeve, the gesture so unexpected and disarming he almost smiled.

"May I speak with you in the hallway?"

"Why?"

"I'd rather not upset Sarah any more than necessary."

"Then don't upset her."

"Sean." Though spoken in a calm, conversational tone it would have been impossible to miss the warning in that one word. Sean glanced over his shoulder and found Fane standing in the doorway. Figured. Fane sensed everything that happened in the Underground.

You all right, sprite?

I'm fine. Just peachy.

Her sarcasm was more comforting than she realized. When Sarah was passive and cooperative, that was when he started to worry.

Sean strode into the hallway, Fane and Cassie trailing behind him. He waited until they were out of earshot of the doorway before he turned around. "You had no right!" He sneered right into Cassie's face, not caring whose mate she was. No one hurt Sarah. No one!

"This wasn't intentional," she assured.

Fane pushed Sean backward with his mind, his expression warning that the next push would be far more violent. "Has anyone else regressed?" he asked Cassie.

"I don't think so. I'll examine everyone immediately." She seemed genuinely upset. After a short pause, she looked at Sean and said, "I have no idea how this happened, but I don't understand your reaction. If anything the result is...better than we expected. Why are you so angry?"

Clenching his fists to keep from shaking some sense into her, Sean turned to Fane. "Would you please explain the situation to your mate. I don't have the patience for Protarian elitism right now."

Fane's gaze narrowed in warning, but he obliged. "Sarah's visions are invaluable to us. She has saved countless lives and —"

"I understand that. But she was dying. The mutation that allowed her to access these visions was killing her quickly. Is a dead seer really more valuable than a live woman without psychic powers?"

"The debate is moot," Sean snapped. "The damage is done."

"The *damage* is repaired."

Fane held up his hand, silencing them both. After a tense moment, he asked Sean, "Why are you here?"

"To ask my sister for assistance." He watched their expressions register the implication and heaved a weary sigh.

"You lost Brianna's trail?" The anxiety in Fane's gaze made it obvious he knew the answer.

"Not that there was much of a trail to lose. Brianna didn't panic and run off into the night. She was taken while I fought Howyn's guards. There is no doubt about it. One of the warlords has her."

"Oh gods," Cassie whispered behind her hand. "What can we do?"

"We can't do anything," he snapped. "I can prostrate myself before the most ruthless bastard I've ever known and hope he doesn't kill me before I have a chance to explain why I'm there."

"Kellan?" Fane shook his head. "There has to be another way. I do not want to end up owing that son of a bitch."

"I thought there was another way, but Allen Lansky just took it from me." He raked his hair with both hands, torn between fury and dread. "I'm open to ideas. I sure as hell don't like my own."

"It's been, what eleven years? Will he even recognize you?"

"I'm pretty sure he'll recognize me. I'm more concerned with how he'll react when he does. We didn't part on the best of terms."

"You're a specter. Think how much easier his rise to power would have been if he could have convinced you to stay."

"How do you know Kellan Felix?" Cassie asked.

"I was born in one of the black zones. Everyone is expected to serve their garrison in one capacity or another. If you don't fight, you don't eat. It's an interesting concept of community. If it weren't for Fane, I'd be there still. Or I'd have died fighting for the overlord."

"Kellan is really our only option." Fane sounded anything but enthusiastic.

"Nothing happens in the zones without Kellan knowing about it. He won't help me out of the goodness of his heart. I'll have to think of something I can offer him in exchange."

"I don't like the sound of that." Fane folded his arms across his chest and scowled.

"If I were an attractive woman, you'd have reason to worry." Sean waved away his concern. "Kellan is all about power."

"You're a specter. That's all the incentive he needs. I don't want to exchange one prisoner for another."

"He can't force me to do anything. He sure as hell can't keep me there against my will. I'm in a lot better position to negotiate than Brianna. Besides, we've run out of options." Sean heaved another sigh and rolled his shoulders. "Try to keep Sarah from killing Lansky while I'm gone. Don't let her stillness fool you. She's even angrier than I am."

* * * * *

"Let's go take a bath?" Brianna echoed in a soft, breathless voice that sent lust spiraling through Kellan's body. "As in you and me together?"

She sounded so scandalized he almost laughed. Gods above, she was adorable. "I've already seen you naked, princess, and you're not leaving my sight until Ceddrick reports back in." He gave her delectable ass another provoking squeeze and leaned in to nip her earlobe. "It's in the room guarding you or in the tub with you. Those are your only two options."

Disentangling his hands from beneath the tunic, she frantically wiggled out of his light hold. "Either way you watch me bathe?"

He needed her unsure and off balance, not soft and malleable. If she didn't resist, at least a little, the only way he would be able to keep from fucking her was to stay the hell away. And he couldn't do that right now. He had to distract her with pleasure, keep her emotions turbulent and wild, which meant he had to remain detached and in control.

"Your stench offends me." He squared his shoulders and placed his fists on his hips. "I presume your condition is not your fault, but failing to correct the situation is not an option."

She covered her face with her hand as a bright red flush crept across her skin. "Where's the bathroom?"

Intentional cruelty was not his usual strategy. He took a step toward her before he realized the futility of the gesture. He couldn't comfort her yet. This farce was far from over. Steeling himself for more of the same, he checked his expression then said, "Leave the tunic here."

Another moment passed as she struggled with her emotions. Rebellion still simmered in her eyes when she raised her gaze. "As you wish." She took the oversized shirt by the hem and drew it off over her head. Her chin raised a notch as she held it out, waiting for him to react to her nudity.

He swept her from head to foot with one slow, assessing stare then took the tunic from her extended hand. Without changing his expression, he said, "Pull off my boots."

Her nostrils flared and her hands clenched into tight little fists. He wasn't sure if she would claw out his eyes or stomp her bare foot in exasperation. It would be fun to see how much it took to make her lose her temper.

Ceddrik pinged Kellan's mental shield, asking permission to enter. *What's taking so long? I thought you were going to take a bath?*

We were. I mean we are...eventually. She's about to pull off my boots.

Pushing deeper into his mind, Ceddrik accessed his optic nerve. *Oh, I see. You want to get her good and dirty before you fuck her in the shower.* Amusement rippled across their psychic link, lightening Kellan's mood, distracting him.

Out! I'm working here. She's never going to believe I'm a ruthless tyrant if you make me laugh.

Make her lick your boots before she pulls them off. That will convince her you're a bastard.

There were a lot of things Kellan wanted her to lick. His boots just weren't one of them.

He sat on the edge of the bed and braced his hands to either side of his hips. Without uttering another word, he raised his foot and waited.

She crossed her arms over her breasts, mutiny gleaming in her eyes. "I don't want to offend you with my stench."

"Disobedience offends me even more. Besides, I'm not sure it was you I smelled. I think it might have been my tunic. Come closer, so I can decide."

With a feisty little sound, part growl and part mutter, she closed the distance between them. "I'm glad I can amuse you. At least someone can enjoy themselves." She grasped the heel of his boot with one hand and the arch with the other and tugged for all she was worth.

He watched the sway of her breasts and the determination in her lovely features while his toes dug in, ensuring his boot remained in place. "It only works from the other way around," he told her after he'd fully indulged the front view.

"I am not going to bend over and stick my ass in your face." She tossed her head, sending her hair cascading over her shoulders and down her back. "Take the boots off yourself or bathe with them on. I don't care which. I am finished amusing you!"

Finally. Never breaking eye contact with his rebellious prisoner, Kellan pulled off his boots and tossed them aside. Then he stood and peeled down his pants, groaning as his cock sprang free of the painful confines. She watched every move he made, her features carefully devoid of all expression.

"Pleasure or pain?" he asked when he was naked.

"What?" She blinked, her gaze stubbornly remaining on his face.

"Those who refuse my dictates must be punished. I warned you of this. You can't claim ignorance. I'm feeling particularly generous, however, so I offered you a choice. Pleasure or pain. Your punishment will utilize one or the other. Which do you prefer?"

Chapter Three

Pleasure or pain. The phrase echoed through Brianna's mind, heightening her uncertainties and teasing her imagination. Would he spank her, make her ass cheeks burn with his strong hands while her pussy ached for the fullness of his cock? Or did he mean something more serious, more damaging?

Fear, cold and oppressive shouldered aside her pleasant fantasies. She didn't know this man, had no reason to trust him. How could she possibly choose pain? Pleasure could be wielded just as ruthlessly, but pain was too dangerous until trust had been fully established.

He stood before her like a barbarian king...*like*? There was no like about it. He was undeniably barbaric and the ultimate authority in the United Territories. She couldn't let herself forget who and what he was. He'd been almost playful before. Why hadn't she just turned around and pulled off his stupid boots?

Because he'd been toying with her, amusing himself at her expense.

"Unable to decide?" he persisted.

"Unwilling to choose." She made her voice stiff and mechanical even though awareness hummed through her senses. "Do what you want with me. I can't stop you. But I won't add to your enjoyment."

"Oh yes you will." He grasped her hand and led her across the room. She followed without resistance. He'd promised he wouldn't fuck her until Cedrik confirmed her claims. This was all intimidation.

The bathroom was even more elaborate than the bedroom, the opulence seeming all the more out of place. Gold-veined black marble in varying shapes and sizes had been combined to tile the floor and walls. The wide vanity, with double basins, was molded from a single sheet of the fabulous stone, and contrasting shades had been used to tile the massive tub and shower enclosure. Though dented and somewhat tarnished, the fixtures appeared to be operational.

Brianna had seen vids of these sorts of accommodations. They were enjoyed by celebrities and heads of state. Had Kellan lived here when the rest of the house matched the splendor of this bathroom, or had his band of mercenaries confiscated it from some deposed ruler?

"How long... What was this place before... What happened to the rest of the house?"

His hand fisted in her hair and he slowly pulled her head back. "If you pester me with questions, I will find something more interesting to occupy your mouth."

Heat pooled between her thighs as she pictured him urging her lower, guiding her to her knees and bringing her face toward his bobbing erection. She'd done her best to ignore the column of flesh jutting from the apex of his thighs.

Like a beacon, it drew her now. His fingers loosened, allowing her head to move. She glanced down and froze. Long and thick, heavily veined, unapologetically savage, his cock was an extension of the man himself. Perfectly proportioned—for someone more giant than man! She quickly looked away and hid her nervous laugh by forcing a cough.

With a gentle tug on her hair, he drew her gaze back to his face. "Are the men on your world pale and puny? Why are you so captivated by my body?"

"My world is filled with technologies that make life easy and convenient. Most people try to stay active, but few are exposed to the sort of hardship that shaped you."

One of his dark brows slashed upward at her words. "How would you know what forces shaped me?"

Emboldened by his stillness and the inescapable urge to touch him, she reached out her hand and splayed her fingers against the distinct curve of his chest. Her thumb skimmed over a thin scar that ended precariously close to his heart. He had countless scars. The worst appeared to be a burn on his hip and upper thigh. None of them distracted from the brutal symmetry of his corded muscles.

They hung suspended in anticipation. This was more than just a bath and she knew it. If he had no interest in her sexually, he would not be guarding her himself.

She longed to rub against him and wrap herself around him, but she only stared. "You've obviously lived an active and eventful life," she whispered, not daring to move her hand, just savoring the steady thud of his heart beneath her palm.

"My scars aren't distasteful to you?" His gaze bore into hers, his tone harsh all of the sudden. "Most medical facilities on Protaria are able to regenerate tissue. The elite strive for physical perfection."

What an odd tangent. She forced her wandering mind back on the issue at hand. His amazing body. No, trying not to anger him too badly until Cedrik could confirm that she was not some sort of spy!

"Such technology is available on Earth as well." Why were they standing naked in a rundown mansion talking about his scars? This was certainly a unique come-on. But she was literally at Kellan's mercy until Cedrik turned her from prisoner into guest. If she could believe one thing this big brute promised her. "Why were your wounds not properly treated?"

He started to say something then shook his head. "Now is not the time for history lessons. I'm supposed to be punishing you." He swatted her lightly on the ass and nodded toward the bathtub. "The shower hasn't worked in years, but there's plenty of room in the tub."

Her older brother had sometimes complained that bathing was punishment, but she'd always been rather fond of water. Thoughts of her brother led to thoughts of

Lorelle, and she refused to think about Lorelle right now. She could not show weakness to a mercenary, not if she wanted to survive.

Dragging her feet every step of the way, she moved across the bathroom and sat on the edge of the tub, swinging both legs over together. The tub was oval and deep, with a ledge across the back in case a person didn't want to be completely submerged in the water.

"Do the jets still work?"

"Yes, but lights dim all over the compound whenever they cycle on, so I don't indulge very often."

Her father was a retired general and her sister was career military. Brianna knew what it took to set up a self-contained compound. And it didn't take a genius to figure out this place was totally "off the grid". Rain-filled tanks on the roof would supply water, if there wasn't a river nearby, but electricity required a higher level of sophistication.

"How is all this powered?" She motioned toward the lights over the vanity and the jets they had yet to activate.

"Generators. Primarily solar, but I'm a redundant fan of redundancy."

She smiled, caught off guard by the unexpected quip. Taking a seat on the ledge, she watched as he climbed in after her. His long legs spanned the slop, muscles rippling beneath his skin with each movement. She pressed her hand over her pounding heart and took a deep breath. Please let him order her to scrub his back. On second thought, she wanted to scrub his entire body!

He activated the primary faucet at one end of the tub and the secondary faucet opened automatically. She reached for the drain stop with her foot, but he lightly grasped her ankle, halting the move.

"Let's get clean before we soak," he suggested. "I'd rather not stew in my own sweat."

"Good plan."

He quickly soaked his hair with a hand sprayer then handed it to her while he reached for the shampoo. She tried to focus on her task, to ignore the lather rolling along his ribs and pooling in his navel. Closing her eyes only allowed her imagination to run riot. It was way too easy to imagine her hands sliding all over his body, gliding through the lather, following every pronounced rise and — His hand covered hers and she gasped, starting so badly he caught her upper arm, keeping her from losing her balance.

"I just need the sprayer." A knowing gleam flashed in his gaze as she passed it to him.

"Sorry." She turned her back, hoping he'd missed her hardened nipples and... Water saturated her hair and cascaded over her face, causing her to sputter.

"Relax." His free hand smoothed her hair back from her face as he rinsed the lather. He pressed against her, his body warm and solid against her back. "Are you a virgin?"

She shook her head, soothed by the water, yet undeniably aware of him.

He must have set the sprayer in some sort of holder. She didn't bother to look. The water flowed steadily over both their bodies while his hands explored her naked curves. She pressed back into him, her hands grasping his hips. He moved her hair aside and licked and nibbled at the nap of her neck. Tingles zinged down her spine, awakening her nipples before lodging in her clit.

With a helpless moan, she wiggled her bottom against him, not caring that she was wanton. If this was inevitable, she would rather encourage him toward pleasure than endure the brutality of which he was obviously capable.

He cupped her breasts, squeezing firmly before focusing on the sensitive tips. His fingers plucked, pinching and rolling the tender buds until they were tightly beaded.

Turning her suddenly, he pulled her up along his chest as his mouth fastened onto her nipple. His arms banded her, anchoring her, one at the small of her back, the other beneath the curve of her bottom. Her arms were trapped against her sides as his mouth moved from one breast to the other and back, suckling endlessly.

She arched into his mouth, letting her head drop back on her shoulders. Trapped, immobilized, *restrained*.

He knew! Somehow he knew how she craved these pleasures, how she felt safest within the confines of—

He nipped her breast, commanding her attention. "You prefer pain, but you're afraid to ask me for it. Am I right?"

She said nothing. He was right and they both knew it, but she gained nothing by confirming his conclusion. He already knew she desired him. She wasn't willing to concede any more. Not yet, perhaps not ever.

"Any assurance I could offer would be mere words. You don't know me. I've yet to earn your trust." He drew deeply on each of her nipples then allowed her body to slide down along his. "So we'll dream of pain while we explore pleasure. Kneel."

Steadying herself on the edge of the tub, she knelt on the bottom, facing him. He took a step back and filled his palm with something from a dispenser on the ledge of the tub. Was this her punishment? To watch him jack off?

We'll dream of pain while we explore pleasure. She'd watch him pleasure himself when what she really wanted was to touch him, to put him in her mouth and suck him dry!

His hand slid up and down, smearing the creamy substance with the steady motion. Heavy-lidded and smoldering, his gaze bore into hers. "Come here."

She crawled closer then sat back on her heels, keeping herself just out of reach. His hand pumped faster, his features tense and determined. Throaty sounds echoed his strokes, making the act more carnal, more overtly sexual.

"Spread. Your. Legs." He punctuated each word with his fist, his gaze focused on the juncture of her thighs. He wanted to see her pussy, to imagine he was inside her. With her hands on her knees, Brianna moved her legs apart, opening herself to his heated stare. He hissed, his hand stroking faster.

Her core clenched and heat cascaded through her body. She wanted him to lose control, to kneel between her legs and thrust his cock into her aching passage. Driven by instinct and madness, she reached between her legs and traced her slit. Her folds were hot and silky, more than ready to surround him.

"You may not come," he snapped. "Not yet."

She moved her hand back to her knee with a muffled cry, trying to ignore the pressure thrumming through her abdomen. She didn't want a quick solo orgasm. She wanted to wrap her legs around his waist and climb to completion together. She wanted his weight pressing her down and his thickness to squeeze when the spasms took her.

Moisture beaded on the tip of his cock, shimmering there like a milky teardrop. Fascinated, she leaned in, meaning to capture the forbidden pearl on the tip of her tongue. Would he groan or gasp? Would he grab her face and thrust into her mouth?

"No." He twisted, taking his cock out of reach, never breaking rhythm with his hand.

Frustrated and disappointed, Brianna sank back to her heels. He would deny her his carnal taste until he knew for certain she wasn't a spy. Why did he hate the mutants so badly? How had he been wronged?

"Your breasts. Now, princess. I need you now."

What started out as a command ended in an entreaty and Brianna couldn't resist. She cupped her breasts and pushed them together, raising them toward her enigmatic—Master. Her mind stumbled over the word as his warm, wet seed anointed her body. She shivered, her nipples tingling.

Kellan wrapped his arms around her as he had before, capturing her completely as his mouth took command of hers. His lips parted, urging hers to do the same, but his tongue entered slowly. He explored and savored, outlining her teeth and caressing her lips.

She returned the kiss with equal fervor, anxious to learn his taste, his scent. Her tongue curled around his and their breaths mingled, flowing back and forth as the kiss went on and on.

"I'm ravenous, princess," he whispered against her kiss-swollen lips. "I can't fuck you, but I'm going to feel you come around my tongue."

The graphic statement sent a shiver deep into her body. "If you insist." She pressed her face against the bend of his neck, suddenly feeling awkward.

Why had he rejected her mouth if he intended to go down on her? She wasn't sure why putting his tongue inside a potential spy was acceptable when putting his cock inside one wasn't, but she wasn't about to argue.

He lifted her in his arms and her thoughts scattered. It felt so good just to be held. She wrapped her arms around his neck and allowed herself a moment of fancy. She imagined that he was a knight from an ancient fable come to rescue a captive princess. He would slay the dragon and steal a kiss then ride away with her to his castle in the clouds. He would cherish her and protect her, honor and love her, and they would live happily ever after for all time.

Tears blurred her eyes and she buried her face in his damp hair. He might be built like a knight in shining armor, but he had the heart of a conqueror. This was no chivalrous knight rushing in to rescue her. She was about to be devoured by a barbarian king.

He placed her on his bed and followed her down, half covering her with his big body. She moved her arms above her head, needing the reminder that she was his prisoner.

"Do you want me to bind you?"

It was frightening how accurately he read her slightest indicator. She nodded, unable to speak the words out loud. *Yes, restrain me. Ravish me! Take control of our pleasure and make me mindless with lust.*

With obvious haste he dragged a wooden case out from under the bed. The lid opened toward her so she caught only a glimpse of its contents, but one glimpse was enough to send excitement coursing through her body. Whips, floggers, paddles, and all sorts of restraints were neatly organized inside the case. So it wasn't just talk. The overlord was well acquainted with the pleasures found in pain.

And she'd just asked him to restrain her. *As if you weren't at his mercy before.*

"Are you sure?" He hesitated beside the bed. "There's doubt in your eyes now where there wasn't before."

"Trust doesn't come easy to me." She licked her lips and held out her left hand. "I want this."

Obviously pleased by her decision, he kissed the center of her palm then nibbled on each of her fingertips before he wrapped the wide cuff around her wrist. The velvet lining felt soft against her skin and the buckles created just enough pressure to make her feel secure.

He extended her arm along the mattress and unhooked a chain from the backside of the bedpost. After fastening the chain to the wrist cuff, he rubbed her arm and bent to kiss her nipple. "Your breasts are damn distracting."

The change in him was captivating. He was in his element now, commanding, controlled, yet unbelievable gentle. He caressed and reassured her as he had never done before. What had brought about this change?

Submission, a tiny voice whispered from the back of her mind. He had become the tender master when she surrendered control.

He repeated the ritual with her other hand, the kisses, the teasing nibbles and the gentle touches. He never seemed to stop touching her. Like a rain-swollen river, desire rushed through her veins, speeding sensations along in their path. She wanted his touch, needed his kiss, wanted everything all at once. With a soft moan, she pressed her thighs together and turned her face to the side.

"No." He brought her head back around. "Don't hide from me. Never be ashamed of your desire."

He crawled back onto the bed and stretched out beside her. "Gods, you make me ache just looking at you." His hand touched her knee and she trembled. "Relax. Let me touch you. Let me ease the ache."

"I want you inside me. I need more than your fingers." She released the tension in her thighs and let her legs fall open. His palm pressed over her mound for a moment, the heel of his hand massaging her clit. She rocked her hips, pushing up against him. It didn't help. "Please."

Slipping one arm beneath her neck, he silenced her with his mouth while his hand went to work between her thighs. She wanted a hard, fast orgasm, thought that's what she needed, but he had other ideas. He touched her gently, building the urgency to the brink then pulling her back. She whimpered and moaned, unable to do more than accept what he gave her.

His fingers slid over and against her, parting her folds and circling her clit. When he finally pushed into her core, she clasped her thighs around his hand, determined to keep him there until she came.

He chuckled, momentarily releasing her mouth. "Let go."

"You're killing me. I've never needed to come so bad in my life."

"You're very impatient. The pleasure will be even more intense because you've had to work for it. Now let go and I'll fuck you with my fingers."

Her thighs gradually relaxed and his hand slid back, dragging his fingers nearly out of her passage. She licked her lips, forcing her legs to relax even more and he pushed back into her. The slide felt wonderful. His fingers were long and surprisingly substantial, but the fullness didn't come close to what she imagined his cock would feel like.

"Better?"

She tightened her inner muscles, pushing the pleasure higher. "Yes."

He repositioned his hand, allowing him to swipe her clit with his thumb at the apex of each rotation. Tension built, her nipples echoing the distinct pulsation of her clit. Close. So blissfully close.

"Look at me."

She forced her eyes open and met his gaze. "I can't... My eyes...close when I come."

"Don't let them. I want to watch the pleasure take you. Look into my eyes."

She stared into his eyes, lost in the rush, amazed by the intensity of the sensations coursing through her body. His fingers drove inward and she squeezed him hard, imagining the thickness he denied her. So fucking close! She canted her hips, taking him deeper, needing more.

Without warning, he thrust his fingers deep and rubbed her clit with firm pressure. The sudden absence of motion focused her attention on the sensitive cluster of nerves. Completion remained just out of reach until he caught her clit beneath his thumb and slowly rolled it from side to side.

She cried out at first, the intensity unbearable. His thumb remained persistent and her cunt clenched, the muscles locked in a continuous spasm. She gasped, a keening cry tearing from the back of her throat. The pressure swelled until one final flick sent her over into release. She shook beneath him, coming in hard, dizzying waves.

"You closed your eyes."

Blinking repeatedly before her eyes would focus, she realized he was right. "I don't think it can be done. The harder I come, the tighter they close."

"We'll have to keep trying." He slipped his arm out from under her neck and slowly withdrew his fingers from between her thighs. "Your cunt is nice and strong. I can't wait to feel it gripping my cock." He licked her cream from his fingers as he studied her lower body. Was he debating whether or not he really needed to wait for Cedrik's report?

His features tensed and he raised his head, staring off into the distance. What was he doing? Did he have an audiocom in his ear, or some implant that allowed him to communicate with his people?

"Is something wrong?" She still felt warm and tingly from the spectacular orgasm, but this intermission was rather awkward.

"I was just thinking how glad I am that you aren't a virgin." He sounded distracted and annoyed, but why would he be annoyed? She couldn't keep up with his moods!

"What would you have done if I had been a virgin?"

He paused, his gaze returning to her face. "I'm within my rights as overlord to demand sexual tribute from anyone in the United Territories." Shit. The autocratic bastard had returned. "Only those who are not yet sexually active are exempt from this rule."

"Anyone?" She drew her legs together. "What about those who are married or mated or whatever you do on this planet?"

"Sexual tribute is a temporary arrangement, usually just one encounter."

Okay, that was just wrong! "So, if you see a woman you want to fuck it doesn't matter if she belongs to someone else? You just crook your finger and she's required to bend over and let you do it? Does her husband watch, or do you fuck him too?"

He had the audacity to laugh. "My sexual encounters with men have been few and far between. But having a resentful husband watch has a certain appeal."

"How often do you demand sexual tribute? Every day? Once a month? At every large gathering?" She could picture him standing on the gallery, watching as his guests arrived, deciding which of the wives or daughters would warm his bed for the night. Kings had been indulging their libidos since time began. Why should Kellan be any different?

Pushing to his knees, he glared down at her, hair wild about his face. "Part your thighs. Your overlord gave you pleasure now you will offer him your cream."

"You're not *my* anything!"

He caught the underside of her knees and spread her legs, ignoring her attempts to kick him. "Settle down, princess. I don't want to hurt you."

"You're disgusting." He moved between her legs, her flailing only making it easier for him to get her thighs apart. "Don't even think about it! You do not have permission to—"

"I'm not asking permission." He draped one leg over his shoulder and pinned the other against the bed. "You're my prisoner until I say otherwise. Have you forgotten that fact, princess? You're not in a position to deny me anything."

With a bold swipe of his tongue, he parted her folds as his mouth settled over her pussy. The smoldering embers of her arousal burst back to fiery life. She clenched her fists and stared up at the ceiling, trying to ignore the pleasure of his torrid kiss. She would not give him the satisfaction of responding to this forced seduction.

He took his time, exploring her with bold licks and careful nibbles. Heat gathered in her belly, churning and curling beneath his lips, stirred by the clever motion of his tongue. God in heaven, the man knew how to use his tongue.

She pressed her lips together, fighting back a moan. He considered this sexual tribute, an insignificant pleasure he could demand from anyone at any time.

He raised his head and waited until she looked at him. "Do you really want to start a battle of wills with me? I doubt you'd enjoy where it would lead us. You asked me to bind you. You knew I wanted to taste you when you got in bed with me. I've made no secret of my intentions."

"I said no." She sounded petulant and breathless. "That means you should let me go."

"You don't want to be free any more than I want to free you. Now stop resisting what we both want."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Like hell you don't. Are you picturing dead kittens or your parents having sex?"

She couldn't quite hide her smile. Those were both very good ideas, guaranteed mood killers. "I was picturing all the other women you've demanded sexual tribute from. There's no telling where that mouth has been."

"You're adorable when you're jealous." He shifted both her legs to his shoulders and grinned. "You don't need to worry about where my mouth has been. Just concentrate on where it's going."

His head lowered and his tongue pushed right into her cunt. His arms wrapped around her hips, one hand cupping her breast, the other pressing low on her belly. He found her clit with his middle finger while his tongue began to move in and out of her passage.

The cuffs caressed her wrists, holding her firmly while his mouth ravaged her pussy. She was lost, taken, devoured, all the things she'd longed to be. Pleasure rushed up through her, summoned by the skillful strum of his finger and the bold stroke of his tongue.

Energy flowed into her mind, creeping, sinking, saturating. Cloying and cold, unwanted.

She fought against the flow, sensing danger and...something dark, something malevolent and twisted. Warnings exploded through her mind, instantaneously eclipsing the pleasure and shattering reality.

Darkness engulfed her, sucking her deeper, then deeper still.

She screamed, but no sound escaped.

She flailed, but sensed no movement.

Everything within her resisted the dank, clammy feel of the intrusion. It insinuated itself into her, infused and inundated her. She shuddered and shrank into the nothingness surrounding her, willing the void to swallow her whole.

"Who are you?"

Nothing.

"Where am I?"

Helplessness crashed over her, amplifying her fear. How could she combat an enemy that didn't seem to exist? What good did it do to devise a strategy when she had no body with which to fight?

If ever I needed a knight in shining armor it's now! The thought echoed through her mind as darkness gave way to oblivion.

Chapter Four

Sean held out his arms, allowing one of Kellan's guards to pat him down. Specters could pull energy out of the shadow dimension and use it as a weapon, so he was never truly unarmed. Three of his spybots were hiding, waiting for his signal before returning or revealing their position. Stealth was his customary strategy. This situation, however, called for a bit of drama.

He'd paused in the shadow realm and used his spybots to locate as many of the guards as possible then he'd gathered energy around himself so the veil crackled and flashed as he stepped through. If the reaction of the guards had been any indication, it had all been very impressive.

"Did you tell him I'm here?" He focused on the only familiar face. Tanner not only knew who he was, he knew *what* he was and how badly Kellan would want this opportunity.

"The overlord has been interrogating one of our prisoners. I'm not sure he'll welcome an interruption, even from you."

"I thought interrogating prisoners was your job."

Tanner just glared.

"Send the message. If he insists, I'll wait."

"Stubborn as always."

Tanner motioned and the guards led Sean through a small opening beside the razor-wire gates. "I love what you've done with the place. Last time I was here there was landscaping and a lot fewer guns."

"Last time you were here we had a lot fewer enemies."

So stop making enemies. Sean managed to stop the sarcastic response from passing his lips, but something in his expression must have given him away. Tanner stopped walking and faced him, clasping his hands behind his back.

"You've been away a long time, so I'll give you a quick word of advice. Kellan won't put up with your bullshit like he did before. He has too many people depending on him now. I don't know why you're here, but don't play games with him. He *will* kill you."

Sean accepted the information with a stiff nod and they continued toward the front door. He hadn't doubted Kellan's ruthlessness. In fact he was counting on it. Hopefully whoever had Brianna was one of Kellan's least-favorite subordinates. The overlord would demand her release and the warlord would have no choice but to obey. And all Sean had to do was convince the overlord to act on his behalf.

The interior of the house was even more shocking than the grounds. Windows that had once filled the halls with warm sunlight had been barred and any hint of civilization had been trampled beneath the heel of brutality.

War.

Sean heaved a frustrated sigh. He couldn't escape its ravages, not in the Underground, not on Stilox, and not here.

Tanner led him to the shell of a library, motioning him inside with an exaggerated gesture. "Have a seat, if you can find one. He'll either join you or he won't. Stay as long as you like. Just don't expect me to entertain you. I've got prisoners to interrogate."

One turn around the room proved there was nothing worth stealing. So what was all the security protecting? The overlord. Kellan was the centerpiece around which a remarkable metamorphosis had taken place. As Kellan stepped into power, he had built upon a foundation laid by his father and succeeded where so many others had failed. He'd secured a ceasefire from the warlords and formed an uneasy peace.

Sean might have relocated to the Underground, but he'd kept track of developments here at home. Home? He shook his head, startled by the thought. Did he still consider this place home?

"Slumming? What brings you back to this charming location after all these years?" Kellan stood in the doorway, or lounged actually. With his shoulder leaning against the frame and his knee bent, foot resting on the toe of his boot, he gave the appearance of calm indifference. Of course the illusion was shattered as soon as Sean glanced into his eyes. Kellan's gaze gleamed with predatory interest and a hint of wariness.

"Would you like me to kneel? I know that's customary now that you're overlord."

Kellan chuckled, pushed off the doorframe and moved into the room. "You almost managed to make that sound respectful, but we both know better. Don't we? My accomplishments are irrelevant because you can melt into shadow and shoot lightning out your ass."

Sean laughed, warmed by an unexpected pang of nostalgia. Kellan had been part friend, part brother, part mentor and part rival. He'd thought of him frequently down through the years, but mutant animosity made it hard to reminisce with anyone but Sarah, and her memories of the black zones were far less pleasant.

"I have very little time, Sean. Why are you here?" He leaned against the desk and waited.

"Howyn built a lab out in Zone 11. I suspect you already know that. I was in the process of rescuing a young woman when one of your warlords snatched her from me. I need her back."

"Who is this young woman and why the fuck should I help you?"

"The young woman is merely a pawn, but she is important to..." He threw up his hands and shook his head. "This is all such a damn muddle. Brianna was a hostage, not a participant. I want to make that very clear."

"Is she a mutant?"

"No. She's not even from this star system. She's from a planet called Earth." Kellan's only reply was a throaty, noncommittal sound, so Sean went on. "Her sister was taken from Earth as well and she is now mated with Mal Ton Adoha."

That caught Kellan's attention. His expression remained impassive, but speculation flashed within his gaze. "Then the alliance was solidified. Fane has joined forces with the Stilox rebels?"

"Not officially. They've cooperated on some missions, but there is no formal alliance." Kellan offered another semi-verbal mumble. Sean chose his next words carefully. He needed to pique Kellan's interest without revealing too much. "Do you know who has Brianna?"

"I might. Is Mal Ton willing to pay?"

Sean tensed. "There are many forms of ransome. We have access to some, not others."

"What is Howyn's interest in these women? What was he cooking in that lab?"

"It's complicated."

"Then I suggest you start talking. I'm losing interest fast."

Sean hesitated. Was anyone endangered by explaining the Chrysalis program to Kellan? He shook away the resistance with a sigh. It had been Howyn's project, not theirs. He needed to stop being so suspicious. "Howyn was programming nanites to control and amplify psychic energy. He needed hosts who were free of mutation and the human women possess a certain characteristic in their DNA he was hoping to incorporate into the programming."

"What characteristic? Are they psychic?"

"They all have a higher aptitude for such skills, but that wasn't the main draw."

"Spit it out."

He couldn't tell Kellan the truth. Unlike the Chrysalis nanites, the humans' arrested aging was still very much of interest to far too many people. There was no way he would add to that list. "I'm just the messenger here. I fetch and carry."

"How badly does Mal Ton want her back?"

"He's mated to Brianna's sister. They were dragged here against their will, and Lorelle only just learned Brianna was still alive. Would you want to get in the middle of that?"

Kellan pushed away from the desk and approached Sean. "Now the question becomes how badly do you want to please Mal Ton?"

"I'm just the messenger."

"Sure you are." Kellan strode past him without another word. He reached the door and glanced back over his shoulder. "Come."

Sean didn't question their destination or the purpose for the trip. Anticipation sizzled in the air, making him restless and tense. Kellan was up to something, but Sean had no idea... Unless she was here already! If Kellan had ordered the raid on the lab or already negotiated her release it would make everything so much simpler.

They climbed the front staircase and walked along the gallery. This was the first time Sean had been on the upper level. Kellan's father had still been alive eleven years ago. Sean and Kellan had slept in the barracks with the rest of the soldiers. Now all the rights and privileges – and all the responsibilities – that his father had once commanded belonged to Kellan.

Sean had been secretly fascinated by the changes in the zones, watched the development of alliances and the rise and fall of warlords. Kellan's father had been both feared and respected, so it had been a natural transition for his son to take his place.

Kellan might have stepped into a power structure his father forged, but the strength of his own character allowed him to maintain and expand that power. He had more than doubled the size of his father's empire with far less bloodshed.

They reached the double doors at the end of a hallway and Kellan paused with his hand on the latch. "I didn't have to agree to see you. Any other mutant would have been turned away."

"I know."

"This is my house and my headquarters. Everyone here is under my protection."

He had her. Brianna was here! "I understand."

"Not yet you don't. Nothing will be done without my permission, *nothing*." He took a step closer. "Look me in the eye and vow on Sarah's life that you will not countermine my authority."

It was a thinly veiled threat. If he did anything to countermine Kellan's authority Sarah would pay the price. Tanner was right. Kellan had changed. "You have my word as a specter that I will submit to your authority during my stay in your house."

"Not good enough."

Scrambling for an out, Sean clenched his teeth. Was this human worth endangering Sarah? Sarah was the most important person in his life and Kellan knew it. Yet Sarah was only in danger if he broke his word. Shit! He hated being backed into a corner. Brianna had been tormented and abused since she was taken from her homeworld against her will. Sarah would be the first person to insist he do this. But did that make it right?

"I swear on Sarah's life, I will not countermine your orders." Each word grated across his tongue like sandpaper.

"And you'll do nothing without my permission."

"Yes," he snapped, infuriated by his lack of options. "I will do nothing without permission."

With a flick of his wrist, Kellan opened the door and motioned Sean inside. The room was large yet mostly empty. Sean's eyes adjusted to the dimness and his heart lurched within his chest. Brianna lay pale and tiny within the massive expanse of Kellan's bed. The sheet was tucked beneath her arms, modestly covering her breasts, but she was obviously naked.

"What's wrong with her?" Sean rushed across the room, not waiting for Kellan's answer.

"I was hoping you could tell me. She's been examined by our medic, but he's better at digging out bullets than diagnosing phantom illnesses. All of her scans are normal. There is nothing physically wrong with her. She's just...asleep."

"What was she doing when she fell asleep?" What a stupid question! As overlord, Kellan had the right to fuck any woman he wanted. And what man wouldn't want Brianna? A better question was why the hell did the thought of any man touching Brianna bother him so badly? He cleared his throat, forcing away the useless tangent. "Is it possible someone used a mental compulsion or some sort of thrall?" Kellan drew his attention to the cot against the far wall. Sean had been so focused on Brianna he hadn't even noticed the second patient. A young, blond man lay in a dreamlike trance, his features utterly peaceful. "And who is this?"

"Ceddrik." Kellan said the name as if that were explanation enough.

"Was he attacked as well? I don't understand."

"He is gifted. I use him to assist me from time to time."

So, Kellan had found himself a mystic after all. Annoyance surged through Sean, unexpected and irrational. If he had wanted the position all he had to do was stay eleven years ago. He had left Kellan, not the other way around. Left him? That made them sound like lovers. He'd had no choice but to retreat to the Underground. His mutation had been unstable and he needed to be taught how to control his abilities.

"In what capacity does Ceddrik assist you?"

"He's able to tell me when others are lying and so forth."

"Is he a mutant?"

"No. He was born with his abilities. I'd never heard of his homeworld, but that's not unusual. Few in the zones ever make it offworld."

"So you were questioning Brianna when she..." Enough with this bullshit! "What exactly happened? I can't help you if I don't understand what I'm dealing with."

"She told me this wild tale, or a tale I thought was wild at the time. I thought she was a spy so I asked Ceddrik to scan her. Ceddrik was scanning her when they both lapsed into this bizarre trance."

That didn't explain how she had ended up naked and in Kellan's bed, but Sean wasn't going to push the issue. First things first. He scanned Ceddrik for mutant energy to see if the mystic had been lying to Kellan, but Sean sensed no trace of the familiar vibration. "You're right, he's not a mutant." A cursory scan was all Sean was able to

perform. As soon as he tried to push deeper, he came up against dense, multilayered shielding. "Wow. He's got some set of shields. There is no way I can get through these."

"Will you be able to bring him out of this state without penetrating his shields?"

"I have no idea. I still don't know what's causing the trance." Sean rubbed the back of his neck as he crossed to the bed. "Did Brianna submit to the scan willingly, or was she being...motivated?"

"Not motivated as much as distracted. Whenever Ceddrik opens a link that powerful, it gives the person he's scanning access to his mind as well as giving him access to theirs, so he wanted me to make sure she was good and occupied while he scanned."

Sean sat on the edge of the bed and slipped his hand under her head. A dark, provocative musk drifted into his nose and his fingers closed into a fist. "Your scent is all over her."

"You're not here to judge me! Can you help her or not?"

Judge him? How could he judge Kellan when he'd also felt her unusual mystique. She looked fragile and frightened at a glance, yet determination and strength pulsed beneath the surface. The combination had been intriguing, almost intoxicating. Until Kellan snatched her away!

He shook away the memory and loosened his grip on her hair, cradling her head in the palm of his hand. "Brianna." Easing into her mind with infinite care, he progressed slowly, scanning as he went. There was no damage, no infection or trauma. So why didn't she wake up?

Pushing deeper, he broadened his search, increasing the intensity and range of his scan. He wasn't sure what he was looking for, so how was he supposed to find it? He was a specter, not a healer.

A muffled sob floated out across the metaphysical plane. He hadn't used a specific visualization, so he was shocked to see a gray stone castle looming in the distance. Had Brianna constructed the castle or had Ceddrik? But neither of them were mutants. This made no sense.

He hurried across the dusty bailey, the sobs growing louder and the buildings more defined. Crenellated battlements, a stout drawbridge and spiked portcullis. Even a sluggish moat. The visualization was amazingly detailed. How was an untrained, supposedly powerless mind creating all this?

The sobbing continued. It was either a woman or a child. Or a man with a very high voice.

"Brianna?" he called up toward the tower window. Where else would one find a damsel in distress?

"Who's there? Where are you?" A small hand appeared in the window opening, but he couldn't see a face. "Oh good sir, please come speak with me. I'm in serious trouble, I fear."

She was taking this all a bit too seriously. He hurried through the great hall and up the spiral staircase that led to the tower room. The iron-banded door was secured with a large metal lock.

"Where's the key to this thing?" he called through the door. And why the elaborate setup? He enjoyed role playing as much as the next person, but this was ridiculous.

"I don't know. You must find a way to get me out before the dragon awakens."

Dragon? This was her visualization, so he wasn't sure his powers would work. But anything was worth a try. He pressed his fingertips against the door, pushing energy through the panel as opposed to attempting to push the panel with the energy. At first nothing happened then his fingertips sank into the wood. Without hesitation, he pushed the rest of his body through the door and emerged in the small tower room.

"Forget about the dragon, Brianna. I've come to take you home."

She knelt on a pile of furs with her hair loose about her shoulders. Dressed in a simple white slip that revealed more than it concealed, she was hardly recognizable as the bedraggled refugee from the lab. She looked fresh and...she looked like a fairytale princess!

Sensations swirled around him, curling through him like tendrils of mist. A princess. He must protect the princess. Chivalry demanded he fight for her, obey her commands, even if it cost him his life.

Chivalry? What the fuck? He shook his head. Resisting the silken lure.

"But, sir." She stood, one shoulder strap drooping as she crossed to stand before him. "This is my home. If you don't kill the dragon it will devour the villagers. We can't allow that."

Captivated by her innocent beauty, he took her face between his hands and brushed her lips with his thumb. He wanted to please her, needed to obey her, yet part of him fought against the desire, insisting the need was irrational.

"Brianna, it's me, Sean. Don't you remember me?"

Her smile turned coy and she lowered her lashes. "I've dreamed of you so many times. I feel like I know you."

"You do know me. I rescued you from the lab, or at least I tried to." The lab. If he focused on the lab the intoxication was not so pronounced. He was able to think through the urges welling within him.

"If you say so." She moved close, resting both hands on his chest.

Was she creating this spell, or had she succumbed to the handiwork of another? Whatever this was, it was affecting him too. Which meant it was more complex than a visualization.

He wasn't sure he should, much less could, dismantle the illusion. It might fracture her mind completely. He was way out of his element here. She needed a dreamweaver and a healer, or a healer who could weave dreams. Alice! She needed Alice.

"Tell me about the dragon." He wasn't sure what else to say. He had to understand what she expected from him. The environment was compelling his cooperation. He needed to slay the dragon!

"It's a cruel beast that slinks through the night and insinuates itself into your mind."

"It's not a physical monster?"

"Only while its sleeping. That's why we must kill it before it awakens. Once it wakes up it will turn intangible again. You can't do battle with something that isn't there."

"Can I see it now?" Determination surged through him, making it impossible to think of anything else. "Where does it sleep?"

"I would show you but I can't get out of this room." She stared up at him with wide, guileless eyes. "It's close by, within the castle walls to be sure."

He must not disappoint her. He must—get her out of here! With a firm mental shake, he recaptured reality long enough to refocus his mind. "Are you safe in here if I leave for just a few minutes? I'll search the castle and then return."

Her forehead creased with obvious displeasure and her fingers twisted in the fabric of his shirt. "You promise you'll return?"

"Of course I'll return." His heart thudded in his chest. He couldn't leave her. He must not abandon his mission. "I vow on my honor, I will return."

"Hurry."

Kellan paced beside the bed, anxiously waiting for Sean to guide Brianna out of her trance. Guilt had ridden him ruthlessly ever since she went limp beneath him. Rage turned to panic when he stormed into Ceddrick's room and found him in a similar trance. If the fool had overloaded her mind, he'd obviously overloaded himself as well.

Having Sean involved was an interesting development. Out of all the friends he'd lost to mutation, Sean was the one he missed most. They had always shared a bond deeper than friendship yet more organic than brotherhood. Their relationship had never turned sexual, but Kellan often wondered if it would have had Sean not left when he did. He could easily picture their affinity taking the final step into intimacy.

None of it mattered now. He shook away the past and looked at Brianna. Her features were delicate, achingly feminine. She looked like a hand-painted doll, almost too pretty to be real. Sean held her so carefully, his head bent toward her. The sheet had slipped, revealing the upper curve of her breasts. Sean held her hand and whispered words Kellan couldn't hear.

They made an attractive couple. Sean's golden good looks complemented her dark-haired beauty. The thought of them together didn't disturb Kellan, but the thought of them leaving, of him being left in the cold, filled him with an all-consuming hunger. It would not happen again. He would not stand idly by and let happiness slip away. He

had sacrificed too much for the cause, put his life on hold for too long. He wanted Brianna and he would have her. If Sean came along for the ride, so much the better.

He crossed his arms over his chest, amused by his own thinking. He'd just met her. When had his feelings grown so possessive? He knew the exact moment her fate had been sealed. When she'd raised her arms above her head with surrender in her eyes. She'd offered herself to him and he intended to accept the offer with everything he— He hadn't even fucked her yet! It didn't matter. She wasn't leaving until he knew her body as well as he knew his own.

Sean carefully lowered her head and crawled off the bed. "She needs a healer. I could try to bluff my way through this, but I think she's in real trouble."

Concern pushed through the lustful haze, clearing his mind and focusing his thoughts. "What do you mean? What did you sense or see?"

"It's hard to explain if you've never experienced the metaphysical plane. Somehow she's constructed an alternate reality for herself."

Tension gripped Kellan's chest. That didn't sound good at all. "What sort of reality?"

"She's a damsel in distress, held captive by a sleeping dragon. This is not a game to her. This is her reality. In fact, the illusion is so intense it affected me as well."

He knew Sean meant every word, but it all sounded so absurd. "She's lost in an alternate reality?"

"Basically. The concept of reality becomes less clear once you've stepped beyond the veil."

Beyond the veil, where wonders lay inaccessible to ordinary mortals. Kellan looked at Brianna, using her beauty to neutralize his resentment. "Undoubtedly, but we aren't mutants. We both reside on this side of the veil."

"Yes, but a powerful psychic was probing her mind when this alternate reality was triggered. Mutant or not, Ceddrik's powers are still similar to ours. I think she needs a healer."

"Doesn't Ceddrik need treatment as well?"

"I'm pretty sure Ceddrik is the dragon. If we can deal with her perception of the threat, I'm hoping it will release him from the trance." He made a helpless gesture. "I don't admit this very often, so enjoy it while it lasts. I need help."

If this was a ploy designed to justify her being moved Sean had failed. "You may bring one additional mutant to the compound. Brianna stays here."

"I suspected you'd say that. I'll be right back."

Kellan watched in awe as Sean created a gap in the fabric of space and stepped through it. "Unbelievable." He stared at the spot where Sean had disappeared long moments after he'd gone. His powers had just begun to develop when he announced that he was leaving. Now he'd had eleven years and the best training available to help hone his skills. Kellan could scarcely imagine the true scope of Sean's power.

Returning to the bed, he sat on the edge and took Brianna's hand in his. A damsel in distress? Had his calling her princess inadvertently added to her trauma? He hadn't meant to upset her. He'd meant it as an endearment.

And why had she reacted so negatively to Ceddrik's scan? Few had ever sensed the mystic's energy much less been repelled by it. Kellan looked across the room at Ceddrik and a fist gripped his stomach. He could still sense the mystic, distant but present as he often was when he slept. If it came to light that he had done intentional harm to Brianna... He didn't finish the thought. It was too soon to cast judgment. Ceddrik might well be a victim of whatever was afflicting Brianna, not the cause. He had no reason to mistrust Ceddrik. Still, it was odd.

Without warning Sean stepped back through the veil with a middle-aged woman in tow. She looked at him with obvious dread before remembering to kneel.

"What's your name?" He helped her to her feet, hoping to ease her fear. His touch only seemed to upset her, so he moved back.

"Alice, sir. May I approach the lady?"

"Of course." He moved to the other side of the bed, watching closely as Alice went to work. She cradled Brianna's head in one hand and skimmed her palm over Brianna's features with her other hand. Back and forth, back and forth, like a living scanner beam.

It seemed like hours before Alice released her hold on Brianna and raised her gaze to his. "I have heard of this sort of fracture happening, but I've never witnessed it for myself. Is she one of the human hostages?"

"Yes," Sean confirmed. He stood near the foot of the bed on the same side as the healer.

"That explains a lot. Think about what this poor child has gone through since leaving Earth. She was exposed to the lentavirus and forced to cope with sexual cravings that she didn't understand. I don't know her specific circumstances, but she either gave in to the cravings and allowed her captors to temporarily ease her pain, or she suffered in agony for hours on end. Either way the emotional toll would have been tremendous. Then her ship was shot down and she likely watched many of her fellow hostages die. After that she was passed from captor to captor until she ended up here."

"Are you saying I did this to her?" Kellan's guilty conscious was more than happy to make the accusation for her.

"Of course not, sir." Alice raised her chin and met his gaze without flinching. "I'm saying you played a part in leading her to this point. If it's your wish to participate in her recovery, it's going to take time and patience. If you lack either, please let us take her back to the Underground where she can be treated with both."

"I'll do whatever needs to be done," Kellan insisted. He wasn't sure why he was fighting so hard to retain responsibility for a wounded woman. He only knew he wasn't ready to let her go.

"The world she knew has been ripped apart, so her mind created a small, simple world in which there are few variables and few expectations," Alice explained.

"I'm not opposed to playing along, but isn't it counterproductive to give in to her delusion?" Sean sat on the edge of the bed. His gaze filled with warmth and tenderness as he looked at Brianna. So he was interested in her too. Kellan accepted the fact with calm determination. Competition was good for the soul.

"This is not a delusion in the conventional sense. I'm not sure how she constructed the visualization. This sort of detail requires a powerful mystic with many years of training. It's almost as if someone is channeling her thoughts onto the metaphysical plane. Are you certain Ceddrik is not responsible?"

"We aren't certain of anything," Sean admitted. "Were you able to sense beyond his shields?"

"No. They are naturally occurring and all but impenetrable. Fane might be able to break through but—"

"Fane is not welcome here," Kellan cut in.

"Fane is well aware of the fact," Sean returned.

After they glared at each other for another moment, Kellan turned back to Alice. "Wouldn't you have sensed their presence if someone else was doing this to her?"

"Anyone who could create this sort of illusion for another person could easily mask their presence from me. I scanned before I left the castle, but I didn't expect to find the source."

"Were you affected by the illusion?" Sean asked.

"Affected? In what way?"

"When I entered the tower room, I felt compelled to participate in the adventure. It was as if I was becoming a character in Brianna's fantasy."

Alice's brow knitted as she considered his words. "I guess she had no use for a female healer. We spoke briefly. I looked through several of the rooms and then departed. I never felt compelled to do anything."

"Perhaps it's best if Sean not participate directly in her recovery." Kellan was unable to resist the suggestion. Spending time alone with Brianna held obvious appeal, but competing for her affections with the specter was even more intriguing.

"And how will you access her without Sean's assistance? I can't stay here indefinitely." After a thoughtful pause, Alice went on. "If Sean uses you as an emotional anchor it should keep him from becoming too engrossed in the illusion."

"And if we're both affected by the illusion?" Sean's gaze connected with his, sharp and challenging.

"Then we'll anchor each other." Kellan crossed his arms over his chest, refusing to back down. "You're not taking her to the Underground. She stays here."

Alice followed the exchange but continued with her instructions without adding fuel to the fire. "She needs to feel safe. Work within the confines of her reality. Encourage her to explore, to discover what lies beyond the castle, but she must do it in her own time. Do not force her to do anything she is not ready to do. She has been

abandoned and abused in ways that have left her shattered emotionally and mentally fragmented. This will not be easy and it will not happen overnight." She settled her expectant gaze on Kellan again. "I still think the best place for her is the Underground. We can take turns —"

"No," Kellan said. "Whatever she needs we will give her."

"If we can still remember who we are." Sean shook his head. "The illusion is incredibly intoxicating. I was only exposed to it for a few minutes and I was ready to go on crusade."

"You're a mutant. Your mind is susceptible to magic forces. If I'm affected at all, I'll resist the influence and pull you back to reality."

"I hope it's that simple." Sean didn't sound convinced.

"If one of us starts to succumb the other will remind him who he is and what we're trying to accomplish. This won't be the first battle I've fought while inebriated." Sean just stared at him silently, so Kellan added, "It's not like we have any other choice."

Chapter Five

Brianna stood at the tall slit window staring out across the mist-shrouded land. Dragon's breath. The beast was restless, tossing in its sleep. But it was asleep. She was safe. Protected from danger, insulated by thick stone walls. Insulated or isolated?

Where had the blond knight gone? He'd vowed to return, yet she still saw no sign of him. It was lonely in her tower room, lonely and cold. She wrapped her arms around herself and shivered, but the chill crept through her bloodstream and tangled in her hair.

Jumbled memories flitted through her mind. Glowing amber eyes. Screams of pain. No! She looked out over the rolling landscape and let the tranquility soothe her. She was safe here. There were no evil chancellors or lunatic mutants. Just an insidious dragon and—a lusty overlord?

Another image appeared, clearer than the others. Blacker than night, his eyes pierced to her soul, commanding and caressing all at once. Wavy dark hair streamed to his shoulders, surrounding a face both brutal and beautiful. He was massive and ruthless and... Her body stirred, her nipples tingling. She crossed her arms over her breasts. What was wrong with her? She was a virtuous woman. She might allow the handsome knight to steal a kiss, but she would never allow a brutish overlord to drape her legs over his shoulders and eat her pussy!

She spun from the window with a gasp, frantically rubbing her temples. What vile sorcerer was sending her these visions? Crossing to her fur bed, she sank to the softness and drew a blanket over her lap. She felt odd. Empty somehow.

The past rushed in again. More memories, terrifying in their clarity. She huddled in the dark, crazed and moaning as her body burned. Endless hours of sexual frenzy. No matter what she'd done to ease the pain, the fire returned. She'd screamed and screamed, begging for someone to end her suffering, but no one heard or no one cared that she was in utter torment.

But she'd been cured of the burning illness. Hadn't she? She fidgeted against the furs, trying to bring the past into focus. There had been a doctor. He'd injected something into her arm.

Then why had the urges returned? Why did she crave the overlord?

Lying back on the mound of furs, she parted her thighs and lightly touched the curls guarding her center. They were damp and inviting, her feminine folds slick and hot. And the little knot of flesh at the top of her slit felt swollen, unusually sensitive. Perhaps if she released the pressure it wouldn't become so intense. She gently rolled the sensitive nub between her thumb and forefinger. A throaty moan escaped and her hips came up off the furs.

"Would you like some help with that?"

She sprang up with a guilty gasp, her hand still between her thighs. The blond knight had returned, but he wasn't alone! The overlord was with him. She wasn't sure which man had made the obscene offer. Probably the overlord. She trembled, torn between confusion and fear. How was this possible? The overlord was a figment of her imagination. Wasn't he?

"What is he doing here?" She scooted back into the corner, dragging the blanket with her and pulling it to her chin.

Her reaction seemed to surprise the men. "You know my friend?" the knight asked.

"That man is no one's friend."

Those devil black eyes narrowed and he took a step forward. The knight grasped his arm, the act more a reminder than an actual attempt to stop his charge. "Who am I if not your friend?"

"You're the overlord. You pillage and seduce. Ravage and exploit. Your deeds are known far and wide. What is not offered freely you take by force."

"I might be guilty of the rest, but I take nothing by force. When I touched you before... I mean, if ever we touch, you will participant eagerly in the embrace. Nothing will ever be forced on you again."

"I don't believe you," she insisted.

"That's why I'm here." The knight stepped forward. "We will take turns guarding you and we will each make sure the other is on his best behavior. Neither of us will touch you unless you wish it."

She looked from one to the other, her emotions turbulent and raw. The restlessness was with her still, churning, making her ache, making her long for things she knew she shouldn't want. She remembered the pain, the endless hours of agony as she writhed and pleaded. She couldn't let that happen again. She'd never survive.

But were these men a better choice? Could she ever hope to be that bold? "And if I wish to be touched?" she asked the knight, not daring to look at the overlord.

"You have only to ask." He let the promise hang in the air for a moment before he went on. "We are here for you, my lady. Your safety and your pleasure is our only concern. We want you to be happy. We're willing to do whatever it takes to make this happen."

"Whatever it takes?" She couldn't help but smile. She couldn't remember the last time anyone had focused on her well-being, much less her pleasure. Long-suppressed needs barreled to the surface, demanding her immediate attention. "That's a pretty dangerous offer. I can be very greedy."

"Be as greedy as you like. Demand anything. Put our offer to the test."

She pushed to her feet, letting the blanket slip from her hands. Her gaze fixed on the knight as she moved over the uneven surface of the furs. He was gallant and gentle, and undeniably handsome. "Can I touch you?"

"You can do anything you like. We're here for you."

Her hand trembled as she raised it to his face. His skin was warm and lightly bristled beneath her fingertips. The tactile acuity surprised her. She hadn't expected him to feel quite so real. Why wouldn't he feel real? She pushed the question to the back of her mind and explored her champion. Sifting his golden hair through her fingers, she brushed her breasts against his chest.

"This would feel a whole lot better skin to skin," he whispered as she moved in to nibble his earlobe.

He hadn't touched her. He'd remained motionless during her exploration. She glanced at the overlord and tensed. Would he have been equally obedient? She couldn't picture him remaining passive for long. Did she really want a passive overlord, or did she want something entirely different from this dark warrior?

"Remove his tunic." She stepped back and waited to see what the overlord would do with her command.

His expression didn't change. He bent and tugged off his boots, his gaze boring into hers. The knight followed suit then resumed his original position. The overlord lifted his own tunic over his head and tossed it aside. His powerful chest and corded abdomen bunched and flexed, drawing Brianna's gaze with hypnotic power. She crossed her arms over her chest, knowing her nipples had peaked and helpless to hide the evidence of her arousal. Damn, the man was ripped.

His gaze filled with an exasperating mixture of amusement and challenge as he moved behind the knight. Without a word, the overlord reached around the smaller man and ripped his tunic down the front.

"I don't think that's what she meant." Amusement twinkled in the knight's gaze as well.

"Then she should have been more specific."

The knight's body was leaner, more compact, yet every bit as appealing. Was there no fast food on this planet? Fast food? Memories hovered at the edge of her consciousness, visible yet unfocused.

Mist swirled across her mind, muting the past, freeing her from the disquieting emotions. She must win the devotion of these men, convince them to champion her cause. The dragon must be slain or all hope was lost.

They claimed to be willing, to serve her already, but she must test their sincerity.

"What now?" the overlord prompted. "Should we finish undressing?"

She shook her head. "Come here." Her voice dropped to barely a whisper as she added, "One in front and one behind." The knight moved in front of her and the overlord stepped up behind. She raised her arms and they lifted her shift over her head. Before her garment reached the floor, they pressed against her, skin on skin. She gasped and shivered. "Touch me. Just touch me."

Their hands slid over her skin, grazing her breasts, but not stopping to linger. She touched them too, first the knight then the overlord, and then one with each hand. It was wicked and wonderful, yet it only made the restlessness worse. She wiggled and arched. The knight pushed his thigh between her legs, rubbing against her mound. A soft cry escaped the back of her throat and she rested her head on the overlord's shoulder.

"I am...restless, sir knight. I want you to touch me and —"

"That's not the offer, princess." The overlord cupped her breasts, speaking softly right into her ear. "*He* doesn't touch you. *We* touch you. We're a matched set. If you want one, you get the other as well."

"But you will do more than touch." Just talking about this was making her need worse. She wiggled out from between them, covering her breasts with her arms.

"I will do nothing you do not ask me to do."

Which meant she would ask him to do everything. The assurance was there in the arrogant tilt of his chin and the demanding flash of his eyes. Well, she'd show him. She'd let them touch her, help her relax, and then she'd curl up and go to sleep! It had been so long since she'd slept soundly, content in the knowledge that she was safe.

The knight took her hand and led her toward the furs. "Do you remember my name?"

"It's Sean, but it isn't seemly for an unmarried woman —"

"I think we've already passed beyond what's considered seemly. I want to hear you cry my name when I make you come the first time."

"The first time?"

"Of course. You've been locked in this tower for a long time. One quick burst isn't going to release all that pent-up frustration." He smiled and leaned in, nipping her chin. "It could take many, many tries."

He swept her legs out from under her and gently placed her on the furs. What was she doing? Did she really hope to control these two? Uncertainly surged, mixing with her desire, muddling her thinking and making her heart hammer in her chest. "But right now you're just going to touch me. Right? Nothing more."

"Let's define touching. Can we only touch you with our hands?" His fingers swept along her ribs and his thumb hooked under her breast. "What about these pretty pink nipples? Can we use our mouths on them?"

"And what about your mouth?" the overlord asked. "I would very much like to kiss you."

Would they abide by whatever boundaries she set? A bit of her anxiety eased. There was only one way to find out. "Mouths stay above the waist. I need to know I can trust you."

"As my lady commands." Sean closed his lips around her nipple and began to suckle.

She pushed her fingers into his thick hair, savoring the strong pull on her breast. So good. She licked her lips and looked at the overlord. His gaze was focused on Sean. How odd. Was he enjoying the spectacle of watching another man suckle a woman, or was the connection deeper? Were they lovers? She wouldn't have put it past him. Kellan fucked everyone. Kellan? How did she know his name much less his sexual practices?

He knelt at her side, his gaze shifting to her face. "Does that feel good? Shall I join him? Or would you like me to kiss you?"

Had she kissed this man before? Why did he seem familiar? "I think a kiss would please me more."

A sexy smile bowed his lips, offering a glimpse of even white teeth. "You'll have to let me know for certain in a little while." He framed her face with his hands and fit his mouth over hers, his warm tongue gently teasing.

She'd expected a savage onslaught, but the kiss was slow and tender. His lips slid over and against hers, his teeth occasionally nipping. As if of their own accord, her arms stretched over her head and crossed at the wrist. An instant later his fingers clasped her wrists, pressing her hands down into the furs.

Excitement unfurled within her, licking along her body like tongues of flame. She parted her lips, welcoming his tongue deeper as she arched into Sean's mouth. Her core came alive, pulsing with need, a desire far more intense than restlessness.

The overlord kissed his way down her neck, leaving her wild and breathless. He captured her other nipple between his lips and took on the rhythm of Sean's mouth. Even as his focus shifted, the overlord continued to hold her wrists, his long fingers easily maintaining the pressure. She undulated and moaned, enjoying the similarities, yet aware of the differences. Sean's tongue never stopped teasing. Kellan liked to use his teeth!

With the softness of the furs beneath her and their mouths tugging firmly on her breasts, she released her inhibitions and surrendered to her darkest fantasies. Her clit tingled each time Kellan scraped his teeth over the sensitive tip, her abdomen feeling hollow and tense. This was their private paradise. No one could find them here. No one could judge them or...steal her away.

For one wicked moment she let herself imagine carrying this decadence to the ultimate degree. She pictured Kellan sprawled in the furs with her straddling his hips. Sean would be close behind her, moving carefully in her ass as she impaled herself on Kellan's massive cock. A groan broke from her throat and she came in short, sharp bursts.

Sean raised his head with a chuckle. "You were supposed to wait until I touched you." He splayed his hand across her abdomen, his gaze hot and hungry. "I guess this has been harder on you than I realized. Are you sure you don't want my mouth?"

"Are you sure you don't need more than foreplay?" Kellan countered. "I think what the lady really needs is a good hard fuck."

As if to approve his proposal, her core clenched so hard she whimpered. "Yes. I can't wait. I need it now."

She wasn't sure who she was asking, but the overlord was faster than the knight. Kellan ripped open his pants and freed his cock in a blur of movement. He knelt between her thighs and grasped the backs of her knees. As he leaned forward, his meaty cock head easily found her slick opening.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Yes! Fuck me now."

Even then he pushed in slowly. She closed her eyes and savored every blissful centimeter. Deeper and deeper, tighter and tighter. Could she even hold all of him?

"Almost there."

Almost? He drove in the last little bit and she let out a whimper.

"Am I hurting you?"

"God no."

"Good." He pulled back far enough to slip his hand between their bodies. "You're really tight, princess. Can you come again?"

"Let me help her relax." Sean eased his arm under her neck and caressed her breasts. His mouth settled over hers in a long, leisurely kiss.

It was overwhelming. She was being kissed and touched, stroked and filled all at the same time. Remembering her hands were free, she raised them to Sean's hair. The soft strands flowed between her fingers as he blazed a trail from one breast to the other and back.

Kellan must have licked his fingers or found a hidden pool of her cream. His fingertips slid smoothly over and around her clit, stirring the embers of her arousal. Liquid warmth spread through her core, easing his way, smoothing out each stroke.

"Oh yes." He shifted one of her legs to his shoulder and sped his pace, filling her completely with each long drive.

His finger kept up its gentle orbit, urging her passion higher. Sean's tongue pushed into her mouth, his hand holding her face. He echoed Kellan's steady rhythm, but the pretense wasn't enough. She wanted them both, wanted Sean thrusting into her mouth while Kellan fucked her pussy.

She tore her mouth away from his kiss and looked into his eyes. "I need you too. Please."

Sean looked at Kellan, clearly surprised by the request.

"Fuck her mouth and hold her arms down while you do it. Our darling princess is clearly a sub."

Her traitorous cunt squeezed him tightly, letting him know how well his suggestion pleased her. How did he know these things would excite her? How had she known his

name? She couldn't think with his cock moving deep inside her, didn't want to think, wanted only to feel!

Sean shoved his pants past his knees then kicked them off the bed. His cock was wonderfully hard, long and deeply flushed, more than ready to be devoured. He took her arms and stretched them over her head, crossing them at the wrist as she had done before. Then he guided his cock to her mouth.

"Just the head for a while," Sean told her. "And don't let me feel even a hint of teeth."

God, he learned fast. His firm tone sent tingles skittering down her spine and she responded by sucking just the head of his cock into her mouth.

Kellan rolled her hips up off the bed by pushing her knees up and back. She gasped around Sean's cock. This new position allowed the overlord to drive even deeper. It also gave him easier access to her clit. He plucked on the sensitive nub until she cried out with each tiny spasm, suspended on the verge of orgasm without being able to plunge.

"Do you want to come?"

All she could do was whimper.

"I don't think you've earned it yet." To her mortification, he pulled out then slapped her on the ass before he released her legs. "Turn over."

"Are you sure she's ready for that?" Sean came to her defense.

"Relax. Both of you. I just want to finish from behind. We'll save the kinky stuff for later."

Like doing them both wasn't kinky? She rolled over and folded her legs beneath her. Apparently she wasn't moving fast enough. Kellan grasped her hips and pulled her ass up then moved her legs apart. "Now give me your arms."

"My arms?"

"Yes. Put your arms behind your back." She wasn't sure how she'd hold herself up if he wanted her hands behind her back, but she obeyed. He crossed her arms behind her back then wrapped his hands around the bend of her elbows. "Offer your mouth to Sean. He wasn't finished."

Sean moved in front of her and took her face between his hands as he slid his cock back into her mouth. Kellan watched him shuttle in and out for a moment before he pushed between her thighs and found her core.

It all seemed to explode after that. She rocked between them in perfect surrender, neck arched, hips raised. Kellan pounded into her cunt, his hands firm on her arms, holding her upright for Sean.

Responding with the aggression demanded by her submission, Sean tangled his fingers in her hair and unabashedly fucked her mouth. He stroked her breasts with his free hand, pinching her nipples, while pleasure shone in his eyes.

She had never experienced anything so wonderful, never dared to dream it could happen to her. They synchronized their strokes, and sensations detonated all over her body. Ticklish little tingles and hard rolling spasms combined in a dizzying rush.

Sean thrust to the back of her mouth with a strangled cry and released his seed in rhythmic jets. She licked and swallowed, determined to cherish every drop of his pleasure and leave him hungry for more.

Kellan grew restless before she could accomplish the last part however. He pulled her away from Sean and angled her upper body toward the furs. She understood the position and what it signified. Submission.

She relaxed her back and shoulders, letting her body fall forward. He wrapped his arm around her waist as he freed her arms and waited for her to adjust her position. She folded her arms in front of her and rested her forehead on her folded arms.

His fingers found her clit, she wasn't even sure how, but the jolt of sensation made her shiver. "Come for me now. I want to feel your cunt ripple around my cock." Ever obedient, her body released an orgasm with the next pass of his fingers across her clit. "Very nice."

He moved his hands to her hips and whispered, "Now we come together. Don't hold back. I'm not going to last very long."

Without pretense or artifice he rode her fast and hard. She pushed up against him and reveled in each aggressive stroke. His thighs slapped against her thighs and his balls stimulated her clit until she cried out and clutched the fur beneath her, ready to come again. Was her body really capable of this much pleasure?

As if to answer her question, he slammed his full length into her and came deep inside her. She was half a second behind. Screaming into the furs, she shuddered and bucked as her body greedily milked his spurting cock.

"Did that feel as good as it sounded?" Sean asked with a laugh. "You two made more noise than holo-porn."

Holo-porn? What was holo-porn? Why did these anomalies keep intruding into her world?

Wrapping his arms around her, Kellan rolled them to their sides. "Tell him to fuck off and die. You can be as noisy as you want."

"Fuck off and die—kind sir." Both her men laughed at her ad-lib and she tried to wiggle away from Kellan.

"I'm not ready to separate," he said into her hair, and contentment unfurled within her. He wanted to stay inside her. It hadn't just been sex. He enjoyed the connection, the intimacy of being with her, not just the pleasure of release.

Sean sat down beside them, brushing her hair back from her face. "For the record, we didn't come here planning to fuck you. We had intended to be gallant and charming and all the nice things knights can be."

"But you found me with my hand between my thighs?" She blushed but didn't regret the outcome, refused to regret even one thing they'd done. Her men were strong and giving and they were *hers*. Two lovers might cause complications down the road, but she was happier right now than she'd been in a very long time.

"You appeared to need naughty more than nice," Kellan agreed. At least she thought his name was Kellan. What if she were wrong?

She looked back at him and asked, "Is your name Kellan?"

"Yes." He drew her head around and kissed her mouth. "But you can call me 'overlord' if it makes you happy."

* * * * *

Twisting and bucking within the misty void, Ceddrik struggled to free himself, to force his consciousness back into his body. He'd heard distant voices and cries of pleasure, yet he saw only smoke and smelled only filth and decay. How had the spirit broken free of her enclosure? That was the only explanation for his captivity. No other creature had power sufficient to best him and no one else had reason to want him harmed.

But I do have reason, don't I? I know all your filthy secrets, all the evil you hide from the rest of the world. I've seen your soul.

He'd grown used to her voice in the long years before his abilities matured enough to silence her. But his power had matured and he'd reinforced her enclosure, ensuring no one ever sensed her or heard her foolish ravings.

Foolish ravings? We both know that's not true. I'm not the one who sold out my own people. I'm not the one who –

Shut up! Ceddrik covered his ears, gasping when his hands pressed against a solid skull and tangible ears. If he wasn't unconscious, where was he? *What have you done to me, woman?*

Her laughter echoed in the mist, taunting him. *No more than you've done to me.*

Dreading what he would find, he held out his hands and began to explore. He moved cautiously forward until his fingertips encountered something coarse and cold, and slimy. Stone. Was he in some sort of cell? He followed the wall until it turned sharply, not a long distance at all. Three strides took him from front to back, and four from side to side.

Ask me nicely and I'll let you see your surroundings, but you'll have to say pretty please.

He ignored her and continued to feel his way around the room. There was a door in one wall, but no window or other openings. Nowhere on the compound was there a room like this. How had she arranged to have him moved? She was incorporeal!

A torch burst to life high on one wall, casting shadowy light on his surroundings. His heart lurched and his stomach tensed. What was this? Rough-cut stones made up the walls and the ceiling. The floor was hard-packed dirt. Only in archive vids had he

seen such crude conditions. A thin straw mat and threadbare blanket were the only amenities.

Do you like your room, dragon?

Why did you call me that?

You're a monster and you're locked in the dungeon of a castle. What else would that make you?

The pathetic room certainly looked like part of a dungeon, but there were no castles on Protaria. *Where am I?* He'd been scanning the human. Despite Kellan's best efforts she'd sensed the intrusion and began to struggle. *What did you do?*

I saw an opportunity and I took it. You were terrorizing that poor woman, so I took her somewhere safe.

And dragged me there in the process?

Some people deserve to live out their fantasies and others belong in nightmares.

The torch blinked out as suddenly as it had ignited, leaving him in utter darkness.

Chapter Six

Folding one of the furs into a soft square, Sean propped himself against the wall next to Kellan. Brianna had curled up with her head in the overlord's lap and fallen asleep. She looked content and peaceful, and unbearably beautiful. Happy just to stroke her hair and have her near, Kellan stared into the distance, quiet and calm.

Sean was physically sated, but he was anything but content. For years he'd obediently fought for the mutant cause, using his skills in whatever way Fane requested. They had saved his life and trained him, so he owed them his loyalty. But his life had never felt complete. Some part of him always longed for the people he'd left behind. Or actually the person.

Watching Kellan master Brianna had filled him with such longing. He understood her need for both of them because he lusted after Kellan. Brianna's silky mouth felt amazing as he slid against her tongue, but it hadn't kept him from picturing him in her place, trying to imagine the incredible fullness and the overwhelming intensity.

The unexpected desire in no way diminished what he felt for Brianna. If anything it enriched the situation. He had... Mist swirled across his mind, muting his emotions and scattering his thoughts.

He had a mission. He must protect the princess and slay the dragon. The princess was safe, but the dragon was still out there, still threatening everything he held dear.

With a frustrated sigh, he glanced at Kellan's profile. Weren't they supposed to be doing something other than lounging around in this tower room? They needed to find the dragon, but it was more than that. Something teased his mind, hovering just out of reach.

"I know what you're thinking." Kellan's expression didn't change, nor did his gaze shift from whatever he found so fascinating in the corner of the room.

"Really? Why don't you enlighten me?"

"You're wondering what we should do next? What will please her most and satisfy her best." He turned his head as he waited for Sean's reaction.

"Do you have something specific in mind?" Their gazes locked without competition or challenge for a change, searching, assessing; neither willing to reveal too much.

Kellan spoke carefully, his tone quiet and thoughtful. "If she had been content with your kiss, I would have insisted you leave. But she wanted both of us, not one or the other, both of us together."

Sean shook his head. "That was the condition you put on her. 'If you want one you get the other.' That's what you said."

"I meant me. She was begging for your touch at the time."

That much was true, but how should they proceed?

Sean looked at her, so peaceful and trusting—in Kellan's lap. The overlord might have won the first round, but she'd reached for him first. She'd trusted him before she surrendered to Kellan. An unexpected pulse of determination burst through his system. "I'm not sure I can share my mate, and that's where this is heading. I already have strong feelings for her. If we continue down this path, it could destroy us all."

"Or it could be the best thing that ever happened to any of us." Kellan shrugged, his hand gently cupping her bare shoulder. "She's perfect. If you can't see that you're blind."

Sean shook his head. This felt wrong. Desire heated his blood and hardened his cock, but something about this was wrong. "Why are we here?"

"To pleasure the princess," Kellan answered without pause. "She needs to know that she is loved and protected and we must worship her with our bodies." Lifting her against him, he settled her bottom between his legs.

She murmured sleepily then opened her eyes. "What's wrong? Has the dragon awakened?"

The fear in her expression tugged at Sean's heart. He didn't want her to be afraid. She should feel only pleasure. "Nothing's wrong, sweetheart. The dragon is sound asleep."

Kellan brushed her hair back from her face then pressed a kiss against her temple. "You're going to suck my cock while Sean fucks your tight little ass."

A violent shiver shook her shoulders and her gaze collided with Sean's. "I am?"

He didn't contradict Kellan's bold statement, but he was as surprised as she had been. They had both been completely focused on Brianna's pleasure the first time around. What had caused Kellan's change of strategy?

"Oh yes." Kellan wrapped his arm around her waist, his face half buried in her hair. "We sat here, hard and aching, while you slept. Now it's time for you to satisfy us."

She fidgeted, her eyes averted. "What if I don't want to do those things?"

"Do you want to please us?"

"Yes but—" He placed his fingertips against her lips, halting her objection.

"I want your mouth and Sean wants your ass. Yes or no is your only option. We do this or we go slay the dragon. The choice is yours."

Her gaze rose to Sean's again, wide and uncertain. He started toward her, but Kellan warned him back with a glare. Then he tapped his temple and Sean lightly scanned his mind.

Think about how wild she became when you fucked her mouth. She needs to obey. It's her nature to submit. But obedience only feels real when it pushes boundaries. Trust me on this.

The thought of breaching her tight rear passage was undeniably exciting. He'd been fantasizing about it while she slept. No, he'd been fantasizing about... He must not

entertain such notions. Valiant knights did not lust after overlords! Still, he couldn't get the image out of his mind.

Brianna. This was about the princess and what she needed to be happy. "I won't hurt you. I promise. You'll feel only pleasure."

"Can you keep that promise?" Kellan challenged. "I don't think she's done this before."

His command of shadow energy would allow him to create extremely effective lubricants and momentarily block sensation if she wasn't able to relax sufficiently. "She'll feel only pleasure."

Kellan pushed her away from his chest. "If this is what you want, princess, you must show us. We'll never force anything on you. You must offer yourself to us willingly."

She hesitated for a moment on her knees then turned and took Kellan's face between her hands. "I want to kiss you first. Is that okay?"

"Always. I adore your kisses."

Sean didn't have time to feel jealous. Kellan motioned him forward as she leaned down and began kissing the overlord. Kneeling behind her, Sean cupped her breasts and gently rolled her nipples. Her skin was soft and warm, her nipples instantly responsive. She gasped into Kellan's mouth as Sean's patient touches became careful pinches.

"Your knight would like to kiss you too," Kellan reminded.

She turned her head and offered Sean her mouth. He sucked her bottom lip between his teeth, feeling unusually aggressive. Her breathy gasp drove him on. He caught her chin with one hand and held her head against his shoulder, pushing his tongue between her teeth as he released her lip. She submitted sweetly, greeting his thrusting tongue with the warm stroke of her own.

"Your cunt is already wet." Kellan pumped his hand slowly between her thighs. "So soft and welcoming. It would be a shame for all this cream to go to waste. Maybe you should use your fingers in her ass and fuck her pussy."

Sean grinned against her mouth. "Make up your mind. Do I want to fuck her ass or not?"

Brianna chuckled and reached up to stroke his face. "Don't let him bully you. What do *you* want to do?"

Everything. He wanted to try every conceivable position and combination of positions. He wanted to know her smell and taste, her texture and the rhythm of her breathing. And he wanted all those things with Kellan. He wanted to suck and fuck and blend until no one could tell one from the other.

He stilled, staring into her shimmering eyes. He must focus on her and only her until she was satisfied. Once the princess was content, he could think of the overlord. "I want to make you happy. I want you to sleep without fear and live happily ever after."

Happily ever after. Like a fairy tale! The room around them undulated, rolling in and out of focus before solidifying again. She was warm and soft and willing. Why couldn't this be real?

What an odd thought. Wasn't this real?

She knelt before him and spread her legs, displaying her sleek ass cheeks and deeply flushed pussy. "Take me however you want, sir knight. I trust you to make it good."

Lust slammed into his body and obliterated what remained of his rationale. His cock jerked and his balls tightened. He could push into her creamy cunt and ride her hard, or tease her slowly, preparing her gradually for a more exotic joining. She was willing and waiting, and she was *his*.

He palmed her ass cheeks, groaning at the silken texture of her ivory skin. Parting her for his ravenous gaze, he admired the puckered opening awaiting his attention. Holding her open with one hand, he freed the other to explore. Sean pushed his fingers into her slippery cunt and her inner muscles pulsed around him. So hot, so snug, the temptation was nearly more than he could resist. His cock twitched and pre-cum beaded on the tip. He was *so* ready to be inside her.

"Suck me, princess." Kellan's voice was dark and passion-roughened. "Take me deep in that warm, wet mouth."

Sean gathered moisture from her pussy and used it to lubricate his fingers. He circled her anus, thrilled by the way her body tensed and quivered. She was soft and giving, endlessly responsive. The need to be inside her pounded through him like the beat of a massive drum. Unable to resist a moment longer, he pushed the head of his cock into her pussy as his fingers eased past her sphincter.

Her narrow channel squeezed him firmly, sucking him inward with persistent contractions. He gritted his teeth against the pleasure and drove deeper, watching her delicate tissue stretch around his cock and his fingers. She trembled beneath him and rippled around him as he moved with careful persistency.

Hot, wet heaven gripped his aching shaft. He slid smoothly in and out of her core, but his fingers soon created more friction than he knew would be pleasurable. Pausing with his cock buried deep inside her, he conjured lubricant and slowly drew his fingers all the way out.

She murmured around Kellan's cock. Whether from protest or relief, Sean couldn't tell. After liberally coating her opening with the conjured lube, he inserted his middle finger in one long drive. A low moan escaped her throat and her back passage fluttered against his finger.

There was no mistaking that sound or the reaction of her body. She was enjoying this as much as he was. Thank the gods!

He started slowly, allowing her to accept the dual penetration. His cock slid inward as he pulled his finger out then he reversed direction. Her body swallowed him

hungrily, her hips rising to meet his downward stroke. He brushed his fingertips across her clit and she yelped, tightening around him so hard he groaned.

She arched and twisted, mindless with carnal intensity. Each of her muffled cries sent his pleasure rocketing higher. Raw. Savage. He'd never felt anything like it, never had a lover so completely lose control.

Kellan held her face, shuttling steadily in and out of her mouth. Her body was pliant and surrendered, lost in the rising storm.

Sean thrust faster, pulling his finger out as he drove his cock in. He circled her clit, rubbing the pad of his finger across the sensitive nub. She came in sudden bursts, her cunt milking him like a fist. Over and over, she came, or were the ongoing spasms one long orgasm?

He held still, savoring each firm squeeze yet fixated on the slow slide of his finger. Kellan had planted the seed, made him yearn for the forbidden grasp of her ass around his cock.

One of Kellan's hands moved to her hair, tilting her head farther back, giving him a better angle. Their gazes locked and feral lust glowed within the overlord's dark eyes. He knew the conflict raging through Sean and he knew he had caused it.

Do it. The thought was clear in Kellan's mind. We can't fuck her together until one of us breaches her ass. You said you can do it without pain. So prove it.

Together. One in her pussy and one in her ass. The image almost pushed Sean over the edge. He shuddered, absorbing the wave of pleasure without letting it rob him of control. Slowly pulling out of her pussy, he positioned himself against her other opening.

With his fingers gently tugging on her clit, he pushed into her ass. She started to tense, but he sent a wave of pleasure and languid relaxation into her mind. The tension eased and her body opened. His cock head disappeared into her ass and euphoria burst within his mind.

Using the momentary dizziness, he relaxed her even further and worked himself in halfway. The tight clasp of her muscles and the heat of her passage surpassed his wildest imaginings. He could barely breathe through the bursts of sensation jarring his body, and he had barely begun! How would they survive the ending?

"That's right." He caressed her cheeks and her hips, rewarding her with tenderness. He needed the break as much as she did, perhaps more. "Now stay still. Let me move for a while before you try to move with me."

Her head gave a little nod as Kellan continued to fuck her mouth.

Sean grasped her hip with one hand and lightly strummed her clit with the other, determined to keep his promise. Drawing back slowly, he watched his shaft emerge. Gleaming with lube and deeply flushed, he had never been harder. He paused with just the head of his cock inside her then filled her again with steady pressure. She accepted him, embraced him, surrounded him. The scalding heat drove the breath from his lungs and made his legs tremble.

"So good," he whispered. "So fucking good."

Kellan watched every move he made, his face flushed, chest heaving. "Suck hard, princess. I'm almost there." He threw back his head and canted his hips, driving his cock deep into her mouth. He shuddered and groaned as release finally claimed him.

Focusing entirely on the pleasure inundating his senses, Sean allowed his movements to speed. He drew nearly out before thrusting back into her smoldering depths. She began to move with him, arching into each downward lunge. Her head tossed, hair whipping around her face as Kellan pulled out of her mouth. She arched and moaned, giving herself over completely to the savage pleasure.

"Now!" He rolled her clit as he drove in hard. "Come for me now." Her passage gripped him with distinct spasms, her orgasm shoving him over the top. He wrapped his arms around her hips, his cock bucking as his seed released in rhythmic spurts.

They trembled together, their ragged breathing the only sound. Then she sprawled on her belly, separating their bodies in the process. Sean raked his hair with both hands, breathless and lightheaded. His vision blurred around the edges, adding to the surreal atmosphere.

This had been perfect, almost like a dream. Too much like a dream.

Shaking away the odd distortion, he struggled to his feet. He needed air. Needed to think clearly, to remember... What did he need to remember?

He stumbled across the room and rested his hands on the window ledge, leaning into the cool night wind. For just a moment the stars faded, leaving a bank of solid black. He glanced over his shoulder. "Is she all right?"

"She's asleep again." Kellan tucked her hair behind her ear then raised his gaze to Sean. "Why?"

"The visualization is collapsing." He leaned out to assess how far the scope had constricted, but the stars had returned to the sky.

"Is there a problem?"

"I'm not sure." He turned around and grabbed his pants off the floor. It felt odd to be naked, wrong somehow. He scanned Brianna as he put on the pants. Her mind was as peaceful as her expression. It must have been a momentary glitch. "She seems fine now. I think we just wore her out."

Kellan chuckled. "Do you think this is what your healer had in mind?"

"My healer? What healer?" Kellan's gaze clouded and he shook his head. Sean rushed toward him. "No! Don't lose the thought. Who is the healer? Something is not right here. I keep seeing images of people I should know, but I can't remember who they are or why I'm so convinced I know them. Who is the healer?"

"You brought a healer to my compound to help treat Brianna." Kellan stood and moved away from the furs, his expression conflicted and confused. "Where are we?"

"This isn't real." As Sean said the words out loud, cracks appeared in the walls all around them. "We're on the metaphysical plane. This is Brianna's illusion." An odd

shimmer snapped Sean's attention to the door. The surface undulated as if something moved beneath the wood. Acting on instinct, he rushed to the door and thrust his hand into the thick panel. "Reveal yourself!"

Energy shot up his arm and drove him backward. With a staggered step he regained his footing and charged the door again.

Kellan was beside him in an instant, sword poised for attack. "What is it? Who's there?"

Rather than reply, Sean concentrated all his attention on forcing the entity into the open. He gathered energy, allowing it to build before he shot it through his fingers and into the door. "Out!"

The intruder suddenly gave in, separating from the wood with a frustrated cry. "Stop! If you harm me, you'll kill Brianna." The woman was dressed in a cleric's robe, the simple garment too large for her thin body. Her hair was snow-white, hanging to her shoulders in a sleek fall. Despite the color of her hair, her face was unlined and ageless.

"Who are you?" Sean asked. "What do you want with us?"

"My name would mean nothing to you and I created this world. I thought it only prudent to keep an eye on how things were progressing."

"You created the castle?" Kellan moved to a less-threatening distance but kept his sword firmly in hand.

She smiled, pale blue eyes gleaming. "Surely you didn't think the lady capable of creating this for herself."

Sean scanned the woman, immediately intrigued by the unique rhythm of her energy. "Why did you trap her here?"

"Trap? She's not my prisoner. She's my guest. I was protecting her from Ceddrick."

"Ceddrick wasn't hurting her," Kellan objected. "The scan is painless and —"

"Has he ever used his powers on you?"

She did nothing to block Sean's scan or shield herself from his probing. He pushed deeper, determined to establish her basic nature if nothing else. "If Brianna isn't your prisoner, then release the visualization and let her wake up."

"She's not ready yet. Besides, no one has slain the dragon."

"Why do you want Ceddrick dead?" Kellan challenged, raising the sword again.

"Because he deserves to die." She moved toward him, unimpressed by his sword or his nudity. "You share a mind link with that creature. Can't you sense the corruption inside him?"

"I know Ceddrick. I do not know you."

She sent her hair flying over her shoulders with a rebellious toss of her head. "You know nothing."

"Is this your natural state?" Sean finally asked, unable to draw any other conclusion from what his scans revealed. "I sense no corporeal tether, no point of origin."

"Very good, Specter. Fane taught you well."

Did she know Fane or had she simply pulled the name out of his mind? "Are you Protarian? Or were you while you were still alive?"

"I am still very much alive. Make no mistake about that. I might be called spirit now, but I am no ghost."

"You are not a ghost and you are not a physical being. What *are* you?" Kellan asked.

"I am many things and I am nothing. You must focus on your mission. Slay the dragon." Her crystal blue gaze shifted to Brianna. "I'm not sure how much longer I can let her play in this fantasy land. Maintaining the illusion is far more exhausting than I anticipated."

"Then let her go," Sean tried again.

The spirit simply smiled. "Your lady stirs. I will come to you after you've seen to her needs again. You do that very well, by the way."

Brianna stretched and wiggled, luxuriating in the softness of the fur against her naked body and the warmth cocooning her. She felt lazy and relaxed and happy. Her lids fluttered before she summoned the will to open her eyes. Did she really have to abandon such wonderful dreams?

She'd been locked in a tower with Sean and Kellan. They had touched her and loved her, made her feel amazingly alive. Clutching the top fur to her breasts, she sat up and looked around. Images rolled through her mind, sensual echoes of passion and pleasure.

She was safe here, cared for and protected. By her knight and her overlord.

It isn't real. Logic intruded with sharp clarity. *None of this is real.*

Her fantasy lovers stood near the window, speaking in hushed tones. Sean had pulled on his pants, but his chest was bare and his hair was mussed. Stark-naked and glorious, Kellan held a gleaming sword, yet there was no dragon in sight.

There is no dragon! This was some sort of dream. It had to be. Sean's rescue attempt had failed. She was now Kellan's prisoner-guest.

Noticing she was awake, Sean ambled toward her, his expression cautious and concerned. "Welcome back, milady. How do you feel?"

His soft tone swept through her, triggering images and sensuous memories. She stood between them, naked and trembling, as their hands caressed her naked body. "Where am I? What is this place?"

He knelt beside her and took her hands between his. "What do you remember?"

Her memory was muddled. Which images were real and which had been part of this fantasy? The sex was definitely fantasy. She would never allow those things to happen in reality. Would she?

"Do you remember the lab?" Sean prompted, drawing her wandering thoughts back to the present.

"Yes." She latched on to the suggestion, using the incident to push away the erotic images teasing her imagination. "You tried to rescue me, but Kellan's men grabbed me while you were fighting off the guards."

"What's the last thing you remember before you woke up in this room for the first time?" Sean stroked the back of her hand with his thumb, the small caress surprisingly soothing.

"I was..." She looked at Kellan and heat spread across her face. He'd been using his mouth to drive her crazy when she'd sensed something or someone forcing their way into her mind. "Someone broke into my mind. It felt like they were trying to lobotomize me."

"Ceddrik didn't mean to hurt you." Kellan set down the sword and crossed to the furs. "The scan has never been harmful before."

Keeping her gaze focused squarely on his face, Brianna ignored the edginess she felt each time she looked at him. "What are you talking about? Why was Ceddrik scanning me?"

"I told you he was confirming your story, I just failed to mention how."

She suppressed her anger for the moment. There was still too much she didn't understand. "Are you sure it was Ceddrik? The being I sensed was horrible, corrupt and evil." She shuddered, unable to hide her revulsion.

"Maybe she sensed our host," Kellan said to Sean. "The spirit might have used Ceddrik's link to insinuate herself into Brianna's mind."

"It's possible, but I didn't sense any real malice when I scanned her."

"What did you sense?" Kellan moved to the other side of Brianna, uninhibited and impossible to ignore.

"Energy, pure, concentrated energy."

She shifted toward Sean, surrounding herself with the compassion shining in his eyes. "What are you talking about now? Who did you scan?"

"The entity who created this reality appeared to us while you were sleeping." Sean sat beside her and wrapped his arm around her waist, drawing her close. "For some reason she wants Ceddrik dead."

"She created all this hoping you would kill Ceddrik?" It seemed like a roundabout way of accomplishing that goal.

"It might be more than a hope," Kellan muttered, apparently content to loom over them. "It could be her intention to trap us here until one of us does her bidding."

"Could you hand me my shift?" She pointed toward the discarded garment. Rather than hand it to her, Sean moved behind her and helped her dress. Kellan's fathomless gaze followed their every move, making it impossible to forget all the things they'd done, all the ways he'd touched her. "I'd rather not stick around to find out what she intends. How do we get out of here?"

Sean helped her to her feet, his warm hand lingering at the small of her back. "I was afraid to attack the visualization before because you were so deeply immersed in it."

"I'm better now."

She tried not to think about everything that had happened since she became "immersed" in this non-reality, but her memory wasn't paying attention to her determination. She saw herself writhing on the fur, one man on either side of her, as they suckled her breasts and caressed her naked body. Had she really taken Sean in her mouth while Kellan fucked her pussy? A graphic image materialized in her mind, making denial impossible. They'd fucked her together and she'd never known such pleasure. Her orgasms had never left her boneless and utterly content until last night.

She should be humiliated, should be squirming from the shame, but echoes of desire were the only things making her squirm. She'd knelt in front of Sean and spread her legs, offering him her pussy or ass to use as he chose. And he'd chosen both! He'd used his fingers and –

"What about Cedrik?" Kellan's question cut through her erotic recap. His tone was tight and conflict knitted his brow. "Is he still lost in the visualization? What will happen to him if you disrupt it?"

"Unfortunately, there's only one way to find out."

"You're going to destroy the castle?" Brianna crossed her arms over her chest. She knew it was inevitable, but she wasn't ready to leave, wasn't ready to face cold, unfeeling reality.

He nodded. "I'm going to do my damndest. This might be our only opportunity. If the spirit pulls your consciousness back into this world, I suspect we'll go right along with you. It's now or never."

Kellan wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her back against his body. "You don't need to be afraid. No matter what happens, you're safe with us. We'll protect you."

She hadn't realized how tense her shoulders had become until his words allowed her to relax them. Despite his gruff exterior, Kellan was remarkably perceptive. She pressed her arm over his and entwined their fingers. His other arm encircled her waist as well and he nuzzled her hair. Would he be this affectionate once they emerged from the illusion? How much would they remember?

"Is Sean at your compound as well?" She felt him nod. "How did that come about?"

"He came looking for you, of course."

"We'll explain everything as soon as we're out," Sean told her. "I need to concentrate."

Sean closed his eyes and spread his arms. A deep pulse vibrated the floor, the rhythm slow and steady. His lids flew open and amber light blazed from his eyes. Visible waves radiated out from his body, colliding with the walls surrounding them.

Brianna pressed into the warmth of Kellan's embrace, fascinated yet terrified by the spectacle. She'd seen eyes like Sean's before, glowing in the darkness, as mutant rebels scavenged the wreckage scattered across a hillside. Checking bodies. Counting the dead.

Determined to fight back the fear swelling inside her, Brianna turned and wrapped her arms around Kellan. He tucked her head beneath his chin then hugged her tightly.

"I've got you, princess. There's nothing to fear."

She hated being so timid. San Carlos women were stronger than this. *She* used to be stronger than this. But the fear was real and inescapable. Her fingers dug into his back, savoring the rock-hard muscles and the warmth of his scared flesh. She breathed in his scent, letting the spicy-clean musk wash over her.

His fingers tangled in her hair and he carefully pulled her head back. Her lips parted as he lowered his head, welcoming him with a tentative lick. His lips sealed over hers and his tongue curled, stroking as he pushed into her mouth.

Sean's energy pulsed through her like an exaggerated heartbeat. Kellan cupped her bottom and dragged her up along his chest. Her toes barely touched the floor and then the floor disintegrated.

With a startled gasp, she broke the kiss and turned her head sharply to the side. Their surroundings blurred and spun. Flashes of light within the stones seemed to protest Sean's efforts.

Sean held his ground, determination contorting his features.

Stop this, specter! I can't let her go until you –

He silenced the disembodied voice with an especially violent pulse.

You must kill the dragon or he will destroy everything!

He ignored the voice and continued his attack. The walls began to crumble, revealing the endless blackness beyond the castle walls.

You fool! The voice sounded thin, depleted. I was trying to protect her. She has seen the true face of the dragon. He will not let her live.

Sean sent one final burst of energy into the visualization and the illusion ruptured, breaking apart into countless shards and blinding flashes of light.

Brianna buried her face against Kellan's chest. She clung to him then melted into him as tactile sensation was swept beyond the metaphysical plane.

Chapter Seven

Kellan sprang up in bed, panting and disoriented. Had Sean done it? Were they free of the spirit's spell? Black dots swam before his eyes, making it hard to see. He blinked furiously as he brushed Brianna's hair back from her face. A soft moan escaped her lips and she shook her head.

"Kellan?" Her eyes opened and she managed a weak smile. Her gaze remained unfocused, her face pale. "Where's Sean?"

"Behind you." He dragged in several deep breaths as his vision cleared. They'd stretched out on the bed with her, one on either side. Sean sprawled on his back, arms spread wide as they had been in the visualization. The steady rise and fall of his chest assured Kellan he was only dazed, at the worst unconscious.

"Is he all right?" She wiggled away from him as her attention zeroed in on Sean.

"I think so." He hoped so, but he knew nothing about battling incorporeal entities. "See if you can rouse him."

Brianna turned toward Sean, giving Kellan a delightful view of her bare back. She touched Sean's face then squeezed his shoulder. "You did it, sir knight. You brought us safely home."

Two words caught in Kellan's mind. Us and home. Who did she include in "us" and how long would she consider this her home?

He scrubbed his hand over his face, his feelings jumbled. It hadn't been real. He needed to purge his mind of the memories and the possessive urges that accompanied the images. It had been an illusion. An intense, amazing illusion, but an illusion all the same.

Sean groaned. His face turned, following her hand, obviously eager for her touch. "Is everyone okay? Where's — Cedrik?"

Needing something to distract him from his troubled thoughts, Kellan rolled off the side of the bed and walked toward Cedrik's cot. Night had fallen while they were inside the castle, or was this the second night? It felt as if they had spent a lifetime comforting her, loving her...

"Cedrik?" His eyes adjusted to the darkness and his heart lurched within his chest. "He's gone." He snatched back the covers to verify the conclusion. "Damn it!" Rushing to the door, he called for a guard and told him to locate Cedrik. "Our link is still active. He couldn't have gone far."

"Can you use the link to find him?" Sean asked. "We need to figure out why the spirit wants him dead."

"If the link can be used like that, I have no idea how to do it."

"I bet Ceddrik does." Sean swung his legs over the side of the bed and wobbled a bit as he stood. "I bet he's been tracking your movements for as long as you've been linked."

"I seldom keep my whereabouts a secret. Why would he bother?" Even as he dismissed Sean's concern, doubt shot tendrils through his mind. He'd always thought of Ceddrik as his servant and the link was necessary for Ceddrik to communicate with him. He should have been more cautious, less focused on the benefits of having a mystic at his disposal. Well, the link existed. There wasn't much he could do about it now. Or was there? "Are you able to follow the link?"

Sean shook his head. "I'm not a tracker. There are those in the Underground —"

"We'll try it the non-mutant way first. If my men can't find him, we'll explore other options."

Sean accepted the decision with a stiff nod.

"She said I'd seen the true face of the dragon." Brianna sat in the middle of the bed, sheet drawn around her slender body. "What did she mean?"

"It was all mystic nonsense." Despite the casual dismissal, Kellan wasn't quite convinced.

"I wouldn't be so sure." Without asking permission, Sean opened the closet door and grabbed one of Kellan's tunics. "If there was nothing to her allegations, why did Ceddrik run?" He handed the tunic to Brianna then faced Kellan. "How long has he served you and how did he come to be your personal mystic?"

Kellan tensed at the challenge in Sean's tone. "He presented himself to me shortly after you left."

"He just presented himself to you? Your distrust of anyone with mutant abilities is well-known. What made him think you would even consider his services?"

"He's not a mutant and my attempt to recruit you for a similar position is also well-known. You caused quite a stir when you left, my friend. No one was sure what I'd do."

Sean had the audacity to laugh. "No one had ever dared to refuse you before."

There was more truth in Sean's statement than Kellan cared to admit. Most people bent over backward to please him. Kellan wasn't vain enough to think they did so without ulterior motives, but there were definite perks to his position. And inescapable responsibilities.

He shook away the useless tangent and narrowed his focus once more. "How Ceddrik came to me is irrelevant. He proved himself worthy of trust."

"It still seems a bit too convenient for my comfort."

"He hasn't done anything," Kellan stressed. "The spirit admitted that she was responsible for the illusion. Why are you so certain Ceddrik is guilty and what do you think he's done?"

Rather than fuel the budding argument, Sean turned to Brianna. "You said the being that entered your mind was corrupt. Were there specific thoughts and images? What exactly did you sense?"

"It's hard to explain." She wiggled into the tunic before she went on, "I had no idea Ceddrick was scanning me, so the presence felt extremely intrusive. The harder I resisted the more...wrong it all felt."

"You should have told her." Sean shot him a sidelong glare. "Invading a person's mind without their permission is—"

"What hypocrisy! Are you going to try to convince me you've never used your abilities to invade a person's privacy? I know Fane has a small army of hackers and spies. Compiling information is the first step in establishing any strategy. So get off your high horse. I'm not buying it."

Brianna crawled off the bed and smoothed the tunic down over her thighs. "What happens now? Do you still think I'm Fane's spy?"

He knew what she was asking and the words clogged his throat. "Sean confirmed your story. I have no reason to detain you." Freeing her was the last thing Kellan wanted to do. Even before the castle she had fascinated him. And now she was like a fire in his blood. He wanted her, craved her, would find a way to have her over and over again. "So the question is, what do you want to do now?"

"I want to see my sister."

Kellan inclined his head, scrambling for a reason to make her stay. "Sean can contact Mal Ton and ask him to bring Lorelle here. Until we find Ceddrick, it's probably better if we err on the side of caution."

"Can I at least talk to her now?" Her gaze shifted from him to Sean and back. "I've been told many things since I was captured. I need to know she's really all right."

"I'm sure something can be arranged." He wasn't sure what. Offworld communications could be tricky in the black zones, and Stilox security made everything complicated. But he'd figure out something. It was obvious she wouldn't relax until she saw Lorelle with her own eyes.

She nodded and looked away, a rosy blush creeping over her cheeks. He'd never wished he could sense emotions more than he did in that moment. Was she remembering the pleasure they'd shared in the tower room, or had her surrender been part of the illusion?

Of course it had been illusion. None of it had been real! But it would be. He would seduce her slowly, explore every angle and curve of her soft body.

Do you know what you're doing?

His gaze snapped to Sean's. He couldn't send his thoughts, but Sean could hear what he was thinking if he was scanning his mind at the time. *The spirit didn't create the attraction, she only intensified it. I've wanted Brianna from the first moment I saw her.*

And wanting her is reason enough to seduce her? What about what she wants?

She wants us both! Do you honestly think Brianna would have accepted such a bold scenario if the desire wasn't already inside her? Stay. Explore this attraction with me. See where it leads us.

*She doesn't need a sexual relationship. She needs affection and stability and –
Let her decide what she needs.*

"I want my own room."

Her words stung like a slap. He was relatively sure she couldn't hear their telepathic conversation, but her comment struck too close to the mark. "It's not safe." The words were out before he could stop them. It didn't matter that they had been trapped in an illusion, every cell in his body remembered.

"It's a reasonable request," Sean reinforced, and Kellan tensed. She needs some space, you stubborn asshole, and you're going to give it to her. If you scare her away now, neither of us will have any hope of winning her heart.

Winning her heart? Did he want to win her heart? His aspirations were far less noble. He just wanted to quench the fire in his blood. Didn't he? "I'll have Tanner move into Ceddrick's room and you can have Tanner's room." Relenting felt alien. He did it so rarely. So why was he giving in for her?

"Thank you."

An odd warmth spread through his chest at her gentle smile. Curious. Kellan delved deeper into his new role. "I'll see if I can find something more appropriate for you to wear. What else can I arrange for you? Are you hungry?"

Brianna released her pent-up breath and nodded. "Actually I'm famished, but I'm sick to death of closed-in rooms. Is it safe to go outside?"

Kellan was obviously annoyed by her request. Without Sean's intervention, the overlord would likely have refused. Sean was a wonderful balance for Kellan. Even in the castle she'd noticed how well they complemented each other. Kellan encouraged Sean to take control when he was being too passive and Sean insisted on gentleness when Kellan pushed too hard.

She licked her lips, unable to prevent the memories from rekindling her desire. It might not have been real, but her body remembered every kiss, every caress and every – No! She couldn't think about the things they'd done unless she wanted to continue on as if it had been real.

If Kellan's hungry eyes were any indication, he was more than agreeable to the concept. Sean was harder to read. His expression was cautions. Did he feel guilty for what had happened in the castle or... She didn't know him well enough to finish the thought.

Dragging her gaze away from them, she asked, "How long will it take for Lorelle to arrive? Where is she?"

"She's on a planet called Stilox, not far from here," Sean explained. "Her mate will—"

"Her mate? Lorelle is married?" Damn, these men moved fast. Lorelle was the last person Brianna would have expected to give her heart away.

"Our customs are different from yours," Sean told her. "Mate is a more accurate word than married. Marriages can be entered into for a number of reasons, to increase social standings or for financial stability. What Lorelle and Mal Ton have found is intense and elemental."

She couldn't even imagine the man who could have formed an "intense and elemental" connection with her no-nonsense, take-no-prisoners sister. "I'm anxious to meet my sister's mate."

Sean smiled, pausing to squeeze her hand. "I'll make the arrangements." He looked pointedly at Kellan and added, "Why don't you show Brianna her new room then arrange the other things you offered her?"

"Stop trying to handle me, specter." Kellan's scowl would have terrified a lesser man. "I know what needs to be done."

"I won't be gone long, so behave." She wasn't sure if the last phrase had been meant for her or the overlord, but Sean's concern pleased her.

Kellan followed Sean to the door and told one of the guards to send Tanner to him while Sean went to contact Mal Ton. Her sister's mate. The phrase made her smile. Intense and elemental, she understood that concept all too well. She'd felt that sort of connection with Kellan the first time he touched her. Maybe even the first time she'd looked into his eyes.

What about Sean? Her attraction to him was less intense yet somehow deeper. Like a comfortable simmer as opposed to a scorching flame.

This was so confusing. She couldn't separate what she really felt from what had transpired in the castle. The spirit had built upon real emotions, expanding and intensifying attractions already begun, so it was almost impossible to filter out fantasy from reality.

"You'll need to stay here until Tanner moves his things to Ceddrik's room. I don't want you and Tanner crossing paths unless I'm there with you."

"You don't trust him?" She had no desire to encounter the interrogator either, but Kellan's concern intrigued her.

"I don't trust anyone where you're concerned. I want you to feel safe here and that's going to take some adjustment on the part of my men."

"Why do you care? Am I going to be here long enough to warrant the effort?"

He stood before her in an instant, moving with surprising speed and agility, considering his size. "You are no longer my prisoner, but I am not nearly ready to be separated from you."

Stress and uncertainty often sped the pace of developing romances. She was sure that's what had happened with Lorelle and Mal Ton. Even before the castle, Kellan's focus on her had confused and frightened her. Then Sean inadvertently explained the phenomenon.

No one had ever dared to refuse you before. The reminder explained Kellan's inability to forget Sean and it explained his obsession with her.

"I'm a curiosity, something to break up the monotony of sexual tribute. When was the last time a woman resisted you?" Not that she'd put up much of a fight. A few heated kisses and she'd melted like butter. "What happened in the castle was an amazing fantasy. But that's all it was. Make-believe. Role playing. I'm not a damsel in distress and you're not—"

"An overlord?" he challenged.

"Okay, maybe that wasn't the best example."

His fingers wrapped around the back of her neck and he tipped her face up with his thumb. "You're overwhelmed. That's understandable. I'm willing to slow things down, give you a chance to catch your breath. But I'm not willing to pretend this isn't real." His thumb brushed across her lips and his gaze focused on her mouth. "There is nothing make-believe about the connection drawing me to you."

Intense and elemental.

Someone knocked on the door and Kellan reluctantly released her. She watched him stride across the room, torn between relief and disappointment. Tanner awaited him in the corridor, looking dour and wary. They spoke briefly in their native language. Tanner glanced at her, his annoyance obvious. Then he offered a stiff nod and walked away.

"He'll have one of the women send up some clothes and you can move into his room after we find you something to eat." He closed the door and leaned against it, his gaze intent upon her face.

She willed him to move, needing his touch, wanting his lips on hers. But he remained where he was, his gaze the only thing that caressed her.

"Have you and Lorelle always been close, or did this misadventure deepen your bond?"

"Our father and older brother were killed in a shuttle accident when I was a teenager." She crossed her arms over her chest, feeling the space between them like a mighty chasm. "Lorelle had already begun her military career, but the loss hit us both really hard. We'd always thought we were sort of incompatible, but losing everything burns through the bullshit and shows you what's really important. We've been thick as thieves ever since."

"I'm glad you'll be reunited." He pushed off the door then clasped his hands behind his back. "You must have been horribly worried about her."

Why was he being so distant? This might be the longest they'd been in each other's presence without touching. She hadn't realized how much she enjoyed the connection until he'd taken it away.

"I was very worried." She cleared her throat. "But that's all over now. Right?" The assurance sounded hollow. Even if her captivity was finally over, the fallout from her abduction had just begun. How would she pay for passage back to Earth? And did she want to return? If others knew about her genetic anomaly, her homeworld might not be safe any longer. Lorelle would help her sort through her options and make the best decision. If Lorelle ever arrived.

A middle-aged woman with compassionate dark eyes arrived a short time later. She gave Kellan a small bundle of clothes and offered Brianna a caution smile. Kellan introduced her as "Lynn from the kitchen" but hurried her away before Brianna could say more than hello.

"That was rude." Brianna crossed the bedroom and took the bundle from Kellan. "You obviously need to review the difference between prisoner and guest."

He caught her upper arm and pulled her toward him. "When you were my prisoner you were naked and chained to my bed. I'm well aware of the difference. Don't push me."

She glanced at the bed, remembering the demanding movement of his mouth against her folds, his tongue thrusting into her... "Where can I change?"

His fingers released and she stepped back. "Bathroom."

Feeling rather cowardly, she rushed into the bathroom and closed the door. She had to decide on a course of action and stick to it. Kellan would take as much as she was willing to give, of that she had no doubt. So how much was she willing to offer him?

This wasn't a fantasy realm. Submitting to him now would come with real conflicts and real consequences. Her heart thudded out her excitement as she unfolded the bundle and inventoried the clothes. Perhaps fully clothed she'd have more luck thinking with her mind rather than her libido. A tunic, not unlike the one she wore, had been paired with drawstring pants. Slip-on shoes, but no undergarments. Her breasts were small and round, so she frequently went without a bra. Still, the lack made her feel vulnerable—and a bit naughty.

She pulled on the pants then took off Kellan's tunic, intending to exchange it for the smaller one. The clothes rested on the counter in between the two sinks. As she turned to pick up the other tunic, her gaze collided with an image in the mirror.

Clutching the tunic to her chest, Brianna stumbled back with a gasp. A woman stood behind her, pale face visible over her left shoulder. Mouth dry and knees wobbling, she slowly turned around. No one was there.

Was this the same entity the men had seen in the fantasy realm? She pivoted toward the door and opened her mouth to summon Kellan. Her throat tensed and no sound escaped. Whipping her head toward the mirror, she rubbed her neck and glared in silent accusation.

The phantom moved to the side, allowing Brianna to see her more clearly. Though sleek white hair flowed to her shoulders, her face was smooth and her light blue eyes sparkled with hypnotic intensity. "I mean you no harm, but I need to speak with you, not the overlord."

A bit more pressure could have closed her airway completely. It was obviously not the spirit's desire to harm her or she would be unconscious. She nodded then motioned toward her mouth and shook her head.

"Do you promise not to draw his attention?"

She nodded again and the pressure paralyzing her vocal cords released. "Are you the spirit?"

"It's not a title I would choose, but some call me that."

Her gaze gravitated toward the door.

"Don't." There was menace in her tone now where only warning had existed before. "I'll just take a moment of your time and then you can rejoin your men."

"What do you want? Why do you perceive Ceddrick as a threat? Kellan insists he's harmless."

"Perception has nothing to do with it and his name is not Ceddrick." She spit out the name as if it tasted foul. "He is a vile little worm who should have met his maker a long time ago."

"We understand your dislike for him. We don't understand the cause."

"Let Sean scan your memory. This is not a burden you should carry alone."

The suggestion sent chills down Brianna's spine. The last thing she wanted was anyone poking around in her mind. "Just tell me what Ceddrick is hiding. Why continue with these games?"

"You appeared to enjoy my games." The spirit smiled, her eyes glimmering. "Can't say I blame you. Your men make quite a team."

She surrendered to a dreamy smile, unable to hide the flush spreading across her cheeks. *Your men*. Why did that sound so perfect? "Do you know where Ceddrick is or not?"

The spirit waved away the question. "There will be many battles in this war. Open your mind to the specter. He's better equipped for this one than the overlord." Without further explanation the image faded away.

Brianna tugged on the new tunic as she rushed out the door. "I just saw the spirit. She can manifest in this realm."

The men sprang apart, making her wonder what had them so engrossed. "She appeared to you in the bathroom?" Kellan looked at Sean. "I thought you said she only exists on the metaphysical plane."

"I never said that. I realized she has no physical body. That's all. I have no idea what she's capable of doing."

"She's perfectly capable of making herself visible in a bathroom mirror." Brianna gathered her hair into a loose mass and tossed it over her shoulder. "It doesn't seem to matter that we've abandoned the castle, she's still determined to slay the dragon."

"What did she say to you?" Sean asked.

Uncertainty twisted through her. Just the thought of Ceddrik's invasion still made her queasy. "Has Ceddrik definitely left the compound?" Kellan nodded. "But no one saw him leave?"

"The guards saw him leave. They just had no reason to question his departure at the time. He was in one of the skimmers, so there is no way to track him. It would have been better for us if he'd stolen my skiff."

"You avoided my question." She hadn't been sure if Sean would allow the evasion and he didn't disappoint. "What did the spirit want?"

She sighed. Explaining what the spirit had suggested didn't mean she had to allow Sean into her mind. "She said Ceddrik wasn't his real name and she told me to let you scan my memory of his invasion. She said there would be more than one battle in this war and that you were better equipped for this battle than Kellan."

"It takes a freak to hunt a freak," Kellan muttered, and Brianna smiled.

"You're jealous." She was amazed by the realization. Kellan commanded more power than anyone she'd ever met and still he coveted the mutants' abilities.

"Weren't you taught not to bite the hand that feeds you?" His tone was mostly playful. "I thought you were hungry."

"I am, but I'd like a shower first."

"I think we could all use a shower." Kellan stepped forward, but Sean caught his arm.

"We can shower in Tanner's room," Sean insisted. "Brianna needs some time alone." His gaze focused on her, his smile warm and charming. "Take as long as you like. In fact, why don't you take a bath and really relax? One or the other of us will be out here, in case you need anything. Then we'll continue our conversation over dinner."

* * * * *

Distracted by the rapid-fire developments, Sean followed Kellan and Brianna down the hallway. They were all freshly bathed and in new clothes, but Sean's mind was still fixated on their unwanted visitor. What sort of being moved freely between dimensions without a corporeal tether? Incorporeal entities seldom bothered interacting with physical species. They considered themselves higher forms of life, having evolved beyond the need for the tactile stimuli. Something must be keeping the spirit here. Something intense and personal.

He needed Fane's advice and his expertise, but there was no way in hell he was leaving Brianna alone with Kellan. There was no telling what the wily bastard would do if left to his own devices.

Sean had expected this to be a simple hostage negotiation. He'd planned to be gone for no more than a day or two. Then he'd return to Sarah. Instead, he found his future embroiled in uncertainty and Sarah left alone in her time of need.

He'd attempted to contact her telepathically several times. She was blocking him, shielding her mind from everyone. Which left him with an impossible choice. Abandon Brianna or neglect his sister. Sarah was surrounded by people who cared about her and were trying to help her. If she'd only let them, while Brianna had no one but him. At least until Lorelle arrived, and that might take a day or two.

There was no way of anticipating how long it would take them to unravel the mystery surrounding Ceddrik and perhaps "slay the dragon". Meanwhile, he and Kellan were attempting to define their roles in Brianna's life, or if they would have roles in Brianna's life.

His gaze focused on her narrow back as they descended the front staircase. Did she want them in her life? The question was daunting. He wouldn't even begin to evaluate if what she wanted was what she needed. That would drive anyone mad.

Everything that happened in the castle had to be disregarded. They had been under the spirit's influence. But what if Kellan was right? What if the spirit only enhanced what they felt, exposed their deepest feelings and allowed them to express things they would ordinarily suppress?

"Are we going outside?" Hope rang through her tone, making Sean's heart ache for all she'd suffered. His life had been hard and he'd survived many harrowing changes. Even so, he'd never been deprived of his basic freedom.

"The woods are too dangerous at night. We'll have to be creative." Kellan led them to the skiff, which was waiting outside the main entrance.

"Are we going somewhere or is the ship our destination?"

"You'll see." Kellan smiled and she climbed into the passenger cabin.

Sean didn't miss the smoldering hunger in Kellan's gaze. Feeding Brianna was the current objective, but he obviously had other plans for how the meal would end. *Tread lightly, Overlord. She's not as strong as she wants you to believe.*

Kellan swung toward him, blocking his path. "I think she would surprise you," he said in Protarian. "But regardless, she's in no danger from me. I want only her happiness."

"And if her happiness requires you release her?"

"It won't," he said emphatically.

Sean shook his head as Kellan boarded the skiff. Despite his insistence that Brianna was free, Kellan had no intention of letting her go.

Chapter Eight

Grasping the wall with one hand, Ceddrik looked around in panicked dread as he pounded on the door with his fist. If Renn wasn't home, or if he'd finally made good on his threat to disappear, Ceddrik was well and truly fucked.

The neighborhood had gone to hell. No big surprise. All the black zones were slums and this one was no exception. The street was littered with abandoned vehicles and piles of garbage. Windows were boarded up or barred and still danger emanated from every doorway, every alley.

A tiny light blinked on in the top corner of the doorframe. Ceddrik stepped back and looked into the miniature lens. Someone was inside Renn's apartment. He prayed to the gods that it was Renn. The light blinked three times in quick succession then became a steady, demanding signal. He knew the routine, understood the need for security measures, but he despised the next step.

Slowly, resenting the vulnerability, Ceddrik weakened his mental shields. To allow Renn to scan him from this distance he risked revealing his identity to anyone else in close proximity. But one of them had to give and he was the one asking for admittance. The door jostled. He jerked it open and ducked inside.

The interior of the tenement was even less appealing with its musty smell and graffiti-decorated walls. Renn stood on the second-floor landing, his dark gaze sharp and suspicious. "Are you on an errand for the overlord, or has he finally tired of you?"

Ceddrik didn't rise to the provocation. He took the stairs two at a time and rushed into Renn's apartment. Unlike the building, the apartment was comfortable and clean. The furniture was custom, the carpeting plush, and the technology operational.

You've benefited from my position as much, perhaps more so, than I have. And now you'll share in my misfortune. Ceddrik had planned for every eventuality when he'd enlisted Renn's help all those years ago. Their association had lasted much longer than he'd expected, but he'd never been willing to abandon his safety net. He'd been a captive once. No one would ever put him in a cage again!

"Then it's over?" Renn shut and locked the door. His watchful gaze belied his nonchalance. "The overlord threw you out?"

I wish it were that simple. He paused. How much should he admit? How much did Renn need to know? *The spirit escaped. She turned Kellan against me.*

"What? Her containment was impenetrable. How is this possible?" Finally understanding the scope of their danger, Renn began to pace.

Obviously her containment wasn't quite as impenetrable as I thought. She waited until I was expending a great deal of energy in another way and then she broke free.

"We have to get the fuck off this planet. We need to get as far away from here as possible as fast as we can."

It won't help. She'll follow. She knows my energy pattern as well as she knows her own. We must find the seer. It's our only hope.

Renn laughed, a short burst of sound that had nothing to do with amusement. "That's a legend. A myth. If there ever was such a person, they would be long dead by now."

No. They exist. I've dreamed of them all my life. They are real and we must find them before the spirit does. Alone I have some hope of destroying the seer, but if the spirit empowers them, the legend will come to pass.

"Are you listening to yourself? If the spirit empowers the seer the legend will come to pass? You've always been eccentric, but this is out there even for you."

Ceddrik closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose. *I'm exhausted. I didn't realize how much she augmented my energy. I must find a way of restoring my strength.*

Some of Renn's agitation lessened. After a short pause he said, "Now that's the sort of request I can help you with. Rumor has it there's a conduit cruising the mutant bars. I've been meaning to look her up and see if she's worth recruiting."

We have bigger problems than staffing your band of petty thieves!

"Without my band of 'petty thieves' you would have come crawling back to me with your tail tucked between your legs long before now."

He was right, and resentment chilled Ceddrik's insides. The information Renn's people supplied had helped endear Ceddrik to the overlord. Without the tidbits of information and intercepted messages, Ceddrik would have been forced to rely more heavily on his abilities. And his control was unpredictable. Too often his probes were damaging, even deadly.

With a frustrated hiss, he pushed away the memories. None of it mattered now. The spirit had seen to that. *A conduit can augment my energy?*

"If she's half as good as the rumors indicate, she'll leave you so saturated you'll scream for mercy."

I don't need mercy. I need energy.

"And I'm always looking for new talent. We've been taking care of each other for years. I see no reason to alter our arrangement. We'll approach her, pretend we're interested in feeding her addiction and then test the true scope of her abilities."

* * * * *

Brianna sat at the small round table beside the pleasure pit, trying to disguise her disappointment. She'd had a leisurely bath and several hours to sort through her thoughts. The food was delicious and the men were on their best behavior. Still, she'd hoped to spend some time outdoors, away from prying eyes and locked doors.

"Is the meal not to your liking?" Kellan had wolfed down his portion and sat back, sipping wine.

"It's wonderful."

"I'm sorry you weren't able to see Lorelle while you spoke with her." His gaze caressed her face, but his expression was carefully guarded. "Ship to ship was the only way we could coordinate a conversation with Stilox security and black zone limitations. The skiff's communications systems are barely functional. It really was the best we could do without metaphysical assistance." He shot Sean a sidelong glance then asked, "Was talking to her not enough to ease your fears?"

"No, it was definitely her and she sounded happy."

"And she should arrive some time tomorrow," Kellan reminded.

"I know."

"Then what's bothering you? You've hardly spoken since we sat down."

She felt ungrateful and petty. They had done everything she'd asked and more. "I just..." This was ridiculous. Speaking her mind had never been a problem for her before and she would not start cowering now. "I appreciate all you've done for me. I really do. I was just hoping for an outdoor setting. I need the wind on my face and the sun..." As she spoke, the main section of the ceiling retracted, revealing a transparent panel and the starry sky. The lights around them dimmed, accenting the view. She floated, suspended in the endless, tranquility of space. "Wow," she whispered, afraid of breaking the spell.

Kellan touched her hand, drawing her attention back to the table. "The sun had already set, so I thought this was better than braving the woods at night."

Starlight accented the harsh angles of his features while making his dark eyes shine. The combination mesmerized her, made her feel uncertain and restless. "This is beautiful. How long can we stay up? Isn't the skiff solar powered?"

"The solar panels charge the energy cells, but the energy cells don't require sunlight. We can stay aloft most of the night if that's what you want."

"I'm not sure what I want," she admitted with a nervous smile. "That's the problem. Everything has happened so fast and most of it has been beyond my control. I'm so far out of my element I don't know how to begin to reorder my life."

"What is your element?" Sean pushed back from the table and leaned against the embankment, his stance casual, nonthreatening. "Tell us about your life on Earth. Who were you before all this started?"

Following his lead, she moved away from the table and took her wineglass with her. "I was born into a family of generals. My grandfather was a general. My father was a general. In fact we called my father 'the General'. I thought that was his name until I was about ten."

"Your sister followed in the family tradition. Why did you choose a different path?" Kellan asked.

"I faint at the sight of blood," she admitted with a shiver. "I knew the armed forces weren't for me. Confrontation is in my genes, however, so I chose a different battleground. The courtroom."

"You're a lawyer?" Sean sounded intrigued.

"I started out as a defense attorney, but I got tired of defending scumbags. I tried my hand as a prosecutor, but I have a hard time maintaining the needed detachment for criminal law. I switched to corporate about four years ago and it was a much better fit. It's a lot less stressful and a lot less lucrative."

"Why isn't it lucrative? You defend corporations when people bring lawsuits against them, right? Aren't you paid for that?"

Sean sounded disappointed now and she smiled. "I don't represent the corporations. I represent the individual or groups of individuals harmed by the corporations. I would say thirty percent of my work is pro bono."

"Pro bono?" Kellan echoed.

"That means I do it because I believe in the cause or because the court requests my services."

"Then you're a warrior just like the rest of your family." Kellan saluted her with his wine. "You just fight with words rather than weapons."

She took a leisurely sip, pleased by the recognition she saw in his eyes. "And how do you maintain order in the United Territories? How often does it come to bloodshed?"

Kellan stood and joined them in the space beside the table. She stood against the wall and Sean leaned against the embankment, which left Kellan with his back to the door. If they hadn't been in flight he probably wouldn't have allowed the vulnerability. Kellan was nothing if not pragmatic.

"Would it surprise you to learn there has been nothing more violent than a bar fight in my territory in the past three years?"

"Bullshit." Sean crossed his arms and shook his head, green eyes flashing.

"Can Fane say the same?" Kellan slanted a smile meant to provoke the other man.

"You're serious?"

"I might rule a council of warlords, but they abide by the truce I implemented three years ago. All hostilities have ceased and everyone has remained within the established boundaries."

"I knew the hostilities had greatly decreased since you were promoted, but no turf wars? No vendettas?" Sean shifted his weight from one foot to the other as he studied the overlord.

"Not unless they covered their tracks extremely well. We're all focused on a common goal. We want to improve the quality of life for the people in our territories and no one is going to do it for us. The elite are oblivious to anything that happens beyond the walls of Sanctum and mutants only care about mutants."

"What happens if someone switches their focus to a less-noble goal, like expanding their territory or overthrowing the overlord?" Challenge infused Sean's tone.

"I act swiftly and decisively with anyone who violates the treaty. My standards are high, but everyone is held to the same standard. There are no exceptions. Everyone is bound by the same set of expectations."

"Are you really so incorruptible?" Brianna teased, hoping to ease the tension pulsing between her men. Her men? There was that phrase again. When had she started thinking of them as hers?

"Oh I'm corruptible, but I'm not a hypocrite. You know what you're getting when you deal with me. I wear my corruption on my sleeve. I'm arrogant. I'm a bully. And I always get what I want."

His silky tone did cruel things to her senses. She hid her smile behind her wineglass, not wanting to encourage his bad behavior.

A shadow moved in the far corner of the room, a dark shape against the charcoal wall. She lowered the glass and focused on the spot, but discerned no movement.

"Would you like more wine?" Sean held out his hand for her glass.

She shook her head. "I think I've had enough." She passed Sean the glass and their fingertips brushed, sending sparks of awareness dancing across her fingers. She knew exactly what it felt like to have those fingers touch her and thrust into her, arousing her in ways she hadn't expected to find pleasurable.

Could he make it that good in reality or had the breath-stealing pleasure been part of the illusion? Intense and elemental. Their lovemaking had been that and more.

Kellan insinuated himself between her and the embankment, crowding her without actually touching her. "Why don't you want Sean to scan you?" He stared straight ahead, his tone casual.

"Things didn't turn out so well last time someone scanned my mind."

He caught her hand and brought her fingers to his lips. "Ceddrik is a hack compared to Sean. You have nothing to worry about."

She tugged her hand out of his light grasp, her skin tingling from the unexpected brush of his lips. These sneak attacks were worse than his frontal assaults. At least she could brace for impact when she saw him coming. His features tensed and his eyes glazed over, his muscles flexed and his shoulders shuddered. She knew exactly what he looked like when he came.

It wasn't real! His physical body had never actually penetrated her pussy—unless his tongue counted. She had to stop thinking about this, had to stop thinking about *them*.

"I don't want anyone inside my head," she said firmly. "I don't care how good they are at it."

"I won't hurt you." Sean stood where Kellan had been, blocking her only retreat.

You're wasting time. Let him scan you or there will be consequences.

Brianna gasped and pressed the heels of her hands to her temples. "She's here. The spirit just spoke to me."

Sean turned, arms spread as they had been in the castle. "Show yourself!"

Tell him to stop. I'm not the enemy.

Then stop trying to manipulate me. Brianna wasn't sure the spirit would hear her, but she had no intention of distracting Sean.

It didn't have to be like this. Remember that. You brought this on yourself.

Pressure built inside Brianna's head, pounding, throbbing. Kellan wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to his chest. She cried out, clutching the front of his tunic as spikes of pain drove deeper into her brain.

A wound opened and sensations flooded in, thoughts, images and emotions, inundating her mind, a raging river of external stimuli. She screamed, eyes tightly shut, face pressed into the bend of Kellan's neck.

She twisted and tumbled, lost in the buffeting current, powerless against the sweeping tide. Rage and fear, lust and heartbreak crashed over her, punishing and relentless. The chaotic deluge tossed her this way and that, no reason, no logic, no rationale.

Then warm fingers sank through her hair and came to rest against her skull. Energy pushed into her mind, surrounding the opening, drawing it inward. Slowly the rush of sensations ebbed and the pain muted. The discomfort didn't dissipate entirely, but it became manageable.

Breathe, sweetheart. Just breathe through the pain. Let me figure out exactly what she did to you.

Sean was there with her in the midst of the storm. Why in the world had she been afraid of this? He was calm and strong and agile. He flowed around her and through her like sun-warmed oil. She opened herself to him, surrendered and still.

Little by little the pain faded. The blasting throb became a faint beat echoing in the distance.

Better?

Yes. Why could she hear his thoughts? Was she telepathic now or was this just because he was in her head? *What did you do? What did she do to me?*

She ripped open your mind, made you utterly empathic. Every thought, every emotion from anyone nearby was pouring into your mind.

Now that the pain was gone, she realized she could still sense them. Fear radiated off Kellan, the emotion surprisingly strong. The indomitable overlord was frightened for her? How sweet. *Why didn't you close the opening?*

I tried. It won't stay closed. I've sealed it several times and it reopens. I've managed to stabilize it at this level. It isn't growing any larger, but it won't allow me to close it completely. A true healer might be able to do more, but for the time being I think it's best if I leave well enough alone.

He sounded a bit intrigued, but she could sense his worry. The specter in him might be fascinated by the development, but the man in him was concerned about her. *I think she was trying to tell me to be a little more open-minded.*

Sean chuckled, the sound warm and encouraging. His arms slipped around her and eased her away from Kellan. The overlord hesitated then let go. Sean swung her up into his arms and carried her into the pleasure pit, situating himself against the embankment with her on his lap.

Feeling dazed and lethargic, Brianna gazed into his green eyes. The color seemed rich and vivid after staring into Kellan's night black gaze for so long. "Is the pain gone?" he asked.

She nodded. His thighs were hard under her bottom and she couldn't help but realize where he had taken her. To an orgy pit, a soft, expansive area where they could stretch out and enjoy each other.

Kellan remained near the entrance, leaning against the top edge of the embankment. Why was he being so cooperative? This wasn't like him at all. Realizing she could answer her own question if she were brave enough to try, she turned her attention toward him without shifting her gaze from Sean's face.

Desire smoldered in Kellan, yet worry restrained the fiery urges. Was he afraid the spirit had done more damage than they realized?

What's wrong? You seem far away all of the sudden.

"I'm not used to feeling other people's emotions." It wasn't exactly a lie. "It's distracting."

Sean smiled. "Is it all right if I scan your memory now?"

She sighed. "I'm tempted to tell you no. I'm not afraid of you anymore, but if I allow you to perform the scan the spirit wins."

"Don't turn this into a competition. This entity is dangerous. What she did to you was... I can only think of a handful of people who would be capable of doing what she did."

"And yet you repaired the damage," Kellan muttered. "Does that mean you're as powerful as she?"

"Not even close. But it's likely she knows what I'm capable of doing. It really is best if we try to work with her, not against her."

"I guess nothing is lost by learning more about the dragon." She glanced at Kellan, feeling a spike in his anxiety. This empathy thing was a lot less exact than she'd imagined. Even when she could identify a specific emotion, she had to guess at the cause and the context. She turned her face up toward Sean and said, "Scan me."

Sean was trying to be gallant, trying to show Kellan how a gentleman behaved. But all he really wanted to do was to press Brianna down into the pillows and force her legs apart with his knees. He wanted to strip her naked and continue the exploration they'd

begun in the castle. One night with this delectable princess had only whetted his appetite for more, a whole lot more of the same.

Knowing she could sense his rising ardor only made it that much harder to control. Was she titillated by how much he wanted her? She hadn't crawled off his lap and his cock had hardened moments after they sat down.

"I'll go slowly. You can stop me at any time." His shaft twitched against her ass and she smiled.

"I'll keep that in mind." Her voice was soft and breathless. Were they still talking about scanning? Her nipples had formed distinct peaks in the front of her tunic. They looked almost as hard as his cock. Gods preserve him, how was he going to concentrate well enough to pinpoint a memory?

She licked her lips and he shivered. The temptation to suck her tongue into his mouth was nearly overwhelming and he refused to remember how it felt to have her tongue swirling around the head of his cock, poking into the slit, lapping up his... He cleared his throat. "Would you be more comfortable if you lay back?"

One of her brows arched and her eyes heated. Undeniable awareness arced between them, crackling in the air all around them. "Would *you* be more comfortable if I lay back?"

"Probably not, but you need to relax and I need to concentrate." On something other than fucking her again.

Suddenly Kellan was beside him. He sat against the embankment, leaving a small gap between them. "Let go."

Sean wasn't sure if the order was directed at him or her, but they both obeyed. He moved his arm out of the way and Kellan swung her legs around. Her round little ass rotated on his cock and Sean bit back a moan. Damn, that felt good. Before he could analyze the sensation too closely, Kellan drew her forward, spreading her out on the pillows between them.

Her legs arched over Kellan's thighs and her head rested in Sean's lap, her eyes wide and luminous. Kellan gathered her hands and placed them on her belly, one on top of the other. She allowed him to position her, seemed completely relaxed.

There was no way he could deny it, and no sense trying to resist it, things just felt more natural, more balanced when Kellan was in control. Was he comfortable enough with who he was to accept the dynamic?

She caught her lower lip between her teeth and closed her eyes. *Go on. I'm ready.*

Her telepathic touch was a bit uncertain but easily understood. Burying his fingers in her hair, he flowed across the tactile bridge and into her mind. The touch wasn't necessary for him, but it made his penetration less intrusive. At least he hoped it did.

There was no resistance, no shielding of any kind. That was the first order of business as soon as he figured out what the spirit wanted him to see. Brianna needed to learn how to protect herself, to shield her thoughts.

Focusing on the task at hand, he found the memory center of her brain. Present energy burned more brightly than past or future energy. He pushed through thoughts and feelings without experiencing them. The future stretched off in one direction, fading from medium gray to purest white while the past followed an opposite gradient, passing from gray to black in an ever-darkening shade.

He waded into the gray, immersing himself in memories, filtering them with skill gained through years of practice. If the image had nothing to do with what he was looking for, he didn't linger but moved immediately to the next situation.

He spotted Brianna in chains, naked and terrified. Anger spiked through him and he dragged the memory to the surface? *When was this? Who did this to you?*

You're too far back. That was before.

Was this your inquisitor? He pushed Tanner's image into her mind. Planning all the ways he would make the man pay.

I have no intention of reliving all that – unpleasantness. Find the right image and get out.

Sorry. Allowing him in had been hard for her. He needed to respect her privacy and show himself worthy of her trust. He slowed the memory stream as they neared the night in question.

He watched Kellan touch her in the shower and watched her respond. Kellan hadn't exaggerated. Their attraction had been combustible even before the spirit took control. She knelt before the overlord naked, legs spread, eyes filled with desire as Kellan stroked himself to completion.

Fuck! No wonder Kellan wasn't willing to release her.

If she looked at him like that – she had looked at him like that. Her eyes had been heavy-lidded and smoldering just before she took his cock in her mouth. Kellan had spent more time with her, but she'd made it clear she wanted both of them, would be satisfied with nothing less.

Focus! He had to analyze the images without being swept up in them.

She raised her arms above her head and asked Kellan to bind her. Sean tried not to react to the scene, but it was impossible. She'd been so open, so needful in that moment. The look resonated through his soul. He understood how she felt. It wasn't just that he wanted her to want him. Sean wanted Kellan the same way.

Desire twisted through him, dark and elemental. The temptation had been there for years, but watching Brianna surrender to Kellan had reawakened a need he thought dead within him. He wanted Kellan.

He watched Kellan bind her then fuck her with his fingers. He'd had no idea they'd shared so much, but he should have realized. In the castle Kellan had anticipated her desires and understood her needs.

After a brief argument, Kellan draped her legs over his shoulders and aggressively ate her pussy. This is what Sean had pictured, what he'd expected from the brutish overlord. It was the tenderness, the patience that came as a surprise.

His balls ached with his need to come. This was stimulating on so many levels. She rocked against Kellan's mouth, grinding her folds against his lips. Forcing aside his own discomfort, Sean focused on her mind, waiting for the intrusion.

Old. The energy pulsed with centuries of existence.

Sean dove directly into the particles, saturating himself with the foreign resonance. Echoes of echoes, faint and distorted. He knew this rhythm, had sensed something similar before.

Brianna began to struggle and the intruder's stream intensified, widening and deepening. Where had he sensed this rhythm before? Why did it seem familiar?

He opened his receptors wider, risking contamination and damage. An image flashed through his mind for an instant. Just a blip and then it was gone. But Sean captured it, surrounding it protectively as he withdrew from the memory stream.

It made no sense.

Releasing Brianna's mind, he rested his head against the embankment and closed his eyes. He raised his shields, closing himself off from everyone before he accessed the image.

The face meant nothing to him, but the clothing and the elaborate tattoo stretching from his ankle to his thigh was unmistakable. Ceddrick, or the person now known as Ceddrick, was a Faundi defender just like Fane. Everyone believed Fane's people were extinct. Even Fane believed he was the lone survivor of a doomed race. He wasn't sure how Fane would react to the news, but one thing was certain. Fane alone must decide what to do with the information.

Brianna touched his face, drawing his attention back to reality. "Are you all right?"

He smiled. "I think I'm supposed to ask you that. Was that too upsetting? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

"You know you didn't." She sat up, her hand buried in the pillows on the far side of his hip. "Was it worth it? Did you learn anything useful?"

Wrapping his arm around her waist, he pulled her against his chest. "Kellan's not going to like it, but I need to take you to the Underground."

"Not a chance."

She pushed against his chest and faced Kellan. "I'm not your prisoner anymore. Remember? It's my decision not yours."

"You can go anywhere you want without him, but he can't take you without my permission and I *do not* give my permission for him to take you anywhere."

"What are you talking about?"

"Sean knows what I'm talking about."

Sean wanted to strangle the son of a bitch. He'd almost forgotten about that fucking vow! "You can't stand the thought of someone else being in control. Can you?"

"This isn't about control."

"Like hell it's not."

She swung her legs off Kellan's lap and knelt between them. "If Sean can't do anything without your permission, I might as well be your prisoner. No one else here is going to lift a finger without your say." She paused as the full measure of his manipulation sank in. "You disingenuous bastard! You had no intention of letting me go." With a furious snarl, she threw a pillow at him.

He easily batted it aside, his expression inscrutable. "Where do you want to go so badly?"

"Anywhere away from you!"

Pushing away from the embankment, he planted his fists on his hips and stared her down. "I allowed you your own room. You can lock yourself inside and sulk as soon as we land."

"I don't want to sulk. I want to fuck. I'm restless as hell, if you haven't noticed." With rebellion flashing in her eyes, she crawled astride Sean's lap and took his face between her hands. "Just ignore him. I certainly intend to."

"Brianna, you don't want to—" Apparently she did. Her mouth sealed over his and her tongue traced the seam between his lips. Cursing himself for a fool, Sean opened for her. She was using him just as surely as Kellan was using him, but it felt a whole hell of a lot better when she did it.

Her hands moved to his shoulders as he took control of the kiss. She was playing with fire. They both were. He glanced at Kellan, knowing what he'd find. Lust, fury and—pain? Why pain?

Sean tried to settle her down, to slow the kiss and contain the tsunami barreling toward them. Despite the pleasure pit, this wasn't a fantasy realm. This was hard, cold reality where hurtful words left lasting impressions and... She pulled her tunic off over her head and guided his hand to her breast.

Her hands were suddenly jerked away from his body and she gasped, momentarily breaking the kiss.

"Don't stop on my account," Kellan whispered, hooking her elbows with one arm while he caressed her breasts with his other hand.

"Stop it!" She twisted, inadvertently rubbing her lower body against Sean's aching erection as she tried to avoid the overlord's touch.

"Why? You knew damn good and well I wouldn't just stand there and watch this. Why are you provoking me?" He pinched her nipple and she whimpered, her breath escaping with a moan. "Do you want me to punish you like I punished you before? Shall Sean hold you still while I fuck you with my tongue?"

It was Sean's turn to moan, unable to suppress the needful sound or the vivid image that burst to life within his mind.

Kellan chuckled. "Did you enjoy watching me eat her pussy? Is that why it took you so long to scan her memory?"

"She's right, you're a bastard."

"And you both love me for it." Kellan pushed his hand beneath the waistband of her pants and cupped her mound. "We're both hard enough to pound nails and she's so wet her pants are soggy. How much longer are we going to pretend this is the result of some magic spell?" His hand moved subtly and her body jerked. "Stop lying to yourself and I'll let you come."

"I hate you."

"Of course you do." His voice was even, almost amused. "The princess is supposed to hate the overlord. But that doesn't stop her from wanting him. She unlocks the door or lowers her golden hair so he can fuck her senseless all through the night. Hate me if you must. Just admit that you want me." He touched her again and again, making her tremble.

"I want Sean!"

"Sean can't fuck you unless I fuck you. Don't you remember the rules?"

"Stop it." There was far less vehemence in her voice this time. "This isn't a fantasy realm. You're really touching me."

"Yes, I am. And you're melting all over my fingers. Pull down her pants, Sean. Give me room to move."

How did he do this? One minute they were rubbing his face in the fact he was an asshole and the next he had them wrapped around his finger. Right where they'd wanted to be all along.

Sean untied the string and bunched her pants around her knees. Her sleek thighs framed Kellan's hand, his long fingers gently massaging.

"Let me do it." Was that tight, urgent voice actually his?

"Let you do what?"

"Let me lick her pussy. I want to feel her come around my tongue."

Kellan paused, his gaze boring into Sean's. "You can lick her pussy while she sucks my cock, but that's not how this will end. After you're swimming in her taste and you get down to business between her thighs, I'm going to kneel behind you. I'm going to spread those tight round cheeks and work you with my fingers. I'm going to lube you up good and push my cock deep into your ass. Then, and only then, I'll come deep inside you while you spill your seed inside our mate. Does that sound like a plan?"

Lust, scalding and raw washed over Sean. He clenched his fists, barely able to breathe. He could almost feel the fullness, the overwhelming heat of Kellan's cock pushing into his body. His lips pressed together, fighting back the words. But somehow they still slipped free, "Yes, Master."

Chapter Nine

Nehalem Bryson sat in the back corner of the seedy bar, loath to touch anything. She didn't dare return to any of the nicer mutant bars—if there was such a thing—for fear that her husband would learn she hadn't left the planet. Yes, her husband and Chancellor Howyn were both in custody, but men with their kind of power were never without resources.

She'd wanted to leave the planet, had booked passage on a luxury liner bound for a leisure colony in a distant galaxy when the cravings surfaced. Her body had become accustomed to the continual influx of mutant energy she had force-fed it during her excursions with her husband and now, like a junkie, her body demanded regular feedings. If she didn't absorb mutant energy on a regular basis, she became violently and excruciatingly ill. Unfortunately the particular mutant energy she needed existed nowhere but on Protaria.

Suspecting that the Chrysalis nanites would make these cravings unbearable, she had opted not to use them. The nanites amplified mutant energy, making everything about it more potent. There was a tiny chance the nanites would allow her to satisfy her cravings with a smaller amount of energy, while it made more sense that everything about her condition would be made that much worse. No. The nanites were staying in suspension until she found another host.

She'd risked too much to squander the opportunity. Her physiology might be ruined, but she wasn't the only person on Protaria capable of absorbing mutant energy. She had to find someone with similar abilities who hadn't abused their gift.

Her search for this perfect host had led her from mutant bar to mutant bar. What she really needed was access to the Underground, but that wasn't going to happen. Too many of the mutants knew who she was. Or who she had been in another lifetime. General Bryson's first lesser wife. Once upon a time, that had meant something.

She heaved a frustrated sigh and looked over the smoky room. Her search for another person with her gift had been futile so far, but she was far from giving up. In the meantime, she disguised her true mission by feeding rather indiscriminately. She never took from an unwilling donor and she never fed from the same donor twice. She was amassing quite a reputation as an energy whore.

A tall, lanky man decked out in synth-leather and chains sauntered up to her table and plopped down a beer. "Word is you've got an appetite for energy but you don't like sampling the same dish more than once."

She narrowed her gaze on his emaciated face. Holy shit! "Renn? Is that you?"

It took a moment for recognition to register in his pale blue eyes. "Nehalem?" He rounded the table and pulled her up and into his arms. "What the fuck are you doing in

Old Towne? Where is your escort? You're not alone, are you? Don't you realize how dangerous it is..."

The years rolled back as they stared into each other's eyes. She was fifteen again, a rebellious girl infuriated by an arranged marriage. Renn was a dashing young security officer in her father's employ. They'd snuck away at every opportunity and he'd introduced her to the pleasures awaiting her in the marriage bed. Or to be more exact, he'd shown her the pleasures she would never find with her militant husband. They had stopped short of actual penetration, but oh how they'd improvised.

"What are you doing here?" Renn asked again, drawing her back into the present.

With a reluctant sigh, she eased away from him and returned to her chair in the corner. "You're not much for news feeds, I take it?"

"Nothing that happens in Sanctum changes our lives down here, so why bother?"

"Padric and Chancellor Howyn were both arrested last week. I am currently without protection."

"Your husband and the chancellor were arrested?"

Apparently he had to say the words before the concept became believable. "That's what I said."

"Then the reports I've received of a..." He leaned across the table and lowered his voice. "Have *you* been cruising for energy hits? Is that why you're here?"

She had fucked three mutants while her husband watched and hadn't felt shame until this moment. "I'm staying alive. If you don't understand what that involves, then get the hell away from me."

"I'm sorry. I'm in no position to judge you. I'm just confused. When did you mutate? Wasn't that one of Bryson's conditions? I thought all of his wives were genetically pure."

She scoffed. "Do you honestly think there's a person in this star system who's genetically pure? I didn't mutate until after the wedding and my mutation left no visible evidence, so he chose not to set me aside. Lucky me." She picked up the beer and took a long pull then made a revolted face. What was she doing? She hated beer. "Who's your friend?" Blond hair and blue eyes, rather ragged around the edges. Just like everyone else in the bar.

"This is Ced," Renn introduced. "He's my cousin. He's deaf and unable to speak. He can communicate telepathically, but he has to establish a link first. If he wants to ask you something, he'll let me know."

She waved, not sure what else to do with a deaf-mute telepath. "Does he have any other abilities? Telepathic energy isn't usually worth draining." She was too hungry to be subtle. Renn had known why she was here when he gave her the beer. She couldn't let the fact they knew each other distract from her purpose. She needed it too badly to turn back now.

"Actually we have something a little different in mind."

"Different than what? I only fuck to feed. I'm not in this for the sex." Did that make it better or worse? She couldn't tell anymore.

"What if you didn't have to 'fuck to feed'? Would you be interested in regaining control of your sex life?"

She leaned back in her chair and stared at him, searching for the man she'd known in the outrageous garb. Was his getup a disguise, or had he changed as much as she had? It had been a really long time since they'd last seen each other. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about little details your husband didn't want you to know. You're not a sponge, Nehalem. Most people with your gift live and die without ever unleashing the potential of their gift."

"It's not even a real gift. I just absorb mutant powers along with their...fluids. Lots of people are like that."

"You're right. Lots of people temporarily demonstrate an echo of a mutant's abilities after they've fucked repeatedly, but that's not what's happening with you. The fact you won't sample the same mutant twice means you're in a completely different category."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"You're a conduit. It's a very rare, very powerful gift. You can give energy and transplant abilities into others. Your gift flows in both directions. We can fuck if you want to. Spirits know I've imagined it often enough, but there are better ways to control your gift."

Each word he uttered only made her more wary. When things sounded too good to be true, they usually were. "Why would you help me? I have some really dangerous enemies."

"Hell, everyone I know is dangerous." Renn's lips curved, but he didn't quite smile. "Ced needs energy and you're one of the few people on this planet capable of giving it to him. I came into this bar looking for a conduit. I won't pretend to be disappointed that the conduit turned out to be you."

Nehalem's heart was pounding. It had been so long since she felt anything resembling hope, she wasn't sure she could trust it. "If I feed Ced, you'll teach me how to control my power. This will be an even exchange?"

"That's the offer."

She licked her lips, fidgeting in her chair. "I'll have to meet you somewhere in about an hour. I—"

"We won't let you starve, beautiful. That would be counterproductive to our needs."

"But how will I feed if we don't have sex?"

"Let's go back to your hotel room. If I can't have you transferring energy in ten minutes or less, I'll go down on you."

Perhaps she'd take eleven minutes just so she could find out if Renn's mouth was as agile as she remembered. She pressed her thighs together and held out her hand. "You've got yourself a conduit."

* * * * *

Are you sure you want to do this? Brianna tried to capture Sean's gaze, but he wouldn't look at her.

I left eleven years ago because I was falling in love with this son of a bitch. I think he's always known how I felt. He knew before I did. Sean ran a hand through his hair, anxiety radiating off him in waves.

You don't seem pleased by the realization. Other emotions seethed beneath the surface, but the combinations were too hectic for her to identify. All she could sense for certain was conflict. Sean was not yet at peace with this development.

He's going to be so damn smug! He never loses. The bastard always gets what he wants.

But they obviously wanted the same thing! Sean's desire was undeniable. Men could be so irrational. She smiled and then laughed, unable to contain the joy bubbling up inside her. It was happening faster than she might have liked, but this is what she wanted as well, for all three of them to form a tight, unshakable bond. She'd been trying to convince herself it had all been part of the illusion, but her heart refused to pay attention to her mind.

"Will it really be so bad?" she asked.

"Which part?" Sean's face turned an adorable shade of red.

"Stop telling secrets," Kellan grumbled. "It's not fair to those of us without magic powers."

"Oh, neither of us is convinced you don't have magic powers." She tossed her pants aside and faced him squarely, hands on her hips. "We think you've beguiled us, made us powerless to resist your scowls and snarls."

"I don't snarl." He sounded affronted, but amusement sparkled in his eyes and he was struggling to keep his gaze focused on her face.

"You sure as hell growl." Sean finally smiled. "And you bark orders like —"

"An overlord?" Kellan suggested.

"You see, this is the problem." Brianna hooked her arm though Sean's and swept her hand toward Kellan. "He's proud of the fact he's an overbearing ass, so it makes it hard to shame him into better behavior."

"I'm an overbearing ass." Kellan stalked toward them. "I'm an insensitive jerk and a barbaric animal. But you're naked and I'm hard as a rock. Can we please fuck now?"

Sean and Brianna both laughed and shook their heads.

"He's hopeless," she concluded.

"I am what the world has made me. When I compromise, people die." His words hung in the air for a moment, potent and unapologetic. All playfulness vanished from his bearing and fatigue crept over his face.

Sean reached for him first, but Brianna was half a step behind.

Sean palmed Kellan's shoulder, looking deep into his eyes. "There is no conflict here, no danger, no responsibilities. I'm not a specter, she's not a lawyer, and you are not the overlord."

Kellan's lips curved and his chin rose. "Overlord is not what I do, it's who I am. That's the difference between you and me. I can't stop being the overlord, even if I wanted to."

"And do you want to?" Brianna asked.

"Sometimes." With a heavy sigh he seemed to shed the gloom. "Right now I want someone to kiss and either of you will do." Before Sean realized what Kellan intended, the overlord grabbed a fistful of his hair and dragged him forward. "Have you had time to accept that you're mine?"

"We belong to each other," Sean insisted. "You are just as much mine as I am yours. And we both belong to Brianna."

Kellan just smiled and slowly pulled Sean's head back. "Have any of your lovers been men?"

"I've exchanged energy with other mystics but I don't consider them lovers."

Kellan tightened his fist, drawing Sean's head farther back. "Did that answer my question?"

"Some of the things we did were sexual."

It was impossible for Sean not to look into Kellan's eyes. Was her interrogation next? Would Kellan want to know all the details of her past lovers? She gave an inward laugh. All three of them?

"Have you ever sucked a cock?"

"Yes." Sean's brows raised and challenge bled into his tone. "Have you?"

"Has a man ever sucked yours?"

"Why is this important? Are you going to answer these questions for me?"

Kellan shrugged. "I've had male and female lovers, and interesting combinations of the two. Sexual tribute is a two-edged sword. I'm able to demand it whenever I like, but I'm also offered it far more often than I would choose. Still, when the choice is fuck a stranger or rekindle a blood feud, I generally get undressed."

His clipped, hollow tone made Brianna want to weep. This sexual tribute nonsense was going to stop! Kellan's body belonged to her now. She would share him with no one but Sean.

"So back to you," Kellan prompted, his tone a bit stronger. "How hard will it be for you to adjust to having a male lover? That's the purpose for my questions. I'm not just being crass."

"As I said, even though the acts were sexual, I didn't think of them as lovers. We were exchanging energy, helping each other heal or preparing for battle."

"I want to fight in your army," Kellan muttered. "Sounds like fun. When my men get hurt, we try to keep them from bleeding to death while we stitch up their wounds."

"People die in any war. Don't fool yourself, Overlord. Your men don't have a monopoly on suffering."

"Time out." Brianna moved forward, trying to imitate Kellan's scowl. "I thought you two were going to kiss. I was feeling pretty left out until you started arguing."

Kellan wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her in close to Sean. "Let's meet in the middle."

"Always a good idea," she agreed.

She pushed to the balls of her feet and Sean tilted his head. Kellan had the greatest distance to cover. He bent slightly and angled his face almost sideways. Their lips brushed and tongues slid. Kellan's hair caressed her cheek and Sean's whisker stubble rasped against her chin. It was intoxicating and decadent.

"Down," Kellan ordered. "I'm too damn tall."

The men frantically undressed on their way down to the pillows. Brianna helped as much as she could, but they were fast. They tumbled in a tangle of naked limbs and straining torsos, Brianna on the bottom then Sean and finally Kellan.

Sean pinned his arms to the pillows while Brianna pumped his cock. She wanted to feel him sliding against her tongue, but she was captivated by their urgent, hungry kiss. Kellan reared up, thrusting his tongue into Sean's mouth. Sean laughed and pulled back, nipping out a warning. Then Sean licked Kellan's lips, teasing him, arousing him, yet denying him the deep, wet kiss he obviously craved.

With a feral growl, Kellan wrenched his arms free and pulled Sean down across his chest. Their lips met and meshed, the faint motion of their cheeks the only hint of the duel going on inside their mouths.

Brianna finally turned her attention back to the cock in her hand. Not that she'd actually forgotten it. The tip was deeply flushed and widely flared, virile, potent, like the man himself. She closed her lips around the knob and sucked. So soft, yet so hard, the contrast never failed to fascinate her. She swirled her tongue as she took him deeper, savoring the hot slide of his shaft against her lips.

Desire pulsed and churned, curling around their bodies like arid winds. It was dizzying to sense the emotions coming from outside her body as well as within. She didn't fight it. Relaxing into an easy, rocking motion, she slid her mouth up and down on Kellan's cock. Her hand cupped his balls, lightly massaging the warm sac.

"I'm not going to last," Kellan gasped, a note of desperation in his tone.

"So don't," Sean advised. "Surrender to us for a change. Lose control."

Kellan bent his knees, rocking up into her mouth while Sean pinched his nipples and kissed him over and over. She wanted to watch his face when he came, see the moment when he finally surrendered.

Get your finger really wet and push it up his ass.

Her gaze flew to Sean, but his eyes were closed. *He'll kill me.*

He'll fill your mouth with cum, but he'll love every minute of it.

Loosening her lips without stopping her slide, she let liquid run out and wet her fingers as they held the base of his cock. Then she switched hands and tightened her lips again as she carefully maneuvered her wet hand beneath his bent knee. Finding the needed angle took a couple of tries and he must have guessed her purpose because he spread his legs wider.

She rubbed her finger against then around his opening, as much to satisfy her curiosity as to stimulate him. She'd never thought of this part of the body as particularly sexy until Sean had given her the most powerful orgasm of her life while buried in her ass.

Kellan made deep, needful sounds in the back of his throat as she moved into position.

Do it, Sean urged.

She drove her finger inward and Kellan cried out. His cock bucked against her tongue and he thrust to the back of her mouth. Hot cum blasted into her throat. She swallowed and licked and swallowed some more. His hands were in her hair as he shuddered, groaning with the force of his climax.

She stayed with him until the last spasm passed, her body tingling with his pleasure. Her breasts felt heavy, the tips extra-sensitive and her core pulsed with unfulfilled desire. Despite the contentment she shared with Kellan, her body demanded some attention of its own.

Sean pulled her into his arms as she released Kellan's cock and removed her hand from between his legs. "We make one hell of a team," Sean said with a smile. "I think our overlord is well and truly conquered."

"Give me...five minutes to catch my breath." Kellan laughed, flat on his back and sated.

"Well, five minutes isn't a lot of time, but I'll enjoy having her to myself for a change." Sean laid her back across the pillows, taking her farther away from Kellan.

"Now who's provoking him?" She opened her arms and bent her knees as he moved on top of her. He bent to her breast, however, which prevented him from responding verbally.

I guess he's right. We both like to see him go off. There's something incredibly sexy about his temper.

Sean's lips moved on to her belly and she used the ticklish sensation to hide the true reason for her smile. She liked to see Kellan "go off" but it had nothing to do with his temper.

Sean spread her legs wide and paused to look at her pussy. "This is so wondrously strange. I feel like I know your body already and yet I haven't actually touched you or tasted you yet."

"What are you waiting for?" She squirmed a little, needing his mouth or his fingers, or both!

He bent slowly, inhaling deeply as he went. His tongue swept out, stroking her from core to clit then circling the nub. She sighed and closed her eyes.

"Don't close your eyes," Kellan said, suddenly beside her. "Watch him. See how much he enjoys your scent and your taste."

She opened her eyes and Kellan moved behind her, pushing pillows aside and settling her between his legs. Her back rested against his abdomen, making it easier for her to see what Sean was doing between her thighs.

Holding her open with his fingers, Sean lashed her clit until her hips began to buck involuntarily. "Oh," she cried, wrapping her arms around Kellan's legs as the tension inside her made her core clench in on itself painfully. "I need..." Sean pushed two fingers into her cunt and she came in deep, pulsing spasms. "Something to squeeze," she finished with a sigh.

Sean draped one of her legs over his shoulder and pressed his mouth directly over her pussy. Building on the embers of her orgasm, he started another cycle of arousal. His lips moved against her swollen folds and his tongue thrust into her core, caressing and stimulating. He grasped her hips, lifting her, driving his tongue deeper.

Kellan held her still while Sean feasted on her cream. His hands caressed her breasts, fingers teasing her nipples. She reached back, caressing his chest and squeezing his shoulders. Having Kellan touch her had been exciting, but they built upon each other, compounding the thrill and transforming simple enjoyment into something—spiritual. This felt fated. Right.

The first tingling ripples of an orgasm had just begun when Sean raised his head. "Don't stop! I was almost there."

"Greedy minx." He positioned himself at her entrance then hooked her legs over his arms. "I let you come once already. I want to feel the next one squeeze my cock."

"Sounds reasonable to me." Kellan stuffed a pillow beneath her ass, tipping her hips up so he could see what was going on a little better.

Sean began long, slow stokes, pulling nearly out before plunging his full length back inside her. The slide felt wonderful, but the new angle tipped her clit away from his shaft. She wiggled, trying to realign her clit for the needed rubbing.

"What's the matter?" Kellan asked, his voice deep and smoky.

"I can't...come like this," she whispered. Communication was the foundation for any relationship, no matter how embarrassing she found the topic. She'd never understood why it was harder to talk about sex than it was to do it, but she'd always found verbalizing her needs awkward.

"Why not?"

Rather than humiliate herself further by explaining, she reached down and rubbed her fingers over her clit.

"I see. Do you want me to pull out the pillow or help you do that?" His voice dipped to a sexy whisper, his warm breath caressing her cheek.

"Touch me."

He needed no other instructions. She expected him to brush her fingers aside, but he covered her hand with his, entwining their fingers. Then she was caressing herself with his fingers and sparks of pleasure jumped beneath their combined fingertips.

Sean moaned and shifted her legs higher, thrusting faster. Kellan's fingers flexed gradually, taking control of the caress. She smiled, relaxing against his body, surrendering to his care. He touched her with her fingers, sending ripples of sensation deep into her core. Sean gasped, pumping faster, eyes passion-glazed.

"Are you ready for me, Sean?" Kellan continued to circle her clit, but his voice held a note of challenge. "You haven't forgotten how this is going to end, have you?"

Sean's eyes snapped into focus and rose to Kellan's. "Now?"

"I said you could swim in her taste and you did. But I said we would come together and it looked like you were getting pretty close to coming without me."

Kellan deftly replaced his body with pillows as he moved out from behind Brianna. Sean lowered her legs and balanced on his knees. He was still more or less inside her, but his ass was in the air, right where Kellan needed it to be.

Brianna framed his face with her hands and smiled into her eyes. "In the castle you took me without hurting me. Can't you do the same thing for yourself?"

"I'm not afraid of the pain."

"He's afraid he'll enjoy it. And he will." There was no conceit in Kellan's voice. He stood a step back from Sean, rubbing lubricant over his cock. "I think most men face these feelings. There are taboos associated with same-sex relationships in almost every culture. It's natural that he's feeling conflicted."

"But you're not conflicted?" Sean asked.

"No. My desire for you feels just as natural to me as my desire for Brianna."

"Then get it over with." Sean turned his head back around and buried his face between her breasts.

Kellan laughed. "I think we can do better than making you feel like a martyr." He went down on one knee behind Sean and squeezed the lube into his palm. "I'm going to use my fingers first. I want you to get used to the fullness and the motion. If you come, don't be embarrassed. We'll work out the timing as we go along."

Sean turned his head and sucked one of Brianna's nipples into his mouth, determined to ignore what Kellan was doing. If the bastard thought he would come at the first thrust of a finger into his ass, he knew nothing about specter training!

She stroked his hair and lightly dragged her fingernails across his back. Her pussy was snug and warm around his cock. He felt almost sleepy.

Then Kellan parted his ass cheeks and lubed his opening. He'd expected the cool slipperiness. Without lubricant, and lots of it, this would never work. But he wasn't prepared for the tingling rush of sensations that followed Kellan's fingertips.

"Most people don't realize how many nerve endings there are in this area." Kellan dragged his thumbnail across Sean's skin to demonstrate. Prickly bursts detonated in his wake and Sean's anus contracted and released, as if begging for attention.

He released Brianna's nipple and took a deep breath. "I'm in big trouble, aren't I?"

"Only if you choose to look at it that way." Kellan touched his finger to Sean's anus, announcing his intention before pushing inside. Smooth pressure, spreading, opening, sliding.

Sean's cock twitched and his balls tingled. Oh shit, this was going to be hell!

Kellan reversed direction and the pleasure intensified tenfold. All the smooth, invading pressure became a pulling, rushing river of bliss. Sean shivered and gasped.

"Easy. Try to relax."

Relax while that torturous finger was sliding in and out, creating the most amazing sensations Sean had ever imagined. This was what it was like to be fucked, to be penetrated rather than to penetrate. The realization left him dazed.

The pressure increased as Kellan added a second finger. His hand was strong and he spread his fingers, carefully, stretching Sean's muscles, preparing him for the greater thickness yet to come.

Just the thought sent lust rocketing through Sean's body. "I'm not going to make it," he cried.

"Then finish now and we'll focus entirely on you."

He shifted his weight off Brianna, driving his cock deeper into her pussy. She drew her legs high against his sides. "I'm sorry, love. This got all confused."

She smiled and kissed his lips, tasting of aroused woman and Kellan's pleasure. "There is nothing confusing about this. Kellan's right. Your first time should be special."

Her concern touched him deeply and he kissed her again, grasping her hips as he moved in and out of her core. She arched into each stroke, taking him as he took her. And all the while Kellan's fingers steadily fucked him, preparing him and driving him insane.

The rocking of his hips took on a new dimension. Each time he drew back, he pushed himself onto Kellan's fingers, and thrusting into Brianna dragged his body

away from Kellan's hand. His head spun and his body burned, lost on a tossing sea of sensual overload.

He arched his back and thrust deep, his ass cheeks clenching. Release erupted from his balls and rolled down his shaft, bursting out in jets of scalding seed. Brianna's cry of pleasure echoed his and her pussy convulsed around him, greedily milking his cock until they were both weak and laughing.

Kellan slowly drew out, reminding Sean the session wasn't quite over. "Do you want to watch, princess? Or are you comfortable where you are?"

"I want to watch."

Sean was afraid she'd say that. She wiggled out from under him, which left him alone on his hands and knees. She knelt beside him, rubbing his back and massaging his tense shoulders. He laughed. "I feel like a pagan sacrifice."

Kellan chuckled. "I'll admit I've got an ego, but I've never thought of myself as a god." He grasped Sean's hips and raised his ass, adjusting the angle. "You know what to expect, so try to flow with the sensations. Push out against me rather than pulling away."

"And don't forget to breathe," Brianna added, and kissed the side of his face.

Sean felt his ass cheeks parted and Kellan's cock nudged his opening. Then Kellan's hand sneaked down between his legs and caught his balls in a firm yet gentle grasp. "Relax." Those long fingers rubbed his balls, the motion smooth and tender. Kellan's cock pushed inward and his other hand grabbed Sean's hip, steadying him.

Stretching pressure shot over to stinging pain. Sean absorbed the pain and defused it throughout his body. Deeper, fuller. He dragged air into his lungs and Kellan drove farther into his ass. Warm fingers caressed his balls and other fingers encircled his cock. Brianna!

"Can you take more, or do you want me to stop?"

The strain in Kellan's voice made Sean brave. This was as amazingly intense for Kellan as it was for him. "More. I want all of you."

Kellan moved both hands to Sean's hips, but Brianna took up the sensual motion, rubbing his balls and stroking his cock. With infinite care, Kellan pulled nearly out, pausing with just the broad head still inside him. Kellan coated his shaft and Sean's stretched tissues with a fresh layer of lube before he executed his first full stroke.

The endless slide took Sean's breath away. He clutched the pillows beneath him and gritted his teeth. Brianna's hand matched Kellan's slow, steady rhythm, sliding up and down his shaft as Kellan filled him.

Sean was trapped in a passive wonderland. All he could do was accept the pleasure they gave. Knowing Brianna could sense his emotions, he opened his mind and poured his bliss into her. She gasped and shivered, her fingers tightening against his cock.

"So good," he whispered, his head tossing back and forth.

"Why is it so good?" Kellan challenged.

"Because *you* are inside me, and Brianna is loving me." His words sounded harsh and breathless, so he left his mind open, revealing the tenderness and the wonder swelling with each combined stroke. "She is selfless and gentle and you are like no other."

"We belong to each other." She pressed a kiss to his shoulder, her hand steadily pumping.

"We belong to each other," Kellan echoed. His fingers tightened against Sean's hips, and the demanding glide of his shaft drove rational thought from Sean's mind. There was only pleasure and hunger and the dazzling blending of three vibrant souls.

He recognized Brianna's warmth and complexity. Then the rich concentration of Kellan's energy surrounded him, infused him with strength and daring.

Pulling back from the splendor, he forced his mind to function, unsure when they would get another chance.

Shall we form a link now or is it too soon? Sean asked, hoping Kellan would agree, craving the intimacy he enjoyed with Brianna. *Brianna and I are already able to hear each other's thoughts. We don't want you to feel left out.*

You won't be able to tell secrets anymore? Kellan sounded anything but abused.

Basically. Sean's control allowed him to send shielded thoughts, but now was not the time for a detailed conversation!

You can already read my mind, Kellan mused. *This will just allow me to read yours. I don't see a disadvantage. I'm ready for the link. Are you, princess?*

She looked up from her task and smiled. *I'm ready.*

Kellan's brow suddenly knitted and his rotations paused. *Is the link permanent?*

This is the first step in a mystic triad, but there are two additional steps.

That seemed to satisfy the overlord. His body lunged back into motion and his mind opened to Sean's touch. Sean flowed from Brianna's mind into Kellan's and back, connecting, bridging, binding. The additional sensations quickly escalated the pleasure, shattering what remained of Sean's control.

He reached for Brianna across the link, needing her to share in their climax. She gasped, her fingers squeezing his shaft, momentarily losing the rhythm. It didn't matter. Sean was too far gone. He arched, taking Kellan deeper than he'd ever gone before.

Release rolled through his body then spread outward, sweeping across the link. Brianna pressed her face against his shoulder as Sean's cock pulsed within her grasp. Kellan threw back his head and roared, coming deep inside Sean's ass.

Sean collapsed onto his stomach, inadvertently separating their bodies. Kellan rolled to his side and Brianna settled on his other side.

"Are you all right?" she asked.

"Can't you feel how I am?" he asked, too sleepy to open his eyes.

"Your emotions are really subdued right now. I thought you might be shielding them."

"Not at all. I'm just exhausted. You slept in the castle. I've been awake for the better part of three days."

She brushed his hair back from his face and kissed his temple. "Then sleep, sir knight, and we'll watch over you."

Chapter Ten

Brianna hugged her sister tightly, happy tears streaming down her face. In the darkest moments of her captivity, Brianna had feared this day would never come. But she had never given up hope. The possibility of seeing Lorelle again was the only thing that kept her going through the worst of her incarceration.

An urgent summons had arrived for Sean when they'd emerged from Kellan's bedroom that morning. Fane hadn't revealed any details, only stated that Sarah's condition had worsened.

A heated argument immediately erupted, but Brianna stepped between her men and asked Kellan if there was any legitimate reason they couldn't accompany Sean to the Underground. Kellan reluctantly accepted the compromise and told Sean to go on ahead.

"I need to make a few arrangements, but we will follow within the hour," Kellan had promised.

"I'll take Brianna with me now and you can join us there whenever you're ready," Sean countered.

"I give you my word as an overlord. We will arrive in the Underground no later than two hours from now. After which, you will be freed from your vow to me." Kellan sighed and shook his head, finger-combing wayward strands back from his face. "We have to start trusting each other, Sean. You demonstrate your trust and I'll demonstrate mine."

"Why do I have to make the first move?" Sean grumbled.

"Because, at the moment, you have the most to lose."

"Sarah needs you." Brianna could sense his frustration and the worry eroding his composure. He loved his sister very much. "Kellan will keep his promise. I'll make sure of it."

Sean had used the shadow realm to travel to the Underground while Kellan and Brianna followed in the skiff. It was almost impossible to tell the difference between Old Towne Sanctum and the black zones on the surface. Both areas of Protaria were sadly neglected and largely derelict.

However, Brianna soon learned the outward condition of Old Towne was used as camouflage by Fane's mutants whereas the occupants of the United Territories were forced to deal with the primitive living conditions because they had no other choice. They were outcasts, discarded, forgotten. The elite considered them inferior, unworthy of the limited resources available on Protaria. And Fane only allowed mutants into the Underground.

Sean had alerted Mal Ton of their new location, and Lorelle and her new mate were waiting for Brianna and Kellan when they arrived in the Underground. The men stepped back, eyeing each other with obvious caution as the sisters embraced.

"They told me you'd been rescued, that you were unharmed and doing well." Lorelle paused to look Brianna over from top to bottom. "After I talked to you, I was much closer to believing, but I don't think I accepted it until just now."

"Why would *your mate* lie to you?" Brianna took a step back and dried her cheeks with the back of her hand.

"He wouldn't, but Mal Ton was only reporting what he'd been told. We had no way of knowing if it was really true." Lorelle squeezed her one last time before she began to relax.

The men had moved off a bit, giving the women some privacy. Brianna glanced around the cavernous room. Her surroundings had become a blur as soon as she'd seen Lorelle. "What is this place?"

"It used to be a hotel. Now it's more or less the entrance to the Underground. A few of the rooms upstairs are occupied, but everything of interest is in the lower levels."

Brianna nodded. She was far less interested in the logistics of the Underground than she was in her sister's happiness and new marital status. Her curious gaze settled on Mal Ton. He was about the same height as Kellan and just as heavily muscled.

"They do grow them big in this star system, don't they?" Lorelle was busy assessing Kellan so the question came out rather dreamy.

"Must be the water." Brianna continued her study of Mal Ton. His skin was smooth and supple, the tone a shade between copper and gold. Kellan had appeared savage and intimidating. Mal Ton could claim both those traits, but he also looked far more alien. From his gleaming teal gaze to distinct angle of his features he was humanoid yet not human.

"Do you love him?" She looked at Lorelle, waiting for her reaction.

"Absolutely. Mal Ton is extraordinary. I have no doubt I will spend the rest of my life with him."

Brianna smiled. It was so unlike her sister to rush into anything. "You don't think this is a bit sudden?"

"Our lives have been redefined. The expectations of Earth no longer apply. It would take a lifetime with a human man to build the sort of bond Mal Ton and I enjoy. I've been inside his mind where there are no barriers and no pretense. I know who he is and I'm honored to share my future with him."

"Has being with Mal Ton given you unusual abilities?"

"The short answer is yes." Lorelle searched her gaze, obviously guessing the reason for the question. "Have you picked up abilities from the overlord? I didn't think he was a mutant."

"He's not." She fidgeted beneath her sister's perceptive stare. She better get used to shocking people unless she intended to hide the nature of her relationship. And that was one thing she was unwilling to do. "Kellan and I have formed a bond with Sean. I understand what you mean about knowing Mal Ton because I've experienced the exchange with both my lovers."

"You, Kellan *and* Sean?" Lorelle's soft gasp gradually turned to a reluctant chuckle. "And I thought I'd been swept away by this place."

Brianna couldn't fault her sister for her shock. If someone had told her a month ago she would be involved in a committed ménage she would have laughed and discarded the notion as preposterous. The concept of having two male lovers had long been a fantasy, but she'd been unable to find one man who stirred more than superficial interest, much less two.

"This place presents challenges you'll never find on Earth," Brianna said softly, and Lorelle nodded in agreement. "We've been interacting with a being who has no physical body. At one point she felt I was being too closed-minded, so she opened my mind to the emotions of others."

The shock returned to Lorelle's gaze. "You're empathic?"

"Sean was barely able to stabilize the opening. Until he did, I thought it was going to kill me or drive me crazy at the very least. It was one of the most painful things I've ever endured."

"Where is this entity now? Did Sean kill it?"

"We're not sure. Sean was focused on healing me so the spirit escaped."

"The spirit? That's what you call it?" It was Brianna's turn to nod. "What does this creature want?"

"It seems like we both have a lot of catching up to do. Why don't we sit down and fill each other in on everything that's happened since we were separated."

The men joined them and the couples sat on couches facing each other off to one side of the large room. Brianna and Kellan kept their explanations simple and non-personal. Brianna suspected Lorelle and Mal Ton were doing the same.

"Do either of you know Sarah?" Brianna asked as they reached the present conflict.

"I've met her, though I don't know her well," Mal Ton explained.

A sudden spike of hostility shot through Kellan. Brianna looked at him then followed the direction of his narrowed gaze to the man approaching them from across the large, shadowy chamber.

Dressed in a tunic and pants similar to those worn in the black zones, the newcomer carried himself with the authority and confidence generally accompanied by genuine power. Red highlights shone in his dark hair and his features were sharp yet attractive. As he drew nearer, his eyes caught the flickering torchlight and revealed their light green shade. Pale yet intense, his gaze shifted from Kellan to her and back to the overlord.

"Fane," Kellan greeted, not bothering to stand.

"Kellan," Fane returned, omitting Kellan's title.

This should be fun.

Before the hostility could boil over, Fane turned to her and extended his hand. "Welcome to the Underground, Miss San Carlos. I'm glad you've finally found your way back to your sister. She's been extremely worried about you."

"I was worried about her too. Are any of the other humans still on Protaria?" Sean hadn't known the answer and the question hadn't come up during the info exchange with Lorelle.

"Karris is still here. Allen Lansky was able to extract the Chrysalis nanites from her body, but she's in for a long recovery."

"What are the Chrysalis nanites?" Kellan asked. Brianna had known that the project involved nanites, but she hadn't known they had a name.

"The Chrysalis project was the reason Howyn brought the humans here to Protaria." Fane stood at the head of the couches, hands clasped behind his back. "He needed biological hosts who hadn't been affected by the lentavirus. The humans possessed the added benefit of their arrested aging cycle. He hoped to reproduce their genetic anomaly and incorporate it in future generations. However, things went to hell when Max intercepted the ship. The humans were exposed to the virus before they could be inoculated, so Howyn very nearly lost his hosts before they could be implanted with the Chrysalis nanites."

"Was Karris the only one who received the nanites?" Kellan's brow creased and he added a second question before Fane could answer the first. "What do these nanites do?"

"The nanites store and amplify mutant energy, thereby empowering the host with paranormal abilities. The result was temporary but impressive."

"Were the nanites destroyed?" Brianna wanted to know.

"Of course."

"What use do mutants have for such nanites when they already have paranormal abilities?" Kellan crossed his legs, resting his ankle on his knee, his foot tapping in midair.

"Were all the nanites recovered, or is someone out there picking up where Howyn left off?" The sick feeling in the pit of her stomach told her the answer before Fane confirmed her suspicion.

"Howyn's lab had been raided when we got there. Unless Kellan or one of his warlords was responsible for the raid, there is still a very real threat out there somewhere."

"The only thing I recovered from the lab was Brianna," Kellan asserted. "At the time I thought she was part of what was going on. By the time my backup arrived, someone else had beaten us to it."

"Do you have any leads? Any suspicions?" Brianna asked.

"My bet was on Nehalem Bryson, but she booked passage on a luxury liner. If she has the nanites, she took them offworld without realizing they won't do her any good. The nanites are programmed for a very specific type of energy and it's only found on Protaria."

"Has there been any attacks? Any indication that someone else has been injected with the nanites?" Kellan asked.

Fane shook his head. "Nothing. It has been frighteningly quiet. Usually a calm like this indicates a coming storm."

Kellan nodded. "Was Howyn really arrested, or was the news of his arrest some sort of ploy?"

"No, it was real. I worked with Director Krentz from the Interplanetary Consortium to make sure the charges will stick. General Bryson will likely be given a lighter sentence. He's provided much of the evidence we needed to move forward, but he will be held accountable for his part in the corruption."

"Then who's running Sanctum?" Kellan scooted to the edge of his seat, his attention fully engaged. "With Howyn and Bryson both out of commission it must be chaos."

"I've tried not to care," Fane told him. "The elite haven't given a damn about our problems, it's hard to feel anything for them. But..."

"He's mated to Howyn's daughter Cassie," Mal Ton provided with a warm chuckle. "Talk about unlikely couples."

"Cassie has helped me see beyond my prejudice. I'm as closed-minded about the elite as most of the elite are about mutants. The people of Sanctum are in need of strong leadership right now and it's not going to come from Howyn's board of directors." He paused for a moment and stared at Kellan. "It might be time to revisit your proposal."

Kellan shot to his feet. "When I proposed an alliance before, you all but laughed in my face. You disregarded the United Territories and everyone in them as carelessly as any of Howyn's elitist pigs."

"I was trying to keep the Underground compartmentalized, to make sure we were as protected as possible." Fane didn't back down, but his tone was carefully modulated, his expression approachable. "Your people are scattered and you deal with too many different leaders. I saw no benefit for joining forces with you then."

"Why bring it up now? You obviously haven't reassessed your opinion of my people. You think you're better than we are. You're as bad as Howyn!"

Brianna stood and placed her hand on Kellan's tense arm. She passed tenderness across their link, hoping to calm him. His gaze didn't shift from Fane, nor did his expression soften.

"You're right," Fane said in a calm, clear voice. "I didn't take your proposal seriously. But I've recently learned that people don't have to be mutants to be extraordinary. My first loyalty was and will always be to those of us who have suffered

through transformation. What I'm offering is an opportunity to look at the current situation and see if there are ways we can help each other."

Kellan's nostrils flared as he wrestled with his pride. Brianna gave him a telepathic push, not bothering with specific words. He glanced at her and smiled then released a long breath. "I would welcome such an opportunity and I would appreciate whatever assistance you can give us in sorting through the current mess."

Fane relaxed and a smile curved his lips. "Sean mentioned some sort of spirit, but I haven't been able to drag him away from Sarah for a more lengthy conversation."

His light green eyes settled on her with a sly sort of knowing and she moved closer to Kellan. There was no way in hell she was letting anyone else into her mind. "If Sean doesn't come out soon, I'll go get him."

Fane accepted her decision with a slight incline of his head.

* * * * *

Nehalem moaned as Renn pushed his cock into her aching pussy. He'd spent the past twenty minutes on his knees, driving her to orgasm after orgasm with his mouth and fingers. The preliminaries were familiar territory. Renn was the first man ever to lick her cunt and he was the standard by which she judged all others. Still, this was the first time he'd actually fucked her.

She was on her knees now, Renn kneeling behind her. He held her hips and moved with power and control, hitting every sweet spot she possessed. It had been so long since she fucked just for the pleasure of fucking. She'd nearly forgotten how wonderful it could be.

Wrapping his hand around her throat, he drew her torso up and turned her head sharply to the side. "Suck my tongue," he gasped, his fingers not allowing her to refuse.

His tongue pushed into her mouth and she obediently sucked, sliding her lips up and down as his firm strokes rocked her entire body. One of his hands moved to her breast while the other circled her hips, keeping her back arched and pressing her ass into his groin. With a ragged gasp, she released his tongue, needing air more than she wanted to please him.

"I want you to suck Ced's dick while I finish fucking you." The statement came out of nowhere, emotionally blindsiding her. "It's been a really long time since anyone showed him kindness. Will you do it for me?"

She tensed. He was asking rather than commanding as her husband had done, but the result was still the same. "Can't we find someone to take care of his needs?"

Renn's hands moved to her thighs and he drove deep, pitching her body forward. "I don't want to subject him to another prostitute. They treat him like a freak. I want you to comfort him, to show him compassion."

He stopped moving and her building arousal fizzled. She locked her elbows and lowered her head, hiding within the semicircle of her hair. His hard length still filled

her, teasing her with the fullness he could easily deny her. All he had to do was pull out and walk away.

"Fine." Shame and hollow resignation washed over her in icy waves. How could she protest after all the things she'd done with her husband? Rumors of her sexual exploits were circulating all through the mutant community. She was an energy whore. She'd fuck anyone for the rush it gave her. Why would Renn hesitate to take advantage of her services? No one else had. "Were you lying in the bar?" His answer wouldn't change the situation, but it would be nice to know where she really stood. "Can I feed without fucking?"

Before Renn could answer, Ced walked into view. He was still fully dressed and looked almost as uncomfortable as she felt. His uncertainty soothed the worst of her misgivings. Life couldn't have been easy for him. He was hoping for a little comfort, same as her.

She sighed and pushed off the floor, freeing her hands. He was passably handsome. His boyish features made it hard to determine his age. Renn hadn't listed lip-reading among Ced's abilities, but she suspected he was not nearly as helpless as Renn would have her believe.

"Come here." She motioned him closer. "I can't very well suck your cock until we let him out to play."

Ced's smile was hesitant but he stepped in front of her and untucked his t-shirt. She unfastened his jeans and reached inside his underwear, grasping his shaft. He was already hard and eager for the promised pleasure.

Momentarily releasing his cock, she tugged his pants to his knees. He twisted away and jerked the jeans back up, frantically arranging the material until only his cock protruded from his otherwise-covered body.

"Is that a tattoo?" She'd only caught a glimpse of the elaborate design, but it made her damn curious to see the rest. The creature's head rested on Ced's hip and its serpent-like body spiraled downward along his thigh. "How far down does it go? What's the creature called?"

"You've never seen a tattoo before?" Renn asked with a droll little smile. "The name of the creature is sacred, as is the meaning behind each element of the design. Maybe someday he'll trust you enough to show you, but it's not going to happen right now."

Ced stepped in front of her, irritation obvious in his crystal blue gaze. He made a hand motion she didn't understand then looked expectantly at Renn.

"He'd like to form a link so he can send his thoughts to your mind," Renn explained.

"Will he be able to hear my thoughts too?"

"Of course."

"Then it's probably a good idea." She looked into Ced's eyes, wanting to assure him the insult hadn't been intentional. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. What do you need me to do?"

His expression didn't change. His eye narrowed and his hand lashed out, grasping the side of her face. She gasped, instinctively grabbing his wrist. His hand pushed back and his fingers curved against her skull, the nails pressing into her scalp. Power sliced into her mind. Lights danced before her eyes and her ears began to ring.

Terrified by the sheer force of the penetration, she rocked back against Renn's chest and tried to twist away from Ced's hold. Renn's arms wrapped around her, pinning her arm against her side and pressing her downward until her knees ached. His cock felt all the more intrusive and Ced leaned in, grasping her chin with his other hand, keeping her gaze firmly focused on him.

"Don't fight him," Renn advised. "Relax and let it happen."

"Why does it hurt?" she cried. "Telepathy shouldn't be painful."

Ced's being burrowed deeper, leeching energy and leaving tendrils, twisting threads of influence, capable of destruction or control. She felt her will eroding, succumbing to his persuasion and power.

Ced's hands suddenly moved to her shoulders and Renn grasped her hips. Ced pulled her head down and brought his cock to her mouth. *Suck me. Pleasure me while I feed.*

Compulsion swelled within her. She hungered for his cock as if it were her last meal. She eagerly sucked him inside, laving his tip with her tongue and caressing him with her lips. Ced pushed her arms back and bent her elbows, guiding them into Renn's waiting hands.

Renn grasped her bent arms and pulled out of her core. He didn't go far. His blunt cock head pressed against her opening, teasing her, building the urgency. She whimpered and wiggled, trying to push back and impale herself on his teasing length.

"You love this," Renn whispered. "I don't think one cock will ever be enough to satisfy you." He thrust his full length inside her, forcing her forward, sending Ced's cock deeper into her mouth. She gagged then moaned as excitement swept the last of her uncertainty away.

She was a sexual being, fully surrendered to her carnal nature. Ced's cock slid against her tongue, feeling hot and heavy and potent. They drove in together, each cycle forcing her arousal higher, building the sensations to an unbearable intensity.

Open the conduit. Pour your energy into me.

Her solo attempts had been futile, but Ced was with her now. He directed her mental movements, leading her to the source of her abilities. Once the path was identified, she instinctively understood what she needed to do.

Imagining a faucet within her mind, she grasped it with both hands and turned.

Energy flowed out in a staggering rush. Her nipples tingled and her pussy tightened around Renn's shaft. His hand suddenly covered her mound. His fingertip circled her clit, encouraging and rewarding her efforts. Bursts of pleasure—not quite orgasmic yet undeniably pleasant—detonated as the energy flowed. She offered herself freely, intoxicated by the transfer, ready to surrender everything.

Now close it. A dead conduit won't do me any good.

His careless comment brought reality crashing down upon her. She meant nothing to either of them. To Ced she was a source of nourishment and to Renn... She was what she had always been, a receptacle for men's lust.

After carefully closing the conduit, physical sensations came back into focus. Ced's presence still blazed within her mind, but he seemed more interested in sexual release than exploring his new slave. And she was his slave now. There was no escaping the truth. She could sense the tether and she understood what it meant.

Ced grasped her hair lightly as he moved in her mouth. She maintained steady pressure with her lips, secretly hoping he would finish soon. This was too confusing. They weren't hurting her, but she still felt degraded, objectified and used.

At least with her husband watching she'd had a reason to perform. Knowing her antics drove him crazy had filled her with a sense of power. This felt mechanical and shallow. She just wanted it to be over.

Renn moved faster, stabbing into her core with frantic demand. Despite her emotional indifference, her body responded to their persistent stimulation. The thickness of Renn's cock combined with Ced's animalistic intensity, and her core rippled with an impending orgasm.

Pushing to the back of her mouth, Ced held her head tightly as he spilled down her throat. As soon as the last spasm passed, he withdrew and stepped back, disentangling his fingers from her hair.

Renn pushed her head down nearly to the floor, giving him a better angle for his thrusting. She braced her knees and embraced each forceful lunge. This was honest, earthy, fucking, without pretense or romanticism. If she kept her emotions suppressed and operated within that mindset, this was almost tolerable.

With one final thrust, Renn buried himself in her pussy and shuddered in release. Her inner muscles echoed the distinct pulses of his climax, leaving them both breathless and sweaty.

He slapped her ass as he pulled out. The unexpected sting made her shiver.

"You've certainly learned a trick or two since the last time we played these games." Renn helped her to her feet before he went to the bathroom to wash up.

What is the Chrysalis?

She pivoted toward Ced. He had righted his clothes and appeared unaffected by their recent interaction. Still, he'd obviously done a lot more than establish a communication link while he was inside her mind. She could feel his power threaded

through her brain. Like the leash on a spirited pet, the mechanism could be tightened or yanked whenever he chose to exert his will.

"It was the project my husband was working on when he was arrested." That was true and it was all she intended to tell him.

Before he could dig deeper into the mystery, Renn returned with a damp cloth. "How do you feel, Ced? Was she able to satisfy you?"

Renn tossed the cloth to Nehalem but she just held it, resenting his insensitivity. Did he honestly expect her to stand here in the middle of the room and scrub between her legs? He'd made a beeline for the bathroom, yet he stood between her and the door.

Her energy is rich and her mouth is talented. I have no complaints.

Well, she had plenty. "I want to learn how to do that without fucking. The whole purpose for this arrangement was so I could get away from this sort of thing." Renn smirked and her palms itched as she pictured a slap hard enough to jerk his head to the side.

"How many times did you come during this little scene?"

"That's not the point. I want control of my body. You said —"

You have no idea what it's like to truly lose control of your life. Ced's anger stabbed into her mind. She gasped and pressed her hands to her temples, temporarily blinded by the pain. I was kept in a cage for eleven years, naked and in chains. Don't pretend like you understand degradation! What you did, you chose to do.

Without another word, Ced stormed through the connecting door and into the adjoining bedroom. Already she doubted the wisdom of their association. She'd thought this time would be different, that Renn would treat her with respect.

"What was he talking about?" Ignoring the slickness of her inner thighs, she tossed the cloth aside and snatched Renn's shirt off the floor, quickly covering her nudity.

Pausing to pull on his jeans, Renn began his explanation. "Rather than firing me outright after your father found out about us, he sold my contract to Chancellor Howyn. I'd already passed extensive background checks before your father hired me, so Howyn was happy to take me off your father's hands and make me disappear. I was sent to work at an isolated facility up in the mountains. I kept hearing about 'the subject', but I wasn't allowed near him for the first two years."

"Ced was the subject?"

Renn nodded, moving closer to her. "He's immune to the lentavirus, so they used his blood to engineer various suppressants and eventually a cure."

"Ced is naturally immune to the lentavirus?" Her emotional grumbling stilled and her mind perked up, focusing in on the implications. "He was exposed and he never got sick?"

"That's right. And Howyn locked him in a cage and treated him like a lab rat because of his immunity." Renn's voice was hushed, his gaze filled with pain. He was obviously distracted by the hurtful memories.

She tried not to let her excitement show, but her search might finally be over. Howyn had used the humans because their DNA was untainted by the lentavirus. Ced's immunity would make him an even stronger candidate. Even if the mutant energy spilled over into his system he would be impervious to its effects. Tucking the possibility away in the back of her mind, she listened to the rest of Renn's sad tale.

"When I was finally allowed near him, I was physically sickened by what they had done to him." His hand touched her upper arm then slid down and clasped her hand. "He was chained to the floor like a dog and surrounded by a cage as well. He was naked, as he said, but that's only where the abuse began. His food was dumped into a dish secured to the floor, so he was forced to eat with his hands or stick his face in the dish like a dog. It was disgusting."

Pulling her hand out of his light grasp, she crossed to the neatly made bed and sat down. "If the lives of our entire race depended upon his survival, why would they treat him badly?" She didn't want to be coldhearted, but Renn's story was starting to sound rehearsed, carefully constructed to elicit just the right emotions.

"It didn't start out that way. Ced refused to cooperate from the beginning. He fought them every step of the way. They explained that the procedures were necessary to save millions of lives, but he had no way of knowing if what they said was true."

"Was Padric involved in this mess?"

He slipped his hand into his pocket and cocked his head. "Your husband is the chancellor's henchman. You know the answer to that question."

She'd sensed the general's ambition and his corruption the first time she met him. It was one of the reasons she'd begged her father to reconsider the union. It didn't matter. That part of her life was over. With one last shudder, she consigned General Padric Bryson to the past where he belonged.

"When Ced continued to defy them," Renn went on, "they concluded that he was an imbecile, incapable of understanding what was at stake. I was told to stay away from him and not to bother trying to engage him in any way. They convinced themselves his brain barely functioned, that he was little more than an animal."

She kept her legs pressed together, unusually aware of how little she wore. "No one tried to communicate with him? Didn't they realize he's deaf?"

"They didn't care." He ambled toward her, his gaze locked with hers. "It was easier to justify what they were doing if he was a mindless animal."

"Why didn't Ced send his thoughts to any of them? Why did he allow them to... I know it's not his fault, but it doesn't sound like he tried to correct their misconception."

He glanced away, obviously annoyed by her observation. "Ced is empathic. He can sense a person's basic nature and scan their emotions, but specific communication requires a link."

"And the link is established through touch."

His gaze returned to hers, a bit of the tension easing from his features. "When they first captured him, he was mad with rage and desperate to escape. He attacked anyone who touched him, so they quickly stopped touching him. They discharged pulse weapons from the outside of the cage and knocked him out before the simplest procedure. Even when he was unconscious they used gloves and face guards. They treated him as if he were diseased."

"So, by the time he settled down enough to communicate with them, he'd lost the opportunity."

"Exactly." Renn sighed, the cobwebs clearing from his expression as he moved closer to the present. "I guarded him for several months, maintaining all safety protocols. But I'd catch him watching me and there was intelligence in his gaze. I began to suspect his handlers were wrong. I tried talking to him, but obviously I got no response. Then one afternoon, I was filling his dish and he reached for my hand. Rather than blast him as I was supposed to do, I took off my glove and waited. His fingers encircled my wrist and I felt a pinch inside my head. Then his voice or his thoughts flowed across the link. He spoke Protarian with a really thick accent, but I was able to understand him. We've been able to communicate ever since."

"You helped him escape." It wasn't really a question. The story's ending was obvious.

"I had to catch the lab on fire to do it, but I got him out of there. We disappeared into the black zones and eventually Howyn stopped looking for us."

"That's horrible." She pushed to her feet and slipped past him, moving instead to the sliding door leading out onto the small balcony. The hotel was on the outskirts of Sanctum, technically elite territory, but few of the elite ever ventured this far from the bustling center of the sprawling city. "Every time I think Howyn couldn't possibly be any viler, I find out something else he's done."

Tell us about Chrysalis. Ced stood in the doorway connecting the two bedrooms. His stern expression brooked no refusal. *It would not remain so prominent in your mind if it was not still a part of your life.*

The threads of compulsion pulsed and she wanted to tell him, needed to explain. "They created nanites capable of storing mutant energy. They can—"

"Who are 'they'?" Renn asked.

Standing so she could see both men, as well as Sanctum's gleaming skyline, Nehalem had never felt so alone. If she lost control of the Chrysalis nanites, she would be nothing. The nanites were her only hope of exacting vengeance on those who had hurt her and of brokering a future where she would be safe and comfortable.

Don't make me compel you. I assure you it's unpleasant.

"Cassandra, Howyn's daughter, was one of the members of the team, but there were others." She glared at Ced, frustrated by her helplessness.

"What else can the nanites do? What is the energy used for?"

"The nanites were injected into a human test subject first. I'm not a scientist, but I know it was important to use someone whose DNA hadn't been altered by the lentavirus."

The men exchanged a secretive glance before Renn told her to continue.

"They used me to gather energy from as many different mutants as I could. Then they drained the energy from me and stored it in alloy cylinders. Each type of energy – each ability – was stored in a different cylinder."

Go on, Ced urged.

"The nanites allowed the human to charge herself up with several abilities at once. She had to recharge the nanites after she completed each mission, but what these nanites allowed her to do was pretty spectacular."

"Where is this human now?" Renn asked.

"I'm not sure. She was at the party with Padric and Howyn when they were arrested. She's either in custody or Fane is working to deprogram her."

Were all of the nanites seized during the arrest? What happened to the storage cylinders?

Again she felt an overwhelming need to tell him the truth. The effect was making her nauseous. "Would you please stop doing that? When Renn told me you are immune to the lentavirus, I realized you're exactly what I've been searching for. Well, not exactly. I was hoping to find someone who can gather their own energy, but you're the best option I've found so far."

"Get to the point." Renn crossed his arms over his chest and shifted his weight restlessly.

She walked across the room and used her thumbprint to open the safe stashed in the back corner of the closet. Trepidation hampered her movements, but her frantically searching mind provided no viable alternative. She pulled out a locking silver case and set it on the foot of the bed.

The men drew near as she opened the case. She motioned toward the double row of bentin alloy cylinders and the sealed injectors containing the nanites. "This, gentlemen, is Project Chrysalis."

Chapter Eleven

Sean sat on the edge of Sarah's bed, torn between anguish and fury. She lay on her side facing the wall, knees drawn up toward her chest. He wanted to shake her, force her to realize this unexpected change could be a wonderful opportunity if she would only allow herself to embrace the unknown. Shame shouldered through his frustration and he sighed. It was easy for him to make judgments and offer advice. He wasn't the one who had been robbed of their power.

She hadn't spoken since he entered her bedroom, and he'd had to slip through the wall to get inside. Fane told him everyone was at their wits' end. Nothing anyone tried had drawn her out of her depression and it was only getting worse. She had barely eaten anything since Sean left the Underground.

"Sarah, you can't go on like this. If I have to hold you down and make you eat, you know damn well I'll do it."

"I had dreams long before I mutated. Most people don't realize that." She didn't bother turning around. Her voice sounded dry and raspy.

He reached for the pitcher on her nightstand and poured her a glass of water. "I can't understand you, sprite. You sound like a frog."

Propping herself on an elbow, she accepted the glass. "You're a terrible liar." She downed the glass and shook her head when he offered her a refill. She sat up and leaned against the wall, her face pale and drawn. "The dreams haven't stopped. There're just shadowed now, as if I'm staring through a really dirty window."

"Everybody dreams, sweetheart. This is just your mind trying to accept the fact that—"

"Don't patronize me." She threw the glass at his head, but he batted it aside before it did any damage. "I can tell the difference between a dream and a prophetic vision."

"If you're still having visions this is good news, isn't it?"

"My mind is still open, but I can no longer *see*. I sense the importance, I know I need to process the images, but I no longer have the capability."

"I'm sorry." He didn't know what else to say that wouldn't sound patronizing.

"Something horrible is on its way, something dark and dangerous. I've sensed the presence growing stronger ever since you left."

He started to ask her if anyone had been able to confirm her prediction, but bit back the words. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'm not sure yet." She tucked her hair behind her ears and sighed. "No one believes me now. At least you're pretending that my warnings mean something. I appreciate the effort at least."

"I believe you. I just need more information before I can act."

She let the subject drop, though he suspected there was a lot more she wanted to say. Neither of them could do anything about it, so why dwell on her limitations.

"They know why it happened," she said instead. "Did Fane tell you that?"

"I only saw Fane briefly. I was anxious to get in here and talk some sense into my stubborn little sister." She didn't react to his teasing. She was sitting up and talking. That was progress at least.

"My deterioration was so severe they didn't think I'd survive until the new nanites arrived, so they reprogrammed some of Dr. Myers. That's why this hasn't happened to anyone else. I'm the only one with Cassie's hand-me-downs."

"Why did using Cassie's nanites lead to this result?"

"One of the functions of her nanites was to keep her healthy and repair any damage her body might sustain. Sort of like an onboard doctor, or more like a team of doctors, continually circulating looking for things to fix. Allen thought the new programming would overwrite the original parameters. Apparently he was wrong. The two programs merged and he ended up with a template for anyone wanting a complete reversal as opposed to stabilization, which was their original goal."

"Can't they... I don't know, purge this set of nanites from your body and use the other ones?"

"Sure they could, but I'd have to find the exact strain of the lentavirus I was originally exposed to and go through mutation all over again."

Sean stared at her long and hard, searching for any hint of such a rash impulse. "You aren't even considering that, are you? The onset illness very nearly killed you and your mutation took—"

"I was there, Sean." She averted her face. "You don't have to remind me about what the first go-round was like."

"That didn't answer my question." He grasped her chin and returned her gaze to his. "Are you thinking about doing it again?"

"Of course I've been thinking about it. That doesn't mean I'm foolish enough to do it. I'm well aware of the fact I barely escaped with my life the first time and there is no guarantee I'd survive this time."

"This time?" His heart lurched out of rhythm as a chill sped down his spine.

"No matter how much I want my powers back, it's just not worth the risk."

He released her chin, but doubt sat like a rock in the pit of his stomach. She'd said she had disregarded the idea. Her answer wouldn't change no matter how many times he asked the question. All the browbeating in the world wouldn't help him now. He had to progress as if he believed her and plan for the worst.

"If I send in a tray, will you eat something? Or better yet, you could brush out your hair and come meet Brianna. She's hoping to at least say hello."

Her eyebrows arched at the sudden warmth in his voice. "Why is it every time one of our men leave on a rescue mission they come back with a mate?"

He didn't bother denying it, nor did he elaborate. Brianna would be enough of a shock for Sarah right now. Once she'd had time to get to know Kellan, Sean would ease her into the true complexities of his relationship. "We can't resist helpless females, I guess."

She laughed and slapped at him playfully. "If Brianna is half as helpless as her sister, you're in serious trouble."

"Well, it's certainly enjoyable trouble." He squeezed her hand and stood. "Will you come meet her?"

As fast as her levity appeared, it evaporated. "I'm not ready. I promise I'll eat, but give me a few more days."

"Two." He held up his fingers, reinforcing his offer. "On the third day, one way or another, your isolation ends."

A sad smile was her only reply, so he reluctantly departed.

There is no guarantee I'd survive this time. Her cryptic words echoed through Sean's mind as he climbed the stairs to the great room. She couldn't be serious, but the twisting pressure in his gut wouldn't relax.

He paused at the edge of the room and took in the sight before him. Kellan and Brianna sat on one couch, Mal Ton and Lorelle on the one facing them. Fane leaned against the arm of the couch near Mal Ton, remarkably relaxed given the challenging dynamics of his guests.

Without dissecting the gathering further, Sean joined the small group. He paused by Fane as their conversations lulled. "Can you please assign someone to shadow Sarah?"

"She hasn't left her room in days." Concern narrowed Fane's gaze. "What's going on?"

"Maybe nothing." Sean shook his head and rubbed his eyes. "Gods, I hope I'm wrong, but she hinted that she might try to resubmit to the change."

"That's insane," Mal Ton said with his characteristic candor.

"What does that mean, 'resubmit to the change'?" Brianna asked.

"She'll intentionally expose herself to the virus so she'll mutate all over again." Kellan's tone hinted at his disgust. "Is it really better to die an agonizing death than to live the rest of her life as me and my people live?"

"This isn't about you," Sean snapped.

"Think about it this way," Fane suggested. "You had been born without sight, but a risky, painful surgery that everyone advised you against allowed you to see. Then without warning, and through no fault of your own, your sight was taken from you. Would you consider a second surgery?"

Kellan didn't argue, but the hostility in his gaze made it obvious he wasn't convinced.

"You're going to try to stop her, aren't you?" Brianna asked.

"Ultimately it's Brianna's choice," Fane began. "*But* I will have her shadowed," he concluded before Sean could object.

"Thank you."

"Now, what were you talking about earlier? You've encountered some sort of ghost?"

"The spirit insists that she's alive." Sean raked his hair with his fingers as he sat down on the other side of Brianna. "We discovered her on the metaphysical plane—no, I better start at the beginning. When I arrived at Kellan's headquarters, Brianna had been trapped in a highly detailed visualization."

"How was this visualization constructed?" Following Sean's example, Fane sat on the opposite side of Lorelle. "You aren't psychic, are you?" he asked Brianna directly.

"No. Ceddrick, one of Kellan's advisors, was scanning my mind and I sort of freaked out. I wasn't told what he intended to do, so I felt like someone was invading me. I struggled for a few minutes and then I blacked out. When I woke up, I was in the castle."

Sean quickly filled Fane in on the basics of what had transpired, ending with the spirit's insistence that Ceddrick was a "dragon" and needed to be destroyed. "The spirit appeared to Brianna after we escaped the visualization, so her existence isn't limited to the metaphysical plane."

"Fascinating," Fane muttered. "What do we know about this Ceddrick? Do you know why she wants him dead?"

"No, but I think you might." Sean stood and approached Fane. "I was able to extract a clear image of Ceddrick from Brianna's memory."

"And why do you believe it will mean something to me?"

"May I pass you the image?"

"Of course."

Sean felt a tiny opening form in Fane's mental shields. He pushed the image into Fane's mind and the shield reformed, dense and impenetrable.

"You're certain this man is Ceddrick?" Fane's tone was crisp, his features suddenly expressionless.

"I am."

Fane pushed to his feet and approached the other couch, his movements stiff, almost stilted. "Can any of you summon the spirit?"

"It doesn't seem to work that way. She has a connection with Brianna, but—"

"Brianna, I need to speak with this spirit. Will you allow me to enter your mind?"

She pressed against Kellan's side, her eyes wide and unblinking. "Why? Who is Ceddrick? Sean's right, isn't he? You know who he is and why the spirit wants him dead."

Fane was silent for a long time. He could likely slip into Brianna's mind and summon the spirit before she detected his presence. But Sean knew he wouldn't. Fane was honorable. He expected his people to use their abilities responsibly and he led by example.

"We can't talk here. What I'm about to tell you must not be overheard." He turned to his longtime friend and confidant. "Mal Ton, you're already acquainted with the dragon. I'll fill you in later."

Mal Ton accepted the dismissal with a stiff nod and led Lorelle away.

Saddened to be separated from her sister so soon after their reunion, Brianna followed Fane into a small office beneath the great room. Ironically, conditions were far less primitive once they reached the lower levels of the Underground. Electric light replaced oil lamps and candles, and the furnishings were significantly newer than what she'd seen above.

They settled into chairs around Fane's desk. He closed the door and activated an audio dampener before he took his place behind the desk and began his tale. "I belong to a people most believe long dead. Our role in the war is complicated, but basically we were used as a living delivery mechanism for the lentavirus."

Brianna couldn't really imagine how that could be accomplished, but she decided to wait until his explanation was complete before she grilled him with questions.

"Are you inferring that you're Faundi?" Kellan sounded skeptical. "I've heard stories about them, but they haven't existed for hundreds of years."

"A stable telomere isn't the only way to arrest aging." Fane looked pointedly at Brianna. "Appearances can be deceiving when it comes to age."

"Just get to the point," Kellan grumbled. "Who is Ceddrick?"

"He found out the Protarian government was interested in our warriors. We had abilities they found useful. In fact most of the abilities found in mutants occurred naturally in the Faundi people." Fane paused, obviously uncomfortable with the topic. "After the Protarians figured out which segments of Faundi DNA were responsible for these abilities, they engineered the virus to attach at those points."

"The lentavirus intentionally created paranormal abilities in its victims?" Fascination gradually eroded Kellan's skepticism.

Fane rested his forearms on the desktop and folded his hands. "I don't think they intended the results to be so widespread or unpredictable, but the virus spread much faster than they anticipated."

"Why did so few of the people in the black zones mutate? We all got sick, but very few of us changed."

"That's always been somewhat of a mystery," Fane agreed. "I know more than one version of the virus was released. Apparently the outlying areas were blanketed with the original virus, the one created before the Faundi were captured."

"What does all this have to do with Ceddrick?"

Fane took a deep breath then expelled the facts in a calm, almost detached tone. "The Protarian government approached our tribal leaders and requested our willing participation. We had always been separatists and had no interest in anything they offered. The last meeting turned into a heated argument. After the meeting, our leaders decided to move us to our winter camp. It was much more secluded and easier to defend."

"Your leaders believed the Protarians would try to take you by force?" The skepticism returned to Kellan's demeanor.

Brianna watched the exchange in silent fascination. Kellan obviously knew none of what Fane was explaining, but how much did Sean already know? His expression was calm and his mind shielded. She couldn't sense his emotions.

"When all their offers failed to lure a sufficient number of us away," Fane went on, "the Protarians focused their ambition on one weak warrior. They recruited the man you know as Ceddrick, promised him anything he wanted if he would lead them to our winter camp. You see, we'd cloaked the village in magic so the Protarians had been unable to locate it until Ceddrick led the way."

"Selan'te." Sean spat out the name, his fists clenched on his knees. "Ceddrick is Selan'te? I was in the same room with that vile creature. Oh gods, I scanned his mind." He shuddered violently. "I failed you utterly."

Fane shook his head, compassion warming his gaze. "He is a deceiver. You had no way of knowing who —"

"Wait a minute." Kellan held up his hand, halting the flow of conversation. "You said this betrayer was a warrior. You must have Ceddrick confused with someone else."

"He wasn't born deaf." Fane easily anticipated Kellan's reasoning. "He was born strong and capable, a competent telepath, who was receptive to other people's emotions. He also had the ability to construct compulsions. Sound anything like the Ceddrick you know?"

"What happened to his hearing?" Brianna asked.

"When our high priestess learned of his betrayal, she unleashed the full scope of her abilities on him. She belonged to an ancient order who passed power from one generation to the next as they died. She possessed the accumulated power of countless generations and she used it all to punish Selan'te. His hearing went first then she shriveled his vocal cords. But before she could rob him of sight, he stabbed her through the heart."

"Your high priestess is the spirit?" Brianna shook her head even as her heart told her it was true. "Has she followed him all these years, trying to complete her revenge?"

"I suspect it's something like that," Fane agreed. "There was no time to perform the ritual of passing before her body died, so she poured her essence into her enemy. According to legend, she will find the lost seer and empower that person to finish the job."

"Then why does she need us to slay her dragon?" Kellan managed to keep most of the sarcasm out of his voice. "And don't you find this all a little dramatic?"

Fane leaned back in his chair, his gaze boring into Kellan's. "These aren't fairy tales, Overlord. I was there. I saw it happen."

"It sounds like she's given up on her quest for the seer and has settled on Plan B," Sean concluded.

"Perhaps." Fane's gaze shifted from Kellan to Brianna then back to Kellan. "And perhaps the dragon's spy is in our midst. Why do I detect his energy coming from you?"

* * * * *

Renn picked up one of the cylinders, his touch almost reverent. "If you've only just gained control over your gift, how were the cylinders charged?"

"Howyn had a device that transferred the energy." It had slowly and painfully leeched it from her body, but many of the details were no longer relevant. Nehalem watched him closely. The cylinders were relatively harmless, but if either of them reached for an injector, she'd dive for the pulse pistol hidden under her pillow. She was going to hold on to control of this project for as long as she possibly could. "I didn't have much time when I teleported into the lab. I grabbed what I knew was important and got the hell out of there."

"You can teleport?" Renn returned the cylinder to its slot in the case and took a step back.

"Not anymore. It was a borrowed ability. They never last long."

Why didn't you inject yourself with the nanites? Ced eyed the contents of the case with obvious interest, but didn't touch anything. His gaze returned to her face as he waited for her response.

"That was my original plan." She hesitated. They knew she'd been cruising mutant bars when they found her. Was there really any reason to deny the truth? Ced might be the host she was looking for, but she no longer trusted Renn. What choice did she have? She hadn't accomplished anything on her own. "All the...gathering I did before changed me somehow. I started craving mutant energy. I become physically ill if I don't receive regular infusions. Each nanite is like a microscopic amplifier. I was afraid it would make my cravings worse."

Renn moved away from the bed as if his interest were waning. His pretense didn't fool her, however. Cunning still burned in his eyes. "Were you going to try to sell the case to an arms dealer?"

She shook her head, closing and locking the case. "I have unfinished business on Protaria."

Renn chuckled. "Let me guess. Incarceration is too good for your husband?"

"You have no idea what that man put me through," she snapped, infuriated by his nonchalance.

"If half the rumors are true, I have a pretty good idea." Renn sat on the side of the bed, one leg bent in front of him the other foot still resting on the floor. "He turned you into an energy whore. You fucked mutants and captured their abilities then the energy was stored in those cylinders until the human with the nanites was ready to use them. Does that about sum it up?"

She'd been coerced every step of the way. It was either fuck the mutants or rot in a penal facility for the rest of her life. "No need for the review, asshole. I was there."

His smile didn't quite reach his eyes and he held out his hand. "Come here. I have another proposition for you."

She crossed her arms over her chest and tossed her head. "I'm not happy with how our last arrangement turned out. The result differed greatly from what you described in the bar."

His gaze shot to Ced and he chuckled, the men obviously sharing some inside joke. "I promised to teach you how to use the conduit. Do you or do you not possess the promised skill?"

"You had nothing to do with my new skill. Ced guided me to the conduit and taught me how to use it." While he wove strands of influence through her brain! Her angry gaze shifted to Ced and a shiver ran down her spine. He wasn't tugging on the telepathic cords at the moment, but she could sense the tether, knew at any moment he could bend her to his will.

And you restored my energy. Everything Renn promised came to pass. Are you really upset by the sex? If you were left wanting, just say the word and Renn will bring you to climax.

"While you watch, no doubt."

His gaze narrowed and his chin rose, the expression both resentful and tragic. *I've spent a lot of time watching others fuck. Few women will bother with someone like me.*

She just shook her head. She'd felt his power in her mind, could sense his potential even now. Ced wanted people to think he was weak and helpless. She knew better. "I'd rather have you on your knees licking my pussy while Renn watches." She called his bluff, expecting an immediate refusal.

He crossed to her with a slow, rolling stride, challenge gleaming in his eyes. *I'll lick you until you scream for me to stop and then I'll fuck you until you're too weak to move. I will think only of your pleasure. I'll do anything you ask, no matter how perverse, and I won't let Renn touch you.*

Heat built between her thighs and radiated outward, awakening nerves and stirring her sense as nothing had before. He could control her with a thought, yet he offered to

be her slave, to surrender control to her. Even if the offer were temporary, nothing in her life had been so appealing.

"Why?" she whispered. He stood close but didn't touch her. Awareness sizzled, intoxicating and...dangerous. "Nothing comes without a price. What do you want in exchange for my pleasure?"

I want to forge a partnership, a true meeting of equals. I know you're thinking about this too. I can use mutant energy without being tainted by it. You can now gather all we need without degradation or danger. We would make an unstoppable team. We can accomplish anything we're brave enough to imagine, starting with your husband's death.

"You want the nanites." She glanced at the case. When she'd taken it from the lab, she thought it would secure her freedom, finally offer her a life without masters. But her body had failed her, leaving only this compromise.

They are useless without your gift. I cannot charge the nanites and you are unable to use them yourself. This is the obvious solution.

Her anxious gaze shifted to Renn. Had he heard everything Ced said to her? Ced sent thoughts to Renn that she was unable to hear, so it was conceivable that Renn was unaware of the offer. Conceivable but unlikely.

Unsure if she could manage the same subtlety, she carefully accessed the strand Ced had been using and pushed her thought into his mind. *What about Renn? Where does he fit into this "meeting of equals"?*

Renn chuckled and stood up, ambling toward them. "You need some more practice before you're ready to tell secrets. You haven't asked about my abilities. Didn't you ever wonder why your father hired me? I'm rather scrawny to be a bodyguard. Don't you think?"

She'd been so captivated by his charm and the forbidden nature of their relationship that mutation had never entered her mind. "You had abilities way back then?"

"I'm a sensitive. Do you know what that means?" She shook her head, remembering his cock slamming into her core and the ease with which he'd manipulated her feelings. "When I walk into a room, I can tell you exactly what each person is capable of and how well they can do it. My accuracy is infallible, but my range is limited."

Their roles took shape within her mind. Renn would identify the mutants, she would collect their energy and Ced would become the most powerful weapon anyone had ever seen. Each person relied on the others and none could function alone. A meeting of equals as Ced had proposed.

Hope blossomed within her heart, nearly forgotten and painful. Every time she allowed herself to hope she was slapped down, forced to accept a reality more dismal than it had been before.

Are the effects of the nanites instantaneous?

“No, it will take hours, perhaps as long as a few days, for your body to function at its full potential.”

Then I suggest we get started. The sooner you're satisfied, the sooner our partnership can begin.

Chapter Twelve

Kellan pushed to his feet and pressed his palms on the desktop. He leaned across the desk and glared into Fane's eyes. "I don't answer to you, mutant."

To his credit, Fane remained calm, returning Kellan's stare without rancor or infuriation. "It was a simple question."

"It was an accusation." Brianna remained seated, but warning snapped in her tone. "Ceddrik offered his services to the overlord in exchange for protection and a place to live. Such arrangements are common in the black zones."

"We don't owe him an explanation," Kellan insisted. He pushed off the desk and stood facing Fane, arms crossed over his chest. Still, Brianna's immediate defense of him cooled the burst of anger and began to soothe his agitation.

"Following his accusation was a legitimate question," she added softly.

He glanced at her and she smiled, warmth rippling across their link. So her defense didn't come without a price. Little minx. She expected him to cooperate. With a frustrated sigh, he turned back to Fane. "Ceddrik's physical limitations made a link necessary for communication. My attempts to sever the link have been unsuccessful."

"Have you tried?" Fane asked Sean.

"I've been shielding all three of us, so I doubt he's accessed the link. But, no, I haven't attempted to disconnect it."

"We aren't used to having people poke around inside our minds. It makes us uncomfortable." Kellan returned to his seat and pulled Brianna's hand into his lap, intertwining their fingers.

"If I can use your link to locate Ceddrik, it won't be necessary for me to enter Brianna's mind."

Fane's casual suggestion bordered on coercion and Kellan's temper rekindled. A bitter refusal formed on his tongue, but Brianna squeezed his hand, drawing his gaze to her. Ceddrik's attack had left its mark on her psyche. Even with Sean she had been reluctant to submit to mental probing. It was a far better option for Fane to scan his mind than to subject Brianna to another mental invasion.

"Fine," Kellan muttered, "but I'll hold you to your word. You won't go near Brianna."

Fane nodded, accepting the condition. "A physical touch isn't necessary for me to establish a connection with your consciousness, however, it sometimes makes it easier for the person I'm scanning to accept me into their mind."

Reluctantly releasing Brianna's hand, Kellan grabbed the arms of the chair and closed his eyes. "Go ahead. I'll allow you to enter."

"Begin with an image of Ceddrik as he looked when you first met him," Fane advised. "Let your mind add details, anything uniquely his. Then focus on the day he formed the link, remember how it made you feel. Was there pain or pleasure as his being moved through you?"

As he spoke, Fane's voice floated toward Kellan, filling his ears then sinking into his mind. His mental touch was light and agile, remarkably controlled. Sean's skill made Ceddrik seem clumsy, yet Fane easily overshadowed Sean. No wonder the mutants followed him. He was —

"Focus on Ceddrik," Fane cut into his rambling thoughts. "Try not to be distracted."

Kellan relaxed, resisting the instinctive need to struggle. Fane pushed deeper, his presence flared yet focused, closing in on his target with brutal accuracy.

"The link is intricate and shielded. It's going to hurt like hell if I start burrowing."

"I'm not afraid of pain," Kellan assured. "We need to know where the bastard is."

Moments passed in strained silence. Kellan felt no change, no pain. Then white-hot agony drilled into his mind, jolting his body nearly out of the chair. He clutched the arms and gritted his teeth, determined not to scream. Beads of perspiration irritated his upper lip and ran along his jaw. His brain throbbed, a blazing pebble surrounded by pulsing pressure.

Brianna knelt on one side and Sean on the other. A strangled moan escaped Kellan's throat and Brianna pressed her hand over his. Sean did the same on the other side. Sean drained sensation from his mind, drawing it into his own body. Gradually the pain dulled and Kellan shuddered. Brianna surrounded him with warmth and affection, allowing him to endure what remained.

Fane expanded the link and images flooded into Kellan's mind. Ceddrik knelt at the foot of a bed, his face buried between the pale thighs of a naked female. The woman undulated and wiggled, grinding her pussy against Ceddrik's mouth.

With effortless control, Fane shifted the image, pulling back to view the entire room. A second man sat in a shabby armchair angled toward the bed, anxiously rubbing the bulge in the front of his pants.

Ignoring the sexual antics of the occupants, Fane searched for clues. The skyline beyond the sliding door only revealed an urban setting. The buildings were unremarkable and barely discernable in the darkness. There was no hospitality table or snack dispenser to indicate that this was a hotel room rather than an apartment.

When the room itself revealed nothing useful, Fane focused again on the couple on the bed. Well, the woman was on the bed, Ceddrik was more or less on the floor.

Be still. Let your mind go blank. I will shield you as much as possible, but try not to react to anything you see, hear or feel.

Kellan cleared his mind, silencing his inner voice. He understood what Fane wanted, what he needed, but submission in any form was alien to him. Drawing calm from Brianna's gentle presence and trust from Sean, Kellan surrendered control to Fane.

Lust blazed across the link. Ceddrik indulged his passion completely as he lifted the woman's hips and thrust his tongue into her cunt. She cried out sharply, twisting and bucking as her orgasm neared.

Fane launched a light compulsion, a fleeting thought in the midst of Ceddrik's lust-muddled mind. *Where am I?*

The exterior of a hotel flashed into Kellan's mind, followed by a kaleidoscope of fragmented thoughts and scrambled images. Kellan instinctively tried to unravel the jumbled mess then he remembered Fane's warning and accepted the input without attempting to analyze what he was experiencing.

Suddenly Ceddrik shoved the woman away and closed his eyes. *Kellan?* The woman shrieked and kicked Ceddrik in the chest. Ceddrik warded her off with one arm as he focused inward.

Fury boiled within Fane, centuries of resentment and pain. He started forward, ready to annihilate his enemy. Then he stilled. Consequences and repercussions tempered the flash-fire impulse. He meticulously suppressed the killing rage and smoothly slipped out of Ceddrik's mind.

Kellan watched the scene fade, dazed and lightheaded. A sudden pinch snapped him out of the trance and he collapsed back in his chair.

"I severed the link," Fane told him, his voice breathless.

"Why didn't you kill him?" Kellan stared into Fane's eyes, determined to understand what just happened. "You considered it. I felt your hatred, your rage. But at the last moment you turned away."

"Fane is the only one strong enough to have survived the blast," Sean explained. "If he had detonated a psychic explosion inside Ceddrik's mind, it would have killed everyone linked to him. That doesn't just mean you. Because of our link with you, it would have killed Brianna and me."

Kellan nodded in mute shock. With one thought Fane could have killed them all? Holy fuck!

"Do you recognize the hotel?" Sean asked the mutant leader.

"What about the other two people?" Brianna remained at Kellan's side, lightly stroking his forearm. "Do you have any idea who they are?"

"I'm familiar with the hotel and the female has been causing us trouble for years," Fane replied. "I know nothing about the second male."

"The woman is Nehalem Bryson," Sean said. "She's one of General Bryson's lesser wives."

"*Lesser wives?*" Brianna echoed. "Do many Protarians have more than one?"

Fane chuckled, his voice already returned to normal. "It's acceptable for you to have two mates, but you're shocked by an extremely rich, powerful man having more than one wife?"

"We are not yet mated," Sean reminded.

"You should seriously consider strengthening your bond before we go into battle. If you could access Brianna's strength it would be an important advantage."

"Are we going into battle?" Kellan challenged. "Two men and one woman doesn't sound like much of a challenge to me. Ceddrik has to touch his victims before he can utilize his power. Do either of the others have abilities that will make this more interesting?"

"Nehalem has the Chrysalis nanites," Fane reminded. "We suspected it before, but now I'm sure. I don't think they've injected Ceddrik yet, but it's only a matter of time."

"Then shouldn't we strike before they inject him?" Brianna asked.

Fane shook his head then rubbed the back of his neck. "The nanites take twenty-four to seventy-two hours before they're operational. Even if they inject him in the next few minutes, we have some time to play with. I'll send people over to stake out the hotel and we'll make a detailed plan first thing in the morning. We may only get one shot at this. I want to make sure we do it right."

"What if they run? Ceddrik sensed you toward the end," Sean reminded.

"Ceddrik thought he sensed Kellan. His reaction would have been far more violent if he'd had any idea it was me."

"You're awfully sure of the reaction of someone you haven't been near in decades, or is it centuries?" Kellan arched his brow. The less control he had over a situation, the less comfortable he was with it. That was simply his nature.

"Go hang out in the parking lot of the hotel if it will make you feel more secure." Fane pushed back from his desk and stood. "I intend to get a good night's sleep and face this challenge with a clear head and full energy stores. Think about what I said. If you three are likely to take the next step anyway, consider taking it tonight. Continual energy transfer will make you faster and stronger and give you more stamina."

Sean laughed. "Are you talking about tomorrow or tonight?"

"Try it and find out." Fane escorted them back to the main corridor before he said, "I'll see you in the morning."

* * * * *

Nehalem knelt on the floor trembling, on the verge of orgasm. Her legs were bent, ass in the air, legs spread wide, arms bound at the small of her back. Her cheek rested against the carpet, burning from rubbing against the coarse fibers. A ball gag muffled her protests if not completely silencing her cries and moans and whimpers.

A thick butt plug filled her ass and Renn drove a massive glass dildo into her cunt. "That's cold and smooth, not like a real cock at all." He bent to her ear, maintaining

deep penetration with the dildo. "But you're corrupt and vile, a used-up whore. You've fucked every scumbag in Old Towne. No real man will ever want you again."

Each insult built her arousal as well as her confusion. Why couldn't she be like other women? Why couldn't she enjoy soft, tender lovemaking with a man who was willing to take his time?

Ced had started out as he'd promised. He'd licked her pussy until she came the first time, but right before her climax crested again something bizarre happened. He'd jerked away from her pussy and said "Kellan". Who the fuck was Kellan? Whoever he was he'd ruined everything! Ced had been so distracted he'd lost interest in fucking and told Renn to finish for him.

Renn had been happy to oblige. He'd approached the bed with cruel hunger in his eyes and she'd known she was in trouble. Ced lingered long enough to demand she tell him how to administer the nanties, and when she refused, he jerked her mental tether and the words came tumbling out. Ced grabbed the case containing the Chrysalis project and fled into the adjoining bedroom, leaving her alone with Renn.

She'd rejected Renn's cock, so he'd promised never to fuck her again. That's when the punishment started and she'd lost any semblance of control. She obeyed without hesitation. He used her pleasure to humiliate her and she was too busy coming to hate him.

"Come, you fucking whore!" He slapped her ass and replaced the dildo with three fingers, working her fast and hard. "Squeeze me, bitch! Say thank you with your cunt."

Like the obedient slut she was, her body climaxed, clenching his fingers in tight spasms. Before the last ripple passed, he shoved the dildo back into her passage and stood. He took his cock in hand and jacked off, spilling his seed on her back and buttocks.

Breathless and tingling, she pictured herself from his perspective, bound and conquered, toys protruding from her openings, inner thighs shiny from cream, cum gleaming on her ass. Did the sight move him to anything but lust?

The door connecting the two bedrooms opened and Ced strolled in, making her humiliation complete. Renn placed a chair next to her and hauled her up from the floor. He draped her facedown across the padded seat and moved away.

It looks like Renn took good care of you while I was gone. Ced walked up beside her and trailed his fingertip through the cum on her ass. You did tell him not to fuck you, so he had no choice but to use toys.

You're both depraved assholes! Untie me!

I can't. You need to practice.

Practice what? Being fucked over by a sadistic pig? I think I've got that down.

Ced sat on the foot of the bed, which put him directly behind her, within easy reach of the toys Renn hadn't bothered removing. Ced slowly drew the dildo almost out then

shoved it back in. Nehalem screamed in frustration, but the ball gag effectively muffled the sound.

She couldn't take much more of this or she'd snap!

Your body has gorged on pleasure, but you need energy. Open the conduit and take some from Renn.

She wasn't even sure where Renn was. He'd been suspiciously quiet since Ced's return. Maybe it didn't matter. The dildo slid in and out, in and out, ever so slowly. Were they both sitting back there? She tried to crane her neck and look, but her torso was too far forward on the chair.

Stop wiggling and open the conduit.

How was she supposed to concentrate with the dildo smoothly fucking her? Not fast enough to get her off, just keeping her aroused. Channeling her frustration into determination, she looked inward and carefully opened the conduit.

Her senses intensified as if her skin were vibrating. The fabric of the chair irritated her nipples and smells filled her nose, sex and sweat and stale food. Her pussy clamped down on the dildo, increasing the friction and fullness. And then she felt Renn, recognized his essence, his energy. He was wielding the dildo, not Ced! She should have known. The bastard had been playing with her since she was a teen. Why should he stop now?

Concentrate! Ced pinged her brain and pain shot down her spine, branching out like thorny vines gouging her flesh. To her mortification, she came in short, sharp bursts.

Renn laughed uproariously and fucked her harder. "We've got a pain slut on our hands."

Enough. The dildo pushed deep and stopped, leaving her suspended in a post-orgasmic haze. *Try it now.*

She focused on the highest concentration of energy and slowly pulled it into herself. Cascading from her brain, the hot rush bathed her body in tingly pleasure. She lay perfectly still, refusing to reveal how much she'd enjoyed the sensation.

"Not bad," Renn said in a calm, casual voice as if he hadn't just fucked her like an animal. "But I felt her in my mind and that will never do. Maybe the bitch can concentrate better with my cock in her mouth."

I think she's been your bitch long enough. It's your turn to play dog.

Silence stretched on as Nehalem waited for Renn's reaction. She felt the dildo slide from her body and then the butt plug was removed. Finally Ced untied her arms and helped her up from the chair.

She turned around and gasped. Renn knelt at the foot of the bed, his features utterly expressionless.

"What did you do to him?"

I didn't like his attitude. A partnership of equals does not include a "bitch".

His gaze remained on her face, so she suppressed the urge to snatch a blanket off the bed and cover her nudity. "You injected yourself with the nanites?" He nodded. "Do you feel any different?"

Not yet. You said it would take time.

"It did with the human. I was just curious." She looked at Renn, her body aching from the toys he'd used so ruthlessly. "This isn't permanent, is it? His abilities will make things easier for us if we can keep his attitude under control."

Ced smiled, the expression only adding to his subtle menace. *It looks to me like I have him under control. Would you like to play with my new dog? He's very obedient.*

Was this a test? He'd just said he wanted them to behave as equals.

He'll be less interested in abusing you once he's experienced the other end of the leash.

She wasn't sure it had been abuse. She'd enjoyed everything he'd done. Still... "He'll do anything I tell him to?"

Command him and find out.

Unable to resist the temptation, she turned to Renn and said, "Take off your pants and bend over the chair."

Nothing happened.

Dog is his trigger. Start each command with that word.

She licked her lips, thinking of all the ways she'd repay his kindness before the night was through. "Dog, take off your pants and lean over the chair." Immediately Renn stood and stripped off his pants. He knelt beside the chair and bent over the seat.

Holy shit, it worked! Excitement surged so suddenly she felt giddy. Then she realized a similar tether anchored her mind to Ced's. If she displeased him in any way, this could be her.

Go on. Enjoy him.

The lust in Ced's eyes convinced her to act. He obviously intended to enjoy Renn's punishment too. "Dog, spread your legs wide." Renn gripped the chair with both hands and moved his knees as far apart as possible. She looked at Ced and smiled, releasing the last of her hesitation. "What did you do with the dildo? Our new pet needs to go for a ride."

* * * * *

Brianna walked along between her men, excited yet anxious. The only peaceful night she'd spent in this star system had been in an illusion created by a vengeful spirit. Doubt tugged at the back of her mind, annoying yet persistent. She tried not to let her misgivings unbalance her completely. It was natural to feel unsure right before a major commitment. Every bride had her moment of uncertainty.

She loved Kellan and Sean. There was no doubt in her heart about that, but it would have been nice to have a few days of peace and focus before they were faced with the

next “battle”. It was hard to make rational decisions when the next crisis began before the previous one ended. They were reacting to volatile circumstances and that was never wise.

At least she’d spent enough time with Lorelle and Mal Ton to know her sister was not only safe but thriving in this new setting. Hopefully, she could adapt as successfully.

“Why so silent?” Kellan wrapped his arm around her waist as Sean took the lead. The corridor narrowed, making it impossible for them to continue walking side by side. “You’re not going to demand your own bedroom, are you?” He leaned down and playfully nipped her earlobe.

“I have yet to sleep in the bedroom you promised me before,” she reminded. His hand boldly squeezed her ass, pulling her tighter against his side. “Keep your hands where they belong or we won’t make it to the bedroom.” She guided his hand back to her waist, but he immediately detoured in the opposite direction, cupping her breast.

She laughed and wiggled away as best she could, not really wanting to avoid his warm hands or caressing fingers.

Sean caught her wrist and hurried her along. “We’re almost there.” His gaze gleamed with amber light, illuminating the hallway in front of them.

They descended a narrow flight of stairs and took the corridor to the right. This building was older than the headquarters, the hallways unlit, the doorways unmarked. Sean paused before a seemingly random door. There was no handle. He extended his hand, palm out, and the door swung inward.

Kellan blocked her path with his forearm as he peered into the darkness beyond. “Let me check the room.”

“I already scanned it. It’s clear,” Sean assured.

“Even so.” Kellan stepped into the shadows, weapon drawn.

Brianna was still processing Sean’s casual manipulation of the door. It must be amazing to command inanimate objects and watch them obey. Yet she couldn’t let herself forget the price he’d paid to attain the power. Lorelle had explained many things about the mutants Brianna was sure they wouldn’t volunteer.

She moved closer to Sean and lowered her voice, not wanting Kellan to overhear her question. “Was your mutation spontaneous or did you ‘seek the change’ like Sarah did?”

Sean sighed, obviously uncomfortable with the topic. “Powerful gifts run all through our family. No one is sure why. My mutation was spontaneous, but Sarah was inoculated as a child.”

“Then how was she able to ‘seek the change’?”

Kellan flipped on the light in the utility room, so Sean hurried through his explanation. “She found a black market dealer who had a strain not covered by her vaccine. The lentavirus has been around for generations. There are many variations of

the germ. Anyway, she got what she wanted. The onset illness would have killed her if we hadn't been in the Underground. Mystic healers worked night and day, dragging her back from the brink of death. In a conventional hospital, she would have died within hours."

"And she's thinking about doing it all over again?" Brianna shook her head. "I don't want to be unfeeling, but I'm siding with Kellan on this one. That's just plain crazy."

"What is?" Kellan ambled back to the doorway, looking annoyed.

"Nothing." Sean dismissed the topic with a wave of his hand.

Kellan mirrored the sweeping gesture, motioning from the kitchen area to the narrow bed and shook his head. "This is never going to work."

"I don't spend a lot of time here," Sean defended.

"I can see why." He reached for Brianna with one hand and Sean with the other. "We'll sleep on the skiff."

"Not until we clean or replace those pillows first, we won't." Brianna shuddered. "I don't mind sleeping on the wet spot once in a while, but I'm not going *there*."

Sean chuckled, neatly snatching her hand out of Kellan's. "This is my territory, Overlord. You've had me on my knees long enough. We must strengthen our mystic bond tonight, which means, like it or not, I'm in control."

"You liked being on your knees in front of me and we both know it." Kellan crossed his arms over his chest and dared to smile.

"I'm not denying that I enjoyed what we did in the skiff. I'm only saying tonight needs to be different. You must be willing to follow my lead. This is not about control, it's about experience."

Tension crackled between them, but it was the sweet sort of tension that sizzled and burned, simmered and smoldered until it finally burst into flames. She slowly licked her lips, watching the exchange with intent fascination. Kellan could be reasonable. He could also be irrationally stubborn. His unpredictability was part of his charm, his unique appeal.

Sean's laid-back personality, on the other hand, allowed him to go with the flow the majority of the time. So when he took a stand, it was because he cared deeply about the outcome of the conflict. Many mistook his adaptability for indifference. Brianna had only to listen to him talk about Sarah to realize he would fight to the death to protect the ones he loved.

"I'll follow where you lead as long as you lead away from this dismal hovel." Kellan suddenly broke the silence, giving in with a half smile. "I will not create the next layer of our bond in such a depressing place."

"You are such a pain in the ass," Sean muttered. They moved into the apartment and Sean locked the door with a mental command. He crossed the room and snatched the bedding off the bed then wrapped one arm around each of his companions.

"I thought you felt only pleasure when I filled your ass," Kellan's throaty whisper swirled around them as Sean parted the veil and pulled them into the shadow dimension beyond physical space.

Brianna tried not to struggle, but tangible sensations faded until she floated in the misty void. She could no longer feel Kellan's arm. Only Sean remained real. She clutched his back and buried her face against his neck as her heartbeat thundered in her ears. They flowed, speeding along without a specific direction, or so it seemed to Brianna's untrained mind.

Her shoes sank into cushiony grass and a cool breeze teased her nose with the fresh scents of pine and wildflowers. Easing away from Sean, she glanced beyond him and gasped. Jagged mountain peaks shoved into a sky brightly lit by a harvest moon. They stood at the edge of a meadow in the center of the valley. Tall trees guarded their backs while wide open spaces beckoned them in front.

"Better?" Sean's tone was filled with challenge, so Brianna didn't bother to respond.

"Where the fuck are we?" Kellan took a wobbly step and then another before he regained his balance.

"Far from anything resembling civilization. No one can get up here unless they can flash."

"Flash? What do you mean?"

"It's a generic term for nonconventional forms of transportation. Windriders, teleporters, shifters, specters, whatever, we can all 'flash' from one place to another."

"How many people on Protaria can flash?" Speculation narrowed Kellan's eyes.

"Not that many." It was an evasion and they all knew it, but Kellan didn't push.

"We won't be interrupted?" Brianna steered the conversation back around to them. Tonight was far too beautiful to waste on old resentments. They were strengthening a bond, not reinforcing bad habits.

"I hung the psychic equivalent of a 'do not disturb' sign." Sean shook out the bedding and spread it on the grass. "No clothes on the blankets. We'll start with everything under us. If we get cold, we can rearrange."

The men always managed to undress faster than she did. She couldn't blame it on more layers of clothes. In this case, their outfits were almost identical. All she knew was by the time she tugged off her boots and tucked her socks down inside, the men were there to help her with the rest. Soon, a messy pile of discarded footwear, garments, and weapons decorated the edge of the blankets.

"Did Fane realize you were armed?" she asked Kellan as he spread out on his back.

"He didn't ask and I wasn't about to volunteer."

Sean stood near his feet, his gaze warm, cock rapidly hardening. "He could have disarmed you at any time."

"If he's so damn powerful, why isn't he running the planet?" Kellan folded his hands behind his head, his upper arms bunching dramatically.

"He doesn't want to run the planet. At heart, Fane's a philanthropist, not a conqueror. Now Mal Ton..."

"I like Mal Ton."

Sean laughed. "I figured you would. You two are cut from the same cloth."

"If you two want to talk, that's fine with me, but I'd like to get started." Taking advantage of Kellan's position, she knelt at his side and bent over his chest, capturing one brown nipple between her teeth. With a few firm tugs she had it beaded enough to suck between her lips. Kellan's fingers fisted her hair, as she knew they would. He never really pulled, well, he never pulled hard enough to hurt, just enough to guide her, control her movements so they both enjoyed whatever she was doing even more.

"Kiss me, princess. I want your tongue in my mouth."

"No." Sean knelt on the other side of Kellan and grasped one arm. "Help me pull him up."

"Are you going to be bossy all night?" An edge of warning crept into Kellan's tone.

"I told you what needed to happen. Did you think I was joking? I can't do this if you fight me every step of the way."

Kellan flexed his abs and sat before they could pull him. "What do you need me to do?"

"Rather than circular, this needs to be a web of sensations. We must each be engaged with the others as much as possible."

To his credit Kellan only nodded and waited for further instruction. Brianna was proud of him. Surrendering control to anyone was virtually impossible for Kellan. His willingness to try demonstrated his devotion as nothing else could.

"Let's wrap our legs around each other and scoot as close together as we can get," Sean instructed.

Their thighs parted and one leg entwined with each partner, creating a tantalizing area in the middle with two hard cocks and one open pussy. Sean didn't have to explain his plan after that. The position said it all.

Mouths met in the middle and hands explored. Everyone touched everyone, no one lingering in one place for long. Sean stroked Kellan's cock and rolled Brianna's nipples while Kellan caressed Sean's balls and teased her clit. Briana pumped Sean's cock only to be joined by Kellan's fingers, still damp with her cream.

Their tongues slid and curled, tasting lips and possessing mouths one after another. Brianna clasped her hands around their cocks, delighted when they each joined the play. Kellan helped her arouse Sean, and Sean's hand covered her fingers as she stroked Kellan.

Sean groaned and shivered, moisture beading on the tip of his cock. Kellan caught the drop with his free hand and raised it toward her mouth. Before she could lick it from his fingertip, he smeared the fluid across her lower lip and kissed her, pushing Sean's taste into her mouth as he shared it with her.

With a feral growl, Sean broke the hold and crouched, sucking Kellan's cock into his mouth. He only sucked for a moment then pressed his mouth against Brianna's cunt, mixing Kellan's taste with hers.

She urged him up and kissed him deeply, partaking of the mixture. Kellan was there in an instant and the three-way kiss resumed, separating their lips but offering their tongues freer access to each other's mouths.

Open your minds to me and each other, Sean said. I've shielded us from the outside world, so hold nothing back. Open yourselves to the sensations. Lower every barrier you are able to control.

Brianna hesitated. The last time her mind had been open completely it had nearly driven her mad.

Sweetheart, I would never suggest something that would harm you. Our bond is far different from the massive hole the spirit ripped in your mind. This is natural and pleasurable. The worst that could happen is you might spontaneously orgasm. Would that be so bad?

Kellan swept her legs out from under her and lowered her to the blanket on her back. Sean followed them down. "Straddle her chest and fuck her mouth," Kellan commanded in a deep, passion-roughened tone. "I'm going to make her come and come until every barrier in her mind is reduced to rubble."

"Kellan!" There was no real objection in her cry. She loved having her pussy licked and he knew it. He bent her knees and pushed her legs wide, rocking her hips off the blanket as he covered her slit with his mouth.

Sean straddled her chest, pulling her arms above her head as he pushed his cock into her mouth. His gaze bore into hers, fierce and demanding. His cock offered no mercy, no retreat. Covered, controlled, *mastered*. Her inner muscles rippled in response to the carnality of the position. This was what she needed, what she craved when she was brave enough to admit it.

Open, princess. Let us inside that amazing mind. Despite his gentle tone, Kellan's telepathic command sent shivers down her spine.

These were her mates. They would never hurt her. They would protect and empower her, make her brave enough to fight at their side.

She relaxed, using the steady slide of Sean's cock to assist her. With each thrust she opened wider and took them deeper, offering more of her mind, holding nothing back. Excitement built, sizzling around them and flowing between them. Her clit pulsed and her core clenched as her body teetered on the brink of release.

Kellan caught her clit between his lips and gently tugged. Pleasure detonated deep in her core, sharp bursts of sensation that bowed her back and curled her toes. The orgasm sailed across their link and Sean pushed to the back of her mouth, coming in shuddering jets.

Lifting his face from between her thighs, Kellan glared at Sean. "You weren't supposed to come. This was for her. Now we have to wait until you recover." The twinkle in his eyes ruined his scowl.

"Or you can let Sean finish you off and you can both start over?" Brianna suggested with a mischievous wink.

"This is your show, Specter. Which scenario works better for the bond?"

Sean crawled off Brianna and helped her sit. "I think we should all be on even footing before we begin again. Lie back and let us devour you."

Kellan chuckled. "If you insist." He lay back and spread his legs wide, knees bent, heels firmly planted in the blanket. "Do I get a choice of how this is done?"

"No," Sean said firmly. "Lock your hands behind your head and enjoy."

Sean wasn't sure Kellan would do it, but Kellan raised his arms and locked his hands behind his head, his dark gaze challenging Sean all the while. Their link pulsed with lust and the need for dominance. This was not easy for Kellan, which made his willingness to compromise all the more important.

Maintaining eye contact, Sean raised the overlord's cock to his mouth and sucked the flared head between his lips. His scent was strong and his taste played across Sean's tongue, sending sparks into his smoldering arousal. Kellan's eyes narrowed and his lips parted as breath hissed out between his teeth.

Hold me with your teeth and lash me with your tongue. Don't use your hands.

The firm clamp required for the maneuver had to be causing him pain, but Sean felt only raw desire radiating from Kellan. He needed this edge, this darkness, and he'd only ask it of Sean.

Brianna watched them, fascinated yet unsure.

"Come here, love," Kellan urged. "I want to suck those pretty pink nipples while Sean swallows my cock."

An image stabbed into Sean's mind. Kellan wanted her back turned so she couldn't see how hard Sean was squeezing or the smears of blood where his teeth nicked the shaft.

Don't hide from her, Kellan. If you can share this with me, share it with her. There can be no secrets between us or this isn't a true bond.

But she is...

Stronger than we give her credit for. Brianna moved up along Kellan's body, but Sean caught her arm. He released Kellan's cock long enough to say, "No, help me here. You need to be part of this."

Kellan closed his eyes and opened his mind, allowing Brianna to see the full scope of his need. He didn't require pain to come, but pushing sensations closer to the edge gave him stronger, more satisfying orgasms.

"Do you enjoy inflicting pain or just receiving it?" Her tone was hushed and needful, the reason for her question obvious. She was intrigued by the possibilities. Her affinity for bondage opened the door to all sorts of exploration.

Kellan opened his eyes and swallowed hard. "We'll have to find out, won't we?"

A flush crept up her throat and her nipples tightened. "I look forward to it."

Sean paused and kissed her deeply, reassuring her before they bent together to pleasure their mate. She held the base of Kellan's cock in a firm grasp while Sean continued his slow, deep sucking. A low moan escaped Kellan's throat when she dragged her fingernails up the inside of his thigh. She switched hands and pressed even harder as she raked the other side.

Carefully shielding his thoughts from Kellan, Sean sent them to Brianna. *Cover your fingers with your cream and fuck him hard. He's the only one who hasn't surrendered to full penetration.*

Are you going to fuck him?

Not tonight. But this will let him know it's going to happen sooner rather than later. For this bond to be real, we can hold nothing back.

Her gaze burned with desire and tenderness as she spread her thighs and pushed her fingers into her pussy. She shifted her gaze back and forth between them as she slowly fucked herself.

"Come closer and I'll do that for you," Kellan offered, licking his lips as his gaze focused on her cunt. "My fingers are a lot bigger than yours." She made a great show of gathering her cream then lowering her hand between Kellan's spread thighs. He tensed but didn't struggle. "Sean, I know this was your idea. I don't want her to— Fuck!" Kellan's cock bucked against the roof of Sean's mouth as the word burst from his throat.

Pure devilment ignited in Brianna's gaze as she watched the play of emotion across Kellan's flushed face. She pulled her finger nearly out then pushed in as far as it would go. After long minutes of steady thrusting, she twisted her wrist and worked in a second finger.

"Just remember...turnabout's fair play!" Kellan's spirit blazed across their link, brighter than it had ever been before. He completely surrendered to the pleasure, allowing himself to be taken without reservation or compromise.

She matched Sean's bobbing head with the pumping of her hand. They drove the sensations higher, twisting them tighter until Kellan's body arched off the ground and erupted into Sean's mouth. Sean accepted the offering gladly, swallowing and sucking until the last spasm passed. They brought him down slowly, caressing and stroking as his mind gradually refocused.

"If we keep this up, we're still going to be teasing each other when Fane's ready to leave in the morning." Kellan drew them up against his sides as they disentangled themselves from his body.

"We have plenty of time for the main course," Sean assured.

"And what is the main course?" Brianna asked.

"You are," the men said in unison.

Chapter Thirteen

Excitement and uncertainty twisted through Brianna with all the subtlety of an emotional tornado. She knew exactly what they meant, had been imagining the act since Sean and Kellan appeared in the tower room. She would straddle Kellan's hips and take him deep into her pussy while he stared into her eyes. Then Sean would kneel behind her and...

"I don't think I can." Even as she whispered the words desire reawakened inside her, warming and melting her body, preparing her for the joining. So why was she holding back?

"We'll be very careful with you." Sean propped himself on his elbow, reaching for her across Kellan's broad chest.

She sat up, taking herself out of reach. "Why do I have to be the main course? Can't we just be together?"

"It's not that simple. For the bond to be formed correctly –"

"If she's not ready, that's the end of the conversation." They both looked at Kellan in shocked amazement. He was usually the first to push her boundaries and urge her to consider the greater good. He gave her a moment to compose herself then asked, "Is it the act you're afraid of or the bond?"

She took a moment to consider the question. They already had access to each other's minds and she could sense their emotions, so was it the permanency that gave her pause? Or was she simply intimidated by the physical act? "It takes three steps to make the bond permanent, right?"

Sean nodded, his expression warm and patient. "Mystic triads require three steps. This is the second. After this, the bond will be difficult to break but not impossible. The third step will make the bond permanent."

"If Fane hadn't told you to do this tonight, is it something you would have wanted to do?" It was a pathetic evasion. Both men had made their intentions clear. Why didn't she just come right out and say what was bothering her?

Sean sighed. "You knew why we came here before we left. Why all these questions now?"

"We let her cool down." Kellan struck with the accuracy of a snake. One moment she sat beside him, the next she lay beneath him, arms stretched overhead. "What's wrong, princess? You better talk fast because I'm losing interest in conversation just holding you like this."

Her legs cradled his hips and his cock gradually hardened against her belly. She could feel desire roll across their link, filling her mind and stirring her senses. He'd just climaxed in Sean's mouth. How could he be ready to go all over again?

His mouth was feathering kisses along the underside of her jaw so he sent his thoughts into her mind. *You'll have to ask Sean why I'm so damn horny. This is his show after all. I've always had a healthy libido, but ever since the first time I fucked you, I can't seem to stay satisfied.*

Bonding fever. Sean supplied the answer. It compels us to strengthen the triad. The more often we fuck during this process the stronger our link becomes, and the more times we take her the more likely it is she'll become compatible with our seed.

"Wait a minute!" Brianna tugged against Kellan's hold, turning her head sharply so she could see Sean. "My contraceptive implant is current. I sure as hell don't want a baby in the middle of all of this."

"High compatibility is a good thing. It just means chances are better we'll be able to produce viable offspring when we're ready to try. None of us are ready to try right now."

She relaxed back on the blanket but remained tense within Kellan's hold. "This is the heart of the problem. I know so little about your world. How can I make decisions that will affect the rest of my life when I don't know what the hell I'm doing?"

"Do you love us?" Kellan asked.

"It's not that simple."

"It's exactly that simple." He shifted his weight, hovering without releasing her. "We love you to distraction. There is nothing we wouldn't do for you. So if you love us in return, we can work through the rest together."

Her heart fluttered in her chest. Was she back in the fantasy world? "You love me?"

"How can you doubt it?" His lips brushed across hers, his tongue gently stroking. Then he pulled back and Sean kissed her with equal affection. Their minds remained open, available to her without crowding or rushing her reaction.

"I don't generally let others speak for me, especially not this gruff overlord, but he's doing a respectable job of it right now. I love you like crazy."

She licked her lips, savoring the tenderness they'd bestowed on her. She wanted it to be enough, needed her doubts to fade into oblivion and love to conquer all. "I love you too. More than you can imagine, but..."

"Spit it out," Kellan insisted. "We're stuck here in limbo until you get this off your chest."

"The only thing on my chest right now is you." Rather than reply, he shifted her wrists to one hand and caressed her breasts, demonstrating his access to the area of her body she claimed he covered. Before his touch could distract her completely, she summoned what was left of her courage and shot to the heart of the matter. "What role

will I play in your world? Who will I be? I won't be content as the overlord's consort. I'm not the wait-at-home type."

He sat suddenly, pulling her with him. Sean scooted in and soon they sat in a tangle of naked limbs and blankets. "I've been thinking about that very thing," Kellan said. "I have a post available on my advisory council that I had intended to offer to Sean, but it actually makes more sense for you to share the position."

"The position vacated by Ceddrik?" Sean guessed.

Kellan nodded. "One of his strengths was his mystique. No one knew exactly what he was capable of doing. If you attend some meetings and Brianna attended others, my enemies will remain unsure." He turned back to Brianna, his expression intent yet guarded. "Sean's reputation is already established. I'd prefer your abilities remain unknown."

"It would be safer," Sean agreed.

"Why safer?" she asked.

"Just being the overlord's mate will make you a target," Sean explained. "If it becomes widely known that you're a powerful empathy, your appeal grows exponentially. I would prefer to let people think I'm the empath—"

"And I'm just Kellan's whore?"

"You are my *mate*. You share your body with no one but our other mate. There is nothing whorish about that. Mate is more precious than wife and far more important than consort. Can you find nothing of worth in my world without risking your life?"

He was offering her his world, his heart, his pride. It was her turn to compromise, to adapt to her surroundings. She licked her lips and let go of the past. Whatever her future would be, she would build it here together with these two men. "You're right. I'm sorry. It makes perfect sense to let people believe Sean is the empath." She would know the truth and so would they. That's what was important. At least she would have a purpose. She would be an active part of what went on, not be locked away in a harem or be expected to...embroider.

"Are we done talking?" Kellan caught her wrists as he waited for her answer. Her hands looked tiny within the circle of his long fingers. They sat facing each other, moonlight painting everything silver.

Brianna looked from Kellan to Sean and back, her mind opening wide. They had to know exactly how she felt. She'd held back the floodwaters long enough, it was time for action. "I'm uncomfortable with the timing, but I don't fear the bond. I know we're meant to be together."

"And the actual joining? Are you willing to try?" Kellan asked with a sexy smile. "How can you be sure you won't like it if we've never even tried?"

Damn the man. He was supposed to be all intimidation and glowers. Where was this playfulness coming from? "The only time I even..." She glanced away, unable to complete the sentence.

"The only time you took Sean up the ass was in the fantasy world?" She nodded. Her cheeks heated as he brought her face back around. "You're about to do it for real, princess. You can say it out loud. I promise we won't tell your sister."

"Oh my God." She jerked her hands free and covered her burning cheeks.

"You're not helping," Sean warned.

"If Lorelle had any idea we..."

Kellan shook his head and looked at Sean. "Lorelle knows she has two mates. Are all humans this sexually conservative?"

"I wouldn't know." He motioned toward Brianna. "Why don't you ask the human?"

"Princess, why is this so much harder for you to accept than the other ways we've pleased each other? Is it any more taboo than Sean fucking his first man?"

A vivid mental image of Kellan's cock sliding into Sean's ass sent sparks dancing across her nerve endings. She shivered and crossed her arms over her breasts, helplessly closing her eyes.

Kellan folded his legs beneath him and bent to her ear. "At least Sean will be your first. He's long and lean, perfect for ass fucking."

It took her a second to realize he wasn't talking about Sean's body type but the shape of his cock. Her imagination bombarded her with possibilities, positions, sensations and the culmination. Would it spread through her slowly like a wave or erupt with sharp contractions? She caught her lower lip between her teeth and moaned.

"Are you getting wet just thinking about it?" Kellan pressed against her side as he guided her hand to his cock. His shaft was hot and hard beneath her fingers and his hand covered hers, accenting the heat and the thickness. "Touch me. I'll touch Sean and Sean will touch you."

Sean pushed to his knees on her other side and framed her face with his hands. "Don't you love the way he 'follows'? He keeps forgetting he's not in charge tonight."

Her smile parted her lips for Sean's kiss. His lips settled over hers and his tongue slid into the interior of her mouth, stroking and sliding with bold movements. She tried to keep her hand busy on Kellan's cock, but Sean's energy pushed into her mind, threading through her being and rousing her senses from the inside out. She wanted more, needed everything they had to give.

Her skin tingled and her breasts felt swollen. Desire rushed through her bloodstream with each beat of her heart. Sean licked her mouth, exploring every silken recess. She was breathless and weak by the time he separated their lips and lightly nipped her chin.

She made raw needful sounds in the back of her throat, feeling intoxicated and dizzy. Sean drew her hand away from Kellan's cock and pulled her arms behind her back as he moved behind her. Deprived of too much all at once, she struggled against

him, but Sean only tightened his hold on her wrists and thrust her breasts toward Kellan.

Still on his knees, Kellan moved closer. His eyes had gone dark and ferocious like they grew right before he came. She fidgeted, desire bombarding her from all directions.

Squeezing her breast with one hand, Kellan bent to the other and caught the nipple between his teeth. She held her breath, waiting for the promised sting. Her anxious breathing tugged her flesh against his restraining teeth, but the pressure remained constant, stopping just short of pain.

"Do you want him to bite you?" A dark sensual edge cut through Sean's voice, making him sound older and more powerful. More powerful? He was a specter, for God's sake. But this was sexual power. The kind of power Kellan wielded so effortlessly. Her insides quivered. Did she want two powerful mates? Didn't that make her even more powerless? Sean nuzzled her hair, his breath warm against her ear. "You're the one with all the power. Say the word and he lets go. Do you trust us?"

"Yes."

Kellan loved these games, but she hadn't expected them from Sean.

Ever so slightly Kellan's teeth tightened, launching twinges straight to her clit. *This isn't a game, princess. The only time I can be completely honest is when I'm here with you.*

Kellan's openness wrapped around her heart and filled her with determination. He had to be everything to everyone. So many people counted on him. He had guards and servants and staff members, but who nurtured the overlord? Who squeezed his hand when he received bad news? Who held him when he felt lonely?

"Bite me, take me, fuck me. My body is yours."

He drew her nipple deep into his mouth, his gaze locked with hers. Then he released the suction and let the tender crest scrape against his teeth. She gasped and shivered. The sensation was harsher than a tingle yet not really painful. He traced her areola with his tongue, his gaze still holding hers.

"Your body is wired for pleasure, not pain," Kellan told her.

"Then why did you want to bite me?"

"I didn't. I wanted you to be willing to let me."

She smiled. "Trust."

He nodded. "There is no way we can attempt this without it."

"There you go again," Sean grumbled. "I thought I was leading tonight."

Kellan threw up his hands. "Old habits die hard."

"Smooth out the blankets and lie down on your back."

"We're going to get right to it?" He winked at Brianna and bent over to do Sean's bidding.

"Not exactly. I thought you two could entertain each other while I prepared Brianna for the finale."

"A little sixty-nine while you lube her ass?" Kellan laughed. "Does it really sound less sexual when you sugarcoat it? You two both need to get over it. This is sexual. We are sexual beings about to engage in a sexual act. I'm going to fuck both my mates at the same time and it's going to be spectacular!"

Sean and Brianna laughed, unable to resist Kellan's enthusiasm. Brianna doubted she would ever be as uninhibited as Kellan, but his abandon was contagious.

Stretching out on his back, Kellan motioned her over and helped her kneel on either side of his head. She positioned her pussy over his mouth, pausing with her slit just out of reach. He took her by the hips and dragged her downward until his lips pressed against her folds. She closed her eyes and savored the gentle slide of his tongue around her clit, so gentle yet so evocative.

Sean grasped the back of her neck and pushed her toward Kellan's waiting cock. "This is supposed to be interactive."

If she'd rather just enjoy, that's fine by me. I can't come until I'm inside her anyway.

"No. I told her to suck your cock." Sean swatted her on the ass. "Do as you're told."

Her core rippled in response to the light slap and Brianna fought back a moan. She might not like being bitten, but she suspected she'd like being spanked!

We'll explore that possibility very soon. Kellan's mouth continued lavishing attention on her folds while his wicked chuckle sounded in her mind.

Damn. It was impossible to shield her thoughts when she was this turned-on. She angled Kellan's cock toward her mouth with one hand and braced herself against the blanket with the other. Pre-cum already slicked his tip, revealing the urgency of his arousal. Had all his dirty talk turned him on, or was he anxious to experience their joining and all the metaphysical intensity sure to accompany the bonding? She didn't care which. His taste was intoxicating.

She dragged her tongue along the rim then explored the tiny slit, capturing the salty-sharp liquid gathering there. He gasped and shivered, his fingers digging into her hips.

Sean squeezed her ass cheeks, his thumbs dipping inward, tracing the crease between. She knew what was coming, had more or less experienced it before. Kellan shifted his hands, holding her open, helping Sean prepare her.

Cool gel was spread around her anus and gently worked into her rear passage. Kellan timed his strokes on her clit with each thrust into her tight opening. She inhaled Kellan's familiar musk and dug her nails into his thighs.

"Easy, love," Sean whispered. "Relax and let me slide."

Kellan's caress became less specific. He traced her slit, circled her clit, and push into her core, never staying in one place long and never following the same pattern. The random nature of his touches fed her restlessness, made it harder to remain still.

"She's ready," Sean whispered. "And this is killing me."

With a muffled growl, Kellan came up off the blanket, taking Brianna with him in the process. Sean quickly removed his fingers as Kellan rotated their mate and repositioned her over his lap. "How are we doing this? Me on the bottom, side by side, or standing up?"

"Standing up?" Brianna gasped. "It can be done standing up?"

"It's easier if the woman's in restraints, but —"

"You can be on the bottom for a change," Sean decided.

"Bottom it is." Kellan lay down and locked his hands behind his head with a challenging smile. "Here I am, princess. Come and get me."

Brianna wasted no time accepting his offer. She placed one knee on either side of his hips and guided his cock to her vaginal opening. He remained perfectly still, his gaze dark yet burning. She lowered her body, filling herself with his flesh.

Sean's hands cupped her breasts, warm and gentle, reminding her the joining was incomplete until he was inside her too. She savored the fullness of Kellan for a moment then bent forward and rested against his chest, offering Sean access to her rear passage.

Kellan guided her hands to his shoulders and urged her gaze to his. "Be brave. Allow yourself to feel what we're feeling, how deeply this moves us, how in awe we are of you."

Humbled by his words, she kissed his chest and closed her eyes, paying closer attention to what her empathic receptors revealed. Kellan combed his fingers through her hair, wave after wave of dizzying love washing into her mind and soothing her body.

Sean had worked the head of his cock past the collar of muscles, but he seemed to be in no hurry to continue. He caressed her back and teased the outer swell of her breasts. And all the while his being moved through her mind, deft and elegant, stirring happiness and joy. Warmth and peace bathed her in contentment as her mates held her tenderly between them.

What were they doing? This wasn't what she'd expected at all.

We're loving you as you deserve to be loved, Sean replied. *Everything about our world has been harsh and overwhelming. We wanted this to be different. Do you have a problem with that?*

Their hands conspired against her, using tenderness to dismantle the last of her emotional defenses. Sean eased into her centimeter by centimeter as his fingers glided over her skin. Blissful pressure, unbelievable fullness, but not so much as a pinch ever distracted from the perfection of their joining. When their bodies were finally flush, Sean kissed his way down her spine as Kellan raised her enough so he could kiss her mouth.

Now and forever you are mine. Kellan offered the vow to Sean and Brian simultaneously and they echoed it back to him a moment later.

The mystic triad launched, binding their souls, sturdy and unique. Kellan dug his heels into the blanket and pushed up with his hips, driving his cock into Brianna's snug heat. She broke the kiss with a cry and tossed her hair, digging her fingernails into his shoulders. Sean pulled back slowly, both men able to feel the other's movements.

Sean took hold of Brianna's hips and established the rhythm. He pushed her onto Kellan's cock then made his slow, steady drive. Sean elongated each of Kellan's strokes by pulling his length nearly out of her ass.

Brianna relaxed into each rotation, flowing with Sean's movements, surrendered to the pleasures. Kellan caressed her breasts, teasing her nipples as his cock filled her pussy again and again. It was savage yet gentle, like a boat rocking on the sea.

"Come for us," Kellan growled. "We're holding back for you. You're going to have to end this for us."

They didn't want to hurt her. That's why this was so different, so subdued. Brianna pushed up, getting a better angle against his shaft even though it increased the pressure in her ass. She breathed through the intensity and encouraged a faster pace with the motion of her hips.

"Don't...hold back. Fuck me hard!"

Sean thrust faster and Kellan bucked beneath her, sensations spinning just out of reach. All she needed was a little touch and she'd go off.

"Do it," Kellan urged. "My hand will never fit."

She squeezed her hand between their writhing bodies and miraculously found her clit. Her fingers passed over the puffy nub and sensations blasted through her abdomen. Her heart pounded in her chest and her inner muscles contracted forcefully around both her mates, triggering their orgasms.

Sean groaned, clutching her hips as he spurted deep in her ass. Kellan ground her down on his cock, his legs trembling with the force of his climax.

Dazed by the staggering orgasm, Brianna lifted her head from Kellan's chest and cried out. The spirit stood off to one side, shimmering in the moonlight. "How long has *she* been there?"

They disentangled their bodies and wrapped Brianna in a blanket before anyone attempted to engage the entity. Even then, Kellan tried to convince Sean to ignore her completely, infuriated by the intrusion.

"It won't do any good, Overlord. I'll have to follow," the spirit said. "I'm running out of options."

"What do you want from us?" Sean kept Brianna behind him as he approached the spirit.

"What I have wanted all along. We must slay the dragon!"

"We know where he is," Sean told her. "We attack at dawn."

"That's why I'm here. I didn't realize how long I'd been imprisoned or how weak I had become because of the passage of time. Creating the fantasy world for you to play

in used up a great deal of my power. I'm not blaming you. It's not as though you asked me to do it, but I did do it for your benefit."

"And in return you would like?" he prompted, his attention squarely focused on the entity.

"I've been unable to locate the seer. Until I do, I cannot leave this dimension. But without a corporeal host I cannot stay in this dimension. My energy will disperse within the next few hours if we don't agree to help each other." Her form rippled, the edges turning to mist.

"You want to possess one of us?" Kellan sounded aghast.

"Not possess, exactly. I'll assist with the attack, perhaps guide, but for the most part I'll be a passenger." She smiled, mischief glimmering in her eyes. "I promise."

"You will do nothing without the host's permission or you're not going near any of us. End of conversation," Sean asserted.

"Fine."

"Not good enough."

"I won't do anything without the host's permission. You have my word." She directed the vow to Sean, but her gaze kept drifting toward Brianna.

"For how long will you need a host, and does hosting your energy pose any danger to us?" Kellan asked.

"Absolutely not, but I cannot be hosted by anyone who has been exposed to the lentavirus. It would taint my energy."

"She wants Brianna!" Kellan stepped in front of her too.

"She is the only possibility left to me. I could have slipped into her a short time ago and it is likely she wouldn't have been aware of my presence. I know what Ceddrick did to her, so I chose not to risk any sense of violation. I want a willing host. I want to work together to rid the world of a very dangerous man, a very evil man. Ceddrick must die and I must find the seer. I can't accomplish either without Brianna."

"And if Brianna refuses?" Kellan persisted.

"I prefer she didn't. My goals must be accomplished and it would be so much more pleasant if she worked with me on this."

"That sounds like a threat," Sean snapped.

"I'm dying! What would you have me do?"

Sean turned to Brianna, his expression too conflicted to interpret. "I don't think she's harmful, but it's your body she wants to borrow."

Chapter Fourteen

"Have your spies reported anything we didn't already know?" Kellan asked Fane the following morning. Kellan's body still hummed from the unbelievable pleasure he had shared with his mates the night before. It was going to be damn hard not to be distracted by their presence on this mission, but he had to think of them as valued team members, nothing more.

"The second man in the hotel room has gone through a list of aliases down through the years," Fane began. "We believe his real name is Renn Majanon. He was once employed by Nehalem's father and then Chancellor Howyn."

"You'll never guess what he did for Howyn?" Sarcasm dripped from Mal Ton's tone.

"If I'll never guess, you'll have to tell me." Kellan managed a deadpan expression in counterpoint to Mal Ton's exaggeration.

Mal Ton chuckled. "He was one of Ceddrik's guards. Helped him escape eons ago."

"You learned all of this by watching them screw around for one night? They must be seriously chatty after they fuck."

Mal Ton threw back his head and laughed. Fane wasn't quite so amused, but the corners of his mouth curved in a reluctant smile. "Physical surveillance isn't the only service at my disposal. Once my research team has a facial imprint, it's amazing what they can tell me."

Pushing aside the momentary diversion, Kellan focused on the subject. "Okay, so Renn isn't a random third. What does that mean to us? Does he have powers?"

"We're not sure," Fane admitted. "Info is pretty sketchy after they went offline."

"So what's going on with the other two?" Sean asked.

"Ceddrik has been injected and is exhibiting early signs of functionality. The sooner we can move the better."

Damn. Kellan scooted to the edge of his seat. The Chrysalis nanites were absorbing into his body faster than they'd anticipated. "I have no problem with that. Are they still at the hotel?"

"Yes." Mal Ton activated a three-dimensional image of their destination. "I'll bring Lorelle in from the hallway, here," he indicated a section of wall not obscured by any large furniture. "Fane and Kellan can blow the main door and Sean can come in wherever he feels like it. We'll have them surrounded before they know what hit them."

"We'll have three additional teams stationed for perimeter backup," Fane concluded.

Kellan looked at Sean. "Do you want to take Brianna with you?"

"No, but I will."

"There's no reason for Brianna to be part of this," Lorelle objected. "We have more than enough warm bodies for this operation. There are only three targets."

"Yeah, well, Brianna is hosting an old friend of Fane's who insists on being there for this," Sean explained.

Fane's head snapped toward Brianna and the spirit surged to the surface. Brianna groaned, her head rocking back on her shoulders. Light burst from her skin in a blinding flash then pulsed beneath the surface.

"Mistress." Fane bowed his head and covered his heart with his fist. "I often thought I sensed your presence, but I couldn't imagine how it could be possible."

"My work is not yet finished. Have you ever known me to leave a task incomplete?"

"I have not." He raised his head and narrowed his gaze until he could tolerate her brightness. "Please let us do this for you. Trust those you trained to protect and keep you safe. You deserve that and so much more."

"Selan'te is slippery and desperate. That's a dangerous combination. I can leave nothing to chance. Sean will keep me cloaked in shadow. Only if I am needed will our enemy even know I'm there. On this you have my word."

"As you wish, Mistress."

"Fane!" Lorelle's jaw dropped. "Your mistress hijacked my sister. I don't want Brianna anywhere near this fight."

"They won't know she's there," Sean stressed. "I'll make sure of it."

"You better." Lorelle produced an intimidating glower she'd likely learned from her mate.

Though he was amused by Lorelle's spirit, Kellan wasn't any more comfortable with Brianna being part of the attack than her sister was. The spirit hadn't come right out and said it, but she'd insinuated that she'd take over Brianna's body and go after the dragon on her own if Brianna didn't agree to host her willingly.

There was too much evidence against Ceddrik. Kellan no longer doubted his guilt. Still, he hadn't witnessed any of the things Ceddrik had done. It all felt a bit surreal.

They crowded into three small ships and flew to separate locations surrounding the hotel. While the first three teams moved into position around the perimeter of the building, Sean launched several of his spybots.

He navigated the most sophisticated bot to the balcony of the suite in which their targets were currently located. The flexible device maneuvered itself between the sliding door and the track in which it rested before attaching itself to the interior wall.

"I've got audio," Sean told the others and sent the signal to the ship's comm system.

"...necessary to leave the conduit active," Nehalem was saying. "For one thing it makes me lightheaded all the time." A short pause followed and then she said more vehemently, "I don't want to get used to it! Why can't I open it when you need energy and..."

The audio signal faded for a moment as the spybot reinitialized its transceiver. The ship's vidscreen flickered and then the hotel room came into view.

Kellan stared at the live feed in awe. "That toy bug is doing all this?"

Fane slapped him on the back with an unexpected grin. "I'll take Sean's 'toy bugs' over the most expensive surveillance equipment on the market. He's a genius with this sort of thing. If you haven't figured that out already."

Sean positioned his other spybots and they were soon able to see and hear exactly what was happening in the entire suite. Rather than continue their argument, Nehalem had stormed into the adjoining bedroom and locked the door.

The spybots didn't transmit telepathic conversations, but Fane picked up enough of what they were thinking to have a pretty good idea. "Ceddrik wants access to any mutant at any time," Fane explained. "If Nehalem keeps her gift active and allows him to use it at will, it could be very dangerous."

"Won't that burn out the nanites?" Mal Ton asked. "The original host could only load a certain amount of mutant energy at one time."

"He might not realize the limitation or he's trying to overcome it." Fane shrugged. "I honestly don't care. We need to take him out before he becomes any more proficient with commanding the damn things."

"Agreed," Mal Ton and Kellan said together.

Having the information they needed, Sean recalled his spybots. It would take him less time to access the apartment through the shadow dimension than it would for the others to work their way through stairwells and utility hallways.

Kellan pulled Brianna into his arms and kissed her, unable to still the impulse. "Stay hidden."

"I will," Brianna answered. The spirit retreated to the back of her mind, offering them a moment of privacy.

"Is she still in there?"

"Yes, she's just being nice."

"We'll see if we can find this seer for her once this is all over. We owe her that much at least."

"One thing at a time." She kissed him on the lips then gently eased away. "Let's go slay the dragon."

Sean tucked the last of his spybots into their protective case and snapped it closed. "Ready?"

Brianna took a deep breath and nodded. "The spirit is restless. She knows the dragon is near. She can sense him and she has waited so long for this day."

"Will she honor our agreement? Will she remain in the shadows and let us do our jobs?"

"I hope so. I'll do my best to make sure she does. I'm the first one to admit I'm not my sister."

"Thank the gods for that. I have nothing against Lorelle, but you are far more appealing to me than little-miss-soldier-girl." His arm swept around her waist and he pulled her against his chest. "The others should be in position by now. Let's get going."

Color faded to gray and her feet dangled as the floor disintegrated. She clutched Sean's back, refusing to be afraid. Her knight held her and her overlord would meet them there. Together they could face any danger and overcome any evil. This was the first true test of their mystic triad and they were ready.

Gradually color returned, first flickers of blue within the gray then streaks of silver and gold. Her toes touched something solid and a wall formed at her back. They emerged in the bathroom as planned. Sean placed his fingers against her lips, cautioning her to remain silent as he sealed the opening to the shadow dimension.

"I said no!" Nehalem's voice penetrated the door, distorted yet shrill.

The other woman's terror stabbed into Brianna's mind and she made a sharp motion toward the door. *He's hurting her, badly! Her fear almost knocked me over.*

Sean rushed toward the door, easing it open far enough so he could see into the bedroom. *It's now or never, people! Sean called. Ceddrik is making his move!*

No longer attempting to be subtle, Sean threw open the door and stormed into the bedroom. "Back away from her!" He pointed his pulse pistol at Ceddrik's head, steadying the weapon with both hands. Ceddrik ignored the directive. He stood at the foot of the bed, hands wrapped around Nehalem's throat.

Brianna stayed in the doorway, not cloaked in shadow as they had intended, but well back from the action.

Sean shot over their heads and shouted, "Break it up. Now!"

Renn crouched at Ceddrik's feet wearing nothing but a spiked dog collar. The long metal leash trailed across the carpet and his arm wrapped around one of Nehalem's legs. Brianna only noted his odd, unfocused expression before she returned her attention to the struggling couple.

Suddenly Ceddrik's head jerked toward her and he sneered. *So, Spirit, you're still alive after all.* Pure hatred flashed in his gaze as he added, *You won't be for long!*

Sean fired, four fast, accurate blasts, but each was absorbed by some sort of barrier. "Fuck! They're shielded." Sean tucked the pistol into the back of his pants and crept closer to the enemy.

A crash in the outer room announced Fane and Kellan's arrival. Mal Ton shifted through the wall on the other side of Ceddrik with Lorelle in his arms. As soon as they solidified, she dropped into an aggressive crouch, weapons in each hand.

"Guns are useless," Sean warned. "Can you shift through the shield?"

Rather than deliberate, Mal Ton sidestepped his mate and charged. His body flickered for a moment as he approached then he slammed into the barrier. He ricocheted off and landed in a sprawl halfway across the room. "Apparently not," he concluded as he struggled to his feet.

Confident in his defenses, Ceddrik centered his attention on the woman in his grasp. His hands tightened on Nehalem's throat and she went wild, twisting and clawing at his hands. Renn whimpered and rubbed his face against her thigh, obviously upset by her peril.

Fane and Mal Ton held out their hands toward Ceddrik, their features tense with concentration.

Kellan raised his pulse pistol, but Sean grabbed his wrist and shook his head. "I already tried. It just feeds the barrier. We can't attack until they bring it down."

"Shit," Kellan muttered, obviously frustrated by the delay.

Similarly aggravated, Lorelle drew a wicked dagger from her boot and threw it end over end at their foe. The blade bounced off the shield and embedded in the carpet not far from her boot. She yanked the knife out and returned it to its scabbard. "Had to try." She took up a defensive position and covered Mal Ton and Fane.

Grab the leash, the spirit urged Brianna. Renn's power is almost gone. We need to snap the weakest link in the chain. I'll get your hand through the shield, but no matter what, don't let go.

If you can punch through the shield, open a hole for Kellan to shoot through. Brianna looked around. No one else was reacting to the spirit's suggestion.

The barrier would absorb the energy long before it reached the dragon. Now do as you're told! We must disrupt their triad and Renn is the logical choice.

Brianna looked at Renn's leash. The leather handle lay off to one side. Was it possible the shield didn't extend that far? No, the spirit had said she'd get her hand through the shield, not that the shield wouldn't be a problem.

Dread tore through Brianna. This was going to hurt like hell. Nothing like this ever came without consequences. But she had to do it. They had to slay the dragon!

Cover me. I'm going to piss off the dog. She sent the thought to her mates as she darted across the room. They both reached for her at the same time, inadvertently blocking each other in the process. Empowered by the spirit, she reached through the shield and grabbed the handle of Renn's leash.

Fire shot up her arm, slamming into her shoulder with enough force to rock her backward. She screamed, clenching her teeth against the searing pain. The spirit poured energy into her arm, dulling the agony and giving her strength. Sean wrapped his arm

around her waist and Kellan grabbed her upper arm. Together with her mates, she dragged Renn away from Nehalem.

"Dog, attack," Ceddrick yelled without shifting his gaze from Nehalem.

Renn snarled and tossed his head, digging his fingers into the carpet and kicking wildly. When his body cleared the shield, he lunged for Brianna. Lorelle knocked him to the side with a forceful kick. Then she took up a protective stance in front of Brianna while the men turned on Renn.

Sean blasted him with shadow energy, reducing Renn to a whimpering heap in a matter of seconds. He paused and lowered his arm. Renn lunged for his throat.

Kellan caught him by the head. Renn's feet dangled off the floor as Kellan stared into his eyes. "No one threatens my mates." He lowered Renn until his toes touched the floor then snapped his neck with a vicious twist.

"No!" Ceddrick's anguished cry echoed as Kellan released Renn's lifeless body and moved closer to the barrier. Sean was at his side.

Ceddrick lost concentration for just a moment, but the moment was all Fane needed. Shooting disruptive energy through the shield, Fane created fissures and cracks. Mal Ton and Sean quickly expanded the cracks until the barrier shattered.

Nehalem shrieked, her body vibrating violently. Ceddrick threw her at Fane as he lunged for Mal Ton. For just an instant, Ceddrick's hand pressed against Mal Ton's face then Ceddrick's eyes flashed amber and he shifted out of sight. Mal Ton stumbled forward, unable to stop the momentum of his charge.

"Did he just teleport?" Kellan cried, eyes wide with disbelief.

"Technically he shifted, but the result is the same." Mal Ton crossed to Fane who was placing Nehalem on the bed. "He barely touched my mind. There's no way he siphoned enough energy for more than one shift."

"She's dead," Fane said. "He used the nanites to amplify the conduit until the gift transferred itself into him."

"He can gather his own abilities now." Brianna didn't elaborate. They all realized the import of what had just happened. Ceddrick was all but invincible.

The room around her twirled and Brianna's vision blurred. She reached out blindly for something solid then there was an instant of black. When her vision cleared again, the spirit stood before her, visible if not solid, her ageless face clearly angry.

"The dragon is not invincible! He is an infant, isolated and alone. He has nothing and no one. I don't care how many fancy machines he shoves beneath his skin. We have him on the run. What he has is potential, a potential that must never be allowed to develop."

"She's right." Fane straightened and squared his shoulders. "Nehalem only knew the basics of how the nanites worked and now even she is gone. Without a mentor, Ceddrick is sure to make mistakes, and when he does, we'll have him."

The spirit floated closer to Brianna, white hair rippling around her thin shoulders. "I was drawn to you from the start, but I wasn't sure why. Now I know you have a connection to the seer. The seer will destroy the dragon." She sighed and glanced away. "I have waited so long and I want this so badly. I admit I was impatient."

"If the seer is the key to destroying the dragon, how do we find them?" Brianna asked.

"When the time is right, the seer will find you."

"So we just wait around until this seer knocks on our door?" Kellan shook his head, clearly frustrated by the spirit's suggestion. "Do you honestly expect Ceddrick to do the same? He's out there right now, searching for this seer, determined to destroy them before you can empower them to destroy him. Look what he did to Nehalem and Renn. And they were his allies!"

"I don't expect you to do anything, Overlord. I only know what the future shows me. The seer will destroy the dragon and no one in this room will be able to find her. She will have to reveal herself to you."

"She?" Brianna challenged. "That's the first time you've assigned gender to the seer." She studied the spirit's pale blue eyes, seeing wry wisdom and serenity that had never been there before. "You know who she is!"

The spirit smiled, her image rippling. "When you shoved your hand through the shield, I saw her face, but I don't yet know where to find her."

"Share the image with us," Fane suggested. "We'll help you locate her."

"She isn't ready to be found."

"Half-truths and riddles. That's all we ever get from you." Kellan kicked a chair out of his way and stomped across the room.

"Every path I see intersects through you." Her claim brought him up short just before he opened the door. "How's that for plain speaking?"

Kellan turned around and glared at her. "It's vague and useless. My response is, so what?"

"So you better start taking this seriously. These events will culminate in your backyard. The dragon knows your black zones almost as well as you do. Where do you think he will hide?"

"If Ceddrick returns to the zones, I'll know about it. No one can hide from me there."

"You better be right, Overlord. There will come a time, not too long from now, when that boast will be put to the test."

The spirit disappeared, but Brianna didn't feel her reenter her mind.

"She is really starting to piss me off," Kellan muttered.

"She's as frustrated as we are." Defending the spirit right now was probably not the wisest course, but Brianna couldn't help it. What little success they could claim today had been because of the spirit.

"How's your arm?" Sean moved up beside her and carefully raised her wounded hand.

The skin was an angry red, the fingers swollen, and blisters had begun to form across her knuckles. Without the spirit's dampening effect, the burn throbbed unmercifully. "It's not happy."

"Let's get you back to the Underground so a healer can take care of this." Rather than wait for one of the ships, Sean used the shadow dimension to take her to the corridor outside the infirmary. Ostan, the resident physician, confirmed that she would need a mystic healer, so Sean went to find one while the doctor disinfected the area in preparation for treatment. He also administered an analgesic mist that took the edge off the pain.

Ostan's hair was more orange than red and his shimmering skin was almost colorless. The exaggerated angle from his broad forehead to his pointed chin formed his face into a concave triangle. Was he from another star system, or had his appearance been altered by his mutation?

"Has the painkiller kicked in?" Ostan asked as he set the disinfectant aside. "We're fortunate that the skin isn't broken. This makes things less complicated."

"I can still feel it, but it's definitely better."

"How did this happen? It looks like you shoved your arm into a vat of boiling water." He raised his brows dramatically and took a step back. "That's not what you did, is it?"

His easy manner made her smile despite the pain. "Not quite that stupid. I reached through a psychic shield."

"What in the world made you do that?"

She told him what happened, and by the time Sean arrived with Alice, she suspected Ostan had kept her talking to keep her mind off her injury. Despite his unusual appearance, Ostan was gentle and skilled. He worked smoothly with Alice, clearly unthreatened by her presence in his domain.

Kellan arrived as Alice was finishing up. Brianna's arm was still a bit discolored, but the excruciating pain had been reduced to an annoying tightness. There were no blisters and Ostan assured her there would be no lasting damage to either her skin or the underlying tissue.

"Dermal regenerators don't begin to work this well." Brianna flexed her hand and rotated her wrist. "Thank you." She smiled at Alice then turned to Ostan. "Thank you both."

"That's what we're here for," Ostan assured.

They left the infirmary a few minutes later. Kellan was conspicuously silent and Brianna could sense the conflict twisting within him. "Are you more annoyed by the fact Ceddrik got away or by the spirit's odd sense of humor?"

"I hate games."

Sean laughed at the claim. "You hate games that you don't control."

Kellan rolled his shoulders, his features as tense as his muscles. "If she knows who the seer is, why won't she tell us?"

"She might not be able to tell us," Sean said. "I've yet to encounter a being who isn't subjected to a balancing force. She might be able to interfere in our reality, but only so far. If she steps over that line, maybe she's jerked back or maybe she risks too high a price for her involvement."

Kellan shook his head, in no way soothed by Sean's musings. "All I know is this is driving me crazy. I don't know how you do it. I'm used to enemies I can see and touch and mangle!"

"Then focus on Ceddrik," Brianna suggested. "He's proven himself worthy of your ire. The spirit said the seer will ultimately destroy him, but that doesn't mean we can't keep tabs on him, make sure no one else is harmed until the seer is ready for the final confrontation."

Kellan nodded, his shoulders relaxing at last. "If he's stupid enough to return to the black zones, like the spirit said, it's only a matter of time before we find him." He scrubbed his chin as speculation darkened his gaze. "And if we can locate this mysterious seer in the meantime, so much the better."

"The spirit said the seer will find us," she reminded. Kellan was a warrior to the marrow of his bones. She couldn't expect him to sit idly by while the conflict raged around him. "Even if we find her, this is her battle to win, not ours. We've done our part."

"I've always believed in being proactive." Kellan softened the claim with a smile. "The spirit didn't forbid us from looking for the seer. She just said we wouldn't be able to and that sounds like a challenge to me."

Sean ran his hand down the back of her hair, warmth flowing across their link. "Let him try. If events are meant to take place, even our stubborn overlord cannot change them."

"True enough. And if events start unfolding within his territory, he will need to feel useful."

Kellan scoffed, fists planted firmly on his hips. "You sounded just like her when you said that. Have you forgotten who you call Master and why?"

Tingles cascaded along her spine and heat gathered between her thighs. "Are you offering to remind me?" They made love slowly at times, savoring each other for hours. Other times they were playful, tickling and pinching as they wrestled and laughed. But Brianna enjoyed it most when Kellan took control and overwhelmed them all with aggressive passion.

Sensing the hunger swelling within her, Sean wrapped his arm around Brianna's waist and drew her against his side. "Shall I have the skiff readied, Overlord, or would you prefer to travel through the shadow dimension?"

Kellan swung Brianna up into his arms and smiled at Sean. "Our mate needs a lesson in obedience as quickly as possible. The pleasure pit is out of commission, so it's up to you." A warm chuckle finally rumbled in his chest and he buried his face in her hair. "Press against my back, Specter. Wrap your arms around my waist and take us all home!"

About the Author

Aubrey Ross writes an eclectic assortment of erotic fiction. From power struggles between futuristic clans to adventurous mystic guardians, her stories are filled with passion and imagination. Some of her recent awards include an EPPIE finalist, two Passionate Plume finalists and a CAPA nomination from the Romance Studio.

With a pampered cat curled on the corner of her desk, Aubrey dreams up fascinating words and larger than life adventures – and wouldn't have it any other way!

Aubrey welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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