



Changeling Press

Aubrey Ross

SENSUOUS

Sensuous
by Aubrey Ross

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Sensuous

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Victor, an organic vampire, is intrigued by his father's determination to modernize Zoltan clan. He has experienced relationships driven by obligation in the past and now he wants a union fueled entirely by passion. Modern society seems less regimented, so he's excited to explore his new boundaries.

Tess Bronstein is in the process of opening X2, a sister club to Station X. After stumbling through one horrible relationship after another, she has given up on romance altogether. Victor attracts and fascinates her, but her unwanted fiancé has burst back into her life, so a fling with a vampire is not going to happen.

Captivated, yet challenged by Tess's resistance, Victor enlists the help of Seth, an arrogant Elfin prince. Seth and Tess were betrothed at birth, and her refusal to acknowledge the contract only fuels Seth's determination to possess her. Victor knows they can unleash her sensuality if they find a way beyond her emotional reserve. Seth woos her by day. Victor seduces her by night. And when her barriers begin to crumble, they combine their efforts, shattering her preconceived ideas of what love is all about.

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Prologue

Sharp fangs stabbed into Cadin's neck, and she screamed. Her body arched off the bed, twisting and bucking in an instinctive flurry of motion. Physical sensations were still new, each discovery intense and addictive. She'd spent the majority of her existence in an incorporeal dimension, never imagining the pleasure awaiting her in the physical realm.

Emit slipped an arm beneath her neck and raised her slightly as he settled on his knees between her thighs. His mouth drew in long, rhythmic pulls, launching a fresh wave of pain with each demanding suck.

Strength flowed out of her body and into his. He pinned her to the bed, feeding with savage hunger and ... malevolence? She scanned his mind, expecting the anger, yet surprised by the resentment pulsing through him. Did he honestly think she'd be this easy to kill? She was a chaos being! Corporeal creatures existed for her entertainment, and to enrich her sustenance. She siphoned energy from the room around her, saturating her levels faster than he could deplete them.

He gasped and raised his head, glaring into her eyes as blood trailed from the corners of his mouth. "How did you do that?" His words were separated by harsh little pants.

"I don't want you to starve." Mockery tinged her voice and shaped her smile. His gaze narrowed, and emotion spiked through his energy, sharp anger and dark ambition, twisting through rich, red lust. So conflicted. So chaotic. She lived for

moments like this. "If you're still hungry, feed. I didn't realize I'd been so neglectful."

Fury ignited within his gaze. His blue eyes glowed, and his features sharpened. "You need me to remain in this dimension." He grasped the backs of her knees and spread her legs wide. "But what do I get out of the bargain?"

His cock drove into her, the thick length stretching the walls of her pussy. Yes! This was what she wanted, what she craved. She shut her eyes and forced herself not to arch or moan. He must not realize how badly she needed the fullness, the utter completeness of having him deep inside her.

"You like that, don't you?" he whispered near her ear as he slowly pulled back.

Refusing to react to his taunt, she concentrated on the blissful slide. She could bring herself to orgasm with a vibrator or her fingers, but nothing replaced the sensation of skin sliding against skin, and his hot, hard cock ... not just any hot, hard cock, his!

She opened her eyes and studied his angular features. Had he guessed her weakness? Her folds spread around his cockhead while her core clenched, aching for his return. Despite her determination, a pathetic whimper escaped her parted lips.

"What's the matter, Cadin? Missing me already?"

Her hand swung fast and hard, but he caught her wrist before her palm connected. His pleased laughter compounded the insult, and she kicked and twisted, desperate to evade his grasp.

"I'm faster and stronger than your human form." As if to demonstrate his claim, he flipped her over and drew her arms behind her back. "The only way you can escape me is to disperse your body, and I can't fuck you if you do that."

"What do you want?" She ground out the question between clenched teeth.

"Fold your legs beneath you and move your knees far apart. I want plenty of room to move between those silky thighs."

Hating him more with each motion, she obeyed his command. He shifted her wrists into one hand, freeing the other to stroke and squeeze and torment her. His fingers rolled her nipple while his cock slid against, but not into her core.

"Stop teasing me!" She pushed back, trying to bring him back inside her body.

"I like teasing you. I love that desperate sound you make in the back of your throat and how wet you get." He inhaled loudly. "Gods, you smell good enough to eat. Shall I thrust my tongue in your juicy cunt? Would you like that, little slave?"

She tensed. "I'm not your slave." He made it sound like an endearment, but she was no man's slave!

"Really?" He pushed into her just far enough so she felt a hint of fullness. "Your thighs are slick with cream and you're trembling. Are you really going to pretend you don't crave this?"

"I enjoy fucking you, but I—"

"You enjoy being fucked by me. There's a difference." He drove deeper. His hold on her arms kept her face balanced just above the mattress. "You don't enjoy this nearly as much when you're in control."

He was right, and they both knew it. "That doesn't make me your slave."

"Are you sure?" His hips pulled back, dragging his cock out of her smoldering center as his other hand abandoned her breast.

She felt his absence with every fiber of her being. His body hovered over hers, part threat and part promise. The only point of contact remaining was his fingers firmly banding her wrists. Her breasts felt heavy, the nipples ultrasensitive, and her passage constricted in deep, painful spasms.

"Tell me what you want, and I'll give it to you."

It would never be that easy, but he nudged her with his cock, the rounded tip effortlessly finding her entrance. "I want you to fuck me. Push inside me fast and hard. Don't stop or pull out until I come."

"That was very specific." He thrust his full length into her heat, and they groaned in unison. "I'm inside you, and I won't pull out until you come." Reaching around her hip, he located her clit and gave it a careful tug.

She cried out in shock and frustration as a short, sharp orgasm burst within her. "That's not fair. I want you to—"

"I know what you want." With a slow, rolling motion he began to move. "You want to be mastered, controlled. You want to surrender, even if you're not ready to admit it out loud." He released one hand and then the other, allowing her

to catch herself before she fell. His hands grasped her hips, and she braced on her forearms. "Better?"

"Gods, yes." She tightened herself around him, arching into each of his thrusts.

There was nothing in her dimension that began to compare with the overwhelming intimacy of being penetrated by another body. He was inside her, part of her, each distinct lunge filling her completely.

His pace sped, and his hands gripped her tighter, his fingers digging into her flesh. She tossed her head and clawed at the bedding. Reality spun away as sensation forced rational thought from her mind.

With a feral growl, he thrust to the balls and pulled her up against him. His cock twitched inside her, and he thrust his fangs into her shoulder. The dual penetration shattered her composure. She came in hard, shuddering waves.

He echoed her spasms with his mouth, or was his mouth triggering the spasms? She couldn't tell and didn't care. Nothing had ever felt this amazing.

Before she could fully savor the sensations, he withdrew his fangs and shoved her forward. She sprawled on her belly with an indignant gasp and turned her head to glare at him.

"What happens to you if I die?" he asked.

"Contemplating suicide?" She made her voice sound hopeful.

"Hardly." He crawled off the bed and conjured a long-sleeved bathrobe. His dark hair flowed back from his face, accenting his sharp features. Despite the casual attire, he appeared regal and unaffected by their passionate tussle.

Feeling like a discarded toy, she rolled off the other side of the bed and shifted into a different body, one fully clothed and less appealing to her arrogant lover.

"What happens to you?" he persisted, his icy blue eyes focused on her face.

"I would be sucked back into my own dimension." That's what happened if she severed the link. If Emit was killed before she released the connection, his death would end her existence. It was an important distinction, but she was unwilling to admit how closely they were connected.

"Can you anchor yourself to someone else or would you be forced to move on to the next dimension? I know you can influence minds, but have you ever taken control of a person entirely?"

Annoyed by his curiosity, she turned away. "Are you dissatisfied with our arrangement? If you wish me to dissolve our link, I can—"

"No." He caught her arm and waited until she looked at him before he continued. "My frustration has nothing to do with you. Darius Zoltan remains a step ahead of us and it's driving me crazy."

Her latest attempt to assist Emit with his rival had forced Cadin to accept her mortality. After countless centuries of existence, she'd faced a combination of creatures that nearly ended her life. Nothing had ever been so terrifying, or so exhilarating. Life had never been so sweet until she'd nearly tasted death.

Emit had every right to resent the Zoltan clan. Or more specifically, Emit had every right to fear them. Cadin would

never underestimate them again. "Is Darius satisfied with the progress he's made or do we have other opportunities to foil his plans?" She pulled her arm out of his grasp, finding the contact distracting.

"The Zoltan alliance with Vasco clan is now solidified. We can't change that. Still, I can't help feeling this is only the beginning. Darius has two more sons. I doubt he'll stop until each has made a beneficial union."

"Has he abandoned the modernization ploy?" She hid her smile, secretly impressed by Darius's wily approach to the situation. Zoltan clan had lived in seclusion, meticulously preserving the purity of their bloodline. They seldom interacted with humans or even the other vampire clans. Then Darius announced his desire to modernize his clan, giving him an excuse to contact the most powerful integrated clans. His interest in modern practices was a cover for his true purpose, forming alliances through his progeny.

"I'm not sure what Victor was told," Emit muttered. "He's the second Zoltan son. Darius sent him to Tess Bronstein, which makes no sense to me. Why would Darius choose an insignificant human?"

"Are you sure Tess is human? Doesn't her brother operate Station X?"

Emit tensed, fiddling with the belt securing his robe. "Powerful people might frequent the place, but Station X is still just a bar."

"If you say so." Warning flashed in his gaze, which only made her smile broaden. He was so much fun to provoke.

"I've met Randolph Bronstein several times," he insisted in a calm, cold tone. "He scans human."

"Which only means he's a well connected human, or he's powerful enough to fool an organic vampire."

"The last is doubtful, but I see your point." He paused for a moment, thoughtfully rubbing his chin. "Randolph's origins are only important if they're shared by Tess. Find out all you can about her. See if you can determine what Darius Zoltan gains by forming an alliance with her family."

"I'm on it." Cadin released her hold on her physical body and sped off into the night.

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Chapter One

Tess snapped her phone closed with an exasperated curse and rubbed the bridge of her nose.

"Such language. I didn't realize you knew those sorts of words." Even filled with poorly disguised amusement, Lillian's familiar voice was a welcome reprieve from the conflict closing in around Tess.

"Stick around and I'll give you a full demonstration of my profane vocabulary." Tess turned toward her friend as she slipped her phone into the pocket of her dress pants. "The masons walked out on me this afternoon, and my order for exotic liquor was just denied by the third distributor in as many days." She dragged the scrunchy off the end of her messy ponytail and finger combed her curly hair. "Hildderoth told me he'd make my life hell if I kept ignoring him. Now I know what he meant."

"Call your brother." Lillian's tone rang with finality, while compassion warmed her light blue eyes. "You shouldn't have to put up with this shit. Hildderoth doesn't own you."

"Actually he does." Tess heaved a frustrated sigh and led Lillian toward the small round table in the back corner of the cavernous room. Framers had outlined where the interior walls would go and stacks of building material waited for absent workmen. The club was little more than a skeletal shell and deadlines were looming. "A Protinese betrothal is every bit as binding as a human indenture."

"Even when you had nothing to do with negotiating the contract?" Lillian pulled out a chair and sat, each movement lithe and graceful. One glance at the leggy blonde led many to the correct assumption that she was a dancer.

"People were frequently indentured without their consent," Tess pointed out.

"I'm pretty sure there are no indentured servants in Las Vegas, and you're only half Protinese."

"So Seth only owns half of me." Tess sat facing Lillian and rested her head against an exposed beam. "I won't give in to this harassment. I'll find a way around him. He doesn't control every distributor in this dimension. There has to be someone out there willing to defy a Protinese prince."

Lillian placed a file folder on the table and shook her head. "Good luck with that. It's not like you can stock your bar through conventional suppliers. I don't see too many cases of daemon ale or Elfin wine offered on eBay."

Tess knew Lillian was right. Still, she refused to bow to Seth's ultimatums. "I don't understand why he's doing this now. The appropriate time to solidify our betrothal was on my eighteenth birthday."

"Why didn't he do it then?" The stubborn gleam in Lillian's eyes made it obvious she wouldn't let the subject drop until she understood every last detail.

If Tess kept the review factual and brief, maybe it would help her organize her chaotic emotions. When Seth blasted back into her life she'd been unsure whether to scream or weep, so she'd hidden behind her anger.

"The Protinese are the largest band of woodland Elves," she began. "They are one of the few bands still biologically compatible with humans, which has enabled them to maintain their population. They were on the brink of war with a particularly vicious band of rebels around the time I turned eighteen."

"What does that have to do with marrying you? Many soldiers make sure their lives are in order before they go off to war."

"Not everyone at court was supportive of Seth's choice. He didn't want me subjected to ridicule unless he was there to buffer the animosity until people adjusted to our relationship."

"That all sounds reasonable." Lillian fiddled with the file folder, but her expression remained attentive. "So why were you so angry the other night?"

"We exchanged comm crystals regularly for the first year. Then all of a sudden the communication stopped. I was frantic with worry, terrified that he'd been captured or worse. My inquiries were returned unopened by his bitch of a mother, but his sister finally told me what they knew. He'd been captured by the enemy during a battle. There was no demand for ransom, so there was little reason to believe that he was still alive."

"Why wouldn't they at least tell you? That's really cold."

"His mother's attitude was what kept Seth from moving forward with the betrothal. I know it was. She was a regular—"

"Was? Is she dead too?"

"She died two years ago."

"Then what's holding you back now?" Lillian's enthusiasm rapidly grew. "The main obstacle is gone. You need to go for it."

"It's not that simple." Tess ran both hands threw her loose hair then folded them on the tabletop, determined to still their anxious movements. "I was devastated when I thought Seth was dead. I grieved. I healed. I grew up. I adjusted to the idea of life without him. Then I evolved into a woman who has no use for fairy tales."

"He's an Elf, not a faerie." Lillian's gaze lit with mischief as she leaned back in her chair. "You're not in a relationship. In fact, I can't remember the last time you went out on a date. You still have feelings for Seth."

"I don't know what I feel. You were here Friday night. You saw what happened. Seth acted as if nothing were out of the ordinary. He swept in here with all the arrogance and expectation of—"

"A Protinese prince?"

Tess scowled. "He didn't give me the chance to react to his resurrection or say anything. He barked orders and made demands and—"

"You lost your temper."

"Whose side are you on?"

Lillian laughed. "If you didn't feel something for him, you wouldn't have reacted so powerfully. I've seen you stare down demons and out glare vampires. There is something special about this guy." She paused, her gaze intense and assessing. "Answer one question honestly. If he had proposed on your eighteenth birthday, would you have married him?"

Tess averted her face. Lillian knew her too well. She might have banished Seth to her fantasies, but she'd never been rid of him completely. "It's irrelevant. My life has moved in a vastly different direction. I'm not the same person I was back then."

"I know you haven't seen him in years, but how well did you know each other before?"

"I was presented at court when I was twelve and again at sixteen. The second time we spent the summer together." She smiled as pleasant memories danced through her mind. She'd been so young and impressionable. Seth had been gallant and attentive, if a bit intimidating to an overwhelmed adolescent. "As you can imagine, Protinese practices would be considered ridiculous by most Americans. We were never left alone. Still, we got to know each other as well as anyone can while surrounded by a royal entourage."

"If I hadn't seen them for myself, I would have thought you were crazy, or you'd watched *Lord of the Rings* too many times."

"They are sort of surreal." Wistfulness bled through Tess's tone, revealing more than she was ready to share. She straightened her shoulders and scooted to the edge of the chair. "None of it matters now. I need to find a way to convince Seth to back off."

"Is the betrothal still binding?"

"Rand is checking into it. Unfortunately, our best opportunity to nullify the contract was back when I was eighteen."

"Why didn't you deal with it then?"

She shrugged with feigned indifference. "A part of me hoped the war would end quickly." Her voice broke, so she cleared her throat and continued in a stronger tone. "But Seth was part of my childhood, a fantasy I outgrew. I'm a businesswoman now, with a life of my own, a life that doesn't include court intrigue and Elfin protocol."

"He certainly seemed determined the other night." Lillian fought back a smile though amusement made her eyes sparkle. "For a minute there I thought he was going to throw you over his shoulder, and walk out while you kicked and screamed."

"That's your fantasy, not mine," Tess insisted, though tingles skittered down her spine. In Protina no one would bat an eye at such a sight and furthermore their betrothal would make such actions perfectly legal. "It might not have been his fault, but his opportunity came and went. We're ancient history. He needs to accept it."

Lillian arched her brow. "To convince him of anything, you're going to have to stop avoiding him, and that might lead this little adventure in an entirely different direction."

"You don't have to sound so hopeful."

"I'm sorry." Lillian managed to smooth her expression though a hint of teasing still rang in her tone. "Your personal life is none of my business. I'll keep my opinions to myself."

"You're the most determined matchmaker on the planet. Why change your habits now?" They shared a smile; then Tess reached for the file folder. "Enough about my potential love life; how did the auditions go?"

"Dancers are a dime a dozen in this town. I picked the best of the best and moved on. I found a wonderful acoustic act for the upstairs lounge, but I'm still struggling with a house band. I haven't heard one yet that knocked my socks off."

"I know how easily you're distracted by musicians. Maybe I better assign the search to someone else."

Lillian pushed back from the table, clearly annoyed by the reminder. "For the record, I've outgrown my fascination with musicians. They're far more fun to fantasize about than they are to date."

"I didn't mean to insult you, but there's definitely a link between your pulse rate and tattoos." Lillian offered a sheepish smile, so Tess relaxed. "We could go with a DJ for the opening. It might make more sense to wait until things settle into a routine before we incorporate live music."

"You're the boss. I'll keep trolling just in case I stumble across the next big thing."

"Sounds good." She pushed to her feet and rolled her shoulders. "Gods, I need a massage."

"I bet Seth would be willing to give you one." Lillian grinned.

"Seth?" Tess paused dramatically. "Our betrothal might grant me such familiarity, but you would be expected to address him as His Royal Highness."

"Seriously? Do all the Protinese expect that sort of formality?"

"You have no idea." The momentary playfulness left her voice. "I studied for weeks before I was presented at court."

The protocols are ridiculous and Seth isn't even heir to the throne."

"I'm beginning to understand your hesitation. There are definite benefits to good old American freedoms. Where else can a troll drink alongside a vampire while they watch a faerie dance with a ghost?"

The mental image made Tess smile, but the expression faded nearly as soon as it formed. Unless she resolved her power struggle with Seth, the night Lillian described might never come.

She made a bland gesture toward the file folder. "I'll look over the applications and let you know if I have hesitations about any of them."

"Don't stay here all night." Lillian stood as well, her expression turning thoughtful. "Brooding about the roadblocks isn't going to make them go away. If you won't ask your brother for help, then talk to His Royal Highness. I'm afraid he has the advantage in a power struggle."

"I'll figure out something." Needing to be alone with her thoughts, Tess manufactured a smile. "I'll see you tomorrow."

* * * *

Concealed by a shield of invisibility, Victor Zoltan watched the thin blonde leave the half constructed nightclub. He hadn't set out to spy on Tess. Well, not entirely. When he'd first entered X2, Tess had been so absorbed in her argument on the phone she hadn't noticed his arrival. Raising his shields had been more or less an instinct. He hadn't wanted to embarrass his hostess, and he'd wanted the opportunity to

observe her in action. Much could be learned by how one dealt with challenges. Then the blonde arrived before he could make his presence known, and their conversation had been far too interesting to interrupt.

Apparently Tess had forgotten their appointment. She hadn't attempted to cancel using her mobile phone or even mentioned it to her friend. Should he be insulted?

Emboldened by his shield, Victor studied his negligent hostess. Humans adored the rail-thin shape the blonde possessed, but Victor found Tess's generous curves far more inviting. High, full breasts swayed gently beneath her sleeveless blouse as she tidied the contents of the makeshift desk. The golden silk did little to conceal the bounty awaiting his hands, and his mouth.

She pulled her phone from the pocket of her dark brown pants and activated the small device. Her anxious pacing drew his attention to the sway of her hips and the flex of her nicely rounded ass. Those long legs would easily wrap around him as he drove his cock into her snug pussy. Lust rolled through him, hot and heavy, challenging his control. He poured energy into the shield surrounding him, not yet ready to reveal his presence.

Loose and curling around her shoulders, her brown hair shone with golden highlights, accenting the unique color of her expressive eyes. Those thick lashed orbs easily dominated her delicate features. Passion would darken their color from honey to molten gold. It was easy to imagine staring into their depths as he moved between her thighs, capturing each cry of pleasure with his mouth.

The thought guided his gaze to her mouth, and Victor fought back a groan. He wanted to watch her lips flush beneath his kisses then see them tighten around his shaft as he slowly fucked her mouth. Would she be wild and abandoned in her pleasure, or would she cling to control with stubborn tenacity?

His father had spent months, perhaps years, searching for a female uniquely appealing to each of his sons. Tess certainly fit the bill. Imagining her in his bed was easy, but how would she fit into his future? Or more specifically, how would he fit into hers? There was far more to life than fucking.

Determination to strengthen Zoltan clan had been at the heart of his father's motivation to find mates for his sons. Darius understood that Zoltan clan stood at a crossroads. They must integrate or risk extinction. Still, Darius wanted his sons to be happy.

Could Victor find happiness with this mixed race female? Bowing to the expectations of the council had certainly not fulfilled his heart.

Had his father known about the Protinese prince?

Possessiveness burst through Victor's smoldering lust, demanding action. He should overwhelm Tess with pleasure, claim her luscious body before his rival had another opportunity. His fangs ached, and his nails lengthened as blood rushed to his cock. Vampires didn't deal well with competition. Everyone knew that.

His older brother's strategy suddenly made perfect sense. He could spirit Tess away and seduce her at his leisure.

Overwhelm her senses until she understood the inevitability of their union. He would keep her in restraints until ... No. Those days were gone. Expectations had changed. Females had changed. They were educated and independent, self-reliant and bold. He had to adjust his thinking if he wanted to accomplish anything with a modern woman.

The Protinese prince was certainly having no success with antiquated strategies.

So what did Tess want from a potential mate? And was he equipped to provide for her needs? In ancient times his course of action would have been simple. He would have captured her, formed a blood bond, allowing him to sense her body's reactions to his seduction, to his domination. But these modern times were confusing.

Even so, he was determined to try. She appealed to him. He wanted her. His father had chosen well. So, he would attempt a more civilized approach, a more modern style of courting.

If a civilized approach didn't work, he could always revert to a more vampiric strategy later.

Soothed by the decision, he set himself in motion. He carefully passed through the perimeter wall and found a quiet section of the corridor beyond where he could lower his invisibility screen. Sounds grew louder and colors more vivid. The Twilight Jewel's casino lay to his left and X2 to his right. The location was excellent and anticipation about the new nightclub was already building. If Tess could overcome the unexpected obstacles, her success was nearly assured.

He pushed the door open with enough noise to draw her attention. Her head turned toward him, and her gaze locked with his. Gods, she was beautiful, so vibrant and animated.

"This area is restricted," she said in a firm tone.

"I have an appointment with Tess Bronstein." He remained just inside the doorway, waiting for her to realize her blunder.

Her expression fell. "Oh shit." Her eyes closed for a moment and she rubbed her forehead. "You're Victor Zoltan, aren't you?" Slipping the phone back into her pocket, she rushed forward to shake his hand. "I am so sorry. This has been the day from hell."

"Would it be better if we rescheduled?" Her fingers were warm, her grip surprisingly strong. She looked so utterly rattled. It was all he could do not to pull her into his arms and reassure her, though he doubted she'd appreciate the gesture. "My time is entirely at your disposal." Until he learned the rules.

She quickly disentangled their fingers. "Actually, a change of scenery might do me good. I'm just spinning my wheels right now, and it's not helping my mood."

"What can we do to lighten your mood?" He clasped his hands behind his back, a necessary precaution to keep from touching her.

"There's an observation lounge on the top floor of tower two. I go there a lot when I need to think."

He smiled and motioned her on. "Lead the way."

She paused long enough to grab her handbag and lock the doors to the club. "I really am sorry I forgot our appointment." They fell into step side by side as they moved

along the secluded corridor. "This doesn't make a very good first impression."

His first impression of her had been solidified while she was asserting herself on the telephone. A fact he wasn't willing to share. "If I kept more conventional hours, perhaps I'd be less forgettable."

Her lovely gaze swept over him with feminine appreciation. "Your unconventionality might account for some confusion, but you're far from forgettable."

His heart gave an unexpected thump. Her reticence toward the Protinese prince had led him to believe she wasn't interested in romantic entanglements. "Thank you. I think," he added with a playful smile, hoping to encourage the spark of interest.

She led him across one section of the casino and down a short hallway. The private elevator waiting at the end was only accessible with a keypad.

"How many people know the code?" he asked, using any excuse to keep her talking. He wanted her to feel comfortable with him, relaxed and safe. Safe? Why was her safety suddenly a concern?

Never one to question his instincts, he scanned their surroundings in progressively widening circles while still attempting to appear attentive. He sensed nothing out of the ordinary, beyond his attraction to her.

"The observation deck in tower one is open to the public," she told him. "This one is reserved for high rollers; those staying in the penthouses and VIPs."

"What are vee i pees?"

They stepped into the elevator; and the door slid closed before she answered his question. "Very important persons."

Awareness swirled around them as the lift sped them upward. "I see." She remained near the control panel, not huddled exactly, but obviously keeping as much distance between them as possible. He allowed it for the moment, pleased by the sensual pulse throbbing between them.

"Your confusion seems to be a good place to start." Her voice sounded oddly hushed, almost smoky. "How much do you know about the modern world? I don't want to waste hours, or even days, explaining things you already know. Has your clan had any interaction with the outside world?"

"Zoltan clan is not unaware of the outside world. We have simply chosen seclusion as a means of keeping our bloodlines pure."

The door opened; she motioned him out into a large, uncluttered room. Couches and chair groupings were scattered about the room, but the main attraction was obviously the view. Floor to ceiling windows displayed the famous Las Vegas Strip. Momentarily forgetting the subject at hand, Victor crossed the room and gazed out over the mesmerizing vista. Animated billboards and colorful lights stretched out into the distance. Towering hotels and risqué attractions promised something for everyone. Decadence and excitement vibrated through the darkness, humming with life and energy.

"It's rather impressive, isn't it?" Tess didn't sound as if she believed her own words.

"I definitely see the appeal." He wanted to pull her in front of him and explore her naked body as he enjoyed the amazing view. Would the hypnotizing glitz add to the discovery; or would it distract from the glory of her soft flesh? "Which location is your favorite?"

"It's hard to say. Each one is so different, yet similar." She sighed. "It all starts to blur after awhile."

Turning to face her, he captured her gaze. "Are we still talking about the hotels?"

She licked her lips and lowered her lashes. "It's been a long day." Her pink tongue wet her lower lip then she prompted, "Back to Zoltan clan. If seclusion was keeping your bloodline pure, why change the stratagem now?"

He leaned his shoulder against the window frame, blocking out the distracting skyline. "As a gene pool shrinks the advantages of purity diminish."

"So this is less about learning social mores and more about scouting out a potential ... spouse? Is that the proper term for a vampire?"

He wasn't interested in a spouse. A spouse was one half of a marriage and a marriage could be terminated. He wanted a mate, a permanent mate, a mate with whom he could spend the rest of his life and ... He was jumping far ahead.

He stepped away from the window, carefully choosing his words. "Organic vampires are required to produce organic progeny. If they happen to find love with their partner, then they are fortunate. If not—so long as both parties are agreed—they are allowed to seek companionship once the

children reach the age of ten. My second son turned ten last summer."

"And your son's mother is agreeable with your finding companionship?" Her tone was carefully controlled. He couldn't tell what she thought about what he was trying to accomplish. He'd been under the impression human ideas about these things were less regimented than vampire traditions. Many humans flitted from lover to lover with little thought and less commitment.

"An opportunity arose for her to marry an ancient three months after Phillip was born," he explained. "She petitioned the council for special dispensation and was allowed to dissolve our union. I haven't spoken with her since."

"You retained custody of your sons?"

"Of course." She worked for Vasco clan. Did she know nothing of vampire ways?

"She sounds really selfish."

"I refuse to waste so much as a thought on that woman." This was where everything got tricky. He couldn't wrestle Tess to the floor and fuck her into submission. Even if every molecule of his nature demanded he do exactly that. He didn't want a blood thrall. He wanted a willing companion, someone who would offer her body, her mind, and her blood, willingly—no eagerly. "The mother of my sons is out of my life, and I will not allow her to return. Even so, my children would benefit from the tenderness of a female, and I am more than ready for a permanent companion."

She stared out at the skyline for a long moment, her expression thoughtful. Then she slipped her hands into her

pockets and met his gaze. "I understand your motives, but why come to me? I know very few vampires and those I do know are—"

"You misunderstand me, Tess. I'm not looking for a vampire." He took a step toward her. "I intend to court you."

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Chapter Two

Shocked into silence, Tess stared into Victor's sky blue eyes. He wanted to court her? First Seth and now Victor. Was there something in the water making men irrational?

Vampires didn't court humans. They stalked; they seduced; they claimed. Yet the intensity in his gaze and the ruthlessness in his expression revealed his sincerity.

They remained a step apart, tension crackling in the air around them. She needed to pacify him fast and get the hell out of here! She might not be the helpless human he presumed, but she was no match for an organic vampire.

"I'm flattered by your interest," she made each word calm and even, "but I don't share my blood."

He smiled. The unexpected change made him look even more dangerous. He wouldn't just let her walk away. She could see it in his eyes. His dark hair was short, the strands not quite military standard, yet unusually severe. Many vampires were almost pretty. Victor's features were rugged and bold, perfectly balanced, creating an aura of savage appeal.

"If I wanted a blood thrall, I wouldn't have bothered with words."

She pictured them sprawled on the carpet in a tangle of arms and legs. His fangs would penetrate her flesh while his erection rubbed against her mound. She'd heard bloodlust could induce an orgasm more intense than conventional sex. It had been so long since a man touched her, forever since

she'd felt ... What the hell was wrong with her? She'd never been a fang groupie, and she wasn't about to start now!

Shaking away the unwanted temptation, she forced herself to think. "I agreed to tutor you in social conventions. If that's not why you're here, our conversation is over."

He moved closer, close enough to touch her, yet he only caressed her with his electric blue gaze. "So tutor me, Tess; explain the mysteries of this modern world. How do modern humans find their mates?"

Mates, not boyfriends, or lovers. He made it sound so animalistic, so sexual. "That's a complicated question. The majority of modern humans don't spend their entire life with one person." She refused to retreat, but his scent was intoxicating, dark and sensual like everything about him.

The corners of his mouth quirked, drawing her attention to his lips. "They have multiple mates or they move indiscriminately from one partner to the next?"

What would it feel like to have those lips cover hers, to slide and tease before they settled in for a deeper claiming? Were they warm or cool? His hand had been warm and strong, easily capable of—What was the question again? She gave herself a firm mental shake. "It depends on the human, but multiple partners are still pretty rare."

She wanted to ask him if he'd cast her in sexual thrall. Never before had she been so easily turned on by a man she'd just met. But to confront him with her suspicion, she'd have to admit she was crawling out of her skin. Her breasts felt heavy and unusually sensitive, and her pussy clenched with unmistakable demand.

He was quiet for a long moment, staring out at the Strip. Had the lights captured his attention again or was he lost in thought?

He turned his head and their gazes locked. Heat cascaded from her head to her toes in a weakening rush. Her knees sagged, and he caught her upper arms. "Are you all right?"

"You know damn well I'm not. Lift the thrall!"

"I cast no thrall." He touched her cheek then swept her into his arms and carried her to one of the couches. "Are you ill?"

"This can't be happening." She blew out an unsteady breath. "It makes no sense. Even if he triggered *animus inaction*, why am I reacting to you?"

"Who is he, and what does that term mean?" He stroked the hair back from her face, his touch surprisingly gentle.

She tried to remain stiff in his embrace, but his warmth beckoned, his touch inflaming her lust with each subtle brush of his fingers. "Please." She caught his wrist. "I can't think when you touch me."

"Then don't think." He moved his hand to the arm of the couch, but circled her waist when she tried to scoot off his lap. "Tell me what you meant before."

"I'm sort of engaged to Seth Hildereth."

Leaving her back resting against the arm of the couch, he moved away. Her legs still arched over his lap, but he was clearly displeased by the revelation. "Why does that name sound familiar? Who is Seth Hildereth?"

Her desire settled into smoldering heat. He was near enough to soothe the intense longing, yet far enough away to allow her to think. "He's a Protinese Elf."

Victor's gaze narrowed and he rested one hand possessively on her knee. "He's a member of the royal family, if I'm not mistaken. Do you consider yourself human or Protinese?"

"I try to avoid labels. My mother was a highborn Protinese. My father's makeup was more complicated, but he considered himself human."

"If you intend to honor your engagement with Prince Seth, I should take my leave."

There was her out. All she had to do was speak the words, and Victor would walk. She'd just met the man for God's sake! Why was her heart pounding?

Her lips parted. Then trembled and the words lodged in her throat. "I need you to kiss me, just kiss me. Will you do that for me?"

"I have no objection to kissing you, but why the stipulation?"

"I'll explain after we kiss."

His hand curved around the back of her neck, drawing her forward slightly. He leaned down as she rose, and their mouths met in the middle. His lips were warm and parted. They brushed over hers and then began to pull away. Before her pang of disappointment could register, he crushed her to his chest and delivered the devouring kiss she'd been expecting.

His tongue traced her lips, warning of his intent a moment before he thrust into her mouth. Yes! This is what she needed, what she craved. She wanted his aggression, his boldness, his ... darkness.

In the back of her mind a warning bell tolled. This wasn't her. Something was triggering these feelings. She didn't crave darkness. She had to know a man well and share an emotional bond before she could open up sexually.

She dragged his shirt out of his pants, desperate for bare skin. Though tall and lean, his body felt steely beneath her fingers. She wanted him naked! Wanted to impale herself on his cock as he thrust his fangs into her breast. The tingling start of an orgasm gathered between her thighs.

Shocked and confused, she dragged her mouth away from his and scrambled off the couch. She pressed her hand over her pounding heart, humiliated by the distinct peaks of her nipples so obvious beneath her silk blouse.

"Did you learn what you needed to know?" There was no mockery in his tone, just curiosity and passion.

"No," she cried as she spun back around. She'd hoped to feel nothing unusual when they kissed, nothing elemental. "If you were Seth, I'd understand. Protinese couples produce hormones during their first mating cycle. In full-blooded couples it ensures a deep, long-lasting bond. With a human, or half human, it also triggers physiological changes that increase reproductive compatibility."

"You think Seth set this process in motion when he was here the other night?"

Suspicion sliced through her lust-addled brain. "How do you know about that?"

He pushed to his feet and stalked toward her, his gaze focused squarely on her mouth. "What happens in Vegas might stay in Vegas, but what happens in Vegas gets around fast. Your betrothed made quite a scene the other night."

She stared back at him in silence, questions bombarding her mind. "No one was here but Lillian. How did you—"

"Did you call security, or did they arrive in response to what they'd seen on the monitors? You're never really alone in a casino, Tess. Isn't that one of the reasons your brother was willing to let you take on this project?"

He reached for her hand, but she twisted away. If she let him touch her again, they'd end up in bed. She couldn't fight this craving, no matter how irrational it was. "Why do you know so much about me?" Focusing on her annoyance gave her a small measure of control. "Did you have me investigated?"

"Nothing so impersonal." He grinned. "I investigated you myself."

"Then why pretend you knew nothing about me?"

"I'm trying to play by your rules, to respect you as a modern woman. I've had no practice at this sort of courtship." Without warning, he dragged her into his arms, pressing her firmly against his body. "And you're not making it easy to remember my intentions."

"I'm sorry. I'm not usually like this. I don't understand why—"

"Why you want me?" He kissed the corners of her mouth. "Is that really so surprising? Vampires and Elves are instinctual beings. I felt a connection to you the moment I walked into your club."

"Seth will kill you." She wiggled restlessly, unsure if she wanted to free herself or wrap her legs around his waist and surrender to the madness.

"Let me worry about Seth." It sounded more like a growl as he pressed his face against the side of her throat.

Intoxicated by the conflict twisting through Tess, Cadin pushed deeper into the female's mind. With the first taste of her energy Cadin had known Tess was no mere human. She was far more powerful than she let on, or perhaps her powers were latent. Either way she was intriguing.

Encouraging Tess's attraction to Victor hadn't been much of a challenge. Still, the real fun would start when Seth found out a vampire had fucked his betrothed. A vampire she had just met no less!

They were kissing again, their mouths moving with ravenous fervor. Tess arched against him, rubbing—no, grinding against his thigh, desperate for fulfillment. Just another moment or two and the vampire would snap. He'd lose his true nature and ravish her.

Cadin kept Tess's lust blazing hot, causing her to arch and moan. Victor pulled her blouse off over her head and unfastened her bra. Tess glanced toward the elevator.

"If someone comes, I'll shield us," he promised in a rough whisper. "They'll never know we're here."

Unless they heard their grunts and cries of pleasure, Cadin amended. Maybe she should go to the lobby and make sure they were interrupted. That might be fun.

Victor paused when Tess was naked, his gaze gleaming with lust. "Damn, woman, you should never wear clothes. You look amazing naked."

She laughed. "That wasn't exactly what I had in mind for X2."

Tess was calming down, starting to think. Cadin spiked her libido, sent a jolt of heat to her cunt. Tess groaned, helplessly covering her mound with her hand.

Victor moved her hand away and touched her gently. "Fuck, you're hot."

"Is that supposed to be a compliment?"

"I meant it literally. Is your pussy always this hot?"

She slapped his hand away, and Cadin reinforced the hostility.

"I told you I felt strange," Tess muttered. "Do you honestly think you're irresistible?"

His gaze narrowed and he pounced. He lifted her briefly then laid her on her back on the floor, covering her with his body. He allowed her to feel his weight for only a moment before he nudged her legs apart and situated himself on his knees.

He caught her wrists and raised her hands above her head. "Something is affecting you, and we need to know what it is. Lower your shields so I can scan your mind."

Oh, this would never do. Cadin inundated Tess with anger and fear. "No fucking way! You stay out of my mind."

"I'm not going to hurt you." She jerked her hand free and swung at his face. He intercepted the blow and returned her hand to the floor. "Tess, look at me. Someone is screwing with your mind, but it's not me."

"Get off me! I don't want to fuck anymore."

Tess thrashed beneath Victor, the smell of fear heavy in the air. "Sweetheart, you're terrified, and you weren't afraid two seconds ago. Something is definitely wrong." He scanned the room and the area around her body, but every time he attempted to enter her mind her struggles increased.

This wasn't some hormone-induced frenzy. Some sort of entity was manipulating Tess. Unsure what else to do, he pressed her down into the carpeting and minimized her writhing. It wasn't safe to release her until he understood what was attacking her, but he sure as hell wasn't going to fuck her.

Tess, can you hear me?

I feel so strange. Why do I feel so strange? She sounded intoxicated, muddled.

Let me help you. Lower your shields, so I can take a look around.

Tess cried out, arching so violently she nearly succeeded in freeing herself. He sensed the entity fleeing, then his attention returned to Tess.

Her head tossed against the carpet, her eyes tightly closed. Tears trailed out from between her lashes, and her legs hooked over his calves. "What was that thing?" Her voice was tense, barely audible.

"I'm not sure. I just sensed it for a second as it left."

Several hard shudders shook her before she spoke again. "Why won't it ... If it's gone, why can't I relax?"

"You're still aroused?"

"What do you think?" she snapped, opening her eyes to reveal the depth of her need. "This isn't natural. This isn't ... Gods, I hurt."

"I'll assure your privacy, or I can help you ease the ache. It's entirely your choice."

Her lips trembled and she turned her face away. "This is so damn humiliating."

He eased his hold on her arms, rocking back onto his knees. "It's not your fault." It was such a feeble consolation while her body trembled with desire.

She took a deep breath and motioned him away. "Give me some time to ... pull myself together. Find something to do on the other side of the room."

Accepting her decision with a stiff nod, he pushed to his feet then helped her up from the floor. How she accomplished the deed was none of his concern. Thinking about it was only going to compound the pressure in his cock.

He moved to the far side of the room, putting the elevator between them. A subtle creaking let him know she'd lain down on one of the couches. His body ached, but his discomfort was inconsequential. Tess had been attacked. He wouldn't rest until he found the assailant and unraveled their motivation.

What sort of being had this much control over others? Vampires were an obvious choice, but this creature had been

completely incorporeal. Vampires retained some element of form, even if it was only mist. A demon?

He tried to remain focused on his anger, to honor his promise to guard her privacy, but geometry conspired against him. Her reflection was clearly revealed in the window in front of her, which was reflected by the window in front of him. His back was turned to the couch on which she sprawled, but he could see everything she was doing.

She reclined against the arm of the couch, her knees bent and angled outward. Her fingers brushed across her clit and she came with a sharp gasp. The frustration on her features made it clear the orgasm had done little to lessen the pressure. She needed more. She needed him!

Victor forced himself to look away. He would not interfere unless—

"I can't ... please, help me."

With preternatural speed he crossed the room, kneeling on the floor beside her. He didn't give her time to speak. He slid one arm beneath her neck and kissed her deeply as his other hand moved between her thighs. Her folds were wet and unbearably hot. Ignoring the subtle burn, he pushed two fingers into her cunt and let her body do the rest. She clenched and rippled, tightening again and again until her cream filled his palm.

"Can I use my mouth?" he asked against her lips.

"Do whatever you want, just make it stop."

He knew she didn't mean it, or at least she wouldn't once the compulsion eased, but his mind filled with all the things he'd like to do to her, all the things he'd like her to do to him.

Crawling onto the couch, he pushed her legs wide and lowered his head between her thighs. Her scent stirred his hunger for more than just her cream. He wanted to fuck her and feel her come around his cock while he fed from her throat. He forced down the bloodlust with centuries of discipline and parted the luscious folds of her pussy.

He dragged his tongue from back to front, pausing to circle her clit. Tess cried out softly, pushing up into his kiss. "More?"

"Inside," she whispered. "I need something inside."

Her core closed around his fingers as he drove slowly inside. They groaned together. Was this really different than fucking her? She was all but begging for his cock.

There's a difference and you know it! You're helping her detoxify. That's all.

But her cunt was so fucking soft and she arched into each thrust. Tormented by her obvious enjoyment, he bent and gently sucked on her clit. She came again and again, until her cream soaked his hand and the cushion beneath her. When two fingers only made her restless he used three.

He had no idea how long it had taken to bring her down. He only knew it had been one of the most amazing experiences of his life. He regretted the way it began, but he refused to regret the intimacies they shared or the pleasure he gave her.

The pause between each flare lengthened, and her arousal grew more natural. "Why don't we do each other this time?" she suggested with a siren's smile.

Lust slammed into his groin and he had to look away. "Are you sure? This isn't that different from a date rape drug. I won't take advantage of you."

She laughed. "You're not taking advantage of me. I suggested it, remember? I fully intend to investigate who is responsible for our little adventure, but you've been amazingly selfless through all this."

His gaze narrowed on her face. "I don't need your pity."

"I don't fuck for pity. Do you have something against having your cock sucked?"

He was naked from the waist down before she finished the question. "I like being on top."

"I never would have guessed." She scooted off the sofa and lay on the floor, crooking her finger with a sexy smile.

His cock had been hard so long, he'd either come with the first swirl of her tongue and make a complete fool of himself, or it would take him hours. Gods, he hoped it was the latter. The snug pull of her warm mouth was one of the delights he'd been imagining all night.

He straddled her head and arched over her body. She guided his cock to her mouth, slowly sucking him inside. He closed his eyes, savoring the blissful heat and the silken swirl of her tongue. She circled his tip and explored the tiny hole, and through it all he remained in control. Convinced he was safe from humiliation, he lowered his head between her thighs.

Exposing her clit with one hand, he squeezed the puffy bud with his lips and lashed it with his tongue. She was incredibly sensitive here. At times he'd had to avoid direct stimulation

until her nerve endings desensitized. The hood flushed and swelled, protecting the delicate stem. He passed his tongue over the hood instead, feeling her tense with each swipe.

Her tongue began to mirror his movements. She sucked when he sucked and licked when he licked. He pushed into her core, curious to see how she'd mimic the motion. Her lips slid down his shaft so far his tip bumped the back of her throat. It felt so good he shivered with delight. This act was nothing new, but it felt different with Tess. More intense, more intimate.

Soon muffled cries and wet slurps filled the air. He tucked her legs under his arms and rolled her hips up off the carpet as he rocked into her mouth. It was a far more dominant position than he'd meant to use. He was assisting her, not topping her, yet she submitted beautifully, instinctively.

She cried out around his cock, and he felt her inner muscles ripple around his tongue. Another deep thrust sent his cum spurting down her throat as pleasure burst within his mind and rained down upon his heated body. She licked and sucked until his entire shaft was clean, while he tenderly savored her luscious pussy. He avoided her clit and kept each stroke slow and soothing.

Breathless and bathed in her scent, he turned around and pulled her into his arms. They kissed deeply, mixing the taste of their passion, forming the first layer of a soul bond. Did she realize the significance of this moment? He needed to explain what they'd begun.

"You've got the most interesting mark on your ass cheek," he whispered against her lips. "Is it a tattoo or a—"

"It's sort of genetic. Everyone in my family ends up with one."

He wanted to explore it with his tongue, memorize the shape and texture. "Do you think we can make it to your room before the fire hits again?" She tensed and he cursed his careless question.

"I need to think. I ... thank you."

He pulled on his pants as she gathered her clothes, feeling her emotional retreat with each second that passed. "I'll give you time to think, but we need to talk."

"I know."

He remained by the windows as she dressed, sensing her need for space. Tonight was so convoluted. He couldn't decide if it was a win or a loss.

Her taste lingered on his tongue and her scent drifted all around him, exhilarating yet soothing him. This was a beginning. There was no doubt of that. But Tess hadn't begun to accept it. They were still worlds apart.

"You don't need a code to go down," she muttered. "Just push the button."

He didn't realize the significance of her statement until she escaped into the elevator.

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Chapter Three

"Sir, there's a vampire here to see you."

Let Act Two begin. Excitement surged through Cadin as Seth turned off the television and looked at his valet. The contrast amused Cadin. The regal elegance emanating from Seth belonged in a palace, not a hotel room.

After hours of searching for the elusive prince, and exhausting herself with mental scans, Cadin had been ready to report back to Emit with the frustrating news that Seth had slipped back through the veil. Then she overheard two bellhops gossiping about "Mr. Vasco's special guest" and how their boss was bending over backward to impress him.

The hotel owner likely had many special guests, but something in their tone made her investigate further. Rather than retreating to his home realm, Seth was comfortably ensconced in one of the Twilight Jewel's luxury suites.

"A vampire?" Seth pushed to his feet and Cadin was struck again by his ethereal beauty. "Is he hotel staff? What does he want?" He was in no way effeminate, but no other adjective adequately described him. Ordinary jeans hugged his lean hips, and his dark green shirt hung open, revealing a highly defined chest and washboard abs. Why would Tess hesitate to mate with this creature? He was spectacular.

His sleek hair defied description: one moment it appeared silver, then pale green, then purest white. In all her travels Cadin had never seen anything like it. And his eyes were just as unique. A bright mixture of silver, gray, and green, his

irises appeared almost crystalline. If everyone in Protina looked like Seth, she would definitely need to check it out.

"His name is Victor Zoltan and he would only say that this has to do with Miss Bronstein."

Seth's gaze narrowed at the mention of Tess. "Allow him in."

The sun had barely set. Victor was certainly anxious to confront his rival.

After a quick introduction silence fell over the room. The men stared at each other, Victor openly hostile, while Seth's expression was far harder to read. They made a stunning pair, light and darkness, brutality and elegance.

"Tess is in trouble and we need to figure out why," Victor broke the silence.

Seth appeared as confused by the statement as Cadin felt. Then suspicion lanced through her being and she shrank back from the scene. Had Victor sensed her? Creating Tess's sexual frenzy had depleted her strength. Had her shields failed as she fled?

"Who are you and how dare you speak of my betrothed with such familiarity?" Seth's chin came up and his shoulders straightened.

Uncertainty made Cadin restless. If her shields slipped again, they might combine forces and trap her, or worse. This dimension was proving more perilous than most. What could she learn by staying that she didn't already know? Sometimes it made more sense to retreat, regroup, and attack another day. Balancing her frustration with the knowledge that this was far from over, she slipped away into the night.

"Your servant told you my name, and Tess's safety is far more important than your pride."

Seth fought back a smile. If the danger to Tess were real, he'd do everything in his power to protect her, but vampires could be so melodramatic. This one was less brooding than most, if a bit more brutish. "What is threatening her safety?"

"When we were together last night—"

Crossing the floor with blurring speed, Seth grasped the vampire by the throat. Victor snarled, baring his fangs as he aimed a punch for Seth's nose. Seth dodged the blow without releasing his grasp on Victor's throat.

Victor retaliated with a surge of strength that caught Seth by surprise. The vampire forced him back against the nearest wall and slapped his arm aside, easily breaking his hold.

"This is about Tess," Victor snapped, his fangs still visible. "We can beat the shit out of each other once we figure out who we're up against."

Seth remained against the wall, more intrigued than angry. "Why do you believe she's in danger?"

"She was attacked by an incorporeal being last night. It drastically affected her behavior."

"Is she all right? How did it change her behavior?"

"According to my man she seems fine today. She's back at work and trying to find ways around your obstacles. Still, we need to know what the hell that thing was and why it targeted her."

His obvious familiarity with Tess sent possessive anger spiraling through Seth. "What is the nature of your relationship with my wife?"

"She's not your wife yet."

He forced down his emotions and focused on the reason the vampire was here. "How did it change her behavior?"

"That's irrelevant. I'm pretty damn sure it can do whatever it wants once it latches on to someone. I only sensed it for an instant, but this thing is powerful."

He pushed off the wall and ambled toward his hostile guest. "Is someone with her now or should I dispatch one of my guards?"

"I thought she'd take it better if she didn't realize she was being guarded, but she hasn't been alone since I left her."

Seth nodded. He should be the one protecting her, but ultimately her safety was what mattered. He'd make other arrangements as soon as the vampire left. "Did Tess have any idea what might have motivated the attack?"

Victor glanced away and when his gaze returned it was shuttered, inscrutable. "She was pretty disorientated by the incident. Neither of us has ever encountered a being like this. It's possible it was just some sort of energy leech. The bizarre behavior might have been a distraction or a side effect. I honestly don't understand the specifics. I've made inquiries, but I've yet to hear back from most of my contacts."

"I'll begin an investigation as well." Victor's only response was a stiff nod. "So we're back to my earlier question. What is your relationship with my fiancée?"

"According to Tess, she's not even that, and our relationship is none of your business."

"I can have you executed for touching her." He took a menacing step forward.

"This isn't Protina, asshole." The vampire held his ground.
"Tess deserves a choice."

"And you believe she'll choose you?"

"I intend to do everything I can to see that she does." The heated flash in his blue eyes added credence to the claim.

"I can insist she honor the contract."

"That's a coward's way out." Victor advanced. Standing toe to toe the vampire had the advantage. He was taller and broader than Seth, and obviously just as determined. "Are you a coward?"

"I suggest a compromise." Seth reluctantly took a step back. "We combine our efforts to find this entity, while we each do our best to persuade Tess to accept our suit."

"An amicable rivalry?"

"As you said earlier, her safety must come before our romantic aspirations."

Victor stared at him for a moment, his features expressionless. "I'm at a disadvantage and you know it."

"Your solar trance?"

"Exactly." The vampire was obviously uncomfortable admitting any weakness. "I suggest we agree to boundaries."

Seth chuckled. "Let me guess. You have exclusive access to her during the night and I rule the day?"

"This will also ensure her protection around the clock."

The concept appealed to his competitive nature more than he cared to admit, but Tess wasn't a prize to be won. He fully intended to spend the rest of his life with her, regardless of what this vampire wanted.

"Why should I agree to any of this?" Seth asked. "Tess is my betrothed. We're practically married. I gain nothing by granting you twelve hours to confuse her emotions."

"You have more control over your sleep patterns than I do, but you still need sleep. I want to be certain of my mate's affections. Don't you?"

Another challenge. Damn. This vampire was smart and perceptive. "And how long do we continue this amicable rivalry?"

"Until Tess makes her choice."

That shouldn't take long. He had far more to offer any woman than a creature of the night. "I agree to everything with one condition."

"Which is?"

"You began without my knowledge. I want tonight alone with Tess to assess the damage you've done."

The bastard dared to grin. "Don't you mean the progress I've made?"

"Do you agree?"

"I agree."

* * * *

Tess heard the main entrance to X2 swing open and turned to see who had entered the club. Half expecting Victor, her heart gave an odd leap as she saw Seth striding toward her. Dressed in jeans and a casual shirt, with his entourage conspicuously absent, he appeared far less imposing, if no less attractive. His features were sculpted with high cheekbones and full lips. A firm jaw and the arrogant tilt of

his head saved him from being pretty, and his otherworldly hair had been confined at the nape of his neck. One of his pointed ears poked through the silky strands, and she couldn't help but smile.

"Where are your bodyguards?" He might be able to disguise the fact that he was royalty, but only glamour could make him look human.

"In the corridor." He sounded oddly subdued. What was going on? "I wished to speak with you alone."

"That shouldn't be a problem." She put her hands on her hips, gathering anger around her to ward off his appeal. "I seem to spend all my time alone thanks to you. I just rolled back the opening and—"

"I'm sorry." He moved toward her slowly, his gaze holding hers, caressing hers with their ice-green beauty. "My approach was all wrong. You deserve more than demands and ultimatums."

She took a step back. "Who the hell are you and what have you done with Seth?"

He smiled, a certain watchfulness seeping into his expression. "Your workmen will resume their tasks tomorrow morning, and your orders will be filled at a discount." She narrowed her gaze and his smile spread. "I'm not trying to buy you. Let me apologize."

"I'm more than happy to end our power struggle, but this doesn't change the crux of the issue. I have a life here. I have friends, and I've poured my heart and soul into this club. I really want to see it succeed."

"Can we sit down? This still feels adversarial."

She motioned toward her makeshift office in the back corner of the room. "I'd offer you a drink, but all I have is coffee, and I know you don't like it."

"I'm fine. I just want to talk."

They sat at the table, and Tess tried not to think about how much she wanted to touch him, to assure herself this was real. "How long has your family known you were alive?"

"Two years." The admission came after a long pause.

"Then why..." She was too angry, too hurt, to put her thoughts into words. His mother had never approved of her, but his sister had been sympathetic. Why hadn't someone bothered to notify her that Seth was still alive? Why hadn't he? All she could do was glare at him with accusation in her eyes.

"Even after I escaped, the war still raged. I knew there was a very real possibility I wouldn't survive. You had already mourned my death once. I didn't want to put you through it again."

He'd been protecting her. The logical side of her brain accepted the explanation, but her emotions still blazed. He'd deceived her, ignored her, then turned her world upside down.

How could she abandon all she was and all she wanted to be in exchange for marriage to a prince? He offered wealth and privilege beyond imagining, yet she would become a member of the royal family, bound by all the rules and expectations that entailed.

"I'm not sure I want the sort of life attached to you anymore. I've learned to appreciate freedom."

"I'm a third son, Tess." He reached across the table and took her hand. "We can have whatever sort of life we want. We can live right here if that will make you happy. Open your club. We'll work together until it's a smashing success. We can do whatever we want. You're focused on details when the question is really simple. Do you want to build a future with me?"

She looked at their joined hands, unable to think with his gaze beseeching her. "I don't know. I was fond of a young man I met one summer when I was just a girl." Reinforcing her determination with a deep breath, she looked into his eyes. "We don't know each other anymore."

"Are you willing to get to know me again?"

"This isn't fair." She slipped her hand out of his. "How long will you remain patient? I was at court long enough to understand how it works. Every woman that caught your father's eye was brought to his bed with or without her permission. Worse still, your mother accepted it as part of a sovereign's right."

"In Protina it's an honor to give pleasure to your king. My father never took a woman against her will, and my mother had nearly as many lovers as my father." He paused. "Still, I'm not my father."

"You want me to believe you would remain faithful to me for the rest of your life?"

"Monogamy is a human concept. I won't pretend to be something I'm not. A wife is honored and cherished above all others."

"But there would be others."

It wasn't a question, and he didn't reply as if it were. "Tell me about last night."

She suppressed her gasp, but a guilty flush spread across her face. "What are you talking about?"

"Victor said you were attacked, but he neatly danced around the details. I want to know what happened."

His Royal Highness had returned. She sighed. That didn't take long. "If monogamy is a human concept, why the hell do you care? Something or someone was using me like a puppet. What took place was ... beyond my control. That's all that matters."

"Compulsions are a vampire's favorite trick."

"It wasn't Victor. This thing was in my head, not just messing with it."

"Were you harmed in any way?" He stood and rounded the table, pulling her to her feet. "One of my guards is also a healer. Would you like him to examine you?"

"I'm fine." He stood in front of her, easily within reach. Victor was right; she was an elemental person. She trusted her instincts, her intuition. If there was no chemistry between her and Seth, there was no reason to take this any further. She found him physically appealing, but that would never be enough for her.

As if sensing her train of thought, he cupped her chin and tilted her head back. His lips brushed over hers, warm and gentle.

I've wanted you since you were sixteen, he whispered in her mind. Thoughts of you gave me a reason to fight during my captivity.

He deepened the kiss, pressing her against his chest as his arms wrapped around her. She reached back and buried her fingers in his silky hair. Their breaths mingled first, then their tongues touched almost tentatively before they curled and stroked.

Suddenly he stiffened. His arms tightened then released, and he stepped back. His gaze gleamed with silver light, frosted over by mystic sight. She'd known he was clairvoyant, but she'd never witnessed a psychic trance. He remained motionless for what seemed like hours then the silver haze dissipated.

He swayed and she caught his upper arm, helping steady him. "I need to rest," he muttered, twisting out of her grasp.

"Wait. What did you see? Why are you angry?"

He didn't look back as he left the club.

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Chapter Four

Seth folded his arm across his eyes, trying to decipher the vision with as much objectivity as possible. His visions were always confusing, but this one had been a disorienting meld of impressions and images, undoubtedly tainted by his reaction to each.

He lay on the bed in his hotel room, the curtains drawn against the flickering lights. Silence. Focus. He needed each if he hoped to unravel the meaning of what he'd seen.

Darkness caressed him as he summoned the clearest image to the forefront of his memory. Tess lying naked on a leather sofa, her legs sprawled as that wretched vampire ate her pussy. He could almost taste her cream and feel the softness of her pink flesh. But it was Victor who licked her, Victor's tongue pushing into her core.

Jealousy blazed through him, threatening his concentration. So, they were lovers. He'd suspected as much all along. She was a mature woman in the prime of life, and he'd always sensed her passionate nature.

Once she'd believed him dead, it was only logical that she'd move on with her life. She'd been little more than a child when he knew her. So why did reality sting so badly?

He tried to dispel the image, to summon another aspect of his vision. The perspective shifted, closing in on her face. Her delicate features were contorted with the most disturbing combination of lust, fury, and shame. This wasn't passion. Had Victor ... no, the entity. This was how her behavior had

changed. Seth understood why Victor avoided the specifics, but the detail was important to the investigation.

As his brain registered the true significance of the image, his gift allowed him to access the next image. Another sex scene. He tensed. Tess straddled Victor's hips, eagerly riding his cock. She gasped and arched her back, taking him deeper. This was certainly not coerced.

Suddenly the vampire rolled, taking her with him. He rocked back on his knees and pulled her hips up to meet his downward thrusts. Seth fought the image, hating the burning fury consuming his soul. Anger was such a useless emotion.

The image shifted slightly, and Seth watched himself climb onto the bed beside the fucking couple. He bent and kissed her mouth as Victor continued to fill her core. She kept her arms raised above her head, utterly surrendered, lost in the pleasure they unleashed within her.

Seth caressed her breasts, squeezing her nipples until she gasped into his mouth. His hand slid lower, easing between her body and Victor's, feeling her slick flesh stretch around the vampire's shaft.

Slow spreading heat passed through Seth's body. He touched them both, pressing the side of his hand against her clit while Victor slid between his fingers. With a feral growl, Victor grabbed him by the hair and dragged his face up for a devastating kiss.

He allowed male pleasure servants to ease his needs from time to time, but it was nothing like this. Victor's mouth was harsh and demanding, his tongue bold and thorough.

This was the memory of a vision. Why were the sensations still so vivid?

"I want to watch her suck your cock while I fuck her sweet pussy." Crude. Explicit. So very vampire. Yet Seth found Victor's words thrilling.

His gaze met hers and she smiled, her lips flushed and parted. Victor's movements jostled her breasts and Seth couldn't resist any longer. He arched over her face and guided his cock toward her waiting mouth.

No! I will not share my mate with a vampire!

"If you don't, she will die."

Seth turned his head toward the familiar voice, but the room was pitch black. "I told you to leave me alone."

"Your protection is my purpose in life," William reminded him. "What kind of guard would I be if I listened to you?"

"Monitoring my thoughts is just plain rude." Seth sat up and scooted back against the padded headboard. William turned on a light. He sat in an armchair near the door, legs crossed at the ankles. His weathered features were stern, yet compassionate. Seth trusted him implicitly. "Why did you say that with such conviction?"

"I dreamed of her last night." William's gifts were vast and varied, which was why he'd been chosen to serve the royal family three centuries before. "Your future is bound to hers, but hers is bound to the vampire. All three of you must accept the dynamic, or she will not survive the conflict to come."

"What dynamic? Do you sense a temporary sexual alliance while we battle this entity or something more substantial?"

William seldom volunteered his opinions, so when he did, Seth listened.

"Both of you want this woman. That will not be enough. This must be a true melding of three souls, or all is lost."

An echo of the excitement he'd felt in the vision zinged through his body. He was a dominant as was the vampire. How would this ever work? Rather than voice his concerns, he asked, "You're certain the creature will attack again?"

"That was unclear. I couldn't tell if the creature was attacking you three, or if you three had gone on the offensive, but there will definitely be another altercation."

"What else can you tell me about the entity?"

"It's ancient and far from home. It has attached itself to someone who enables it to remain here. Destroy this person and you will destroy the entity."

* * * *

"Emit Duarte," Victor spat out the name, unable to expel the taint fast enough. "I should have known he was involved somehow."

"The being we encountered was powerful, wily, and connected to that worthless bastard." Anthony obviously shared Victor's dislike for their longtime enemy.

"Unfortunately, I can tell you little more than that."

"Could there be more than one?" The possibility set Victor in motion. He paced the drawing room in their family's manor house. The Zoltan estate was secluded in the mountains of Montana. Victor had teleported in, hoping to speak with his father. Darius had departed for Europe the night before, but

Victor found his older brother recently returned from his adventure in Scotland.

"Anything is possible," Anthony said, "but what you described is too similar to what we experienced. I'd lay odds that it's the same being."

"It will be easier to find Emit than to find a creature without a body."

"That goes without saying."

"So what's being done to find Emit?"

"He's not in any of his usual haunts. Father dispatched scouts before he left yesterday. If something doesn't turn up soon, I'll start smacking heads together." Anthony paused, his expression turning thoughtful. "Father hoped hostilities would lessen after Edmond's death."

"If someone killed our father, would we slink away into the shadows?"

"We're not Duartes."

"Thank the Gods."

"I presume you didn't leave Tess unprotected," Anthony said.

Victor shot him an impatient look. "You know me better than that. Rick Cameron is shadowing her, and others are not far away."

"Why aren't you with her? Once I touched Monique, I could hardly think of anything else."

"Things have gotten complicated."

With a warm chuckle, Anthony crossed his legs. The leather chair creaked as his weight shifted. "Complicated is

what we do best. Is Tess not receptive to you? Father's instincts were dead on with Monique."

"Monique is a vampire. She understands how things work. Tess might as well be human. I'm not sure how she'll react to my dark nature."

"Do you find her attractive?"

"Unbearably. That's not the problem." He heaved a frustrated sigh. "She's betrothed to a Protinese prince."

"And you're an organic vampire, descended from one of the oldest bloodlines in existence. Don't sound so defeated. Do you sense a connection with her?"

"Absolutely."

"I don't usually kiss and tell, but I think this is important. The creature we encountered moved effortlessly from mind to mind. It attacked each of us in turn and we were powerless to resist its effects. When it turned on Jacob, the only way we were able to expel it was to bring him into our soul bond. By combining our abilities, we were able to accomplish what none of us could have done on our own."

Victor glared at his brother. "Surely you're not suggesting I share my mate with an Elf."

Something in his tone made Anthony laugh. "I'm not suggesting anything. I'm telling you what happened to me."

Anthony's descriptions made Victor all the more anxious to return to Las Vegas. If fucking an Elf is what it would take to keep Tess safe, then so be it. The sexual bond they'd triggered the night before was weaving, expanding, intensifying his connection to her, and his hunger for her.

He'd promised Seth one night to catch up in their twisted competition, so the report that the prince was alone in his suite came as a shock. Rather than break his word, he decided to confront his rival and find out why he was squandering precious time.

The same overdressed valet ushered him into the main room of the suite then disappeared into the adjoining bedroom. Seth emerged a short time later, dressed much as he had when they first met. "What are you doing here?" the prince asked bluntly.

"I don't want Tess left alone. I thought I made that clear. Either you're with her or I am, period."

"Don't you trust your men?"

The insolence in Seth's tone brought Victor closer to losing control. He needed Tess, and he needed to feed. "That's not the point. We made an agreement. If you're not going to take this seriously, I'll—"

"How much do you know about the Protinese?" Seth swept his arm toward the furniture arranged at their side.

Victor reluctantly sat in one of the chairs while Seth faced him on the matching loveseat. "I've never bothered to keep track of all the Elfin tribes. How many vampire clans can you name?"

"Is everything a competition with you?" Seth snapped.

"Why aren't you with Tess?" Victor reinforced the question with a glare.

"My people—my family in particular—move strongly in the gift of foresight."

"Fascinating."

"I had a vision about you."

"Let me guess," Victor said with a sneer. "I was brokenhearted because Tess had chosen you."

"Actually she decided to keep us both."

The implication hung in the air as Victor's mind filled with tantalizing images. Strong, pale limbs entwined with his as Tess writhed between them. "Did my brother put you up to this?"

"I've never met your brother." Seth seemed genuinely confused. "Why do you ask?"

"What exactly did your vision reveal?"

"The three of us in bed together." He flashed a challenging grin. "We weren't sleeping."

This couldn't be a coincidence. Victor hesitated for a moment. What did Seth gain by concocting such a tale, and how could he have guessed what Anthony had told him? "My brother and his mates were able to combat this creature, or one like it, by pooling their abilities. He suggested I consider combining forces with you rather than motivating Tess to choose between us."

"And what are your thoughts on the matter?" Seth crossed his legs and met Victor's gaze directly. His expression was guarded, but there was an awareness pulsing between them that had never been there before. That must have been one hell of a vision.

Victor studied the Elf. Seth was striking, exotic, obviously otherworldly. It was easy to see why Tess would be tempted by the prince, but would he find Seth's taste arousing, would he crave his touch and ache to be near him? Already Victor's

cock was hardening in anticipation of a new adventure. Still, if all he felt for Seth was a mutual need for Tess, it would be foolish to bind their souls together.

"How would your family react to such an alliance?" Victor asked.

One of Seth's pale eyebrows arched. "You're considering it? I honestly didn't think we'd get this far."

"Tess is my mate. I can smell it on her, taste it in her cream. I will do whatever it takes to keep her safe and ultimately make her happy."

"Even if that includes accepting another person into the union?"

Victor flared his nostrils and inhaled deeply, assessing Seth's scent ... fresh, earthy, like a rain-soaked forest. "I don't think you'd be that hard to fuck."

"But how hard would you find it to be fucked by me? I have just as strong a need for control as you do."

This didn't surprise Victor. Despite the ethereal quality in Seth's attractiveness, Victor sensed his strength, his nobility. Seth might be a prince, but he was also a warrior. "Times were very different in my youth," Victor admitted. "I fucked in just about every combination imaginable. I learned that, in the right situation, being taken can be just as intense as taking."

"And I was raised in a palace, surrounded by pleasure givers, both male and female. When war separates Protinese soldiers from their females for long periods of time, it is expected that we seek physical relief with each other. Many of

these battle forged bonds lead to permanent relationships once the men return home."

"So a royal ménage won't even raise eyebrows?" Victor smiled. "How disappointing."

"Oh, the participants in this particular ménage are sure to cause a scandal. Still, it sounds like the concept is easier for us to accept than it will be for our mate."

Our mate? Victor found the phrase oddly thrilling. It was forbidden in these modern times, which made it all the more appealing to his dark nature. "My clan is searching for Emit Duarte. Anthony believes the creature is linked to Duarte in some way."

"William, my master-at-arms, said much the same. According to him, the creature is not of this world, and destroying the person to which it is connected will also destroy the creature."

"Works for me. Duarte deserves to die."

"So how do we convince Tess that she can't live without us?" Seth mused as he pushed to his feet.

Light glistened off Seth's hair, and a vivid image formed within Victor's mind. Tess sprawled on a padded table, bound wrist and ankle. Seth stood between her thighs, bending forward from the waist. The prince licked her pussy and fucked her with his fingers. She arched and moaned, unable to escape his ruthless attention, a willing prisoner to their pleasure. Victor had his cock buried in Seth's ass, but he wasn't moving. He wrapped Seth's hair around his wrists, guiding him, controlling him as he savored the firm grip of the Elf's hot passage.

"I have lots of ideas." Victor's lust-roughened tone revealed the nature of his thinking. "But none of them fit in well with modern expectations."

Seth waved away his concern. "Expectations are relative, and human mores don't really apply. Tess is about to be claimed by an Elf and a vampire."

"But Tess is human."

A long pause followed as Seth searched Victor's gaze. "What I'm about to tell you must never leave this room."

Was the Elf being melodramatic, or was the import in his tone genuine? Victor didn't know him well enough to decide. "All right."

"Tess is part demon."

Victor narrowed his gaze as suspicion twisted through his soul. What game was this? "None of my information indicates she has demon blood."

"The exact components of her lineage are a closely guarded secret. Her paternal grandfather has powerful enemies. He's a controlling member of the ruling class. After several of his legitimate children were murdered, he scattered his progeny in various dimension to ensure the continuation of his dynasty. Tess's father was born to one of his consorts. He was able to pass as human, so he was sent here."

"I thought her father was dead." It was natural that Seth would know more about Tess than Victor did, but it still annoyed him.

"He is, as well as the rest of Nogafel's children. The rival house was ruthless in their quest to wipe out Nogafel's offspring. Randolph and Tess are the last of his progeny. The

conflict is still being waged, so Randolph agreed to remain hidden until his grandfather's forces are able to stabilize the situation, or his grandfather is killed. As a mixed-race female, Tess is considered incidental. Even if Nogafel is killed, she can't take over his holdings. Her only value would be as a pleasure slave or war trophy, and it's unlikely they would bother."

"Sounds like a charming place."

"I'm in no position to judge them." Seth glanced away, his discomfort with the topic obvious. "My people are intolerant of mixed-race people as well. Unfortunately for them, I fell in love with one years ago."

"Tess was a child when you first met." Victor stood, studying Seth's expression, assessing every shift and nuance. "Even if she was infatuated with you then, how can you possibly expect her feelings to remain the same? You let her believe you were dead, for God's sake." His logical mind had already accepted that some form of sexual bond was necessary, but his stubborn heart refused to surrender without a fight.

"I won't justify my actions to you, vampire! You've known her for less than two nights, yet you're ready to bind your soul to hers. By human standards, we're both irrational."

"Neither of us is human."

"Nor is Tess," Seth stressed. "She's just lived among them for so long she's forgotten what it's like to be ... Other."

"I have one last question before we figure out a strategy," Victor said. "If Tess's father worked so hard to pass himself off as human, how did he end up with a Protinese mate?"

"One of our scouts sensed his latent abilities. They offered to train him in exchange for information."

Victor chuckled. "Tess's father was a spy?"

"The fact is no longer classified, but you didn't hear it from me." Seth buttoned his shirt and tightened the leather thong holding back his hair. "Any more history will have to wait. We have a mate to seduce."

* * * *

Tess had been given a suite at the Twilight Jewel until X2 opened, and it was finally looking like she would still be young when that day rolled around. Two of her subcontractors had called to verify that they would resume work in the morning, and she'd received emails from several vendors. Things were looking up, thanks to Seth.

The conclusion annoyed her. Everything had been running smoothly until Seth interfered, so why should she thank him for removing his roadblocks? The new and improved Seth was far more appealing than the arrogant jerk who'd disrupted her life. Even so, she didn't trust either of them.

And what the hell had he seen in his vision?

The kiss had been wonderful, until he was overcome by the trance. She wasn't intimidated by mystical abilities. Though she tried not to depend on them, she had a few of her own. Still, he'd looked at her with such anger and betrayal. All she could conclude was that his gift had revealed what really happened in the observation lounge.

It wasn't as if she'd lied to Seth. Everything she'd said was true. She'd just left out the part where Victor used his fingers and his mouth to soothe the sexual frenzy.

If she were honest, it had gone farther than that. By the time they did each other, the frenzy had dissipated. Victor had been so patient and caring, so selfless ... She shook her head with a guilty smile. That wasn't accurate either. He had been all of those things, but gratitude hadn't prompted her suggestion. She'd wanted his cock in her mouth, longed for the earthy taste of his cum infusing her body with euphoria.

When he'd held her down against the floor and fucked her mouth so brutally, she'd never felt so liberated, so utterly free. It was odd. Why would confinement make her feel free? She knew the answer, had always known. The more control her lovers exerted over their love play the more she enjoyed it. But it had always been play before. If she submitted to Victor, it would be a commitment, a lifelong offering of body, soul, and blood.

Her thoughts drifted back to Seth. Life would be no less complicated with him, but it would likely be less intense. Would he be wild and passionate? Their brief kiss hadn't really given her time to determine how he would approach sex. She'd spent her adolescence fantasizing about making love with him, but those had been the curious imaginings of a virgin.

With a heavy sigh she turned off the television and tossed the remote aside. Something else had been bothering her all day. Had Victor threatened Seth or manipulated him into

changing his attitude? She never would have thought Seth would be so easily intimidated, but the timing was suspect.

An electronic bell tolled in the outer room, so she strolled across the suite and looked through the peephole. The blurry image was unmistakable. They were ganging up on her now. Her heart gave a traitorous leap, and tingles raced across her skin. She took a steadying breath and opened the door a couple of inches.

"It's late and I'm in a shitty mood."

"Dawn is still at least two hours away and we've come to lighten your mood," Victor countered.

Seth watched her closely, his gaze filled with secrets. He held a gym bag, and Victor had an ice bucket and a bottle of what looked like champagne.

"I'm not in the mood for your games," she tried again.

"We're not here to play games and my hours are never quite reasonable."

Too exhausted to argue, and tired of the conflict, she stepped back and opened the door.

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Chapter Five

"Are you losing your touch?"

Emit's mocking question made her want to unleash the full force of her power for just a few moments. The full force of her power? The longer she remained in this dimension, the weaker she felt. At first she'd thought she was venturing too far from her anchor, but now she wasn't sure Emit had anything to do with how quickly she tired or her inability to concentrate.

His cruel laughter drew her attention to his sharp-featured face. "You really haven't figured it out, have you?"

"You're so fucking smart. Why don't you tell me?"

"Your natural state is incorporeal. The longer you remain in solid form, and the more often you shift from one form to another, the weaker you become."

His conclusion made sense, but his attitude pissed her off. "Do you really want me to leave while your enemies are joining forces? First Vasco, then Zoltan clan. Who will you take on next, the council of ancients?"

He slapped at her, but his hand passed through her body. "You're even weaker than I thought."

Damn him! "You starve me," she whispered. "I do everything you ask of me, and still you ration your energy with such miserly..."

His laughter ended her performance. "You should be on the stage. I'm not your primary source of sustenance, and you know it. I'm your anchor, your green card, as it were."

She didn't understand the reference and didn't care enough to ask him to clarify. "I told you everything I learned in Las Vegas. Tess is contracted to some Elfin prince, but Victor is still determined to have her."

He glared. "If you'd slipped away unnoticed, I could have sent you back in. You could have played your little mind games and maybe even started a war between Zoltan clan and those annoying Elves. Now that would have been fun."

"So what do you want me to do instead?" She was so fucking tired of his complaints.

"They're on to you. I don't want you anywhere near them." His gaze lit with something suspiciously close to compassion. "I think you should go formless for a day or two. Regain your strength. By the time you return, I'll have figured out our next move."

Trepidation skittered down her spine. He didn't give a damn about her, never had and never would. Her only value to him was the information she gleaned and the chaos stirred in her wake. He was up to something. Why did he want her out of the way?

"I really am tired." She infused her tone with fatigue. "I'm going to drift closer to home and recuperate."

"But you will return?" Now he sounded concerned.

"If I sever our link you'll feel it." She'd make damn sure he did. "I'll see you in a day or two."

She slowly faded from view, intentionally decreasing the intensity of their connection until she could barely feel him.

He blew out a ragged breath and rubbed his hands down the front of his pants. Were his palms sweaty? His features

relaxed, but his shoulders remained tense. He walked across the nondescript office on the outskirts of Santa Cruz and held back the heavy drapes so he could look outside.

Cadin drifted up behind him, trying to keep her perspective similar to his. The poorly maintained parking lot was empty. No one had been able to find Emit because no one imagined the head of Duarte clan would subject himself to such dreary surroundings. His clan was old and wealthy. They had even been well respected while his father was alive. But Emit was not his father, far from it. He lacked the ambition and ruthless focus that had made Edmond so successful.

Allowing the drapes to swish back into place, he moved away from the window. He pulled a comm crystal out of his pocket and activated the device with his breath. A rumbling voice responded in a language she didn't understand, so she carefully scanned Emit's mind for the meaning.

His brainwaves heaved and twisted, becoming incomprehensible as his body reshaped itself from the inside out. Was she this revolting when she shifted?

His skin split, and his limbs bulged, reddish-brown blood streaming onto the carpet around his claw-like feet. The lower portion of his body was heavily muscled, while his torso remained lean and agile. His long, narrow head would easily touch the ceiling if he unfolded those powerful rear legs and his upper limbs were uniquely jointed, allowing him to move as no humanoid could. A charcoal pattern marked his grayish skin and his eyes were solid black. His thin, reptilian mouth opened, and he produced a rumbling sound similar to the one emanating from the crystal.

Humanoid vocal cords wouldn't be capable of producing those sounds. Was this why he'd chosen to shift?

Gradually she found the rhythm of his thoughts, understanding the meaning if not each individual word. He apologized for having taken so long in his mission and paused as the other voice responded.

"I've found them, Father. I told you I would. I wanted to be absolutely certain before I notified you of my discovery."

She finally assimilated their rumbling language enough to follow the conversation.

"Them? You've found both his son and daughter?"

"Yes. And I'm absolutely certain this time. Nogafel's last remaining kin are well within my grasp."

"The male must die. No potential heir to his dynasty can be allowed to live, but the fate of the female is up to you. Enjoy her before you kill her, or if she pleases you well, bring her back as a slave. The continual humiliation of a Nogafel female would help keep his followers in line."

"She would split in two if I tried to fuck her. She is a pale, puny thing. Highly favors her human blood."

"You'd be surprised what human females can endure, but as I said the choice is yours."

"I will see you soon."

The crystal blinked out and Cadin quickly withdrew from the creature's mind. She couldn't pinpoint his dimension, but he was obviously what the humans termed a demon.

Reforming Emit's body was nearly as disgusting as revealing his true appearance had been. Congealed blood and

clumps of excess flesh littered the carpet and splattered the furniture by the time the process ended.

Emit looked at the mess with a careless shrug and headed for the bathroom. He'd simply move to a similar location, something shabby and forgettable. When this "crime scene" was discovered, either the human government or some paranormal task force would cover up the anomaly.

Cadin vibrated with anxiety and speculation. Had this demon been masquerading as Emit the entire time she'd been anchored to him? Did any of the vampires know they had a spy in their midst? She couldn't warn them. Anything that harmed Emit harmed her, and she had barely begun to explore this realm. She needed to figure out what he'd been talking about and who he intended to kill.

And then what?

How was she supposed to make decisions when she only understood a fraction of the elements? Demons were hiding among humans. What else was new? That had been going on since time began.

It sounded like this brother and sister were being pursued by their father's successor or perhaps someone in the process of overthrowing their father? Many ruthless rulers murdered all possible rivals upon ascension to power.

None of it concerned her as long as she was careful to release her connection to the Emit creature before he returned to his dimension. Still, she couldn't let it rest. She needed information. She would not be blindsided again.

One thing was certain. Everything was connected. Emit's obsession with the vampires had everything to do with

locating his prey. Station X seemed to be a hub for paranormal activity. It was worth returning to the nightclub and reassessing some of her earlier conclusions.

If she turned up nothing there, she'd take another shot at Tess and Victor. If she remained a distant observer, she ran the risk of being trapped in this dimension without an anchor. Yet any of her usual tricks could alert them to her presence. There was no other option! She had to learn what she could without getting too close.

* * * *

"Can we make this quick," Tess muttered. "I want to go to bed."

Victor turned to Seth with a conspirator's smile. "What do you think, Oberon? Should we let her get on the bed?"

"Oberon was a faerie," Seth objected, though amusement made his eyes sparkle. "I'm an Elf." He closed and locked the door. His movements were inherently graceful, sensual, yet undeniably masculine all at the same time.

"What's with the champagne, and what's in the bag?" An unexpected wave of vulnerability washed over her. She'd just allowed them into her private suite—together no less. She tightened the belt on her bathrobe and tried to look brave.

"We want you to share in our celebration," Seth said.

"The only thing I have to celebrate is the fact that you stopped being an asshole."

His chuckle was warm and accepting. "This isn't your celebration, it's ours."

That was the last thing she'd expected to hear. "Yours, as in you and Victor? What do you have to celebrate?"

Victor set the ice bucket on a nearby table and turned the full intensity of his gaze on her. "You'll see."

She didn't like the sound of that.

He held out his hand, and anxiety lodged in her throat. Why were they here together? She could deal with Victor's intensity by thinking of Seth's smile, and Victor's dark appeal helped her resist Seth's gentle persuasion. But she wasn't sure her senses could withstand the temptation of their combined seduction.

Seth handed the gym bag to Victor and raised her hand to his mouth, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. His lips were warm, his fingers long and strong. "Why don't you have a seat on the sofa, unless you'd be more comfortable in bed."

If they needed a bed for whatever they had planned, they were going to be disappointed. Her one and only concern right now had to be X2.

Without releasing her hand, Seth led her to the sofa. Even in jeans and a cotton shirt, he exuded wealth and privilege. Humans were drawn to the elegance of Elves, and Seth was a prime example of why they were so fascinating.

She hadn't expected to see either of them until the following day, so she'd shed her work clothes and washed her face. The pull-on shorts and oversized T-shirt she wore now were by no means flattering. Perhaps seeing her au naturale would help them reconsider their respective desire to court her.

A distinct pop snapped her attention back to Victor. He was pouring champagne into two crystal flutes, but she couldn't imagine where he'd gotten them, unless they'd been in the gym bag. Which led her back to her unanswered question. "What's in the bag?"

"You'll see." He handed her one glass and gave the other to Seth. Seth took a sip of the bubbling wine while he looked around the suite. Victor's gaze remained fixed on her. "Seth and I have been investigating the creature. We each accessed different sources yet came to the same conclusion."

"Have you learned what that thing was, or what it wanted with me?" Rather than the artificial compulsion tainting the intimacies she'd shared with Victor, the reverse had proven to be true. When she thought about that night, Victor's unexpected tenderness remained foremost in her memory.

"My older brother had a similar encounter while he was in Scotland with Monique. We suspect it was the same being."

Victor's reply didn't answer her question. Was he being intentionally evasive or was he trying to protect her from something unpleasant. "Were they as helpless against the damn thing as I was?" He sat on one side of her and Seth sat on the other. She felt surrounded, protected, yet restless. They both claimed to want her as their mate, so why were they suddenly so chummy?

"Obviously they weren't able to destroy it, or you would have been spared the encounter," Victor continued. "They were able to learn one important fact. It's less able to deal with the combined power of a soul-bonded couple."

She tried to stand, but they restrained her, each of them catching one of her shoulders. "I see where this is going and I won't be frightened into bonding with one of you."

"You've made your desire quite clear," Seth said. "You don't want a mate, yet we can't leave you unprotected. We each care for you deeply and refuse to be deterred by your stubbornness."

"That left us with one last option," Victor concluded.

Seth set his champagne aside and the men stood, positioning themselves directly in front of her. What did Victor mean? If they weren't here to seduce her then...

Victor worked the buttons on the front of Seth's shirt, revealing his lean chest and tightly muscled abdomen. Seth kicked off his shoes while Victor moved on to Seth's jeans. Soon the prince stood before her naked, and Tess forgot to breathe.

Many long, lonely nights she'd imagined Seth holding her, touching her, initiating her into the pleasures of the flesh. All those girlish fantasies did nothing to prepare her for the reality of Seth's nudity. Victor snapped the thong binding Seth's hair, and the shimmering mass swished free, brushing sleekly muscled flesh and flawless skin.

Her breath escaped in a sigh, and her fingers tingled, desperate to explore each curve and angle of his amazing body. She crossed her legs and clenched her fists. Was this some sort of game? Did they expect her to lose control and ... But they weren't even looking at her. They stared at each other as if they were alone in the room.

Seth undressed Victor slowly, teasing her with his patience and the possessive slide of his fingers. Victor took Seth's hand and guided it to his erection. Lust throbbed through Tess. She wanted to touch him. No, she wanted to touch them! She pictured herself naked, standing between them, stroking one hard cock with each hand.

"How do you trigger *animus inaction*?" Victor's voice was deep and passion roughened, his lids drooping over his eyes.

Panic jarred her to full alert. He couldn't mean it! If Seth formed the bond with Victor, it rendered her choice moot. Unless ... Understanding cut through her lust addled brain. They expected her to be so overcome with desire that she'd bond with both of them! She wasn't sure she wanted one mate, why in the world would she want two?

Using anger to calm her hunger, she settled back against the cushions, determined to enjoy the show.

Victor kicked his pants aside and paused, angling his naked body toward her as he reached for Seth. The contrast between them accented the magnetism of each, light to dark, long hair to short, noble defender to savage predator.

And they were about to fuck!

She watched Victor's hand move closer to Seth's neck. His fingers curved around Seth's nape, and the prince shivered. She understood the conflict raging through Seth. Victor was fierce and intimidating, yet so damn desirable. Victor drew Seth toward him and Seth moved both hands to Victor's shoulders.

Their lips touched, parted, then touched again. Tess wasn't sure how bonding worked with vampires, but each new

intimacy would strengthen the link for Seth. They exchanged breath, and the connection formed. She caught a glimpse of their dueling tongues as their mouths repositioned, and her heart gave a rebellious leap. Let them fuck each other's brains out. It didn't matter to her. But the hollow ache inside her expanded, deepening until she could barely sit still.

Victor wrapped his arm around Seth's waist and aligned their lower bodies, pressing, rubbing, cock against cock. Seth groaned and angled his head, taking the kiss deeper.

She couldn't watch this! It was too evocative, too confusing.

Keeping her movements slow and smooth, she tried to sneak past them.

Victor blocked the bedroom door, a lazy smile parting his lips. "What's the matter, sweetheart? Never watched before?"

"Voyeurism has never appealed to me."

"You're welcome to join in at any time," Victor countered.

"Our mutual affection for you led to this situation." Seth ambled toward them, cock bobbing with each step. "The least you can do is give us a little encouragement."

She nodded toward his erection. "You're doing just fine on your own."

"I told you she'd be difficult." Before she could guess his intention, Victor picked her up, and shoved the bedroom door wide with his foot. "Grab the bag," he directed Seth then strode into the darkened room.

"Put me down!" She wiggled and shoved against Victor's chest, but he hardly seemed to notice. "You're using the danger to manipulate me."

"True."

The admission was so unexpected she went still in his arms. "True? You're not even going to try and justify it?"

"We're racing the sun." He nipped her chin then sat her on the side of the bed. "I know you love to argue, but I don't have time to indulge you right now."

Seth set the gym bag on the foot of the bed and said, "The creature has given us reason to push you harder than we'd intended to push. Still, it doesn't change the reality of what's going on. We both believe you're our mate."

"The only way we can both be right is if we are also mates." Victor shot a hungry glance at Seth. "There's no need for us to pressure you until we determine whether or not our suspicions are true."

"How do you make this determination, and why should I believe what you decide?"

"Seth needs to taste my cum," Victor told her. "And I'm going to form a temporary blood bond so there will be no uncertainty for any of us. You'll feel what we feel and know what we know."

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Chapter Six

They pounced before Tess could even think Victor's explanation. Victor pulled her to her feet and wrapped his arms around her, trapping her arms against her sides. Seth dragged her shorts and panties off as she kicked and twisted, then they worked together to rid her of her T-shirt. Each provocative slide of her skin against his incited Victor's hunger.

"We were going to book a dungeon, but Vasco assured us this suite was equipped with everything we'd need to tame a reluctant mate," Victor whispered the taunt in her ear as he guided her around to the foot of the bed.

Her laugh was harsh and humorless. "Multiple partners isn't twisted enough? You want to play BDSM games, too?"

Much to Victor's delight, Seth stepped in to defend him. "None of this is a game, Tess. The danger is real. Our feelings are real. And our needs are real. You can't accept that you're our mate until you understand exactly what that means."

Victor held her against him, her back pressed against his front. Seth pointed a remote control at the ceiling and triggered a discreet panel. The compartment opened and wrist cuffs lowered on sturdy cables.

Tess trembled in his arms. Victor inhaled deeply, analyzing her scent. The acrid bite of fear was undeniable, but arousal was just as strong. "This is overwhelming. I understand that, but you're stronger than you realize."

"I'm stronger than you realize." Her shoulders straightened and her chin rose. "I'll allow a temporary bond, but neither of you will force me into anything permanent."

She raised her arms and Seth secured her wrists. Victor stepped back, fascinated by her surrender. Stubborn and feisty, yet trusting and submissive, she made his blood sizzle and his fangs ache.

Seth used the remote to open compartments in the footboard. After a slight hesitation, Tess spread her legs, and Seth restrained her ankles. Open and accessible, her body was entirely at their mercy. The significance tore through Victor, stoking the fire in his blood and intensifying his hunger.

He wanted to fuck her pussy while Seth stuffed her ass. They'd fill her so full she'd scream with the pleasure and never want it to stop.

Seth grasped his chin and turned his head away from Tess. "It can't just be about her. This can't be a true joining unless we're mates."

Acknowledging the reminder with a stiff nod, Victor grabbed Seth by the hair and thrust his fangs into the Elf's throat. Seth yelped, struggling for a moment before surrendering to Victor's bite. Victor drank slowly, forcing down the pleasure so he could analyze each sensation.

Seth lowered his mental shields and allowed Victor into his mind. They touched, flowing through each other as Victor formed a temporary link.

Now Tess, Seth prompted. Bring her into the link.

Victor withdrew from Seth's flesh, savoring his unique taste as he crossed to Tess. Her eyes widened with each step he took, her fingers clenching into tight little fists. "In all the years you've worked for vampires, you've never allowed one to bite you?"

"Never even been tempted." She licked her lips and her nipples hardened. She was certainly tempted now.

"I won't hurt you."

"I wouldn't have opened the door if I didn't believe that."

He pushed his fingers into her hair and tilted her head to the side. Her pulse echoed in his ears, and his cock. This would be so much better if he were inside her.

Soon, Seth whispered in his mind. Give her time, and she'll surrender completely. It must be her decision.

Unable to resist the temptation a moment longer, Victor penetrated her flesh with his fangs. She tensed then shuddered, a low moan escaping her throat. Her evocative taste rolled across his tongue, combining with Seth's.

Her being was warm and welcoming as he pushed into her mind. Seth was there with him, weaving her into their link with inherent skill.

I can feel both of you. She sounded a bit muddled.

That's the idea, Seth assured her. *No lies, no manipulation, just brutal honesty.*

But mind control is a vampire's stock-in-trade. How can I be certain what I feel is real?

You have access to my mind and feelings, Victor explained. *When a vampire takes control of someone, it's a one-way connection.*

Withdrawing his fangs took every ounce of Victor's self-control. He wanted more, so much more. More of her blood, more of her body, more of everything.

He looked at Seth, hoping to stabilize his blazing hunger. The prince stared at Tess with such longing it only compounded Victor's need. If they didn't move this thing forward, they were both going to go up in flames.

"Even if we're not mates," Seth began in a breathless tone, "I say we still—"

"No," Tess cut in. "You're too competitive. If this can't be a true joining, I won't bond with either of you."

Victor narrowed his gaze on Seth's flushed face as Tess's ultimatum rang through his brain. All or nothing. Make it work or else. He wanted to laugh. Who was manipulating the situation now?

Even if they didn't feel the primal connection when they fucked, maybe they could convince her they did.

I can hear you, Tess reminded him and Victor offered a sheepish grin.

Seth placed his hand on Victor's shoulder, drawing his attention away from Tess. "Stand close enough to touch her while I go down on you. I don't want her to lose interest."

Victor's dominant nature surged, and he wrapped Seth's hair around his hand, fulfilling one of his fantasies. "You can top her, pretty boy, but don't even think about trying to control me."

Seth glared into Victor's eyes. Reality narrowed, and time paused. He could sense Tess silently watching the battle of wills unfold. His heart thudded wildly in his chest. No one had

ever dared to challenge him like this. He was a royal prince. Lovers tripped over themselves as they tried to please him.

His head began to throb, Victor's hold on his hair remaining constant. Tess would submit to them both, but must he submit to Victor? Heat cascaded through his body at the thought. Victor was stronger and older. Seth searched his heart and realized this felt right.

"Yes, sir." The words didn't come easily, but they passed his lips and Victor's grip loosened.

"On your knees." The imperious snap in Victor's tone sent another wave of lust crashing over him. "You will pleasure me with your mouth and one hand, while you pleasure our mate with the other."

If Victor wanted to deprive himself of her softness, let him. Seth had no objection. He sank to his knees in front of Victor and fisted the vampire's cock. He slipped his other hand between Tess's thighs, delighted to find her folds slick with cream, more than ready for his touch.

Rather than stand in silent stillness, as Seth had imagined, Victor caressed her breasts and kissed her mouth. Seth circled the tip of Victor's cock with his tongue, unable to watch what Victor was doing if he sucked him in earnest.

"You seem distracted." Victor held the back of Seth's head and drove his shaft into his mouth. "Don't forget why you're on your knees."

Hot and thick, Victor's cock felt amazing against his tongue. He sucked and licked, savoring each gasp and moan he dragged from the vampire's throat.

Seth pushed two fingers into Tess's core. Her body clenched, snug and hot around his fingers. Her pleasure rippled across their link, alive with pulsating energy. Finding her clit with his thumb, he circled the bud while her inner muscles caressed his fingers.

"Don't let her come," Victor warned. "Concentrate on what you're doing."

That's right. This wasn't just a blowjob. He was assessing a possible mate.

Unwilling to deprive himself of her heat, Seth left his fingers inside her and focused on Victor. He gently caressed the vampire's balls with his free hand while he sucked and licked his shaft. The salty sharp taste of precum spread across his tongue. He tightened his lips around the flared head and sucked with ruthless focus.

Victor released his hair, framing his face between his hands instead. He fucked his mouth with fast, smooth jabs, bumping the back of his throat. Seth tilted his head, taking Victor deeper. The vampire's cries echoed his thrusts as he drove himself toward completion.

Reluctantly withdrawing his fingers from Tess's cunt, Seth grabbed Victor's hips and restrained his last few thrusts. If Victor spilled down his throat, his taste would be lost. Seth needed to roll it across his tongue like wine, absorb and savor his essence.

Victor came with a muffled growl, his seed thoroughly coating Seth's tongue. Seth closed his eyes and waited for his body to react. Pleasure burst behind his eyes, spiraling down through his body, and shooting along his shaft. He groaned,

unable to stop his spontaneous climax. His cock twitched and jerked as streams of cum jetted into the air.

Possessive hunger surged through the tingling aftershocks of his release. He sucked on Victor's cock, enjoying every last drop. Within seconds he was hard again, ready for more.

Mine. The word burst from Seth's mind as his mouth stubbornly drew.

Victor growled and pushed him back, dragging his cock out of Seth's eager mouth. "You appear to have your answer. Now I will have mine."

Echoing the feral growl, Seth turned to Tess. He pressed his face against the apex of her thighs and pushed his cum-covered tongue between her folds. Her delicate tissue absorbed the fluid and she came with a startled cry.

Victor knelt behind him and Seth moved his legs apart. He had no doubt Victor was his mate, but Victor obviously needed this final test. Using his fingers to hold Tess open, Seth delved deeper, pushing his tongue into her passage as far as he could.

Slick fingers moved over his anus, teasing and preparing him. His body ached, his cock growing impossibly harder. *Take me, sir. All I am is yours.* Shocked by the words and the desire driving them, Seth held perfectly still. He wanted this, needed the overwhelming fullness and fierce desire.

Those persistent fingers pushed into him, circling and stretching until his body surrendered. He gently sucked on Tess's folds, wanting her cream to mix with Victor's cum. She wiggled against his mouth, hardly able to move with her limbs restrained.

Victor positioned himself between Seth's ass cheeks, forcing back his need to ravage and control. Instead he carefully worked the head of his cock past Seth's tight sphincter. Gods, he was tight! And so fucking hot he could just about come without moving.

Deeper, sir. Fill me up!

A smile parted Victor's lips. Seth would never truly submit, but he'd accept the sexual dynamic Victor needed so desperately. Steadying Seth's lean hips, Victor drove deeper and deeper until Seth cried out in ecstasy. His passage clenched so tightly Victor groaned, then he reversed direction.

Reaching around Seth's trembling body, Victor found the Elf's cock and stroked him in tandem to the motion of his hips. Emotions bombarded Victor's mind and burst within his body. He was ravenous, yet consumed with protective tenderness. Nothing in all his centuries had ever felt like this. So intense, so significant. There could be no doubt, they were mates.

Seth was nearly delirious with Protinese bonding fever. He slammed his hips back into Victor, demanding his cock. Tess cried out again and again as Seth devoured her pussy.

Release her ankles and you can fuck her while I finish fucking you.

No. We fuck her together for the first time.

Strength seeped out of his body and Victor realized he was out of time. With three forceful thrusts, he triggered his climax and shuddered against Seth's back. He fought off his solar trance with every fiber of his being, but he didn't quite make it to the bed.

Dizzy and desperate for another orgasm, Tess moaned as Seth rocked back on his heels. Her mind understood what had just happened, but her body didn't seem to care. She wanted Seth's mouth back on her folds, his tongue thrusting into her core.

Seth pulled back the covers then placed Victor on the bed.

"Will the curtains protect him or do we need to take him somewhere darker?"

"He'll be fine."

She looked over her shoulder. "Will you please release me now?"

"I meant what I said. I'm not going to fuck you until we seal the joining."

She closed her eyes and blew out a shaky breath. Her pussy throbbed, and her clit pulsed with the same persistent rhythm. "I don't get to come again until the sun sets?"

"I didn't say that." He grinned and strolled toward her. "There are all sorts of things we can do to keep ourselves entertained until our mate is released from his trance."

* * * *

Restless and bored, Cadin floated from one corner of the hotel room to the next in the incorporeal equivalent of pacing. Watching people fuck wasn't nearly as much fun as messing with their emotions. She didn't dare enter the mind of Tess or her Elfin prince, which left her as a frustrated voyeur.

"What sort of things?" Tess asked as her mind filled with possibilities.

Seth turned from the sleeping vampire and returned to his place in front of the female. "We can begin your training. I don't think Victor will mind."

"My training for what?"

"As a proper submissive." He moved behind her, pressing his naked body against her back. "You're far too outspoken and greedy with your pleasure. You need to learn to trust us implicitly, to accept that we will never harm you, and we'll always give you what you need. Do you trust me?"

Tess hesitated. "Why? What are you going to do?"

He pinched her nipples and whispered in her ear, "Trust isn't required if you know what's coming."

"I trust you."

"I might have believed you if you'd replied without hesitation." His hands skimmed over her body before he stepped back. "Now they're just words."

She started to speak then Cadin felt a sudden spike of resentment and Tess turned her face away. "Why do I need to prove myself to you? You're the one who violated my trust, not the other way around."

He unfastened her restraints before he spoke again. "You know why I allowed you to believe I was dead. Do we really need to go over all this again?" She headed for her discarded clothes, but he caught her upper arm, preventing her retreat. "We can talk this out, but don't hide from me."

Cadin thought Tess would refuse. Rebellion simmered just under the surface. "So talk."

He drew her into a light embrace. "I'm sorry I hurt you. That was never my intention. I will never hurt you again."

"If you honestly wanted to protect me, why come back for me now?"

"How can you ask me that after what we just shared? You are my mate, Tess. I have ached for you every night since our summer together." His mouth crushed down over hers, smothering her reply. One hand cupped her ass, pulling her up along his body. His tongue moved boldly in her mouth. Cadin watched the possessive slide as their lips parted and slid.

Tess eased away from him and sank to her knees. She raised her arms and locked her hands behind her head. "I trust you."

Cadin expected him to thrust his cock into her mouth. That was obviously what she offered. Instead, he caressed her cheek and stared into her eyes. "I did one more thing you might consider a betrayal of trust."

She lowered her arms, but remained on her knees. "What did you do?"

"I told Victor you had demon blood."

"Why?" She shot to her feet, hurt and fear clear in her expression. "I told you about my father in the strictest of confidence. If and when Victor needed to know, it was my place to tell him."

"You're right. I spoke out of turn and, again, I'm sorry."

Cadin had heard all she needed to hear. This confirmed what she'd suspected all along. Emit was after Tess and her brother. The real question was, how could Cadin benefit from the knowledge?

Invigorated by the discovery, she followed her connection to Emit's new abode. He'd checked in to a dilapidated motel. The room was dingy and reeking of sex. He sat on the bed, watching porn on the television.

His head snapped up as she entered the room, shrewd intelligence gleaming in his gaze. "Welcome back. Are you feeling better?"

The question brought her up short. She hadn't revealed herself to him. How had he sensed her?

Seeing no alternative for it, she took on a visual form. "I am feeling better. Did you miss me?"

He didn't respond to her smile. His gaze bore into hers. "How long have you known?"

She could play dumb, but there was really no point in denials. He obviously knew she was on to him. "Not that long. When did you kill Emit?"

"Emit's not dead. We're cohabitating. I knew I'd need this body longer than I can keep it operational on my own."

"That's why you asked what would happen if he died."

"I can sense your true power. Why do you restrain it so carefully?"

"The more power I exert, the harder it is to control."

He inclined his head with a thoughtful smile. "That's a frequent complication."

"You want something or you wouldn't have confronted me."

"You're going to help me capture Nogafel's grandchildren. I assured my father of this prize. I don't intend to fail."

"I don't give a damn what you intend. I've lost interest in this conversation." She flipped her hair over her shoulders and pinched off her link to Emit.

She felt the familiar rush of energy, guiding her home, then the sensation slowed, finally sputtering out. What the fuck?

The demon grinned and clasped his hand around her throat. She hadn't been solid a second ago! "Chaos beings aren't the only ones who use dimensional anchors. You'll leave when I've finished with you and not before."

Rebellion shot through her spirit. Thank the heavens she hadn't told him what she knew. He might have moved their power struggle onto a new playing field, but she still had a few tricks up her sleeve.

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Chapter Seven

Tess bent over the ottoman in the outer room of her hotel suite, legs spread wide, offering Seth an unobstructed view of her pussy and the handle of the butt plug he'd inserted a few minutes before. She knew the plug was meant to train her body, to stretch the muscles so it wouldn't hurt when his cock replaced the toy.

"Talk to me, love," he said. "Tell me how that feels."

"It makes me want to bear down, but I'm afraid I'll push it out."

"Squeeze all you like. I'll make sure it doesn't go anywhere." He slowly rotated the toy, making her wiggle and moan.

"I need to come!" she snapped when bearing down only made the urgency worse.

"You come when I do this." His fingers pushed into her cunt and Tess whimpered. "So what's the difference?"

"Let me touch my clit. I can—"

"No. Your body is too familiar with that pattern. You need to learn other paths to release."

She had never been able to make herself come without touching her clit, but Seth seemed to know her body better than she did. He ignored her claim and showed her how well she responded to other forms of stimulation. He'd fucked her with a glass dildo, while he sucked and pinched her nipples. On and on he'd gone, adjusting the angle and increasing the

pressure of each pinch until an unexpected orgasm swept over her.

"Pain is obviously a trigger with you," he'd concluded as she rubbed her tender nipples.

She hadn't wanted to believe him, but he'd wrestled her down across his lap and spanked her virgin ass. With her cheeks smoldering with sensual heat and her cream running down the inside of her thighs, she'd experienced her second spontaneous orgasm.

Now bending over the ottoman, he was working to obliterate her next preconception. "There are more nerve endings in and around your ass than in your pussy. It should be easier to come when I do this." He drew the plug back, intensifying the pressure as her body stretched around the fullest part of the plug.

Rather than argue with him, she closed her eyes and concentrated on the demonstration. The toy slipped free and she sighed. A moment later he replaced the plug with two slippery fingers.

His lips feathered a kiss over the brand high on her right ass cheek. "It makes me crazy to think of how badly this must have hurt."

"I don't remember the pain." His fingers slid, slowly, so very slowly in and out of her ass. "Rand does, but he was older when they branded him."

"I shouldn't have brought it up. I'm sorry. Feel the slide, only the slide." His fingers pushed deep then reversed direction, spreading slightly as he pulled them outward. "Imagine my cock moving inside you, caressing you from the

inside out." Her body adjusted quickly to the smooth motion. Sensations curled into her abdomen then flowed out in a sudden rush as he pulled back.

"Oh!" She shivered, bearing down on his fingers.

"Harder. Squeeze me tight." Over and over she squeezed him. Her pussy echoed each clench, increasing her frustration and accentuating the tension building inside her.

She cried out, tossing her head. His thrusting slowed, focusing her attention on each tingle, each rhythmic tightening of her inner muscles. The sensations gathered, teetering on the brink of bliss. He thrust in fast and pulled back slow, while she soared ever higher. Then his teeth bit into the flesh of her ass, and she came in hard, deep spasms.

Shaken by the powerful orgasm, Tess slumped against the ottoman. Seth caressed his way out of her passage and soothed the bite with his tongue. He turned her over and gathered her into his arms.

"You all right?"

"You bit me." She chuckled at the odd sounding complaint. "I'd expect that sort of behavior from Victor."

"I can be every bit as savage as Victor. Don't let the pointed ears fool you."

They took a long, hot shower, soothing and exploring with soapy hands and tender lips. Tess savored each moment with Seth, but her spirit was ever aware of the vampire asleep in her bed. Watching the men touch each other had been undeniably erotic, and she was looking forward to many such exchanges. Still, she couldn't wait for the final joining, the ultimate blending of ... The thought brought her up short.

How had she accepted all this so easily? She was an independent woman, a modern entrepreneur, yet she'd given up her freedom without a fight.

"Having second thoughts?" Seth pressed against her back, wrapping his arms around her waist.

"My heart knows this is right, but my logical brain is shocked at how easily I let you two take over."

"It's a risk either way." He turned her around and looked into her eyes as the warm water cascaded around them. "If you trust what you're feeling, and it all falls apart, you'll be devastated. But if you trust your logic and lock yourself away, you'll never know the wonder of a soul-bonded love."

"Are you saying you love me?"

He kissed her gently on the lips. "I've always loved you."

Her heart swelled in response, but her mind wasn't ready for the words. This was happening too fast. She was risking too much.

Understanding her hesitation, yet disappointed all the same, Seth turned off the water. "Let's see if we can wake up Victor. I generally enjoy foreplay, but today seriously challenged my control."

"Your misery was largely self-imposed. I offered you my hand, and my mouth, and—"

He silenced her with a demanding kiss. "Victor came inside you once and I came inside you once. If I'd accepted any of your other offers, it would have thrown off the balance of our joining."

Her delicate brows drew together as they stepped out of the steamy shower stall. "Will that always be an issue?"

"No." He wrapped a towel around his hips and used another to dry her off. A smile played about his lips as he lingered over her curves. If his men could see him now, they'd be shocked at the changes this woman brought out in their battle weary commander. He'd left Protina embittered and arrogant, ready to reclaim the life snatched from him by war. "Once the bond is formed, we'll be free to indulge ourselves in any way we choose as often as we like."

She took the damp towel from his hand and rubbed it over his chest. "What were you thinking about just then? Your eyes turned sad."

"The past," he admitted. "I was such a fool to ever let anything come between us." He wrapped his arms around her and hugged her tight. "It will never happen again."

In a rare moment of brazenness, Tess tossed aside her towel and snatched his from around his hips. She took him by the hand and led him back into the bedroom.

It took a moment for his eyes to adjust to the darkness. Moonlight caught on something metallic, and Seth's heart leapt in his chest. The restraints. Tess had accepted bondage so sweetly, responding without fear. They had accomplished far more in one day than he had ever dreamed possible. She would be such a joy to train, such a joy to love.

She slowly pulled the covers down, revealing their mate in the moonlight. Victor's body emanated strength and danger, sending darts of excitement through Seth. They crawled onto the bed; he was on one side of Victor, and she was on the other. They touched his chest and his ridged abdomen, intentionally avoiding his cock.

Tease him with your hair. She sat back on her heels and watched to see if he would obey.

He drew a thick strand over his shoulder and fanned out the end, then dragged the makeshift brush from the base of Victor's throat to his navel.

Now, his cock. Tease his cock with your hair.

Victor's shaft was rapidly hardening. He was either already awake or heading there fast. Seth wrapped his fingers around Victor's semi-hard cock and circled the tapered head with his hair.

In a flash of movement, Victor wrapped that same strand around his hand and pulled Seth's head toward his waiting cock. The message was unmistakable. He parted his lips and obeyed.

"Victor!" Tess's gasp made Seth look up as best he could without releasing Victor's cock. The vampire pulled her forward and situated her astride his face. She cried out again as Victor's mouth latched on to her pussy. Her back arched and her hips rocked as Victor fucked her with his tongue.

Desperate for the culmination of their passion, Seth dragged his mouth along the length of Victor's shaft then released it with a wet sounding pop. He wrapped his arm around Tess's waist and dragged her off Victor's face.

Victor snarled, baring his fangs and reaching blindly for Tess. Seth didn't give him time to escalate. He moved Tess into position over Victor's hips and guided his mate's cock to his other mate's core.

She didn't hesitate. In one slow, continuous motion, she impaled herself on Victor. He stroked her breasts, firmly rolling her nipples.

"Lean forward and kiss him," Seth said. "I'll join you in a second."

Heat washed over Tess as she heard Seth's words. He'd join them in a second? His body would push into her ass, and they would move as one. Their minds would join, their souls would join, and nothing would be the same.

Victor guided her down, his mouth warm and waiting. She abandoned herself to his kiss, using the familiar intensity to soothe the last of her fears. Their union was unique and wonderful, unexpected and right. She wouldn't let her logical mind taint what her heart felt so clearly.

Relax, love. Victor stroked her back, his kiss deep and tender. Your uncertainty is natural. Only time will prove that your trust in us is justified.

The mattress rocked slightly as Seth rejoined them on the bed. He caressed her hips and squeezed her ass, dipping into the crease between her cheeks for slow, teasing strokes. His fingers focused in on her anus, slippery now with lube. He circled and pressed, loosening the muscles and spreading the gel.

Tess dragged her mouth away from Victor's as Seth positioned himself to take her. An unwanted flash of fear sliced through her mind, tensing her muscles and overshadowing her emotions.

We're here, love. Seth soothed. Take all the time you need.

Victor took her face between his hands and smiled. "You'll know only pleasure in our arms. You're safe, always safe."

Staring deeply into Victor's eyes, she pushed back onto Seth's cock. Seth held her open, guiding her, but Tess did the taking. Her body spread, and spread some more, accepting him suddenly. He slid deep in one smooth lunge, and they groaned together.

Fullness overwhelmed her fear, driving pleasure right to the breathless edge of pain before it settled into blissful throbbing wonder. Together. They held her between them, buried deep, surrounded by them, completing them.

Seth was the first to move. He rocked back onto his knees, pulling nearly out. Then he grasped her hips and dragged her body up along the length of Victor's shaft, pushing her back onto his in the process.

After two slow rotations, Tess learned the rhythm. She took Victor deep as she released Seth and impaled herself on Seth as she rose off Victor. She was never empty, never alone. Her head swam with sensations and emotions. The blood bond had faded, yet she could still sense how well the joining pleased her mates.

Victor propped himself on his elbows so he could reach her breasts without disrupting the steady rocking of their lower bodies. He pricked her nipple with the tip of one fang and lapped at the blood released by the tiny wound.

"Drink, my love," she urged. "I want to meet all your needs."

A savage growl warned of his intent an instant before his fangs sank into her throat.

Sensation exploded through her body, driving rational thought from her mind. Her cunt echoed each deep pull of his mouth, propelling the pleasure higher and higher still.

The men shifted, supporting her between them as they drove up into her trembling body. Unified, synchronized, their cocks slid against each other within the tight heat of Tess. She surrendered to their strength and trusted in their caring. She was safe in their arms, always safe.

She came again and again, lost in the wonder, savoring the ecstasy. Her body floated between them, alive with sexual heat and mystic energy. They flowed through her mind and moved in her body, each rhythmic stroke binding them more firmly together.

Victor hooked her legs over his arms and thrust his entire length into her pussy. Grasping her hips, Seth answered with an equally deep stroke in her ass. She tightened her inner muscles, and both her men groaned. Pleasure swirled around them in a dizzying ebb and flow.

"The vampiric bond is as strong as I can make it," Victor whispered. "Seth, can you weave Protinese strands through it as well?"

"Let me try." They paused, clinging to each other while Seth concentrated on the metaphysical link.

Tess felt suspended beyond reality, insulated from the harsh realities of life. Euphoric. Seth's presence became stronger in her mind, balancing Victor's savage intensity.

"That's better," Victor agreed. He pressed her back into Seth and slipped his hand between her thighs, stroking his

thumb over her clit. She gasped and shivered. "You look entirely too relaxed."

They passed her back and forth, keeping her off balance and dependent on them. She resisted the strategy for a moment, not wanting to be helpless. Then she submitted, surrendered to their tenderness. She offered herself without reservation, opening completely, body and mind.

After all the blinding passion that had come before, the final climax came gently, slowly. They clung to each other as warm waves rolled over them, completing the ritual and leaving them sated and sleepy.

The men insisted Tess take a bubble bath to soothe her sore muscles and tender areas. When they ignored her claims that she wasn't uncomfortable, she began to suspect that they had an ulterior motive for their caring. She slipped into the bathroom and turned on the water, then waited to see what her mates were really up to.

"She's listening on the other side of the door," Seth whispered.

Victor fought back a smile. "If she were spineless, neither of us would have been attracted to her."

"I can't argue with that."

"Let me see what Anthony managed to learn while we've been—otherwise occupied." Pausing long enough to pull on a pair of jeans, Victor found his mobile phone and dialed his brother.

"About fucking time," Anthony snapped. "Don't you ever answer your phone?"

"I've been busy." He shot Seth a conspirator's smile.

"What's wrong?"

"We found him."

"Emit?"

"He checked into a seedy motel in Santa Rosa. The council cleaned up one of his messes in Santa Cruz, which made us recheck some of our leads. Even vampires eventually fall into patterns and stick to what they know."

"The Duarte stronghold is in San Francisco," Victor muttered. "He didn't even bother to leave the state?"

"We figured he was long gone and he counted on our misconception."

"When do we make our move?"

"We're almost there," Anthony told him. "Why do you think I've been trying to call you?"

"Send the address to my phone. I'll meet you there." Victor kept the phone open long enough to make sure he received the address then he looked at Seth. "Guard Tess. I'll be back as soon as I can."

Infuriated by Victor's highhandedness, Seth watched him teleport out of sight.

"Where did he go?" Tess asked from the bathroom doorway. She was dressed in a bathrobe and looked almost as annoyed as he felt.

"Did you know he could teleport?"

"He's organic, and he's Zoltan clan." She made it sound as if that explained it. "Chances were pretty good he could teleport. Did he tell you where he was going?"

Seth shook his head. "Apparently, Victor's brother located Emit and they're off to save the world."

She smiled as she crossed to the main room of her hotel suite. "You don't sound pleased."

"I have no problem with my assigned task. Nothing is more important than protecting you. I just resent the hell out of his superior tone."

"Vampires have never been known for their tact." She wrapped her arms around his waist and slipped her hands into the back pockets of his jeans.

"Vampires are better known for their long tongues and big dicks."

Quickly untangling her hands from his clothing, Seth pushed Tess behind him and turned to face the intruder. Of average height for a human female, the being shimmered around the edges as if she were not quite solid. Dark hair framed her narrow face then spilled about her shoulders and down her back.

Trepidation surged through his mind, and Seth automatically reached for the sword he wasn't wearing. *It's a trap!* He sent the thought to Victor, but sensed no response.

The intruder grinned. "Sorry, dear. I can't let you ruin Emit's fun. He's waited a really long time to kick some Zoltan ass."

"How the hell did you get in here?" Tess stepped out from behind Seth.

"Who are you?" Seth extended his arm trying to maneuver Tess back into a protected position. "What do you want?"

"Those questions are far more interesting when your lovely mate answers." The intruder moved closer, her expression challenging. "Does he know about you?"

"If you're here for me, let him go." Tess sounded calm, but he could sense her dread. Dread, not fear. How odd.

"If her grandfather sent you, you're wasting your time." Seth intentionally withheld Nogafel's name in case the demon had nothing to do with the current situation. Recognition immediately registered in the intruder's gaze, but Seth still chose his words carefully. "Tess would rather die than return to that dimension, and I happen to agree with her decision."

His statement seemed to surprise the intruder. She stared back at him in silence for a moment. He shifted his weight to the balls of his feet, realizing her distraction might be his only opportunity. With otherworldly agility, he lunged, but his body passed through hers, and he slammed into the wall behind her.

"It was you, wasn't it?" Tess finally sounded angry. "You're the creature that attacked me in the observation lounge."

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Chapter Eight

Cadin clenched her hands into fists, wishing she could feel her fingernails digging into her palms. Pain would help clear her head right now, and she desperately needed to think. Emit had her trapped between a rock and a hard place, and she didn't like the sensation at all.

Incorporeal beings couldn't be trapped, just like they couldn't be killed, and they couldn't be fucked. If she'd been content within the rules of her existence none of this would have happened!

"I didn't mean for the compulsion to be so strong," she told Tess. "Victor sensed me as I left, and my power spiked." It was more or less true.

"Why should I believe one word you say? Your damn compulsion lasted for hours." She didn't raise her voice, but her eyes spoke volumes.

Cadin heaved a frustrated sigh. They didn't have time for this! "Warn the vampires, but make it quick. I'm running out of patience. Tell Victor the Elf had a premonition, or something clever. Do not say anything that will bring him back here. Do you understand me?"

"Yes." Without melodrama or elaboration, Tess postponed the attack on Emit.

"Very good."

"Why are you here?" the Elf asked, his tone terse and demanding. Did anyone that beautiful ever hope to be intimidating?

"That's a complicated question."

"Do you intend to harm us?" Tess asked.

Cadin's chances of survival were better with Tess than with the demon masquerading as Emit. It was as simple as that.

"Probably not."

"Then cut the bullshit," Tess suggested. "Tell us your name and explain what you want."

The direct approach. Cadin could respect that. She checked her mental shields, meticulously scanning for any crack or weakness that would warn Emit of their intentions.

"You may call me Cadin. I'm sorry to inform you that your grandfather has been overthrown."

"I appreciate the sentiment, but I never knew him." Tess's monotone delivery was almost convincing. She might not have been old enough to remember him, but she'd been branded by him, or one of his people.

"Whatever." Cadin waved away the detail. "His successor's son is here to kill your brother and bring you back to his dimension as a war prize. I presume you know what they do with female war prizes. Suffice it to say, it's not pleasant."

"What do you gain by warning us?" Seth asked.

"Hopefully my life." Why wouldn't the Elf shut up and let Tess speak for herself? Tess was far less suspicious. "Emit's body has been taken over by the demon. I saw him shift into his natural shape, and he must have sensed my presence, because he confronted me with what I know."

"Did he threaten you?" the Elf persisted. "How is he motivating you? I still don't understand why you're willing to help us."

Refusing to give in to her annoyance, she patiently answered his bothersome questions. "In my natural state I am incorporeal. To remain in a dimension and move around freely, we require a dimensional anchor. I chose Emit."

"Is Emit still alive?"

Oh, for fuck's sake? Did he never shut up? "I'm not sure Emit will still be functional after this creature returns to his dimension, but technically Emit is still alive."

"I didn't mean to distract you. Go on."

There was a deity! "So, I'm anchored to Emit. When the imposter realized I knew what he was doing, he anchored himself to me. If he dies, I die."

Seth laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. "Let me make sure I understand this. You want us to incapacitate a trans-dimensional demon without killing it."

"Yes," Cadin admitted after a long pause. "If you don't, he will attempt to force me into his dimension, and I will not go quietly."

"That sounds like a threat."

"Not at all," Cadin assured. "It's a statement of fact. The more power I'm obliged to use, the less control I have over my abilities. A life or death struggle between two—how did you put it, trans-dimensional beings—might well create an explosion that will obliterate this dimension."

"How convenient."

The consensus was much the same when they joined the Zoltan brothers in Santa Rosa later that night. The vampires had commandeered an apartment with several windows facing the motel where Emit was holed up. Cadin's mutual

link with the Emit imposter allowed her to track him with relative ease. Unfortunately, it also made her relatively easy for him to track, so the vamps were reluctant to have her around.

Cadin understood their suspicion and volunteered to return to her nemesis so he wouldn't become suspicious. Her only hope of survival rested with Tess and she knew it. She also agreed to plant transmitters in the room so her new allies could more closely monitor Emit.

"I still don't trust her," Victor grumbled as they watched her saunter across the parking lot.

"I don't give a damn about her motivations as long as she sticks to the plan." Anthony sat in front of a wobbly desk, staring at a blank monitor with obvious expectation.

None of the equipment looked new. Tess couldn't help wondering what sort of missions these men had undertaken in the past. Who had they observed? What information had they extracted? How much of Zoltan clan's seclusion was explained by situations like this?

"A chaos being?" Seth muttered, shaking his head. "I've never heard of such a thing."

"Well, everyone else in this room has experienced her power," Anthony told him. "She is not nearly as harmless as she looks."

"So why does she need our help?" Tess whispered the pessimistic question under her breath, but Victor heard her and gave her hand a squeeze.

"Let's take this one step at a time," he suggested.

"As always," Anthony agreed.

Tess wasn't generally so negative, but this entire situation was so far outside the norm she could barely process what was happening. The norm. The phrase made her smile. Her life had abandoned that path entirely about a week ago.

The audio feed came online first. An angry male voice. "Why didn't you follow them? Slipping between dimensions is nothing new to you."

"Seth must have sensed the danger." Cadin sounded as if she were speaking to an enraged child, not quite condescending, yet every word precise. "Why do you think he took her to Protina? He will have palace security on high alert."

One section of Anthony's screen flickered to life, revealing a shadowy image of the hotel room. Cadin's back was to the camera, while Emit was only partially in the shot. It wouldn't win any awards for cinematography, but it was better than nothing.

With apparent nonchalance, Cadin crossed to the bed and sat on the side. She stealthily planted another tiny transmitter on the edge of the nightstand before she spoke again.

"I don't see any dead vampires, so I'm guessing your half of the mission wasn't any more successful than mine."

"She's a cheeky bitch." Victor said as a second section on Anthony's monitor went live.

"Trust her yet?" Anthony asked, his gaze fixed on the monitor.

"Not a chance."

Cadin and Emit's heated conversation quickly rambled off into a redundant litany of insults and accusations, so Tess asked, "I've heard rumors about a collar that neutralizes paranormal abilities. I'm pretty sure the Sentinels use them, and the gossip mongers report Zoltan clan has one as well." Victor and Anthony exchanged a meaningful glance. "It's true?"

Victor closed the distance between them as he explained. "If Emit is really inhabited by a demon, we're not sure the collar will help. They seldom possess the sorts of abilities the collar suppresses."

"They're naturally large and strong and fast," Anthony clarified. "The collar wouldn't change that."

"What about shape shifting?" she asked. "Cadin said she saw it change shapes."

"It's unlikely what she witnessed was a mystical ability at work," Victor said. "The demon probably surfaced temporarily. I seriously doubt it can become anyone or anything other than Emit."

"But Cadin said it's not much of a danger as long as it's in Emit's form."

Seth shook his head, apparently seeing where her train of thought was leading. "Even if the collar worked, it would be an extremely temporary solution."

"All we need is enough of a window so Cadin can break the link."

"If that were true, why wouldn't she have done it already?" Anthony asked. "He's been in Emit's shape for days."

"Because the imposter isn't really restrained in any way." She tried not to sound as exasperated as she felt. They had to try something, anything! They'd about worn tracks in this faded carpeting. "He's just hiding inside Emit's appearance. I think this will work."

Anthony shrugged and rolled back from the desk. "Let's ask Ms. Chaos. I sure as hell don't have any other ideas."

Victor sent a carefully shielded message asking Cadin to meet them in the alley behind the apartment building. When she arrived a few minutes later, Tess explained what the collar did and asked Cadin if she thought the device would allow her to break the link between her and Emit.

Cadin considered the option for a moment. "If it works the way you say, it sounds like my best chance. If it even weakens his hold enough for me to go incorporeal, I should be able to escape."

"If you flash out of sight, it's safe for us to kill him?" Victor asked.

"Is it ever safe to kill?" Cadin shuddered. "That seems like such a contradiction."

"It's not the violence in death that repels you, it's the utter absence of conflict," Victor challenged.

"If you say so."

"You might find chaos surrounding death and those who are dying, but death itself is peaceful." He took a step forward, ready for the confrontation. Tess wrapped her hand around his thick upper arm. "You twist lives and manipulate emotions, creating upheaval and—"

"We don't have time for this." Tess pressed his arm against the warmth of her body and poured affection across their link. *Let it go, love. She has no power over us now.*

She mind fucked you and I won't just let it go!

Like it or not, she brought us together.

"Shall I come back? You seem to have issues to work out." Victor reached for Cadin's throat, but his hand went through her incorporeal illusion. She rolled her eyes. "I've been visible since the demon linked with me. If I blink out, he's all yours. When do we go?"

"Fifteen minutes," Victor told her, his tone as lethal as his stare. "Seth will deliver a pizza. If you can get the door open, great. If not, we'll kick it in."

Tension gripped Cadin tighter with each step she took. How had her life come to this? If she survived this night she'd make better choices, use her abilities in less destructive ways. Disbelief twisted through her fear. She was a chaos being! She was supposed to be destructive, but she had to admit things had gotten way out of hand.

"Where did you go?" the imposter demanded.

"I needed some air." She glared at him. If her attitude changed all of the sudden, he was sure to grow suspicious. "I don't do incarceration well."

"You'll have more freedom once we return. Well, if you decide to be cooperative for a change, you'll have more freedom."

"I have no interest in being a fuck toy. Yours or anyone else's."

He laughed and strolled toward her. "We both know that's not true. You couldn't get enough of my cock before you realized Emit had a visitor. You're just demon-phobic. If you're worried about damage, take on the form of one of our females."

"Now what fun would that be?" she drawled. "You can already fuck any female in your dimension. I think you want to fuck a human female, and I think you want to damage her."

Pure evil gleamed in his eyes and bile rose to the back of her throat. Damn it! Did he realize she was solid? Strong emotions, like power surges, robbed her of control. Where was the fucking pizza? She would rather not be raped before she was rescued.

"If I damage your body, how quickly would you be able to repair it?"

The question was so demented, she gagged. "You're truly depraved." She ducked his backhand and ran for the door as the expected knock finally came.

"Do not open that door!" he bellowed.

She ignored him, but remembered her role well enough to inch the door open. "Did you order a pizza?" she asked as she let the door swing inward.

Infuriated by her stupidity, the imposter stomped toward the open threshold. Seth dropped the pizza box and snapped a thin metal collar around Emit's throat. The imposter screamed, clawing at the offensive object as the rest of the team rushed in around them.

Cadin rushed back and stayed out of their way, concentrating on the link binding her to the demon. The imposter tossed his head, saliva flying from his mouth as capillaries burst in his eyes. She'd known Emit wouldn't survive this, and she wasn't out of the woods yet. So she forced down her flash of pity, and began shredding the link, layer by searing layer.

Another being joined her on the metaphysical plane, a powerful, complex entity, colorful and strongly connected to two other entities. Tess. Why would Tess help her after the way she'd treated her?

No one deserves what this creature has planned for you, Tess explained. *Don't be distracted. Work!*

Shocked and moved by Tess's generosity, Cadin accepted the assistance. They attacked the cord, severing individual strands.

The demon surged within Emit. Flesh split, and strength shook the metaphysical plane.

Hurry! They thought the word together, clawing and chewing at the connection with frantic desperation.

The cord snapped, launching Cadin backward, freeing her from the physical realm. She sent energy tumbling in her wake, saturating Tess with strength and ferocity.

Thank you. The thought echoed through Tess's mind as she emerged from the trance, dazed yet exhilarated.

The demon tossed aside the collar with a rumbling laugh as it ambled out into the courtyard between the rooms. Chunks of flesh fell from its grayish body with each rolling step. No hint of Emit remained: nothing faintly humanoid.

Solid black eyes dominated its narrow face and the muscular body promised both strength and agility.

Four of Seth's men arrived and set up a mystic perimeter. Anyone who approached the motel would see nothing unusual and simply pass by, even if they'd meant to check in.

One of Anthony's soldiers flew at the demon's head. It batted the vampire aside with a throaty chuckle. His teammates opened fire, but bullets bounced off the demon's thick hide. So did arrows and spears.

"Why is it just standing there?" Victor snapped. He turned to his brother in exasperation. "Put it to sleep or something!"

"Mental compulsions are tricky when you can't speak the language," Anthony replied.

"I think I can communicate with it," Tess said.

"You're not going near that thing." Victor stepped in front of her.

"Not physically. This body isn't capable of creating his language, but we can speak on the metaphysical plane."

"Then I'm coming with you." He wrapped his arms around her.

"We're linked, silly man. You're always with me." Without further argument, she rested her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes.

The metaphysical plane opened suddenly, sweeping her along like a storm swollen current. She gasped and reached for Victor, but she couldn't find him in the churning water. A moment of panic cleansed her mind of all distraction. Despite what her senses perceived, she was never really alone. As if

to reinforce her conclusion, affection and energy flowed across their link. And not just from Victor, from Seth as well.

The water receded, depositing her on a sun-drenched beach, which stretched as far as the eye could see in either direction. Humid breezes kissed her skin, and she glanced down. Her modesty was protected—sort of—by a barely there bikini. This was clearly not her visualization.

"It took you long enough." His form was basically humanoid again, yet nothing like Emit. Ink-black hair swept back from his face to his shoulders, accenting the sheen of his solid black eyes. The same charcoal markings decorated his pale white skin, identifying the demon more specifically than a name. His only garment was Hawaiian-print surf shorts. Did he want to negotiate or play beach volleyball?

He stalked toward her, shoulders slightly hunched. As he circled to the side, she matched him stride for stride. "Stop it," he growled. "I need to see."

"You've made sure you can see just about everything."

"The brand," he snapped. "I want to see the brand."

Her toes dug into the sand and she suppressed her indignation as he continued his orbit. His fingertips grazed the mark, and she twisted away from his touch. "You see with your eyes not your hands. Are you satisfied?"

"Far from it."

The back lace of her bikini top suddenly loosened and she clasped the material to her chest, widening her stance. "I was hoping to negotiate. If you have anything else in mind, this meeting is over."

She quickly turned away and retied her top, frustrated by her inability to control her surroundings. If she could manipulate energy, his fingers would be scorched.

He leered at her breasts for a moment then reached out his hand. A tingling sensation passed through her chest, and energy arced toward his palm. He yelped and snatched back his hand.

"That bitch taught you a trick or two before she took off, I see." He blew on his singed flesh as he glared at her.

Tess had felt the rush of energy, but she'd had no idea what it meant. What else had Cadin empowered her to do? She gave the demon a mental shove, just to see if it would work, and he went sprawling on his ass in the sand. Holy shit!

"You obviously want something." She stood over him, hands on her hips, not allowing him to rise. "Why are you still here?"

"That's incredibly rude after you just cost me the most interesting prisoner I've ever captured." He scurried backward like a crab and scrambled to his feet. "Perhaps I'll allow you to take her place." A bit of his arrogance returned.

"If that were your intention, I'd be in your dimension by now."

"True. You're locked into that fragile human form, aren't you?"

"I am. Yes."

"Despite my father's encouragement to do so, I really have no interest in fucking a woman to death. I was hoping we could enjoy each other here, but that doesn't appear to be an option. So, here's the deal. My father wants proof that your

brother is dead and the Nogafel line with him. It's my understanding that your brother has no interest in returning to our dimension, but I can't disappoint my father."

"What sort of proof?"

"As I've just seen on your spectacular ass, Nogafel children are branded when they are legitimized. Go get your brother's brand, so I can give it to my father, and we'll call this whole thing finished."

"If I bring you my brother's brand, no one from your dimension will ever return to this dimension with further demands?"

"You have my word on it."

She understood demon law better than he realized. "I want it in writing, signed in blood."

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Epilogue

"Do you think we can trust him?" Tess wiggled away from Seth's fingers, too distracted to enjoy the ministrations of her mates.

Seth withdrew his hand from her pussy with a frustrated sigh. "He gained exactly the same thing by taking the brand to his father as he would have by killing Rand. I don't think it's a matter of trust. He was just being practical."

"It's over," Victor said firmly. "Cadin escaped without destroying our dimension, and you are safe."

"I know." She tried to smile, but the expression didn't quite warm her eyes. "Everything is happening so fast. I think I'm just overwhelmed."

"Then relax," Seth suggested, mischief making his eyes sparkle. "Lie back and think about nothing at all."

Her relaxation lasted about a second and a half. She propped a pillow behind her and settled against the softness. The men knelt facing each other, just out of reach. Just out of her reach anyway. They touched each other freely. Strong hands sliding over strong bodies, caressing, stroking, squeezing. She followed the hypnotizing progress from chest to hip to thigh, and finally to cock. They stroked from stem to tip, the tapered crowns brushing back and forth as they worked each other.

She couldn't remain passive any longer. Joining them on their knees, she took one cock in each hand, and they moved their hands to her breasts. Fingers rolled her nipples, pulling

and pinching until she moaned and shivered. Seth bent to suckle, while Victor continued to use his fingers.

"Are you getting wet?" Victor's voice was low and rough.

"Can't you smell it?"

"Well, Seth is dripping like a sieve, so I wasn't sure who I was smelling."

With her thumb she rubbed the drops of precum into Seth's skin then she caught a drop and rubbed in into Victor's cock. He shivered and groaned, so she wet her fingers with her own juices and anointed them both with her cream.

Lust bombarded her mind. Her mates loved it when she was naughty, and she loved pleasing her mates.

"Now we all smell like each other," she whispered, licking her fingers provocatively.

"And that's only the beginning," Seth predicted. He urged her over on her side and buried his face between her thighs. Victor followed suit, guiding Seth's cock to his mouth as he arched toward Tess. She sucked Victor in long, deep pulls while Seth lapped away at her folds.

They slid and sucked, in a tangle of arms and legs and eagerness. Tess canted her hips, rubbing her pussy against Seth's mouth while Victor slid within the circle of her lips. Victor sucked Seth with fierce determination, making him groan and shiver. The tight circle allowed them to climax simultaneously, sharing each shiver and tingling spasm.

With their mouths still filled with juices, they quickly shifted position. They mixed their taste, blending cream with cum, stroking tongue against tongue until no one could tell where one ended and the next began.

Victor pulled away first, kissing his way down Tess's throat. "Are we still moving too fast, love?" He latched on to her nipple and suckled so hard she gasped, arching clear off the bed.

Seth slipped an arm beneath her waist and stretched out along her other side. "We can slow down if you like." He matched Victor's motion, suckling her other breast, leaving her no room for escape.

"Oh gods!" She pushed into their mouths, trapped between pleasure and pain. "Too hard. Too..." But it wasn't. Her body adjusted to the forceful sensation, her clit taking on the intense throb.

Don't fight it. Victor's voice caressed her mind as their mouths continued their bewitching assault on her nipples. *Relax into it and you'll come.*

Sensations flowed freely from one mind to the others, emotions blending in an intoxicating elixir of possessive tenderness and lust. With perfect timing, their teeth bore down, not quite a bite, but harder than a nip. Pleasure stabbed down her spine and blossomed in her pussy. She whimpered as their persistent mouths prolonged the blissful spasms.

She had just started to drift down when they lifted her legs and draped them over their hips. "Don't I get to play?"

"We've got all night," Victor reminded with a wicked smile. "You in a hurry or something?"

Seth pushed two fingers into her pussy, and she forgot everything but how wonderful it felt. She relaxed against the bed and closed her eyes. With two lovers it was easy to get

caught up in who was doing what to whom. Instead, she absorbed the sensations with greedy abandon and shared the pleasure created by her passivity.

Her inner muscles squeezed the fingers sliding in and out of her. Tension gathered, encouraged by the caress against her clit. She floated, safe and warm, free to experience each instant to the fullest.

Fingers pushed against her ass, and she spread her legs wider, welcoming Victor in. She knew it was Victor by the sudden surge in his excitement. Seth bent and kissed her, his tongue surging deep. She greeted him with a swirl of her tongue and moaned when he sucked hers into his mouth.

A warm tongue replaced the fingers caressing her clit. Seth was still kissing her, so it had to be Victor. Both sets of fingers moved with steady speed, sliding with an opposite pattern.

"Look at us." Seth broke the kiss and raised her shoulders. The angle shifted, increasing the pressure of their fingers. She gasped and slowly opened her eyes. They framed her, her legs spread wide, calves resting over their hips. She couldn't see Victor's hand, only his face, his tongue circling her clit, and his passion-bright eyes boring into hers. "What do you see when you look at him?"

"My mate." His fingers thrust hard enough to jar her breasts.

"That's a copout." Seth spoke, but she felt Victor's emotions echo the words. "What does he make you feel? Who is he to you?"

"He frightens me, and he thrills me. He challenges me, and..." She licked her lips and let her head drop back on her shoulders as she said the last sentence. "He's strong enough to be my mate."

Victor closed his lips around her clit and launched her into orgasm. She shook in Seth's arms, unable to think beyond the incendiary sensations blasting through her. A grin parted her lips as she floated back down. Apparently, her list had pleased him.

When her mind began to function again, she found herself in Victor's arms with Seth between her legs. Victor held her arms beneath her while Seth parted her folds, allowing him access to all her vulnerable spots.

"That was quite a confession," he began. "Are you going to offer me something as heartfelt and generous?" He dragged his tongue from back to front in one long lick.

"Not if you ask in that arrogant tone." And not if licking her pussy was his deterrent. Surely he knew how much she loved it by now.

"Oh, I know how much you love being licked." He arched his brow in silent challenge. "I also know how much you hate it when I won't let you come."

She tugged against Victor's hold, more to savor the strength of his hands on her wrists than out of any real hope that he'd release her. Seth rimmed her opening with his tongue, his warm breath its own brand of torment.

Shall I tongue-fuck you, sweetheart? He passed back and forth across her opening without pushing inside. *You like that almost as much as when I tease your clit.*

Do whatever you like. She dug in her heels and pushed up, trying to drive herself onto his tongue. *Just don't stop when I'm about to come.*

Then start talking. What do I make you feel?

"You're my fairytale prince," she whispered as his tongue slowly claimed her. "My fantasy come true." Victor freed her arms, so he could stroke her breasts, but Tess was focused on Seth. "You're brave and stubborn. Unbelievably beautiful, and I've loved you since I was twelve."

Seth paused, his lips on her clit, and he looked into her eyes. *Say it again.*

She smiled as happy tears blurred her vision. *I love you. Now lick my pussy. That's all I'm saying tonight!*

He lavished affection on her sensitive flesh, using his lips and his tongue, his fingers and his nose. He draped her legs over his shoulders and let her come again and again. Her cream covered his face and his hand, and still he showered her with love. She arched and shivered, covering herself with his hair.

"Enough!" Victor snapped after a very long time.

"Sorry," Tess said with a completely unrepentant smile. "We've more than established you two can give me what I need, but this union is all about balance. What do you need from us?"

They faced each other on their knees. Tess reached down and squeezed their asses, but neither man seemed to notice. Victor stared into Seth's eyes as he slowly wrapped his hair around his hand.

She'd expressed her feelings for her men. Now it was time for them to communicate their feelings for each other. Emotions churned and twisted, too convoluted to define.

Drawing Seth's head back with a savage smile, Victor asked, "Have you ever been whipped, my gorgeous Elf?" His long fingers closed around Seth's cock and stroked with long, firm rotations.

Seth moaned, powerless to resist the rough play. Who would have thought that the perfect place for a Protinese prince was on his knees? "Would that please you, sir?"

"Answer my question." He gave Seth's hair a little tug. "Or do you want to be punished? Is that why you didn't answer a direct question?"

"I have never been whipped, but I believe disobedience must be punished."

Victor didn't smile, but his gaze softened, caressed. "You're right. Disobedience must be punished." He drew Seth off the bed by his hair, the pressure miraculously stopping short of pain. "Tess, come. You're going to help me punish Seth."

For a moment she looked as if she'd argue, then she crawled off the mattress and joined them at the foot of the bed. "Release the wrist restraints then sit. Spread your legs so I can see your pussy."

"Yes, sir."

She sounded a bit like she were playing a role, but Seth didn't mind. They had just begun to meld with each other. Something deep and meaningful had stirred within him the first time Victor dominated him. The experience had been just

as important as when they had taken Tess together for the first time. They fulfilled needs in each other, and each need was unique, yet each need complimented the others.

He placed his wrists in the cuffs, and Victor squeezed them shut. Even the sharp metallic snap excited Seth. Using the remote, Victor shortened the cables, drawing Seth to the balls of his feet. Tess silently assisted Victor then moved to the bed and spread her legs as she'd been instructed to do.

Seth faced the bed, his gaze drawn helplessly to Tess. She rested back against her elbows, legs spread wide. The deep pink furrow he'd devoured such a short time ago was still slick from her cream and his saliva.

A faint hiss was his only warning before fire kissed his ass. He cried out and twisted so violently his cock nearly slapped her startled face.

"Settle down, love." Victor touched his hip, caressing downward, pushing his thumb into the deep crease between his ass cheeks. "Turn your attention inward. Create a new path from one sensation to another. Ride the current; see where it leads you."

Tess smiled and Seth knew she was thinking about how closely Victor's advice echoed his. She'd learned how to process new sensations. He could do this too. The stabbing fire mellowed and spread.

Victor's thumb continued its teasing stroke up and down, barely inside his crack. "Your skin is so smooth. The contrast is so vivid." He traced the lash mark and Seth shivered. "Ready for more, or should I get something less painful?"

"No," he objected immediately. He wanted the pain, needed it.

"Move your feet apart and think about my cock pushing into your ass. Take the sensations deep, then spread them to every part of your body." As he said the last sentence, Victor swung the whip. The pain was no less intense, but Seth was ready this time. He absorbed its fire, savored it for a moment, then defused it. Heat sank deeper and deeper, rolling through his flesh like molten lava.

The third strike lacked the shocking sting of the first two. Seth accepted the welcome heat, but was unable to stop himself from sending his thoughts to Victor. *Don't hold back. Please.*

Excitement surged across their link, assuring him Victor had heard him. "Tess, kneel before our disobedient Elf and take his cock in your mouth. You may lick and suck him, but he is not allowed to come."

"Yes, sir."

Seth closed his eyes as Tess obeyed. Her warm lips closed around his engorged tip and he whimpered. His balls pulsed and drew up even tighter. If he came, would he earn another punishment? That might not be so bad...

The whip kissed the inside of one thigh and he let out a strangled scream. Nothing had ever felt so incredibly, pleausrably painful! Victor carefully placed each lash, making sure the whip didn't wrap around his leg or come anywhere near Tess.

Seth stopped counting the strokes. His mind became incapable of coherent thought. He floated in a euphoric haze

of jumbled signals, suspended beyond reality. Did he hang there for moments or hours? He couldn't say, but he returned gradually.

A rich female moan drew him out of the blissful state, and he reluctantly blinked his eyes open. Victor sprawled on his back on the bed, Tess straddling his face. She rocked and wiggled as she rode his tongue, obviously in ecstasy. She reached down and parted her folds so he could suck on her clit. Happy to oblige, Victor caught the tender bud between his lips and gave it a little suck. She cried out sharply, shaking with obvious climax.

"Can I play too?" Seth asked. "I can't seem to get enough of that particular clit."

"Welcome back." Tess crawled off Victor's face as he licked her cream from his lips. Retrieving the remote from the nightstand, Victor released Seth's restraints.

Seth's legs wobbled, so Tess draped his arm across her shoulders. "Damn, Victor. That was one hell of a punishment."

He grinned, obviously pleased with himself. "You're welcome. I wouldn't try and lie on your back for awhile."

"Good point."

"Which doesn't mean you can't put that hard-on to use," Victor said with a wicked smile.

Seth looked down and shook his head. How the hell had he stayed hard through all of that? "Did you have something specific in mind?"

"Actually, I did. Why don't you fuck Tess, while I fuck you?"

The idea was infinitely appealing and Victor had even managed to pose it as a question. Seth brushed the crest of Tess's cheek with his knuckles. "Do you understand how lucky we are?"

"Oh yes," she responded with a beaming smile.

Crawling onto the bed, she spread out on her back and opened her legs in obvious invitation. Seth grasped the back of her knees and steadied his shaky legs as he positioned himself at her entrance. She was hot and wet from Victor's mouth. Seth didn't hesitate. With one forceful thrust, he buried himself to the balls.

His head dropped back on his shoulders, and his eyes closed in ecstasy. "You feel so damn good!"

"Hold that thought," Victor whispered.

Cool, slick fingers parted his ass cheeks and pushed into his body. He'd taken Victor's cock before, but not since their link allowed them to share the intensity of their emotions. More lube and more sliding fingers, more of Victor's ravenous hunger and savage tenderness. Stretching pressure gave way to blissful fullness as Seth spread around Victor's thick shaft, embracing him and caressing him.

"How did we find what we needed most when we didn't know what that was at the time?" Tess asked, her voice breathless with wonder.

Seth laughed, driving Victor deeper in the process. "That's a damn good question."

"It was obviously meant to be." Despite the uncharacteristic sentimentality, Victor sounded emphatic. "Now, a little less talk and a little more fucking."

Sensuous
by Aubrey Ross

That was pretty hard to contradict, especially when Victor started moving. Seth joined the rhythm. Tess arched into each thrust, intensifying the pleasure surging back and forth across their bond. They moved as one, lost to every thought except each other, cries of joy the only sound left in the room.

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Aubrey Ross

Award-winning author Aubrey Ross writes an eclectic assortment of erotic fiction. From power struggles between futuristic clans, to adventurous Mystic Keepers, her stories are filled with passion and imagination. Some of her recent awards include an EPPIE finalist, 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 of fascinating worlds and larger than life adventures—and wouldn't have it any other way! Visit her website at www.aubreyross.com. Join Aubrey's news group at: groups.yahoo.com/group/Anything-but-Ordinary/.
