

# COMET COALITION 3: REPLICANT

Aubrey Ross

Loose Id.<sup>®</sup>  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

## Warning

This e-book contains sexually explicit scenes and adult language and may be considered offensive to some readers. Loose Id® e-books are for sale to adults ONLY, as defined by the laws of the country in which you made your purchase. Please store your files wisely, where they cannot be accessed by under-aged readers.

# Comet Coalition 3: Replicant

Aubrey Ross

This e-book is a work of fiction. While reference might be made to actual historical events or existing locations, the names, characters, places and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Published by  
Loose Id LLC  
1802 N Carson Street, Suite 212-2924  
Carson City NV 89701-1215  
[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

Copyright © November 2007 by Aubrey Ross

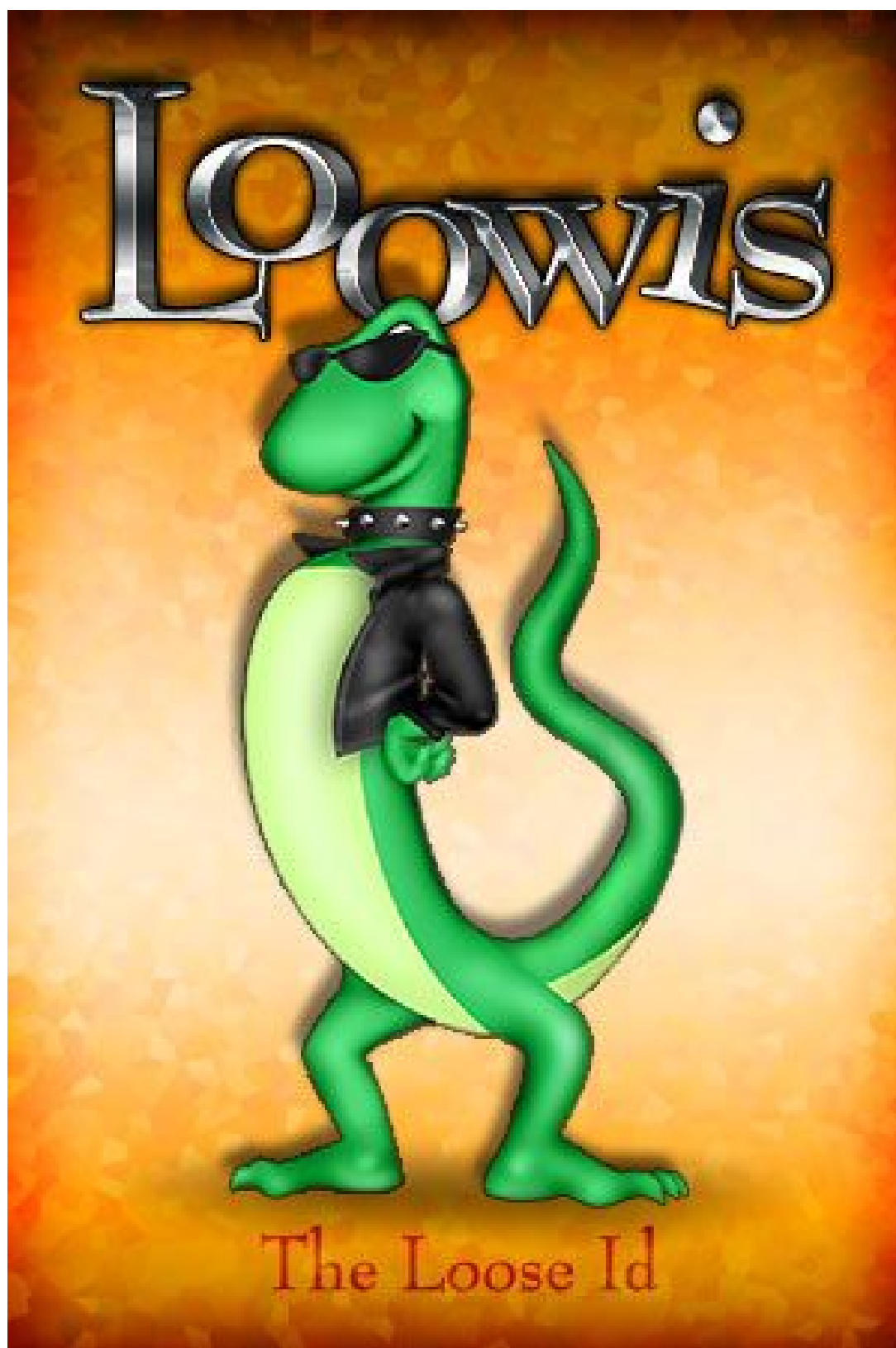
All rights reserved. This copy is intended for the purchaser of this e-book ONLY. No part of this e-book may be reproduced or shared in any form, including, but not limited to printing, photocopying, faxing, or emailing without prior written permission from Loose Id LLC.

ISBN 978-1-59632-574-6

Available in Adobe PDF, HTML, MobiPocket, and MS Reader

Printed in the United States of America

Editor: Maryam Salim  
Cover Artist: Scott Carpenter



[www.loose-id.com](http://www.loose-id.com)

## Prologue

Gathering her waist-length hair into a tight twist, Serena wrapped the heavy mass around the crown of her head and held it there as the high priestess lowered a snug headdress into place. “I’m the only acolyte ascending tonight. Everyone will know who I am.”

Hyalee didn’t argue. “Every aspect of the ceremony is designed to focus our attention on the ascension. Nothing must distract us from the changes the Deity is about to work in you.” They had already ringed her eyes with soot and used the deep red juice of the *tersatta* plant to stain her lips. The high priestess secured a mask across the upper half of Serena’s face and stepped back to look at her.

Few ever witnessed the ascension of an acolyte. It was the holiest of all Perrlain rituals. Serena had awakened this morning to a troubling combination of excitement and dread. Everyone had tried to soothe her, but all of Hyalee’s vague assurances hadn’t eased the tension gripping Serena’s belly.

Though diminutive in stature and build, the high priestess exuded authority. She’d swept her honey blonde hair away from her face and worked it into a simple braid. “You still seem uncertain. No one ascends unless they’re ready.”

“I am ready.” Serena took a deep breath and let the words ring through her mind. This is what she’d waited for her entire life. So why couldn’t she shake the trepidation?

“You have a great capacity for divine energy. I’ve sensed this for some time. Do you have any idea which gift the Deity is going to release within you? Your mother was having dreams long before her ascension.”

Serena shook her head. “I only feel as if my life will never be the same after tonight.”

Hyalee studied her for a long, silent moment. “All acolytes, male and female, are expected to refrain from sexual expression during their training. Some, like you, will experience intercourse for the first time during their ascension, but most have experimented with carnal pleasure in one way or another long before that time. Are you frightened by that aspect of what is about to happen?”

“Of course not.” Most Perrlain rituals included some sort of sexual expression. Carnal hunger was an elemental and enjoyable part of adult life. Still, Serena wanted her sacrifice to be special. She’d suppressed her desire as best she could and compromised only by relieving the tension with her own touch. “I’m anxious to express my sexuality, but...” Serena released a shaky sigh. “I’m not sure what’s bothering me.”

“The unknown is always frightening. Watching others fulfill their carnal appetites is different than surrendering your virginity. I will make sure the participants take special care to arouse you before the Chosen One enters your body.”

“How many will participate? Will I be allowed to touch them, or am I just expected to submit? Who was Chosen for me? Am I allowed to know?”

Hyalee lifted the woven shade away from the window and glanced out into the forest. “You will have answers to all your questions as soon as we join the others.” The shade slapped lightly against the window frame as the high priestess let go. “Night has fallen. It’s time to go.”

Serena tried not to panic. Only priests and priestesses were allowed to participate in an ascension. Everyone in attendance had been through this themselves, including Hyalee.

The sun hovered on the horizon, casting eerie shadows among the towering trees. To keep their people focused on the Deity’s wonders, the Perrlain Tribe had settled deep in the wilderness of Temple-Tuttle. The entire outpost was dedicated to spirituality, but unlike the rest of the settlers, the Perrlain Tribe shunned technology and remained secluded from the materialistic world. The Deity provided all they would ever need, so the Perrlain spent their lives in worship and celebration.

Following behind the high priestess, Serena made her way along the narrow path that led to the Cliffs of Enarre. Torches surrounded the grassy clearing, their flames dancing in the evening breeze. Triple waterfalls cascaded from the dramatic cliffs, reflecting the meager light and forming luminescent froth in the pool far below.

The worshippers stood in a circle, alternating priests with priestesses. As Hyalee approached, the worshippers parted, allowing them to pass. High Priest Kapali stood in the center of the worshippers. His light brown hair fell in burnished waves to his shoulders, framing his rugged features. Like his sister, Hyalee, he made no attempt to disguise his appearance. Kapali created the impression of strength without the bulging muscles of a warrior. His gleaming dark eyes saw everything with just a glance, and Serena suspected no one knew the full extent of his power.

“We have gathered to celebrate our sister’s ascension. From acolyte to priestess, she will rise.” His voice rang in the clearing and the worshippers echoed with a phrase Serena didn’t understand. She would be taught the ancient words and evocations once her ascension was complete. He looked into her eyes. “Are you ready and willing for this change?”

“I am.” Serena sounded more assertive than she felt.

The priests and priestesses all wore identical garments, a wraparound robe of red and gold. Kapali and Hyalee wore similar robes, but theirs were red and black. Serena glanced down at her gold-trimmed white robe and realized it was the last time she would wear it. When she left the clearing tonight, she would be dressed in red and gold.

Her gaze swept the circle of worshippers. Despite their headdresses and masks, she tried to identify as many as she could. The priests had also painted the lower portion of their faces making it harder to identify their features. The first priest on her right had to be Baylott. His height surpassed the others by half a head. Which one had been Chosen for her?

Kapali motioned behind him, drawing her attention to the stout poles, which had been driven into the ground. “If you are ready, shed the trappings of an acolyte and take your place.”

With trembling fingers, she untied the belt at her waist and let her robe slide to the ground. The worshippers began a soft, lyrical chant. She absorbed the rhythm, letting it wash over her in soothing waves. This was the culmination of her training. There was no reason for her fear. She moved between the poles and looked to Kapali for instruction.

“Raise your arms in supplication and grasp the loops to keep them raised.”

Lifting her arms over her head, she slipped her hands through the leather loops. She would not be restrained in any way. Her sacrifice must be willing. Hyalee held a wooden cup to her lips and Serena took a tentative sip. Tersatta juice. The cool liquid rolled across her tongue, spreading warmth along with the tangy, sweet flavor. Hyalee tipped more of the juice into her mouth, then held the cup out toward Kapali.

Kapali had a long-handled brush in one hand. One of the worshippers must have given it to him. He hadn’t had it a moment before. He dipped the brush in the juice and reapplied the liquid to Serena’s lips, but he didn’t stop there. Boldly descending along her body, he painted her nipples, her navel, and her feminine folds. The prickly-soft stroke of the brush made her shiver and gasp.

Warm night air dried the juice as Kapali and Hyalee circled Serena. Her nipples tingled and her folds stung. The sensation wasn’t entirely unpleasant, just more intense than she’d expected. She could feel the worshippers gazing at her naked body. One of these priests would take her virginity. Her pussy twitched at the prospect of finally being filled. So many nights she’d watched others touch and taste, enjoying the freedom of a true believer. She’d witnessed many variations of sexual expression, while her body remained empty and unfulfilled.



Pausing in front of her, Hyalee looked into her eyes. "To ascend, you must transcend your fears, release your hold on self, and surrender. Because of your inexperience, we will begin with the basics." She smiled, then pulled Serena's mask down, covering her eyes with the snug material.

Serena's immediate reaction was to turn loose the straps and remove the blindfold. She fought back the initial impulse, however, and accessed her other senses. Sweet *firmine* flowers scented the breeze and the shuffle of clothing warned of someone's approach. A hand touched her right shoulder, the contact firm and warm. Fingertips brushed the underside of her arm from elbow to armpit. She shivered as the stimulation swung from tingle to tickle and back again. A hand cupped her breast, and another stroked her bottom. So many hands. Was this three people or four? Were they men or women? Did it matter?

Heat swelled within her while a knot of apprehension restrained her pleasure. Someone moved her legs apart and caressed her inner thighs. She felt the wet stroke of the brush trace the crease of her bottom.

Fingers rolled her nipples, intensifying the ache. She twisted her hips and arched her back, needing... She didn't know what she needed, but her core throbbed and tension gripped her abdomen. Everywhere the juice touched, tingled, and the unseen worshippers intensified the sensation with their breath.

A mouth closed around her nipple while fingers massaged her other breast. The massage was almost soothing, while the suckling sent pulses of need cascading through her body. Heat pooled between her thighs. She tightened her inner muscles, lost in the wonder of discovery.

Another mouth joined the first, mirroring the deep, rhythmic pulls on her other nipple. Hot, humid air swirled around her as the worshippers shifted position. She felt fingers trail along her torso and her back, a synchronized stimulation. Her nipples were still being suckled, so there had to be at least four worshippers. Her imagination ignited, trying to picture each face and how they were positioned around her.

The descending fingers reached their targets at exactly the same time. One hand traced the crack of her ass while the other followed her feminine crease. With a sharp gasp, she twisted her hips and felt herself steadied. They ventured deeper. The hand in back found her tightly puckered hole and teased without pushing inside. The other worshipper circled her front passage, drawing attention to the aching emptiness.

Soon! She would feel hot, hard flesh filling her, stretching her, and releasing her sexual potential.

Keeping her outer lips spread, one of the worshippers rubbed her clit. The fingers passed up one side and down the other, across the top, then a gentle squeeze. She squirmed and tossed her head. Her own touch had never felt like this.

With a wet pop, the lips released their hold on her nipples and began to flick the buds with their tongues instead. It became one rhythmic caress. Sizzling sensations shot between

the launch points, building intensity with each pass. Her muscles tensed and her back bowed as the fire burned hotter. Having nothing to squeeze, her inner muscles clenched in on themselves. Fingers closed around her clit and rolled the sensitive bud, pulling ever so slightly. She cried out and shuddered. Pleasure showered down upon her, then surged up through her, leaving her shaken and stunned.

Her knees buckled and she clutched the loops, barely keeping herself upright. A strong arm wrapped around her waist from behind, steadying her until her strength returned. She panted and shivered as aftershocks skittered along her spine. This was why women cried out and men groaned. The tiny spasms she'd released within herself had been a pale foreshadowing of true sexual expression. She rested her head against the shoulder of the man behind her and Hyalee lifted the mask away from her eyes.

"You did very well, Sister," the high priestess said with a smile. "Now the Chosen One will taste your passion before you offer the final sacrifice."

Serena nodded. She'd seen people bring each other to climax with their mouths. It seemed to be a favorite form of stimulation among the Perrlain Tribe. The Chosen One would lick her pussy and suck on her most intimate flesh until she felt those wonderful sensations all over again. Why would she object to that?

A smile parted her lips and she looked beyond the high priestess, searching for the Chosen One. The clearing was distorted. She blinked, trying to bring the scene into focus. All she could see were shadows against the darkness, silhouettes outlined by twisting strands of colored light. She looked from one worshipper to the next, fear escalating each time she shifted her gaze.

"Relax," Kapali whispered into her ear. It was his arm wrapped around her waist. "Release your inhibitions and offer yourself without reservation."

One of the priests moved in front of her and shed his robe. He was of medium height, indistinguishable from several of the other priests. His torso had been covered with body paint, undulating patterns in red and gold. Tersatta juice accented his flat male nipples and created a spiral along his shaft. The head of his cock had been coated with the juice, making it look inflamed and -- angry.

Hoping to steady her pounding heart, she dragged her gaze away from his erection and looked at his face. Only his mouth and jaw were not obscured by the mask and the face paint further distorted his appearance. His dark eyes gleamed in the torchlight and his lips curved without parting.

He took his cock in hand and stroked from base to tip as he said the evocation, secret words known only by the priests. Her head pounded and color strands pulsed around him, growing brighter as his excitement built. The colors were beautiful, but the pattern twisted in an ever-tightening weave. The strands locked and the colors darkened, blending until tiny fibers of color threaded through a thick black cord. He thrust his hips toward her and their gazes locked. Blue light erupted within the depths of his dark eyes.

She shrank into Kapali as the naked priest advanced. Why did his eyes burn blue? Only the Wikoli had eyes like this! Turning her head toward the high priest, she spoke in a frantic whisper. "I don't want him to touch me."

"You'll be fine." Kapali stroked the side of her face and pressed his body against her back. "Everyone is frightened the first time."

"It's not that. I..."

The man knelt before her and raised his arms, calling out to the Deity. His voice sounded familiar. She knew all the priests, had known them since birth. He spoke again, a bit louder this time, and she identified his voice. This was Gelmont. She released her pent-up breath and relaxed against Kapali.

Gelmont cupped her breasts, leaning forward so he could press his face against the juncture of her thighs. She heard him inhale her scent and felt his warm breath on her folds. A persistent shiver dispelled the flicker of heat before it could ignite. The others took up the chant. Kapali brushed his hands along her upraised arms, down her sides to her hips, then back up. He used his touch to calm her, communicating peace and support as the other man became bolder.

She dragged air in through her nose and released it through her mouth. Why did she want to kick and twist? Gelmont was the Chosen One. He would enter her body and accept her final sacrifice. He rolled her nipples, tugging on the tender crests until she made a soft, distressed sound. Pulling his face away from her sex, he pushed his hand between her thighs. He traced her slit with his middle finger, as the other worshipper had done. Then he pushed against her hymen, grinning when he found the barrier intact.

Despite her determination to abandon her fear, she trembled and bit down on her bottom lip. He brushed his thumb across her clit. Nothing he did was hurtful; it just felt *wrong*. She let go of the loops and shoved him back as hard as she could. The priest landed in the grass with a startled grunt as the worshippers lapsed into silence.

"You are not Gelmont!" Serena cried. "Can't anyone else see the colors?"

Kapali lunged for the fallen priest. The imposter kicked out at him, then scrambled to his feet. "She's had too much tersatta juice," he cried. "You all know me!"

"He's Wikoli!" Serena shouted. "I saw it in his eyes."

Her warning jarred the others out of their shocked stupor. Kapali tackled the imposter as two other priests joined the fray. The imposter slammed his elbow into Kapali's gut and kicked wildly at the others. The remaining worshippers formed a protective ring around Serena as the fight continued.

"Alert the guards!" Hyalee shouted, and one of the priestesses ran to obey.

Lubricated by body paint and desperation, the imposter broke free and fled into the forest. The two priests rushed after him, while Kapali fought to regain his breath.

“He could not have done this alone.” The high priest forced the words out as he struggled to his feet. “It would have taken others to reinforce the illusion.”

Serena leaned against one of the poles and crossed her arms over her breasts. Even surrounded by a shield of people, she couldn’t stop shaking. Had the imposter wanted to defile a holy rite, or was this a personal attack? Had they put something in the tersatta juice? She could still see the bizarre lights.

“Are you all right?” Hyalee asked cautiously.

Serena held up her hand to keep the high priestess back. If anyone touched her right now, she’d completely lose control. “How did he know about the ascension?” She snatched her robe off the grass and clutched it to her breasts. “Only a priest knows the evocations.”

“We will find the imposter and whoever was helping him,” Kapali said, then realization sparked within his gaze. “Where is Gelmont?” He motioned two of his priests forward. “Check his cottage and the meditation garden. Even his body art was identical. They had to have inserted the imposter after Gelmont’s preparations were complete.” Kapali returned to her side, his movements stiff and careful. “What exactly did you see?”

She swallowed past the lump in her throat and forced herself to look at the high priest. Kapali stood close enough for the moonlight to reveal his features, but the ribbons of color still surrounded him. “Everyone is glowing. I can see strands of color and pulses of light. There’s movement in the strands. They seem to flow. The imposter’s strands tangled and tightened, until they strangled the color.” With murmurs of speculation, the others pressed in around her. Serena shrank back against the pole. “What’s happening to me?”

“You’re a soul seer.” Hyalee’s tone was filled with awe. “The Deity hasn’t bestowed this gift for many generations.”

“I don’t think I want to see souls.” Serena wrapped her arms around herself and lowered her gaze to her feet. At least the grass wasn’t glowing. “How do I make it stop?”

“Were it not for this gift, you would have been taken by the imposter,” Hyalee reminded her. “This is a rare and wonderful gift. We cannot allow it to slip from your grasp.” She patted Serena’s shoulder, but conviction rang in her tone. “I’ve always sensed you were meant for extraordinary things.”

That brought Serena’s head up and she stepped away from the pole. “Why didn’t you sense the imposter? Why didn’t *anyone* realize he was not Gelmont?”

“This was not the work of one man,” Kapali stressed. “We all know the Wikoli can create illusions, but to influence all of our minds, it would take several sorcerers working together. I have never heard of such a thing.”

“We should have been prepared.” Tears stung Serena’s eyes and she quickly blinked them back. One of *them* had touched her and been a hair’s breadth away from stealing her sacrifice -- in plain sight of half the Order!

No one spoke of it openly, but Serena's mother claimed she'd been raped by a Wikoli warrior and Serena resulted from the attack. Others speculated that force had nothing to do with Serena's conception. All Serena knew was the incident shattered any hope of peace between the two tribes, and the Wikoli leaders had been plotting ways to claim their descendent ever since. Serena's potential for divine gifts had greatly heightened their resolve to steal her away from the Perrlain.

"You must complete your ascension," Hyalee said quietly.

"I can't do this tonight." Serena tore off her headdress and mask, tossing them to the ground. "He wasn't trying to abduct me. He was trying to fuck me! Why would they attempt something so despicable? This is a sacred ritual."

"They would have claimed you ascended into the Wikoli Order." Hyalee put her hands on Serena's shoulders and spoke in a quiet, calm tone. "It would have given them a legitimate right to take you from us. You cannot allow these villains to rob you of your destiny. Our warriors will find the imposter and whoever was helping him. They will be punished for what they attempted tonight. But, Serena, if you reject the Deity's gift, it might never be offered again. Once you learn to interpret these strands, you will be able to guide others through their innermost conflicts. A soul seer can heal from within. They restore health and balance to those desperately in need. Think of all the people you can help. This is your divine calling."

Dragging her fingertips across her eyelids, Serena wiped away the soot. How could she continue on as if nothing had happened? She could still see the imposter's cunning blue gaze burning into hers. "What about Gelmont? I can't ascend without the Chosen One."

Kapali and Hyalee moved a few paces away and spoke in urgent whispers. Serena watched them closely, unable to imagine what they were debating. Without Gelmont the ascension couldn't progress -- could it? Hyalee motioned for the tall, lean priest to join them and the hushed conversation resumed. The other priests and priestesses loitered in an untidy cluster, unsure if they would be needed or not.

The tall priest was Baylott. His height and the breadth of his shoulders couldn't be disguised by his mask. Baylott's sexual prowess and easygoing nature made him popular with both men and women. Many times her gaze had drifted to him and his chosen partner during celebrations. He was utterly unashamed of his sexuality. Would they designate him as the new Chosen One? Despite Serena's anxiety, her body awakened, humming with anticipation.

Hyalee stepped back, her expression tense and uncertain. "Are you sure?" she asked her brother.

"There is no other choice."

Accepting his decision with a stiff nod, the high priestess turned to Serena. "Only a high priest can facilitate an ascension without formal preparation."

Serena glanced at Kapali and struggled to conceal her shock. "I have never seen Kapali express his sexuality with a woman."

"It has been some time since I found pleasure in a woman's body," Kapali admitted, "but these are extraordinary circumstances. Baylott has agreed to assist us. He will add his energy to mine and together we will complete your ascension."

"You will both --"

"No." The high priest smiled. "I will accept your sacrifice on behalf of the Deity and Baylott will..."

"I'm going to fuck Kapali while he fucks you." Baylott softened the graphic statement with a playful wink. "I'll make sure you're more than ready before we get to that point."

"I appreciate your candor," Serena told him, yet, uncertainty buffeted her composure. She couldn't purge her mind of the imposter's blue gaze or blithely accept these unexpected changes. This was nothing like she'd imagined her ascension would be, and she couldn't help feeling cheated. Unwilling to turn loose of her robe, she nodded beyond them. "I would feel more at ease if we were not on display."

"It's too dangerous to leave you unprotected," Hyalee said. "But, tonight, they will act as guards, not participate in the celebration."

Baylott took Serena's hand as the high priestess stationed the others around the perimeter of the clearing. After brushing Serena's knuckles with his lips, he unfolded her fingers and pressed a kiss into the center of her palm. Kapali stroked her hair away from her face and eased her robe out from under her other hand.

"You're safe now," Baylott whispered. "We'll take care of you."

She knew who Baylott was, but his mask was an unwelcome barrier. Taking off his headdress, she used his mask to wipe away his face paint, then raked her fingers through his hair.

"Better?" he asked.

She nodded and he shrugged out of his robe, pulling her into his arms before she got a good look at his body. His fingers curved around the back of her neck as his lips settled over hers. Kapali discarded his robe as well and pressed in against their sides. Instinctively, she wrapped her arm around his back and Baylott did the same. They shifted, aligning their bodies so all three touched skin to skin.

Her nipples hardened as they rubbed against her. Hands stroked her back and squeezed her bottom. Instead of releasing her mouth to kiss Kapali, Baylott brought Kapali's lips to hers. Moving from her mouth to the high priest's and back, Baylott established the needed connection. Soon Kapali's tongue joined the kiss, sliding into her mouth as often as Baylott's. She followed their lead, returning the kisses with equal fervor.

Tension melted from her muscles, replaced by simmering heat. Kapali was strong in the ways of the Deity, and Baylott was a master of carnal pleasure. Could she ask for a better

ascension? She must purge her mind of everything but this moment and the feelings awakening within her.

The men pulled back, making room for their eager hands. She lost track of who was touching her where. It all felt wonderful. Kapali rolled one nipple while Baylott bent over her other breast. She felt Baylott's hand nudge her thigh and realized he was stroking Kapali's cock. A jolt of lust stabbed through her body, lodging between her thighs.

"I want to see you touch each other," she whispered, emboldened by the hunger unfurling within her.

Neither man objected. She sank to the grass and caught her bottom lip between her teeth. Baylott's hair was several shades lighter than Kapali's. The high priest was older and far more serious. He approached everything with reverence and respect, while Baylott laughed often and loved to tease.

They kept their bodies angled toward her while they enjoyed a long, thorough kiss. Baylott grasped the high priest's shaft as Kapali cupped his balls. Serena watched their hands, fascinated by the contrast in the way they touched and the reaction of their bodies. Like the rest of him, Baylott's cock was long and lean compared to Kapali's thick, heavily veined shaft. She suddenly wished Baylott would be entering her instead of the high priest.

As they aroused each other, their soul strands intensified. Kapali's colors were richer, while Baylott's burned brighter. The interwoven patterns came into focus and Serena covered her mouth with her hand. Thoughts and impressions flooded her mind, revelations about the two men. With a soft gasp, she tore her gaze away and stared off into the darkness. These were private thoughts and secret longings, things she had no right to know.

Baylott chuckled and stepped back, drawing her attention to his flushed face. "Where is the tersatta pulp? I think our acolyte is getting restless." And, gauging by the size of his erection, she wasn't the only one.

"If we don't complete the ceremony, will the gift fade away?" she said as Kapali found the bowel of crushed tersatta.

"Why would you consider allowing that to happen?" Baylott knelt in front of her and took her hands between his. "Surely you realize there's nothing to fear from us."

"I'm not afraid of expressing my sexuality. The Wikoli will stop at nothing to capture me. I didn't realize that until tonight. How much greater will their determination grow once they learn of my gift?"

"Conflict has surrounded you from the moment of your birth." Kapali handed the bowl to Baylott and joined them in the grass. "If you live your life in fear, the Wikoli have won."

She agreed with his logic, but the tension coiled inside her refused to release.

"Lie back," Baylott instructed her. "Tersatta juice stimulates sensitivity and the plant's flesh provides moisture whenever extra moisture is needed." She reclined in the grass and he bent her knees, parting her thighs and exposing her sex to the breeze -- and the heat of his

gaze. Gathering some of the crushed tersatta on his fingertips, he worked the cool pulp between her folds and around the entrance to her passage. "Besides, it tastes wonderful."

Holding her legs wide, he bent and traced her slit with his tongue. Serena's abdomen quivered. She'd dreamed about this for so long, imagined the warm brush of a lover's lips and the questing touch of his tongue.

She had just begun to enjoy the sensations when Kapali stepped into view.

"Do you like that, little acolyte?" The high priest's voice took on a smoky quality as he watched Baylott lick her. "Does his mouth feel as good on your pussy as it does on my cock?"

His soul strands tangled and the colors darkened. Kapali cared about Baylott far more than the high priest would ever admit.

"Does she taste good, Brother?"

The sharp note in Kapali's tone made Baylott look up. "She has never known a man before. She needs to be extremely aroused before you take her. Would you like to taste her while I attend to you?"

Kapali crossed his arms over his chest and looked off into the distance. "Continue. I will endeavor not to distract you again."

Baylott kissed her inner thighs, then used his thumbs to hold her open. "Close your eyes. Think of nothing but how good this feels."

She lowered her lids and he resumed the wonderful caress. He explored her folds, then concentrated on her clit. Warmth built and tingles spiraled deep into her abdomen. She rocked her hips, rubbing herself against his mouth. Yes, that was it. Just a little more and --

A startled grunt escaped Baylott and interrupted the rhythm of his kiss. Serena opened her eyes and found Kapali kneeling behind the younger priest. Kapali's fingers were coated with tersatta pulp and the high priest was shoving them in and out of Baylott's ass. The possessiveness burning in his gaze was echoed by his soul strands. Did Baylott realize how deeply Kapali cared for him? Gauging from how often she saw Baylott with other partners, she seriously doubted Kapali's devotion was returned.

Baylott twisted back and caught Kapali's wrist. "Are you going to be able to do this?"

Serena heard the warning in Baylott's tone. Kapali grabbed Baylott's hair and pulled him up for a savage kiss, all the while his fingers shuttled in and out of the younger man's ass. Baylott's cock bobbed in time to the fucking and she couldn't drag her gaze away. Her pussy throbbed and her heartbeat raced. She felt utterly intrusive.

"Later," Baylott growled and dodged Kapali's next thrust. "We are here for Serena."

Bracing his hands on his thighs, Kapali took several deep breaths, his head slightly bowed. Serena felt an odd tightening in her chest. Would anyone ever look at her with such consuming passion?

Baylott took a handful of crushed tersatta and rubbed it along the length of Kapali's shaft. The high priest trembled at the touch of Baylott's hand. This is what Kapali wanted,



what he craved with every pulse of his soul strands. Kapali groaned when Baylott set the bowl aside and motioned toward Serena.

"I don't want to hurt her." Kapali's words were barely a whisper, but somehow they reached Serena's ears. This was as much a sacrifice for Kapali as it was for her. "She deserves better for her first time."

"I'll help you get in; then we'll do the rest together."

With a stiff nod, Kapali moved between her legs. He found her opening with the blunt head of his cock and looked into her eyes. "I wish Baylott could do this instead of me. Your ascension should be pleasurable."

She accepted his statement with an uncertain nod. The intensity of his soul strands had stabilized, so she tried to relax. Baylott circled her clit and caressed her delicate folds as Kapali pushed inside her. She gasped and turned her head to the side. Was it supposed to hurt this much?

"Don't tense up, sweet acolyte. Offer your sacrifice." Baylott turned her head back around and covered her mouth with his.

"She's -- so tight." Kapali groaned, then thrust hard and Serena cried out. Baylott captured the sound with his open mouth.

The sharp tearing sensation gradually receded, and she released a shuddering sigh. It was done. She'd surrendered her virginity. Kapali relaxed over her and buried his face against her throat. Why wasn't he moving? She'd seen couples do this often enough to know his hips had to move.

Baylott knelt behind Kapali and smiled into her eyes. He paused to coat his cock with tersatta pulp, then spread the high priest's ass cheeks. The slow, steady drive of Baylott's hips forced Kapali in a little deeper. She was stretched tight around his erection. Did Baylott feel this big inside Kapali?

She shifted her legs and stroked the back of Kapali's hair. This was awkward and uncomfortable. Shouldn't she feel complete, if not ascended? Perhaps that would happen at the end.

"Together, my Brother." Baylott grabbed Kapali's hips and pulled him back, then forced him forward as he drilled deeper. In one extended motion they moved. In and out. In and out.

Serena closed her eyes and concentrated on the fullness and the unfamiliar slide. Kapali held his weight off her, balancing on his forearms and his knees. It was more like Baylott was using Kapali's body to fuck her.

Liberated by the thought, she opened her eyes and watched Baylott's expressions. He clenched his teeth at the end of each stroke, then gasped when he rocked forward again. His thick lashes drooped and his head tossed as he increased his speed. Kapali mimicked him thrust for thrust, taking her as Baylott took him.

Energy pulsed around them. Their soul strands illuminated the night. On impulse, she raised her arms and pushed her fingers into Kapali's strands. Her arms tingled and her pussy rippled. She could feel how close he was to climax and how long it had been since he'd joined with Baylott. Kapali was quaking with his need to come, yet he fought it with every fiber of his being, unwilling for the blissful moment to pass into memory.

She arched her back and reached around Kapali, touched the colors surrounding Baylott. Pleasure spun through her body, the intensity staggering. Baylott abandoned thought, hesitation, and misgivings. He felt only pleasure, consuming and wonderful. But it was impersonal, hollow. He could be with anyone.

Thrusting his full length into Kapali, Baylott threw back his head and roared. She absorbed the crest of his release, then moved her fingers back to the high priest. Kapali shuddered, his cock throbbing deep inside her. Bursts of energy saturated her senses and her body accepted his seed.

Trembling on the brink of orgasm, Serena marveled at what she'd just done. Their sensations had been incredibly real. She'd absorbed their thoughts and emotions, while feeling little herself. Rolling to his side, Baylott dragged Kapali with him.

Serena stared up at the stars, aching with unfulfilled need. Was this what it meant to be a soul seer? Would she only experience emotions by siphoning them from others? Why hadn't their orgasms triggered hers? They had certainly been strong enough.

Hyalee knelt beside her and drew Serena's gaze from the sky. "Are you all right?" All Serena could manage was a nod. The high priestess helped her sit and handed her a red and gold robe. "Congratulations, Priestess Serena, you are an acolyte no more."

## Chapter One

Matt Sterling stood at the edge of the Perrlain village, wondering how long it would take for someone to notice him. Miranda had warned him that the settlement was simplistic, but Matt hadn't expected the conditions to be quite this primitive. Pilgrimages to Temple-Tuttle had always been popular, and the recent adventure of Ashton VinDerley and his fiancée only added to the outpost's mystique. Still, the Perrlain settlement was surrounded by dense jungles and treacherous mountains. Only the most adventurous pilgrims risked the arduous trek through the wilderness.

Outsiders were lured by whispers of sexual rituals and ceremonial orgies, enlightenment through sensuality, and a sort of freedom the materialistic inhabitants of Halley Prime couldn't even imagine. Matt was skeptical of the Perrlain customs, but he wasn't here on a pilgrimage. His reasons for seeking out the Order were harsh and desperate. After nearly a year of searching for guidance, the Perrlain were his last resort.

Dome-shaped huts dotted the jungle around a large fire pit. Each tiny structure had been placed wherever the trees allowed, as opposed to clearing away nature to make room for the dwellings.

A group of bare-breasted women strolled along a shady path not far from Matt. He fought back a smile and glanced down at his hiking gear: sturdy boots, cargo pants, and a black T-shirt. He was definitely overdressed for this setting. One of the women did a double take just before the group turned into the heart of the village. Her eyes widened and her steps faltered. The others noticed her reaction and one of them screamed.

He was just standing here watching; he wasn't even armed. He'd been told the Perrlain welcomed pilgrims. What the hell was wrong with them?

The women ran off, shouting warnings in their native tongue. Matt leaned his shoulder against a tree and waited for the guards to arrive. If Lutton wasn't around, communication

would be tricky. Matt hadn't been able to find a language file on the Perrlain and only the priests and priestesses spoke Shardrake, the standard language of the Comet Coalition.

Within minutes, he was surrounded by glaring warriors sporting sharp-looking spears. The leader spoke a phrase Matt interpreted to mean "move your ass" and they marched him into the center of the settlement.

"Lutton," Matt said as they neared the fire pit. "I need to speak with Lutton."

"Who are you?"

Thrilled to hear words he understood, Matt turned his head and found a petite blonde woman openly assessing him. Unlike the scrap of material the other women had tied around their hips, a thin black and red garment draped gracefully over her body. She had drawn her honey blonde hair away from her face, and managed to look menacing, despite her size.

"I'm so glad you can understand me." He offered his most charming smile. "My name is Matt Sterling. Is Lutton available?"

Her dark gaze swept over his body before settling on his face. "How do you know Lutton? For that matter, how did you know where to find our village?"

"Are you a priestess of the Order?"

"Our village is closed to pilgrims. We found the influx too disruptive. You can find a spiritual guide among the Wikoli. They'll be more than happy to barter with you."

"I didn't come for spiritual guidance." Miranda had suggested he claim to have met her brother at Shardrake university, but there was a chance Lutton wouldn't play along. "Miranda Kayten is a friend of mine. I'll explain the rest to Lutton."

"If you were truly *that person's* friend, you would know we are not allowed to speak her name, much less do her bidding."

"She told me to claim I'd met Lutton during his years at Shardrake University. I didn't want the first words out of my mouth to be deceptive."

Her delicate brows arched and she folded her arms over her chest. "You didn't want to risk Lutton's reaction to the lie. Your decision had nothing to do with integrity." Rather than disapproving, she sounded amused. "You should have stopped while you were ahead."

Swiping his forehead with his sleeve, he unfastened the waist strap on his backpack and allowed it to slip off his shoulders. "I think that was about two days ago." The pack bumped against his butt; then, he swung it around in front of him and lowered it to the ground between his feet. "Is Lutton here? And if he's not, is there somewhere I can cool off while I wait for him?"

She said something to the guards and they lowered their weapons. "Come. I'll see if Lutton has time to indulge an outsider."

He heaved the pack to one shoulder and fell into step beside her. A group of giggling children paused to stare as they passed. The blonde walked on without comment or reaction.

“Am I allowed to know your name?”

“High Priestess Hyalee.” She glanced up at him, her expression carefully guarded. “Our village is not easy to reach. Why did you come all this way if you weren’t even sure of your reception?”

“Miran -- *my friend* seemed certain your people would be able to help me.”

She paused and pivoted to face him. “Help you with what?”

“It’s personal. I’ll explain my situation to Lutton and he can decide who else needs to be involved.”

They reached a hut slightly larger than the others. “Wait here.” She called out in her native language, then parted the woven curtain and entered the lodge.

Left alone in the tranquil setting, Matt slipped his hands into his pockets and looked around. Birds trilled in the distance and unseen creatures chattered in the leafy canopy high overhead. Laden with fresh, clean scents, the humid air caressed his face. He refused to analyze the unique combination of smells and just enjoyed their fragrance instead.

He caught the rumble of male voices and intensified the sensitivity of his audio receptors. Unfortunately, hearing the rapid exchange didn’t enable him to understand their words. Hyalee offered several responses, then footsteps moved toward the door. Quickly returning his hearing to normal, he opened his backpack and retrieved the letter Miranda had given him.

Hyalee exited the hut, followed by a dark-haired man. Matt searched for a family resemblance, but dark hair and copper-tinted skin were the only similarities between this man and Miranda.

“I’m Lutton.” He swept Matt with a glance every bit as assessing as Hyalee’s had been. “Are you my sister’s friend, or one of her clients?” Distaste sharpened the last word.

“I like to believe I’m both. I originally contacted her in a professional capacity, but we know many of the same people. Our paths just seemed to cross.” He held out the neatly folded letter. “This should help you understand why I’m here.” The message was written in Perrlain, so Miranda hadn’t bothered to seal it. Her brother read the single page and, much to Matt’s surprise, handed it to the high priestess.

“My sister was banished from the tribe. For all intents and purposes, she is dead to us.” He folded his arms across his chest and waited for Hyalee to finish.

With an enigmatic smile, the high priestess handed the letter back to Lutton. “Was she told about Serena or has her power grown since she’s been away?”

“To my knowledge, Serena hasn’t contacted her,” Lutton said, “and only one of my sisters would dare.”

“Then this is the Deity’s will, regardless of the dictates of the elders.”

Lutton inclined his head, while mischief gleamed in his dark eyes. "You're the final authority on all things divine. The elders will want to know how our visitor came to us, but I leave the rest to you and Kapali."

"Your sister suggested Matt might have met you during your seasons at university."

"A reasonable explanation." Lutton handed the letter back to Matt. "Destroy this. You would be met with great hostility if the contents of this ever came to light."

"What does it say?" He tucked the letter into his pocket, wanting to shake answers from both of them. What had Miranda been thinking when she sent him to the middle of nowhere? How could such a primitive people understand his torment, much less help end it?

"Miranda believes we can help each other and I'm inclined to agree. Hyalee will explain everything." Without further discussion, Lutton went back inside the lodge.

Hyalee curved her hand around Matt's elbow and led him toward the main path meandering through the village. "Only a handful of our people understand your language, so we can speak freely. What inspired you to seek out Miranda's services?"

"She's a therapist. You make her sound tawdry."

"She's a therapist who utilizes divine gifts for profit. In my estimation, that *is* tawdry."

He didn't argue. Everyone had a right to make a living. From what he'd seen, Miranda used her "divine gifts" to help people work through their emotional conflicts and he had no problem with that. If it wasn't for her assistance, he wasn't sure he'd have made it through the past few months.

"You didn't answer my question," Hyalee reminded him.

"I survived an illness everyone -- including myself -- expected to kill me." He paused, trying to encapsulate his thoughts. The guilt, the shame, the spontaneous memory loops. How could he explain in a few short sentences the forces that had reshaped his life? Even Miranda only knew enough to realize she was in over her head. "Staring into the eyes of death does something to you. At least it did to me. Miranda gave me the impression there was someone here who could help me. Was she mistaken?"

"From what little the letter revealed, it appears you need a soul seer. A soul seer is a true spiritual guide. Not the sort we use to entertain tourists, but a healer of incredible power."

"Is there a soul seer in your village?" Damn, these people enjoyed being evasive.

"The Deity recently bestowed the gift on Miranda's youngest sister, Serena. There were complications with the ceremony, however, and she was left with a fundamental fear of using her ability."

"How did Miranda find out about this if she hasn't spoken with Serena?"

"It's possible she's been in contact with Orillia. Orillia frequently ignores the ban and communicates with her sister, but it's more likely the unmentionable person had a prophetic

vision. Your friend is exceptionally gifted. It's a shame she couldn't accept the expectations of our Order. We could have helped her train and strengthen her natural abilities."

Matt had witnessed Miranda's abilities, so he wasn't surprised by Hyalee's explanation. He'd also glimpsed her fiery temper a time or two. "Lutton said we could help each other. What did he mean?"

"Serena equates her gift with sexual expression and her first experience with sex was less than it should have been."

"I don't think I like where this is leading." He shifted his pack to his other shoulder and sighed. "You want me to seduce her?"

"The letter refers to you as a *kavis laren*, a pleasure connoisseur. Who better to chip away at her misconceptions than someone who knows exactly what it takes to please a woman? Miranda seems to think this would be...dare I say, therapeutic?"

Meaningless sex and carnal excess were part of the past now haunting him. He wanted to permanently take his life in a new direction. He rubbed his eyes with his fingertips, resisting the urge to refuse and walk back into the jungle. The unwanted images would follow him. He couldn't outrun this and Miranda knew it.

"Let's say I help Serena accept her sexuality -- and I'm not saying I will. What happens then?"

"Once she can freely express her sexuality, her gift will enable her to guide you through your inner turmoil and restore balance to your soul stream."

"That sounds simple enough." He scoffed. The high priestess had no idea what she was talking about. But Miranda had set this thing in motion, and he trusted Miranda implicitly. "Where can I find Serena?"

"Her guards allow her an hour of privacy each afternoon to bathe and relax in the steam caves."

"Her guards?"

"They've been her constant companions since her ascension. Despite her frequent complaints, Chief Amayis refuses to relent."

"Why does she need guards? And what the hell is an ascension?"

"When someone completes their training as a priest or priestess, they go through a ceremony called an ascension. One of our enemies attacked Serena during her ascension. She was not physically harmed, but the incident left her shaken and withdrawn."

"Is this why she can't enjoy sex? Was she nearly raped?" It sounded like Serena needed Miranda, not a stranger trying to seduce her.

"It's complicated. The imposter's attack is only part of it." She paused, tension creeping into her expression. "Why don't you go to the steam caves and decide for yourself. If you don't think Serena will benefit from your expertise, no one will pressure you."

Knowing he would need to slip past Serena's guards, Matt left his backpack with Hyalee. He followed the lower fork in the river as the high priestess had instructed and scanned his surroundings as he crept through the trees.

Miranda had spoken of these people with a combination of resentment and regret. She hadn't agreed with many of their beliefs, but it had been obvious she missed their uncomplicated lifestyle and their ability to savor each moment.

He spotted a cluster of warriors practicing in a small clearing and heard the distant laughter of children. Smoke drifted on the air and he searched out the source. Women huddled around a smoldering fire spreading thin strips of fish across a charred rack. Perspiration dampened their hair and made their skin shine. What a miserable task for such a warm afternoon.

Why was he even considering this seduction? If Serena had submitted to one unpleasant sexual encounter after nearly being raped, her emotional misgivings could take years to overcome. He didn't doubt his skill. His patience, on the other hand, was very much in question. He'd never understood the allure of virgins. Getting down and dirty with an experienced, and eager, woman was far more his style.

The river turned sharply at the bottom of a long, steady incline, and the caves were located at the river's bend. Matt easily spotted the area Hyalee had described, then realized he was on the wrong side of the river.

He hesitated in the shadow of the trees. Days, sometimes weeks, went by without him thinking about the specifics of his new existence. He functioned effortlessly. He was alive, strong, and healthy. Could *health* be attributed to a machine? Opening and closing his fist, he watched his replicated hand instantaneously obey the signals of his neuro-processor.

*You're housed within a robot, Matthias. Your wasted, deceased body was incinerated back on Halley Prime. The infamous Toymaker has become a toy. Could anything be more ironic?*

He kept his boots on and hurried across the grassy bank. There was no help for it if he wanted to enter the caves. Bedrock crunched beneath his boots as he waded into the river. The current was brisk and a shiver sped down his spine -- or his primary sensor relay, if he wanted to get technical. Every system inside him was hermetically sealed and his external membrane acted as a secondary barrier. Still, immersing his new body in water filled him with dread.

The cool tug of the water against his legs felt surprisingly refreshing. He'd programmed this body to respond to his surroundings. If the heat would be uncomfortable for a human, his external membrane perspired. When it was cold, he shivered. His fingers and his lips could even turn blue. It was these simulated responses that helped Matt forget he was a replicant.

At its deepest the water only reached his waist. He trudged onto the opposite bank and headed for a flat rock, intending to empty out his soggy boots. Muted voices drew his



attention to the surrounding trees. He blended back into the shadows and amplified the sound.

“Are you sure they’ll stay away?” a female voice asked.

Matt understood the softly accented words. The steady stream of pilgrims had motivated the Order to teach Shardrake to their priests and priestesses. Hyalee’s attitude made it apparent the change had been unwelcome. So who was telling secrets in the outsider’s tongue?

Using the voice as a guide, he crept closer to the sound.

“This is my private time,” a second woman replied, also in Shardrake. “They’ll only intrude if I specifically call out to them.”

A long pause followed and Matt activated his heat signature scanner. Two small forms sat together to his left, while two larger figures stood a short ways away on the right. Did the women realize how close the guards were?

*That’s probably why they’re speaking in a language the guards can’t understand.* Matt moved soundlessly until he found a position from which he could see the women. They sat side by side on a fallen log. One was dressed in a red and gold robe, much like Hyalee’s garment. The other wore only a scrap of material tied around her hips.

“Lutton is worried about you,” the bare-breasted one said. “We’re all worried about you.”

The priestess pushed to her feet and tossed her long, dark hair over her shoulders. “I’m doing everything I can to make my body cooperate with my mind. It’s become a game to the men in the village. I wouldn’t be surprised if there are wagers on who can make me come first.”

Anger lashed through her tone, but the pain in Serena’s dark eyes tugged at Matt’s heart. He had no doubt the priestess was Serena, but was the other woman a relation or a friend?

“You begrudgingly submit your body as they go through the motions. It’s going to take more than that to get you over what happened during your ascension.”

“What do you suggest?” Serena snapped. She was older than Matt had expected. This was no shrinking virgin, barely out of the classroom. “My final assessment comes with the next full moon. If I can’t...feel something by then, the Order will turn me out.”

“Let them,” the other woman insisted, rebellion flashing in her dark eyes. “If the Order turns their back on you because of this fiasco, they aren’t worth your time.”

Serena crossed her arms under her breasts and smiled. “You haven’t forgiven them for Miranda.”

“And I never will. They didn’t just rob me of my sister, they banished my closest friend.” She heaved a sigh and refocused on Serena. “I’m sorry. This isn’t about the past. Have you allowed a woman to touch you? Perhaps it’s --”

"I've tried everything."

"You had two orgasms during your ascension. We know your body is capable of the sensation." Serena nodded. "If you're relaxed and others are not staring at you, waiting for you to come, maybe it will happen again." She reached behind the log and retrieved a small bundle, spreading it across her lap. "This is tersatta pulp." She handed the small pot to Serena. "I presume they used it during your ascension."

"They did, but what am I..."

She passed Serena the second object and Matt couldn't help but smile. Carved of dark wood and highly polished, the dildo was thin, yet detailed. "This will provide fullness and movement as you thrust it in and pull it out. Use the tersatta pulp, not only to insert it, but also to keep your fingers sliding smoothly around your clit."

"You want me to use this to fuck myself?" Serena sounded truly shocked.

"In cultures lacking our sexual freedom, this is not at all unusual. Once you have trained yourself to accept pleasure again, you won't need the" -- she motioned awkwardly toward the dildo -- "substitute."

"Does Hyalee know you're suggesting this? I'm not sure it's permissible."

"I don't care what the Order finds permissible," she snapped. "I lost one sister to their ridiculous ideas. I'm not risking you, too. Those idiots are responsible for your fear. If you'd enjoyed a gradual initiation like everyone else, this wouldn't be an issue." She stood and brushed off her skirt. "I'm going to go ensure your guards don't disturb you for a good long time. Remember, lots of tersatta pulp and don't give up. It will happen."

She scurried off into the trees and Matt focused on Serena. Her hair flowed like a silk curtain to her waist, so richly black it gleamed. Thick, dark lashes drew immediate attention to her exotic eyes. Given her dark hair and copper-tinted skin, her eyes looked like frosted crystal. He magnified his vision to see their exact color and found a unique combination of silver and blue.

As she turned the dildo this way and that, her confounded expression was almost comical. Masturbation wasn't a bad suggestion, but she didn't need the dildo. A vibrator would have been more helpful, or just her slick fingers.

She tucked the toy into the pocket of her robe and finger combed her hair away from her face. Her movements were tense and impatient, yet pain shone in her eyes. Her expression was all too familiar. Desperation tinged with loneliness, Matt saw that haunted look every time he glanced in a mirror. How could two wounded souls heal each other?

Needing a momentary break from her allure, he reactivated his heat sensors and looked at the guards. There were three figures now. One kneeling in front of the other two. Serena's sister certainly had no trouble expressing her sexuality. She was sucking on one guard's cock while she worked the other with her hand.

When he looked back at Serena, she was rubbing the bright red paste on one of her nipples. Her robe hung open down the center, but she hadn't removed it. Even in the defused light of the clearing her skin looked incredibly smooth. Her breasts were full and round, the tips deep rose without benefit of the paste. After dipping dramatically at her waist, her body flared to softly curved hips. This was no frightened girl. Even now desire smoldered in her eyes, so what kept her from reaching orgasm?

Intrigued, he focused on her hairless mound. Dusky folds peeked out from between her outer lips. Had anyone licked her pussy, held her open and sucked on her clit? Many women responded to the gentle brush of a tongue when fingers wouldn't release the needed sensations. If another woman had touched her, it was probable this had been tried.

She reclined along the slope and braced one foot against the fallen log. Setting the pot of tersatta pulp within easy reach, she pulled the dildo out of her pocket and explored its sculpted length. She was ripe and inquisitive, more than ready for a mate.

Longing gripped Matt's belly and tightened his balls. There was no doubt he was fully functional. A recent modification would allow him to suffuse his ejaculate with sperm, yet he'd never activated the function. In fact, he'd hardly thought about the ability since the procedure had been completed. Why had the capability sprung to mind as he looked at Serena?

He blew out an unsteady breath and adjusted his position, making room for his rapidly growing erection. If she got off with the dildo, he'd return to Hyalee and explain that his help was no longer needed. His simulated pulse gave a disapproving leap at the possibility. He stubbornly ignored the reaction. It would be so much less complicated if she set herself back on the road to sexual fulfillment. So why was he hoping beyond hope that she wouldn't succeed?

She closed her fingers around her nipples and rolled the buds. After applying a second coat of the red paste, she lightly pinched and tugged her nipples between her thumbs and forefingers. She needed his mouth licking off the paste and suckling. If she could relax, while he caressed her, this would be much more stimulating.

Apparently dissatisfied with the result, she moved on. Her fingers created streaks of red across her torso as she drifted downward and eased one hand between her thighs. She cupped her mound, squeezing while she scooped more of the red paste out of the jar. Parting her outer lips with one hand, she painted her flesh with the other.

Matt couldn't look away. He'd seen more pussies than he cared to remember, but it was as if hers were the first. A sense of wonder expanded within him until his heart thudded painfully. Her inner thighs beckoned his touch and her delicate folds turned bright red as her fingers spread the paste. She pushed her fingers into her core and her ass cheeks clenched. Matt realized his body was mimicking the motion and he consciously relaxed the muscles.

Her fingers explored for a few minutes; then she applied the paste directly to her clit. She shivered as she massaged the substance into the sensitive bud.

*That's it, sweetheart. Stay right there and you'll be fine.*

As with all her other explorations, she was methodical and quick. She retrieved the dildo from the pocket of her robe and paused to smear it with paste. He shook his head, knowing she needed to accept one stimulation at a time. Penetration would only distract her from what she needed to feel.

She traced her slit with the toy and Matt scrubbed his face with his hands. It was all he could do not to charge from the trees and snatch the thing out of her hand. True, she wasn't ready for the fullness, but his objection was more complicated. He wanted to arouse her to the brink of madness, then fill her with his cock. Or at least wield the damned toy!

Keeping her legs angled wide, so she could maneuver between her thighs, she found her entrance with the rounded tip. Matt clenched his hands into fists and his gaze fixed on her cunt as she pushed the dildo inside. She only got the head in before she reached for more paste.

*You're not ready! You need to be held and caressed, kissed and -- seduced.* In that moment he accepted the inevitable. He would free Serena from her sexual demons. Even if it took every trick lurking in his misspent past, he would reawaken her passion.

## Chapter Two

Serena jammed the wooden cock into the dirt with a muttered curse and snapped her robe closed across her breasts. It was useless. She was broken. With the first tingle of carnal hunger came unwanted images, flashing blue eyes, and the overwhelming sense of dread. The imposter had never been apprehended. She couldn't help feeling he was still out there watching her, waiting for his next opportunity to disrupt her life.

Orillia meant well with her suggestion, but nothing helped. In the six moon cycles since Serena's ascension, she'd tried everything she could think of to unlock her emotions and free her sexual nature. Releasing a frustrated sigh, she stood and brushed off the back of her robe. There were other ways she could serve the community. Perhaps she wasn't meant to be a priestess.

Just the thought made her heart ache. Every female in her family, for as long as anyone could remember, possessed some sort of divine gift. It had never been a matter of *if* she would be gifted. Everyone wondered which gift the Deity would release within her. And now she knew. She was a soul seer, the most revered of all healers. Or she would be, as soon as she overcame her fear.

A throaty moan revealed the means by which Orillia had chosen to distract the guards. Vitik and Fyn were both accomplished warriors, strong, dominant men in their prime; the exact sort of lover Orillia preferred. Fyn was also a priest and Serena had no doubt he reported each of her failed attempts at sexual expression to the Order.

She had already bathed, and meditating in one of the steam caves lacked its usual appeal. Knowing it was unwise to wander far, she meandered beside the river. Her hair was still damp, so she spread the long tresses with her fingers, encouraging the breeze to pass through.

Sunlight dappled the leaves and shimmered on the briskly flowing water. Tranquility surrounded her, yet her spirit tossed and turned, restless and unsure. An unfamiliar sound drew her attention toward the trees beyond the grassy riverbank. She glanced back the way she'd come. Could her guards still hear her from this distance?

The bushes rustled and light gleamed off a metallic object. She turned and took one hurried step before a man stepped out of the shadows in front of her.

"I am frighten not for you." He held up both hands in a nonthreatening manner.

His pronounced accent and the scrambled phrasing kept her from screaming. Every Wikoli spoke Perrlain effortlessly. Would he attempt to stop her if she ran past? His attempt at communication did little to appease her instincts. Hyalee had closed the village to pilgrims, so what was an outsider doing here?

The stranger's torso was bare, but every inch of his body from the waist down was covered. No one who lived in this climate wore so many clothes. His hair had been cut up and over his ears, the back curling at the nape of his neck. Artificial gold streaks threaded through the light brown strands and his skin looked as if it had seldom known the sun's warm kiss. She had never seen anyone quite like him.

"Lutton...I come to...damn."

He was clearly struggling for Perrlain words. None of the other pilgrims had attempted to communicate in her language. They blithely expected their needs to be met at every turn. She could put him out of his misery and respond in Shadrake. If he were one of her brother's friends, he had likely come from Halley Prime.

Leaving nothing to chance, she summoned his soul strands. So faint she could barely see them, the interwoven colors came into view. Was her ability fading already? She suppressed her panic and concentrated on what she could see. Vibrant blue and rich leaf green, interspersed with crimson. The pattern repeated smoothly for the most part, yet several distinct constrictions hindered the flow. Past wounds or profound regrets often created such constrictions. She saw no evidence of malice or cruelty, so she turned her attention to the man himself.

Rugged, almost harshly masculine, his features were so different from the elegant angles of Perrlain males. His sculpted chest was lightly dusted with golden hair and his abdomen tapered to a trim waist. The damp material of his pants clung to long legs and boots encased his feet. He would surpass Baylott by at least half a head and Baylott was the tallest man in their village. And those arms... Her gaze lingered over his highly developed biceps and wide shoulders. Only a few of the warriors had a body anywhere near as imposing as this stranger's.

Ignoring her rude stare, he gave up his feeble attempt to speak her language and combined simple Shadrake phrases with hand gestures. "Hyalee." He waited to see if she responded to the name.

"*Lidante Hyalee nar itareen ordesta?*" She asked how he knew the high priestess.

His lips thinned and he exhaled through his nose. What would it feel like to be wrapped in those strong arms and pressed against that broad chest? Would his sensual mouth claim hers with demanding passion or coax and tease, patiently waiting for a response? An unexpected wave of heat swept through her body and her nipples gathered against the filmy cloth of her robe.

Was this a good omen or should she run in the opposite direction?

"Hyalee told me to relax in the caves." He motioned beyond the tree line. "Too hot." He fanned his hand in front of his face. "I need to cool off. Already sweaty."

Intrigued by his determination to speak with her, she took pity on him. "Didn't the river refresh you? Your pants are still wet."

His dark eyes narrowed for an instant; then his lips parted in a dazzling smile. "You speak Shardrake. Thank God! I felt like an absolute idiot. Miranda told me Lutton was the only one here who knew my language. I'm so glad she was wrong." He pushed his fingers through his hair as his gaze moved over her face. "I'm Matt Sterling, and I didn't mean to frighten you. I already sent a group of women screaming into the village once today. I'd rather not do so again. What's your name?"

"You know Miranda? How is she? It's been ages since I've been able to smuggle a message to her."

"She's doing really well. Her practice is flourishing and she seems happy."

Serena looked at Matt's virile body and couldn't help but ask, "Are you her lover?"

Calculation gleamed in his dark eyes; then he shook his head. "We're very good friends. What is your connection to her?"

"She's my sister."

"I should have realized. Lutton must have taught you how to speak Shardrake. Are you Orillia or Serena?"

"Serena."

His grin returned. "The feisty one."

His playful tone brought back happy memories. Lutton would chase them through the forest as they squealed and giggled, pretending to be afraid. It had been so long ago and so much had changed since those carefree days. Whispers became speculation and the council sent Miranda away.

"I caused more than my share of trouble when I was a child." Serena dispelled the past with a regretful sigh. "Still, Miranda has been gone a long time." Silence stretched between them as she stared into his eyes. She couldn't quite catch her breath and her nipples rasped against her robe with each attempt. "What brings you to our village? Are you acquainted with my brother as well, or were you... Please tell me you're not a pilgrim. We've all had our fill of tourists."

"I'm not a pilgrim. The reason for my journey is...complicated." He looked at the river and sighed. "Is the current always this strong? I really would like to cool off."

"Does Lutton know you're here?" His neat sidestep made her curious enough to press. "Did you meet him on Halley Prime or d'Arrest?"

"I met him for the first time a short while ago, but Miranda suggested I claim a previous acquaintance. She was afraid being her friend wouldn't open many doors for me."

"She was right. I'm surprised Lutton played along. That's not like him at all."

"I decided not to use the deception. The high priestess responded to the disruption caused by my arrival. She took me to Lutton, but he was in some sort of meeting. He asked her to see to my comfort while I waited for him. She suggested I enjoy the steam caves and my imperfect sense of direction led me here."

Suspicion tingled down Serena's spine. Hyalee knew her daily routine. Had the high priestess steered this intriguing stranger into her path?

"I spotted the caves on the other side of the river, so I reluctantly waded across," he went on when she didn't comment.

How long had he been in the area? Was it possible he'd seen her touching herself? A tingling flush crawled up her neck as she imagined him peering through the leaves as she explored between her thighs.

She gave herself a mental shake and continued the conversation. "You're not much of a swimmer, I take it?"

"I'm terrified of water." He laughed, but threads of black snaked through his soul strands.

Serena licked her lips and glanced away. She hadn't intentionally looked at his strands, so why had she seen the sudden change? Black could indicate many things, fear, deception, even death. Regret and grief could also produce the color. The overall change in the pattern was a truer indication than the surge of an isolated color.

"We don't bathe in the river. As you noticed, the current is swift and we don't want to pollute the water. Come, I'll show you."

"Let me grab my shirt."

He stepped back into the trees and Serena reached for Orillia's mind. *Can you give me a little more time? Meet me down by the bathing pools. I have an idea.*

*If you'll keep trying, I'll distract these two all night. Just call out to me when it's safe to turn them loose.*

Serena smiled at her sister's boast. Vitik and Fyn were lusty, to be sure, but they were also dedicated to her protection. Despite Orillia's confidence, her time was limited.

Matt returned with a black shirt slung over his shoulder and curiosity shining in his eyes.



"Is Hyalee waiting for you?" she asked. "I'm surprised she didn't send you with an escort."

"She probably didn't want to subject anyone else to the smell." He chuckled again. The rumbling sound was warm and appealing. "I'm not accustomed to this heat."

"Well, let's get you cooled off." She motioned to her left. "It's not far."

"I gather from your robe that you're a priestess like Hyalee?"

"Hyalee is high priestess. I only just ascended."

"I'm not familiar with that term." He fell into step behind her as she wended her way along the barely discernable bath.

"I just completed my training. When the full moon rises again, my time for evaluation will end. I will either be accepted by the Order permanently or I'll need to choose another path."

"You sound anxious. Is there some sort of final assessment?"

With her back to him, she was free to let her frustration show. "The final assessment, as you call it, is usually nothing more than a celebration. Unfortunately, I'm still struggling with some of my skills."

"What will be expected of you?"

She had brought up the subject, so she shouldn't feel invaded by the question. Still, her emotional barriers slammed into place. "It's complicated."

That sexy chuckle sounded again as they emerged into a small clearing. "I suppose I deserved that. If I tell you more about myself, will you explain why you're worried about the assessment?"

She was never comfortable talking to men. Ever since her ascension she'd spent most of her time in seclusion, meditating or honing her ability to summon soul strands. So why did this outsider put her at ease?

"This is where my people bathe." She indicated the vine-covered cliff wall and the series of shallow pools. "We are on the back side of the steam caves. An underground spring flows beneath this mountain. We funnel rainwater into a cistern located in the upper chamber of the caverns. After it is heated by the steam, the water flows through wooden tubes to these dispensers."

"Warm showers in the middle of the jungle?" He looked suitably impressed. "I never would have imagined."

"Lutton instituted many improvements upon his return from d'Arrest. Since he insisted we keep our wash water separate from our drinking water, we have seen a decrease in many once common illnesses."

"That's wonderful."

She smiled. "I agree. We use plant extracts to cleanse our skin and hair. They are stored in baskets tied among the vines. Would you like my assistance?" He hesitated, looking at the bathing area and then at her. Why was she being so bold? This was not like her at all. "The Perrlain find no shame in our naked bodies. We are the ultimate expression of the Deity's creative skill. We are wondrously made and all life is meant for celebration."

"I think I would feel more comfortable if you joined me, rather than serving me. Is that permissible?"

She didn't miss the subtle challenge in his gaze. Show me yours and I'll show you mine? Amused by his reluctance, she unfastened her robe and walked to a nearby tree. Entertaining guests had become the responsibility of the Order. Many of the priests and priestesses enjoyed interacting with people from other cultures. Mostly Serena watched. She removed her only garment and hung it from one of the branches.

His gaze narrowed as he looked at her breasts and she cringed. The tersatta pulp had left red streaks on her skin and stained her nipples bright red. Had he seen her applying the pulp or was he just curious about the discoloration? Ignoring her impulse to cover herself, she motioned toward the tree.

"You can leave your garments here. I'll have them cleaned and returned to you."

"If I just leave them on while I bathe, we'd kill two birds with one stone."

"We live in harmony with all forms of life. It is a sacrilege to --"

"Accomplish two tasks at one time." He clarified as he joined her beneath the tree. "I didn't mean it literally."

"Lutton has incorporated such phrases into his speech since he returned from Halley Prime. Does everyone on that planet speak in metaphor?"

"To some extent, I suppose we do. I bet there are Perrlain sayings that will make no sense to me."

He was stalling. She swept his strong body from head to foot and shook her head. "You have nothing to be ashamed of. Your body is very well made." His lips pressed together and his nostrils flared. "I'm sorry. What did I say?"

"Nothing." He draped his shirt over a branch and sat down to unfasten his boots. "I'm exhausted and hot and grumpy. You did nothing wrong."

Needing a moment to compose her expression, she moved to one of the bathing pools. The grassy indentations were shallow and wide, allowing the ground to soak up the water before it reached the river. She released one of the baskets and lowered it, retrieving what they would need. Cleansing agents were formulated from a variety of ingredients, creating distinct scents. She chose one popular with the warriors and waited for her reluctant guest.

He undressed with his back to her, bending from the waist as he shed his pants. His back tapered dramatically to lean hips and long muscular legs. His buttocks were sculpted

and dusted with a light sprinkling of gold hair. How odd. Most of the Perrlain had little or no body hair.

After raking his burnished hair with his fingers, he slowly turned around. She had never met a man more reluctant to reveal his nudity. Most of the men in her tribe strutted and drew attention to their endowment in every way possible.

"I picked out a soap I think you'll like. If the fragrance does not suit you, there are others we can try."

With a stiff nod, he crossed the clearing, his stride long and rolling, like the powerful jungle cats who prowled the mountains beyond their valley. Everything about him seemed larger and more... Her wandering gaze came to rest on the apex of his thighs and her thoughts scattered. From a nest of wiry gold curls sprang the longest, thickest cock she had ever seen in her life. He was easily as long as Baylott and thicker than Kapali -- and he was not yet fully hard!

Swallowing her shock, she turned back to the basket and fiddled with the pots and jars. Were all the men of his tribe... The rest of his body was... Holy Divinity, she had never imagined men grew to such proportions.

His warm hand lightly touched her shoulder. "I noticed I'm quite a bit taller than anyone else in your tribe and I easily outweigh your largest warrior. I suspected the rest of me was -- unusual. I'm not shy, Serena. I didn't want to frighten you."

"I'm not frightened." She shook away her discomfort and straightened her shoulders. "Your body is perfectly proportioned as the Deity intended. If my foolishness embarrassed you, I apologize."

He turned her face until she looked into his eyes. "I'm not embarrassed."

"Good." She pulled the carved stopper out of the jar and handed it to him. He was her brother's guest, a guest of their village. It was her responsibility as Lutton's sister, and as a priestess, to make him comfortable. "Do you find this pleasing?"

After inhaling the scent, he passed it back to her. "It's very nice."

"All right. Move closer to the vines." She reached beyond him and raised the small trap door, releasing water into the oblong dispenser. The carved wooden end had been pierced by a multitude of small holes. Rivulets flowed from the holes showering Matt with tepid water.

"Oh, I expected it to be much hotter. This is nice."

"We can control the temperature, but most find this a soothing combination."

He raised his arms and smoothed his hair away from his face. The muscles in his back rippled, drawing her gaze down to his behind. What would those tight ass cheeks feel like beneath her hands as he thrust between her thighs? She had seen women claw welts in their lover's flesh in just such a way.

There were no set customs for how a visitor's bath was to be attended. Some priestesses stayed back, discreetly handing their charge the supplies. Others not only joined the

outsider, but washed them with their hands and pleased them with their mouths as part of the bathing ritual.

How would he react if she touched him? “Would you like me to wash your hair?”

“Only if I can wash yours.”

Excitement curled through her belly. Her body hadn’t felt any of these sensations since before her ascension. He didn’t know her shame. He only knew her as Lutton’s sister. Perhaps this was what she needed. Someone untainted by all that had gone before.

“That seems like a fair compromise.” She filled her palm with the amber liquid then set the jar aside. Moving up behind him she raised her hands to his hair.

“Can you reach me?”

“Barely.” She swayed toward him as she scrubbed her fingers through his thick hair. Her nipples brushed against his back and lather cascaded along his spine, caressing her skin as it passed.

He turned in one smooth motion and pulled her against his chest. Holding her there with one arm, he found the water with the other and shifted his body back under the spray. “That smells wonderful.”

His eyes were closed and his hand swept up and down her back. It wasn’t an embrace really, so why did she find it so stimulating?

“My turn,” he said in a soft, throaty rasp. His chest brushed against her as he bent and retrieved the jar from the surrounding grass. Following her lead, he coated his hands with soap and then worked his fingers through her long strands. “Your hair is incredible. I thought Miranda’s was beautiful, until I saw yours.”

“They cut her hair when she was banished. She endured it in stoic silence, but Orillia and I wept.” His fingers stilled against her scalp. “I’m sorry. We aren’t supposed to speak of those events.”

“Why was she banished? She told me that she was no longer welcome among her people, but she never explained why.”

“The women in my family move freely in the gifts of the Deity. Miranda was unusually gifted even for one of my kin. Instead of accepting her calling and entering the Order, as was her destined path, she --”

He placed his fingers against her lips. “You’re reciting what you’ve heard others say. Why do you think Miranda was banished?”

“She refused to follow customs simply because they were customary. ‘That’s the way it has always been’ was never acceptable justification for my sister and the elders couldn’t allow her attitude to influence others.”

“They were afraid of her.”

“They still are. Echoes of her discontent ripple to this day.”

"That would please her greatly if she knew."

"She knows. Orillia has made sure she learns of all her inadvertent triumphs."

Serena lapsed into silence as he dragged his fingers through her hair, working his way from scalp to tip again and again. How could something so simple feel so...decadent? She closed her eyes and felt the lather slide between the cheeks of her bottom and down between her legs.

His fingers brushed against her back and over her hips. She swayed into him, amazed at how easily their bodies slid together. His knee insinuated itself between her thighs and she gasped.

With the gentlest of tugs, he pulled her head back and sealed his mouth over hers. His other hand cupped her breast and Serena trembled. His lips pressed against hers, his tongue teasing without actually entering her mouth. She touched her tongue tip to his, frustrated by his patience. His mouth opened, inviting her to play. He tasted hot and foreign, exotic and wild.

She pushed to her tiptoes and framed his face with her hands, deepening the kiss and grinding her mound against his thigh. Heat unfurled within her and her nipples tingled.

Searing blue eyes pierced her memory. Malice, lust, and hate shattered the sensual spell. With a little whimper, she dragged her mouth from his and twisted to the side.

"I'm sorry," he whispered. "I didn't mean to frighten you." His arm remained around her waist and he pressed against her back. "Relax. Let's rinse the soap from your hair." He spread her hair over his arm and let the water saturate its length.

His touch changed. He was gentle, yet impersonal. She felt the sweet ache receding and she closed her eyes against the loss. Turning back around, she placed her hands on his chest and looked into his eyes.

"I don't want to be afraid. I can't allow myself to be afraid."

"But you are. Fear is seldom willed into submission. It takes time and --"

"I have given it time. I am out of time." She covered her face with her hands as shame washed over her. "I don't know what else to do."

His arms enfolded her and he pressed her cheek against his chest, tucking her head under his chin. "Why must you *do* anything?"

"If I can't overcome this fear, I'll fail my final assessment," she admitted. Why was she telling this stranger her most shameful secret? Standing in his light embrace felt natural and right.

"Are you certain you want to enter the Order? Maybe your fear stems from something more fundamental. If you remain afraid, you can avoid an unwanted calling."

She eased back and met his gaze. "Now you sound like Miranda."

“If you honestly want to conquer this, I’ll help you. But you have to want to face what’s frightening you. No one can do it for you. I can support you and guide you, but ultimately *you* will make the change.”

“Do you understand what’s wrong with me?”

His smile was gentle, his gaze knowing. “I have a pretty good idea. You stare at my body as if you want to devour me, yet one kiss leaves you trembling with fear. I may not be a trained therapist, but I can figure out what that’s about.”

“Are you sure Miranda didn’t send you to me?”

“I think she sent us to each other.”

## Chapter Three

“You must transform me!”

Drey Fon stiffened at the command and turned to face Ratauni. Their relationship was symbiotic. She couldn’t access her powers from this dimension without his Wikoli energy, and her demonic essence unleashed abilities in him no ordinary sorcerer could achieve.

“I *must* do what pleases me and nothing more.” He clasped his hands behind his back and stared boldly into her eyes. “I summoned you, not the other way around.”

“Then send me back,” she snapped, demonic light undulating beneath her delicate features. “I would rather return to my own dimension than serve a fool.”

With a furious snarl, he swung at her. She didn’t even flinch. His hand passed right through her face and his skin instantly blistered. He howled and clasped his hand to his chest, rocking back and forth.

“My existence might be linked with yours, *mortal*, but I am not your slave. I can sense the Perrlain priestess growing stronger. Why do you hesitate? You cannot penetrate their protection spells. Chaos knows you’ve tried.”

“Each time I allow you to transform, the Order is given another opportunity to determine the source of my power.”

“So what? They are helpless against you, against us.”

He wished he shared her confidence. If the Order isolated the source of his power, they could combat his actions far more accurately. They knew someone among the Wikoli had developed abilities beyond the reach of ordinary sorcery. But they had yet to identify which of the mystics had strayed from the true path, or in which direction they had wandered. There were seven demonic dimensions, each offering unique abilities and distinct risks. Few mystics found the benefits equal to the dangers.

“I have one last incantation I wish to try before I send you.”

She harrumphed and crossed the dwelling, stripping out of her robe as she went. Her corporeal form was pleasing. He had shaped her appearance as he summoned her, so it was not surprising that she looked very much like Serena.

Unfortunately, the resemblance ended there. Ratauni -- a vastly abbreviated form of her demonic name -- was cruel and demanding, aggressive and impatient. He had wisely anchored her existence to this secluded lodge deep in the jungle separating Wikoli from Perrlain. She could only leave when he allowed her to select another shape. Even then the transformation was temporary and her range limited.

She caressed her breasts as she moved toward the fire pit. Despite the sweltering heat, Ratauni insisted a fire burn continually. She straddled the tiny blaze and closed her eyes as her flesh absorbed the heat. Swaying and undulating, she fucked the flames. There was no other way to describe what she was doing. Her hands moved from her breasts to her thighs in a hypnotizing pattern, all the while her hips rocked and her abdomen quivered.

He turned from the spectacle with a groan and gathered what he needed to invoke the incantation. Serena. Her name wrapped around him and drifted through him, speeding his pulse and hardening his cock. From before her conception, she had been destined for him.

His mentor, Gyan, had spent the majority of his life translating the ancient scrolls. He had discovered spells and secret rites the others abandoned centuries before. Gyan had first summoned a being from the outer realm when Drey Fon was but a boy. Drey Fon could still remember the stench and the terror.

When Drey Fon was fourteen, Gyan sat him down and explained what he intended. The Perrlain Order had always been stronger than the Wikoli. And the Deity was especially generous with the females of Naneka's bloodline. Gyan would appear to the chief's mate in the form of her husband and plant a female child in her womb.

"This female child will mature into a woman of exceptional power and beauty. And on the night of her ascension, *you* will take her sacrifice."

"They will never allow such a thing. How can I --"

"The same way Naneka will allow me to fuck her. Illusion."

Drey Fon shivered. That one word had defined the purpose for his life. He learned everything he could about creating illusions, surpassing even his mentor's skill.

The true danger of disturbing the demonic realms had been revealed to Drey Fon in graphic detail six summers past. Gyan opened a portal to the third dimension and a hostile entity emerged. In less than a heartbeat, the creature tore him limb from limb and disappeared back through the portal. The grisly incident motivated Drey Fon as nothing else could. He studied the ancient texts, assimilating every scrap of information.

Ratauni cried out, drawing Drey Fon's attention away from the past. She knelt now, one knee on either side of the fire pit. The flames lapped at her pussy, while she trembled and moaned.



He took a shallow basin and covered the bottom with murky water. Bribing Serena's guard had not been easy. Even under the influence of Ratauni's mind tricks, Vitik refused to directly endanger his mistress. A jar of Serena's bathwater had seemed on odd request, but the warrior saw no harm in complying, especially when the demon bitch rewarded him with her skillful mouth.

Stirring the bathwater with his fingertips, Drey Fon recited the incantation. The ancient syllables rolled across his tongue, summoning erotic images and releasing primal sensations. His brain echoed the steady thumping of his heart.

Focus.

Remember.

Project.

He formed a perfect likeness of Serena within his mind, accurate in every detail. She stood before him naked, arms raised in supplication as he caressed her most intimate flesh. Her scent, the softness of her feminine folds, he remembered everything.

*Find her, meld with her, slip beyond her defenses.* The command came from within him, yet the voice wasn't his, the words were spoken in the language of the ancients. He shuddered and closed his eyes, holding his fingers still within the water, absorbing her energy.

For a long moment, he hung suspended in black tranquility. Her signal eroded the darkness, the sensations faint and distorted. Arms held her, lips caressed, and desire began to build.

No! She must not overcome her fear until the full moon. All of his plans would be forfeit if someone else completed her ascension. He saturated her mind with fury, malice, and hate, snuffing out the flicker of passion before it took hold.

The fragile link snapped like a dry twig. He snatched his fingers from the water and opened his eyes. "She is with someone, someone who does not frighten her."

Ratauni laughed and he balled his hands into fists. Why did the she-demon persist in provoking him?

"I thought you had perfected the compulsion," she said. "If her fear wanes, you are doomed."

"Thank you for that needless reminder. I had completely forgotten what's at stake."

"Transform me. I'll find out who stirred her passion."

"Didn't the fire satisfy you?" He pushed away from the workbench and stalked toward her.

"Nothing satisfies me for long. This dimension is making me crazy."

He suspected her insanity had begun long before he summoned her, but she was even less interested in his opinions than he was in hers. "On your knees." She dropped to her

knees and lowered her shoulders toward the floor, presenting her sex in blatant invitation. "That's not what I meant and you know it. I want your mouth."

"And I want your cock ramming into me."

How could he argue with that? He parted his robe and knelt behind her, tracing her slit with the tip of his cock. Her body was always hot and accommodating, but her flesh had retained some of the fire's heat. He groaned, searing pleasure rising along his shaft and bursting in his belly. She thrust back, taking him deep with one forceful motion.

He cried out. Her cunt tightened, accenting the burn. His prick would end up as blistered as his fingers if this bitch had her way. Grasping her hips, he plowed into her, hard and fast. She was wild by the third stroke, clawing the ground and tossing her head.

It would serve her right if he held himself back, drawing out her hunger. She couldn't transform until he came. But she was tight and hot, and he was restless. Digging his fingers into her sleek hips, he imagined Serena bowing low before him, abandoned to her savage desire.

"Now, my love, now!" Serena's urgent plea completed the fantasy, and Drey Fon lost control. Thrusting to the balls, he pumped his hot cum deep into the demon.

She screamed. The sound twisted, transforming from plaintive human cry into the frantic call of a bird. Her body fluctuated between substance and energy. His hands sank to the floor as the shift rolled from her feet to her head, reshaping her in one smooth motion.

Wings flapped, stirring dirt and ash, stinging his eyes. He crawled to the door and pulled it open. With one last cry, the hawk escaped into the hazy twilight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Serena strolled beside Matt, amazed that she still felt comfortable with him. Always before, after a failed attempt at intimacy, she could hardly look the person in the eyes. Matt had kissed her and touched her, and still she had the irrational urge to snuggle against his side.

He looked wonderful in a woven *soratti*, the simple garment worn by the majority of her people. The wraparound style accented his lean hips and long, muscular legs. And his chest should never be covered. It was disrespectful to the Deity not to display something so appealing.

"How long will you be staying in our village?" she asked as they reached the outer ring of dwellings.

"I'm not sure. I didn't realize outsiders were no longer welcome." A teasing smile curved one corner of his mouth.

"You aren't an outsider. You're my brother's friend, remember."

They reached the center common a short time later and his attention drifted to a group of children wrestling in the grass. Serena took advantage of his distraction to contact Orillia.

*Change of plans. I'm back in the village. You can release the guards whenever you're finished with them.*

A moment passed before Orillia responded. She was obviously more actively involved in their distraction than she had been the first time Serena reached out to her.

*Were you...successful?*

Serena could almost picture her sister and the guards. Orillia loved nothing better than being pressed between the bodies of two strong men.

*Let's just say I've made some encouraging progress. I'll explain everything when you return.*

"Are you all right?"

She smiled at Matt and tucked her hair behind her ears. "I'm fine. I was just checking in with Orillia."

"Are all Perrlain telepathic?"

"No. Many in the Order can speak mind-to-mind, but not all."

"That's right. The women in your family are particularly gifted by the Deity."

"Are you mocking me?"

"Not at all. After meeting Miranda, I have no doubt your abilities are legitimate." His hand came to rest at the small of her back, his touch light and casual. "What are your abilities?"

"I'm a healer, of sorts. It's..."

"Complicated?" He finished for her.

Lutton came into view across the grassy common. Hyalee and Kapali walked just behind him, lost in conversation.

"Who is with the high priestess?"

"Her brother. His name is Kapali and he is high priest of the Order."

"How does one become a high priest or priestess?"

She glanced up at him. Was simple curiosity motivating his questions or did he have some other purpose for wanting to know? If she knew why he was here, she might be less suspicious. The Order's practices were well documented. She saw no reason not to explain.

"Every five years a vote is taken among the Order. Both Hyalee and Kapali were recently chosen for the second time."

"Matt, my old friend," Lutton said with a facetious smile. "Why don't I take you on a tour of the village while Serena speaks with Hyalee?"

"Is that all right with you?"

"Of course." His concern was sweet, but she had no reason to fear Hyalee.

Matt fell into step beside Lutton and they moved off down the path.

"Where are your guards?" Kapali asked.

Hyalee's curious gaze echoed the question, yet her expression revealed more. Speculation and...satisfaction?

"Did you send Matt to the steam caves knowing I was down there?" she asked the high priestess.

"If your guards were doing their job, it shouldn't have been an issue," Kapali muttered. Ever since her ascension, he had been more protective than Lutton.

"Have either you or Orillia communicated with your other sister since your ascension?" Hyalee asked.

A warm breeze ruffled Serena's hair, brushing the long strands across her cheek. "I haven't, but I can't speak for Orillia. What does that have to do with Matt?"

"*She* sent him here."

"I know. He told me."

"Did he tell you why?"

"He said it was complicated." She crossed her arms, defensiveness welling within her. Apparently, Matt had told Hyalee far more than that cryptic sentence. "Why did you send an outsider to me?"

"Would you rather I assign him to another guide?"

"He has come for spiritual guidance?"

"In a manner of speaking. Unlike the pilgrims, he is not here to be entertained. He needs a soul seer. Do you know of any other?"

His strands had flared without her summoning them. He touched her and she felt no fear. How could she disregard these signs? The Deity had brought them together. The ultimate purpose had yet to be revealed, but she couldn't ignore the opportunity.

"You know you'll be expected to demonstrate your skills. It's the final step in any ascension."

She nodded. "Matt is to be my assignment?"

"Yes. You have until the full moon to balance his soul stream. Part of the assignment is to make him feel comfortable enough to confide in you. You will never be able to help him until you discover the true source of the disruption."

Hyalee paused to look at her brother. Silent communication passed between them. Serena couldn't hear their thoughts, but she had no doubt they were arguing. Kapali shook his head and stormed off in the direction they'd come. Hyalee had won that round.

"You don't have much time," the high priestess went on. "Kapali will instruct your guards to take up perimeter positions. I took the liberty of moving Matt's possessions to your cottage. He will be your guest."

Serena started to object. Her cottage had only one room -- and one bed. "Is that wise?"

Hyalee smiled, a knowing gleam flashing in her eyes. "I think it's essential to your success."

The high priestess left Serena alone in the village common. Twilight had faded to darkness and people were congregating around communal meals. A shadow drifted across the moon, drawing Serena's gaze upward. A large bird was circling the common, an occasional flap of its mighty wings keeping it airborne. How odd. Birds of prey tended to remain where they could stalk their victims, open fields and barren mountainsides. Except for the common, the entire village was crowded with overlapping trees. So what had caught the hawk's attention?

Disturbed by the incongruity, a shiver passed down her spine.

"Now I'm nice and cool and you're shivering." Matt moved up beside her. Lutton was nowhere in sight.

"That was a quick tour."

"I believe it served its purpose. What did the high priestess want with you?"

"You're going to be my guest during your stay in the village." She made a sweeping gesture to her right. "My cottage is this way."

He caught her hand and brought it to his lips. "I don't need to stay in your cottage. I can camp nearby or --"

"Inhospitable creatures roam this area at night. You'll be safer inside my cottage."

"And what about you? What will make you feel safe?"

"I'm hoping we can discover that together."

\* \* \* \* \*

Matt accepted the bowl of fruit chunks, nuts, and smoked fish from Serena. His nutrient converter allowed him to process food into energy, although the highly concentrated protein paste he had in his backpack provided a longer lasting charge.

She knelt across the fire pit from him, picking at her own bowl of food.

"Was there some sort of banquet going on tonight? I noticed people gathering in front of several of the larger cottages."

After handing him a wooden cup filled with fragrant juice, she explained. "My people live in a true community. Only the elders have designated mates and they are primarily for the purpose of procreation. Everyone else offers support and companionship to the entire tribe."

"There are no families, no couples?"

"There are no divisions. We share all divine blessings freely and celebrate the wonder of discovery."

"What if two people want to form a couple? Is it forbidden?"

“Of course not. Some of the Perrlain express their sexuality with only one or two other people, but it’s far more common for them to find pleasure with a variety of partners.”

“You said the elders have designated mates. Why the double standard?”

“Being an elder requires wisdom, intelligence, and divine gifts. Many of these gifts are passed from parent to child, so the elders must choose who they breed with carefully. Once the children are born, thereby securing a future for the entire tribe, both parents are free to resume normal sexual activities.”

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He suppressed the wayward expression, not wanting her to think he was mocking her. Few societies would consider what she’d just described “normal.” The rest of the coalition put such an emphasis on monogamy. Permanent relationships were a goal few attained, but most of the people in his acquaintance spent their lives trying to find “the one.”

“What about children?” He set the bowl aside, far more interested in the conversation.

“Children are raised together and supervised by a variety of people. They’re nurtured and taught skills that allow them to contribute to the community.” She took a sip of her juice and shifted her legs to one side. “The Perrlain have no possessions. Everything you see belongs to the entire tribe.”

“How does everyone know where to sleep?”

She chuckled. “You’re making it far too complicated. We sleep wherever we choose and share pleasure with those we find pleasing. It is hard for us to understand why others twist sexuality with a combination of reverence and shame. Fucking is natural and affection should flow as freely as water.”

“Your people are never jealous?”

“Jealous of what? We don’t *own* anything.”

“None of the other women are jealous of your beauty or your divine abilities?”

“My gifts belong to the people. Everyone in the Order is available to anyone who needs help. That is our purpose, our calling.”

“And your beauty?”

She set her bowl aside and turned toward the open window. A warm breeze blew through the cottage, rippling her hair. “If I inspire any emotion, it’s pity. What sort of priestess is afraid to be touched?”

He doubted she’d meant it as an invitation. Still, he was unable to resist. With one long stride, he stepped across the fire pit and sat beside her. “Can you tell me what happened during your ascension?”

Gathering her hair over one shoulder, she worked the long strands into a loose braid. “You came to us for help, not to be burdened by my...inadequacies.”

“You are far from inadequate.” He brushed her jaw with the back of his knuckles, not risking a more intimate touch. “How about if we play a game?”

“What sort of game?” She turned her head and looked into his eyes.

“I’ll ask you a question, and you can either answer the question or let me touch you.”

“That seems like a rather one-sided game.”

“Okay, we’ll alternate. I’ll ask you a question; then you ask me a question. We each get the option of paying a physical forfeit, as opposed to providing the answer.”

“Do we get to know what the physical forfeit is before we decide?”

“That only seems fair.”

She drew her legs up in front of her, carefully covering them with her robe. “Who goes first?”

“Ordinarily I’d insist the lady go first, but I am your guest, after all.”

She smiled. “What’s your question?”

“Have you ever had an orgasm?”

“You’re moving right to the heart of the matter. And what’s the forfeit?”

“I get to kiss you on the mouth for as long as I want.”

Her gaze focused on his lips and her tongue peeked out, barely touching her lower lip. God, he hoped she let him kiss her.

“Yes, I’ve had an orgasm.”

“Damn. That was a waste.” He laughed at her horrified expression. “Not your orgasm. My question. Let me see if I can do better this time.”

“It’s my turn.”

“So it is.”

“How do you make your living?”

A much better question than his had been. He wasn’t opposed to explaining his unusual line of work, yet he felt compelled to ask, “What’s my forfeit?”

“You lie on your back and untie your soratti; then I caress your cock and your balls until I’ve appeased my curiosity. I won’t allow you to come, but you have to let me touch you for as long as it pleases me.”

“Have you played this game before?” He couldn’t quite keep the laughter out of his tone. “How about if I answer your question while you explore my body? I would love to have your hands on me.”

“Even if I don’t let you come?”

“Orgasm is the destination, but I’ve always enjoyed the entire journey.”

“All right.” Her crystal blue gaze caressed its way from his face to his lap and back. “We’ll play a different game. I’ll touch you anywhere you want, for as long as you want, as long as you tell me anything I want to know.”

Desire rushed through him in a tingling wave. He was supposed to be seducing her! “It sounds like a one-sided game.”

“Not at all. I want to know more about you, and you want my hands on your body. Why shouldn’t we both get what we want?”



## Chapter Four

Serena held her breath as Matt moved across the cottage and sat on the edge of the bed. Many of her people slept in woven hammocks; however, she had always preferred the comfort of a bed. It was a frivolous extravagance, but she was certain the Deity would forgive her. Stuffed with palm fronds and dense firmine fibers, the mattress provided both softness and support.

“Do you sleep here every night?”

“This cottage was assigned for my use as my ascension drew near. The Order wanted to make sure I had plenty of time to meditate and make preparations without the usual distractions. Why do you ask?”

“I’m still trying to comprehend how your people live. It’s fascinating really, but so different from the rest of the coalition. Are you sure you’re descendants of Shardrake?”

The pilgrims had been equally intrigued by the social structure of the Perrlain. It shouldn’t surprise her that Matt was struggling with the concepts. “Do you have a permanent mate?”

“Of course not. I wouldn’t have kissed you if I was bound to another.”

“Were your parents joined only with each other?”

“No.” It was apparent from the resignation in his tone that he had already realized where the conversation was headed. “I can’t think of anyone I know who successfully formed a relationship that lasted a lifetime.”

“Instead of complicating our lives with unrealistic expectations, we allow relationships to ebb and flow. No pressure, no guilt. We focus on creating a loving environment for everyone as opposed to isolating ourselves in family units.” She motioned toward his soratti. “I thought we were going to play a game.”

“If you won’t let me touch you, can I at least look? You are incredibly beautiful.”

She smiled. His desire far more affecting than his flattery. "You first."

He untied the soratti and dropped it beside the bed before he settled on his back. "I'm entirely at your mercy."

Which was why she wasn't afraid.

Slipping out of her robe, she hung it from a hook on the wall of the cottage before joining him on the bed. He raised his arms and folded his hands behind his head. The position showcased the thick muscles in his arms and the dramatic narrowing of his torso. She trailed her fingertip from the base of his throat to his navel, marveling on how far it was between the two.

"Are all the men in your tribe so large?"

He chuckled. "Are we talking height or something else?"

She pinched his nipple, intentionally ignoring his impressive endowments. "Forget I asked. I want you to answer my first question. How do you make your living?"

After a short pause, he said, "I developed toys that assisted people in expressing their sexuality. I've made simple dildos, full service androids, and everything in between."

"People have sex with...machines?"

His abdomen tensed and his expression hardened. He was clearly displeased by her reaction. "It's as hard for you to understand my world, as it is for me to understand yours. I worked at a place where people went to experience all sorts of pleasure. Technology played a big part in the services we provided."

"Technology?" She sat back on her heels, her fingers splayed against his hip. "What sort of technology?"

"Have you ever pretended you were somewhere else while you were making love?"

"If that were the case, I would find a more attentive lover."

He shook his head. "I didn't mean it like that. A simulator tricks the body into thinking it's anywhere the person wants to go, a moonlit beach or a mountaintop, or suspended in outer space."

"How very odd."

"And the person can be with anyone they choose, a celebrity, or a historical figure, or their college sweetheart."

"But they aren't really with anyone at all. Isn't that what you're telling me?"

"Some people are more comfortable... I don't know how to make you understand. You're so far removed from all of the complications of my world."

"My world has its own complications." He seemed frustrated by her attitude, but she wasn't sure how to appease him. She certainly didn't want to spend all night comparing their cultures.

"Have you ever known a woman who enjoys being with two men at the same time?"

Heat crawled up her neck and she nodded. "My sister, Orillia, enjoys nothing better."

"It's a common fantasy, yet few women want the emotional challenge of actually being involved with two men. So, I created a pleasure bot that can provide that sensation...and many others."

She licked her lips and stroked his chest, unable to meet his gaze. It was obvious he wanted her to see the appeal in such devices, but she refused to be dishonest. "Orillia gave me an artificial cock. She thought if I brought myself to orgasm, I would feel more confident the next time I allowed someone to touch me. The toy felt cold and... How can anyone find pleasure with such a thing?"

He sat and caught her hand as she tried to pull away. "What if it hadn't been cold? What if it pulsed inside your pussy and vibrated against your clit?"

"Vibrated?" She pressed her thighs together, feeling restless and unsure.

"I know you can't imagine it and I have no way to demonstrate." He wrapped his arm around her waist and guided her onto his lap, one knee on either side of his hips. "Didn't you ever play make-believe when you were a child?"

"I don't know what that means."

He outlined her lips with his fingertip. "I'm not sure if that's admirable or the saddest thing I've ever heard. You've never used your imagination to..." He shook away his speculation with a sigh. "You live in paradise. Why would you need to pretend you were somewhere else?"

"No culture is perfect. Our worlds are just different."

"I guess I hadn't realized how different."

She mimicked his touch, her gaze focused on his lips. "Does this mean you no longer want to play my game?"

"You can touch me all you want, but I need to touch you, too." He swept his fingers through her hair and pressed a kiss to each corner of her mouth. "You lead. I'll follow."

She wasn't sure what he meant until she moved her hand to his shoulder. His hand settled on her shoulder as well. She stroked the side of his neck and his hand repeated the caress as if they were connected by an invisible leash.

Intrigued, she scooted back and sat between his thighs, wrapping her legs around his hips. Would he mirror every move she made? She explored his torso, his shoulders and back, mesmerized by his echoing touch. She squeezed his thighs and he squeezed hers. She followed the contour of his pectoral muscles and he traced the upper curve of her breasts.

"Don't stop now," he whispered. "Show me how you want to be touched."

His throaty words made her bold. She brushed her thumb over his nipple, knowing his fingers would be half a heartbeat behind. Did her hands feel this good on him as his did on her? She caught his nipple between her thumb and forefinger and waited for his response. She squeezed, then squeezed harder. He obediently mirrored each move.

Excitement curled within her, insidious yet intense. Not wanting to lose the warmth of his hands, she caressed her way around to his back and pressed her breasts against his chest. Her nipples had hardened beneath his touch and his chest hair rasped against the sensitive peaks.

“Why does this feel so good?” she murmured.

“Don’t think about why. Just accept that it’s good.”

Tilting her head, she covered his mouth with hers. She caressed his lips and he nibbled. The sharp little bites sent sparks of pleasure bouncing down her spine. He was technically breaking the rules, but she no longer cared. She parted her lips and he accepted the invitation with a slow, curling sweep of his tongue.

“Touch me,” she whispered into his mouth. “Touch me now.”

His hand slipped between their bodies as the kiss went on and on. She clung to his shoulders, yet arched back, offering his hand freer movement. With feathery strokes, he swept from her breasts to her belly and back. Each descent brought him closer to his target. He caressed her mound with the backs of his fingers, his touch teasing and light. She wiggled, trying to bring one of his fingers in direct contact with her clit.

Ever so slowly, he traced her slit, delving between her folds a bit more with each pass. Ruthlessly patient and undeniably skilled, he waited for her anxiety to pass before he moved on to the next level of intimacy.

His questing fingers reached the entrance to her body. Instead of thrusting inward, he turned his wrist and accented her need with the teasing swirl of his fingers. She rotated her hips, following his hand, aching for sweet penetration.

Hot, melting sensations cascaded through her abdomen. She whimpered, then gasped, as his thumb passed back and forth across her clit. “Please.” She breathed the word into his mouth. He held her open, while his long middle finger pushed into her throbbing core. All the while his thumb continued its gentle massage.

A sharp cry sounded from the trees outside the cottage. She tore her mouth from his and looked into the night. “What was that?”

“It sounded like a bird.”

She shuddered, remembering the hawk. Leaves rustled and branches snapped and the angry cry sounded again.

“What’s the matter?” With a barely discernable sigh, he moved his hand to her thigh and waited for her to relax. “You told me yourself there are all kinds of creatures in the jungle.”

“Something doesn’t feel right.”

He turned her face from the window. “Things were feeling pretty perfect a few seconds ago.” She tried to crawl off his lap. He caught her hips, keeping her from retreating completely. “Talk to me, Serena. What happened that night?”

Just the mention of her ascension compounded her fear. All she had to do was close her eyes and it came back in vivid detail. The paralyzing dread, the flash of Wikoli eyes, and the aching isolation as Kapali accepted her sacrifice. Why couldn't she banish the memories or get beyond this fear?

"Nothing can harm you here," he said emphatically. "I will keep you safe. Do you believe that?"

"I want to."

"Am I bigger than any person in this village?"

She smiled just a little. "Bigger and taller."

"Would it surprise you to learn I'm stronger than most people my size?"

"Anyone who looks at you can tell you're strong."

"I'm also familiar with several forms of hand-to-hand combat."

"Are you trying to replace my guards?" She fidgeted, feeling awkward now that the fleeting moment of passion had ebbed.

"I'm trying to convince you that you're safe. I'll protect you from any threat, including insane birds."

"Physical strength can't protect me from evil, and the entire Order wasn't powerful enough to keep me safe. I don't want to talk about this."

"I think you need to."

She shook her head. "It won't help."

"You either tell me what happened that night, or we're going to try a vastly different strategy." His voice took on a steely edge she had never heard before.

"What are you talking about?"

"Sometimes people must be forced to face their fears before they can overcome them. I would prefer to guide you through this tenderly. But twice now you have allowed your mind to overwhelm the natural instincts of your body."

She looked around the cottage, anywhere but at him. He was the epitome of a virile male, strength and unabashed sexuality. How could she not respond to him?

"How will you force me to face my fears?"

"Force was the wrong word in this instance. I will use your body to overwhelm your mind, allowing you to see beyond your fear."

"It won't work. Others have tried."

He swept her beneath him in the blink of an eye, pinning her arms to the mattress above her head. "I will not hurt you, but I will not stop until you surrender to the pleasure." Shifting both wrists into one large hand, he cupped her chin with his fingers. "Do you trust me?"

"This has nothing to do with trust."

"It has everything to do with trust." He brushed her lips with his thumb and stared into her eyes. "I will not hurt you. Do you believe me?"

She nodded.

"I need to hear you say it."

"I know you won't hurt me."

"Open your mouth."

His mouth covered hers as she parted her lips. The kiss was dark and demanding, so very different from the ones that had gone before. He tasted her and shared his breath with her as he rubbed his chest against her breasts.

He released her hands for a moment as he shifted her legs over his arms. Before she had any idea what he intended, his hands pushed up along her back, then shot out and curved around her upper arms. He pulled her arms down and under her body, crossing her wrists at the small of her back.

She wiggled and twisted, but her own weight restrained her as much as his light hold. The position arched her back, thrust her breasts outward, and brazenly spread her legs. He was firmly lodged between her thighs, making it impossible to arrange herself more modestly.

He nibbled a tingling path down one side of her neck.

"You don't have to hold me down. I won't fight you."

"Yes, you will." His lips continued on to the upper swell of one breast. "Relax. Prove me wrong."

How was she supposed to relax in this absurd position? He closed his lips around her nipple and suckled. She closed her hands into fists, torn between her need to stroke his hair and pound on his back. How hard could it be to surrender to pleasure? She had been so close before.

His lips were warm. He combined firm suction with the velvet rasp of his tongue. She closed her eyes and his mouth released her.

"Keep your eyes open. Watch me, if you can. It's important that you know who's touching you."

He waited for her eyes to open before he returned to her breast. His tongue flicked across her nipple as his gaze bore into hers. Determination was clear in his stare, but she saw possessive passion building as well. He caught the moist tip between his teeth, squeezing until she gasped. The sharp sensation blazed through her uncertainty, focusing her attention entirely on her body and the sensations being created there.

The pressure on her arms increased as he moved lower. She was spread before him, open and accessible. She was helpless against his strength and vulnerable to his driving purpose, yet she felt completely liberated. He nipped his way across her quivering tummy

and along the inside of her thigh. Shifting her hands into one fist, he freed his other for more intimate pursuits.

“Say my name.” His warm breath wafted across her folds as he gave her the directive.

“Matt.”

He parted her outer lips with his finger and thumb, then pressed his mouth against her folds. “So soft.” His tongue flicked against her flesh and circled her opening. Her clit throbbed, anxious for attention.

“Oh.” She panted and lifted into his torrid kiss. Tension gathered, curling along her inner muscles and radiating out through her abdomen. Her eyes drifted shut as an orgasm neared and blue light ignited behind her lids.

Icy fear swept away the pleasure moments before it burst within her. She hissed out a breath and tossed her head. Would this never end?

Matt didn’t stop. His mouth moved against her, his tongue circling her clit. She tugged against his hold, more humiliated than afraid. “It won’t work.”

Ignoring her whispered protest, he thrust his fingers into her pussy. He lashed her clit with his tongue and flexed his arms, shifting her legs to his shoulders. Cream flowed through her passage, allowing his fingers to slide freely. She tightened her inner muscles as he pulled out and relaxed as he thrust in. Each stroke of his tongue hurled sparks of pleasure up through her body.

*Close, so close.*

Images flared, echoes and memories. With a cry of helpless frustration, she felt the tension bleed from her body again. She turned her head to the side and clenched her teeth. It was no use. She was broken, damaged, useless...

Pushing to his knees, he allowed one of her legs to slide back down his arm. He pulled her up and spread her wide, angling her pelvis for a more intimate invasion. His fingers drew out of her passage and he drilled into her with his tongue. The movement was so demanding, so possessive, she whimpered. She could see his face again, and his expression was every bit as savage as his actions.

“Look at me.” His lips moved against her sex as he made the demand.

Their gazes locked and he fucked her with his tongue. Her inner muscles contracted and her clit throbbed. *Yes!* The tingling pressure began to build again. In and out, in and out, his tongue disappeared into her body, then emerged coated with her cream.

Suspended from him and controlled by him, she was left with no option but surrender. Anxiety crept in around her and he caught her clit between her lips, sucking on the sensitive bud until a red haze floated before her eyes.

He released her wrists and moved both his hands to her hips. Holding her steady, he began a rhythmic combination. He pushed into her cunt with his tongue, then flicked across her clit. Flick, thrust, flick thrust, over and over.

She tossed her head, lost in the sensual onslaught. He drove her beyond thought, beyond worry, beyond fear. She screamed and panted, then screamed again.

Sensations blasted up through her, then tumbled down, releasing a reservoir of suppressed emotion. Tears trailed from the corner of her eyes, while her body shook. Hard convulsive bursts gave way to undulating swells. His mouth gentled, caressing her with slow tender strokes. He released her leg and lowered her hips to the bed, kissing his way up her body.

The sexual haze receded and Matt came back into focus. He stretched out on his side and slipped one arm beneath her neck. His other hand brushed along her hairline, wiping away the last of her tears. Desire smoldered in his eyes, yet his touch was soothing, his smile patient and pleased.

“Are you all right?”

It was a foolish question. He had to know she’d just had the most amazing orgasm of her life. She felt alive and happy and...ravenous for more. She wanted to experience all of the pleasures she’d watched others enjoy. She wanted to wrap her legs around his lean hips and feel that massive cock filling her until she screamed with pleasure. “I’ve never been better.” She rolled onto her side and pressed her body against his. Rocking her hips against his, she confirmed her suspicion that he was still hard. “When do I get to return the favor?”

\* \* \* \* \*

A sharp rapping drew Drey Fon’s attention to the door of his secret cottage. He carefully draped a cloth over the ancient scroll before stepping away from his worktable. Had hunters stumbled upon his hideout, and, if so, were they Wikoli or Perrlain? He’d put out the fire shortly after Ratauni transformed. Lamplight or lingering smoke must have alerted someone to his presence.

He crept toward the door, wishing he could see through the barrier. “What do you want?” he called out.

“I believe I recovered something that belongs to you.”

The male voice was familiar, yet he couldn’t identify the speaker. “Just leave it by the door.”

“I’m not sure it would stay.”

He closed his eyes for a moment, lifting his lids as he pulled the door open just wide enough to see into the darkness. His eyes adjusted, yet the hooded figure remained in shadow. The visitor raised his arms and Drey Fon’s heart lurched within his chest. Draped across the stranger’s hands lay a large hawk, the neck lolling at an unnatural angle.

“What have you done?” he cried, taking the bird from the stranger’s outstretched hands.

“I found her like that. Was I wrong to bring her to you?”



Drey Fon rushed into the cottage and the stranger followed him, barring the door once they were inside. “Lower your hood.” Drey Fon knelt beside the fire pit and carefully arranged the bird on the hard packed dirt. “What makes you think this bird belongs to me?”

The stranger raised masculine hands and lowered the wide hood to his shoulders. Drey Fon fought to maintain an expressionless mask, while dread and anticipation twisted within him. What was Kapali doing here?

“I recognized your scent on Serena the night of her ascension. I know you’re the renegade.”

“Why tell me? If you’re so certain, why didn’t you expose me to your elders or at least alert the others in your Order?” Drey Fon reignited the flames with a mental command.

“What makes you think I haven’t? Members of my Order could be surrounding this cottage even now.”

“I would sense such an intrusion. The Perrlain are not the only ones capable of casting protection spells.”

“You didn’t sense me.” Kapali crossed the cottage, his steps stiff and hesitant, despite his brave words.

“If I sensed no impending peril, you are no danger to me. Why are you here?”

“Your illusions are flawless, but they are only illusions. That creature is not of this world. How did she come to be here? How far have your powers progressed?”

Drey Fon recognized the hunger in Kapali’s expression. This was far more than casual curiosity. Kapali was restless and discontent. Still, he was the Perrlain high priest. Shame and obligation could be powerful motivators. It would be foolish to reveal too much too soon.

“Thank you for returning my pet. You may go now.”

Kapali grasped his upper arm, bending down as he snapped, “She is no pet and her lifeforce is nearly gone. Can you save her or not?”

Jerking his arm free of Kapali’s grasp, Drey Fon extended his hands. “I sense no lifeforce left in her. Can you still sense her being?”

“Move aside.”

When he didn’t immediately comply, Kapali shoved him out of the way. Fascinated, Drey Fon watched the high priest. Demonic energy still pulsed through the hawk; Ratauni was in no danger. All Drey Fon had to do was saturate her with Wikoli energy and she’d return to her humanoid form. Could Kapali transform her? Would she respond to Perrlain energy when a Wikoli had summoned her?

Kapali chanted softly, his hands hovering over the bird. “I can sense her being.” He gasped. “She is ravenous. Transform her.”

Drey Fon pushed to his feet and snatched some firmine salve off a nearby shelf. Encased in a length of *malignari* intestine, the oily paste was most commonly used to protect

wounds from infection. It also made a fabulous lubricant. "She responds best to sexual energy. I suggest you feed her."

"But how ..." He made a helpless gesture toward the bird.

"You'll think of something."

With defiance blazing in his eyes, Kapali unfastened his robe and spread his thighs. He coated his palm with the firmine salve, then took his cock in hand.

Drey Fon watched every move, reveling in his enemy's humiliation. "Why are you here?" Facing Kapali across the fire pit, Drey Fon eased into his mind. His mental shields were strong. Drey Fon pushed harder.

"I might be interested in an alliance." His hand slid up and down his thick shaft, his thumb curving across the tip at the end of each stroke.

"What can you offer that I cannot take?"

"Serena." He paused and looked into Drey Fon's eyes. "She is your ultimate goal, isn't she?"

In an instant blur of motion, Drey Fon stood beside the priest, his hand grasping the back of his hair. "You stole her virginity from me! I should kill you for that alone."

"I'll lower my shields and allow you to share the memory. You can feel her tear beneath your first thrust and surround you with her hot pussy."

Drey Fon growled, infuriated by the temptation. "I should not have to share a memory. I was meant to be her first and only lover. She was conceived to unite our tribes."

"Then Gyan was her father. Even Naneka was never sure."

He didn't dignify the speculation with a reaction. What Naneka knew, or thought she knew, was irrelevant. Gyan was dead and his mantle had passed to Drey Fon.

"Any move you make against Serena will brand you a traitor. You'll be cast out by the Perrlain and mistrusted by the Wikoli. Am I supposed to believe you're prepared to make such a sacrifice?"

"I know you're influencing one or both her guards. I suspect your success has been hampered by our protection spells."

"You are not solely responsible for those spells."

"No, but I can counteract them. I can give you full access to her guards and increase your influence over Serena herself. Because I am not solely responsible for the spells, no one will know how they failed to protect our precious Serena."

Drey Fon thought about the offer. It made sense. Kapali could stand back and wring his hands, bemoaning poor Serena's fate. No one would suspect his role in the outcome. "Feed my bird. I want to watch your face twist in horror as she transforms."

Kapali's hand resumed its steady pumping. "Is she that grotesque?"

“You will see for yourself as soon as you come.” He released the high priest’s hair. Perhaps he should scan Kapali’s memory. Serena’s virginity could never be restored. Reliving the event was better than... No! Memory melds were interactive. Kapali would have access to his mind for the entire time he was experiencing the memory. “Faster. You’re barely hard.”

“This is unnerving. I’ve never performed well on command.”

“You performed just fine the night of Serena’s ascension. You shuddered and complained while you violated my mate!”

Kapali stopped again. “You left me no choice. If I hadn’t completed her awakening, her gift would have slipped away. Serena is beautiful, yes, but I presume you are also interested in the power she possesses.”

Drey Fon glared at Kapali. “My interests are none of your business. What do you want in exchange for Serena?”

“I know what it’s like to long for someone you can’t have.” Kapali shifted his position slightly and continued stimulating himself. He used both hands now, pulling down on his balls before sliding his fist with punishing speed.

“How will an alliance with me help you secure this reluctant lover?”

“I know you can influence minds and create emotions.”

His compulsions were undependable. Ratauni was the one who could bend others to her will. Still, Kapali didn’t need to know the specifics. “Who would you influence if I taught you the spell?”

“You get the object of your obsession and I get mine. That’s all you need to know.”

Drey Fon watched Kapali’s cock harden and his features tense. Thinking about his reluctant lover was far more arousing than his own touch. “I want to know. Tell me or there will be no alliance.”

The priest growled in exasperation and braced his hands on his thighs. “I need to concentrate. Do you want your pet to die?”

“My pet is in no danger. I can transform her with relative ease. I’m just curious to see if she will respond to Perrlain energy.”

“This is an experiment?” He slapped the sides of his robe together and started to rise.

“If you get up, it will end our negotiation.”

“This isn’t a negotiation. You’re amusing yourself at my expense.”

Drey Fon shrugged. “You can make my ultimate goal much easier, I admit. But I have no doubt I can succeed, even if they find your lifeless body in the jungle.”

“Now you resort to threats?”

“You sealed your fate when you admitted you know I’m the renegade. You either work for me or you die.”

With his chest heaving and fury blazing from his eyes, Kapali parted his robe and reached for his cock. "Which dimension did you access, and what abilities did this creature bring with her?"

"You can ask her as soon as she transforms. Now tell me about your obsession. It's another man, I presume." He clasped his hands behind his back and thought about Serena's ascension. Ratauni had shielded him from the Perrlain until the ritual was complete. They'd never even left the clearing. "Are you still lusting after Baylott?" Kapali's gaze flew to his and Drey Fon laughed. "That's pathetic. Baylott fucks anything that moves. Why would you waste your time --"

"He's changed. Ever since Lutton took Baylott to his bed, they have only shared pleasure with each other. Baylott always claimed that he would never be happy with one person, that his body demanded variety."

"And while he buried his cock in any convenient hole, you didn't feel cheated."

"He lied." Kapali closed his eyes and rocked his hips. A bead of moisture formed on the tip of his cock. "He can dedicate himself to one lover."

"Just not you."

Cum streamed from Kapali's cock, splashing on and around the bird. Blue light flashed through the feathers, brightest at each point of contact. Vibrations passed through the hawk. The neck straightened and the wings extended.

Kapali watched the transformation through wide, frightened eyes. Drey Fon was as intrigued by the priest's reaction as he was by the familiar shift. Energy gathered, sweeping from the bird's talons to her beak. The hawk disintegrated in a wave of sparkling light. Long supple legs framed the fire pit, spread wide as the blaze licked her pussy. She arched her back and clawed the dirt floor, arms spread out to each side of her body.

"Fuck me," she whispered. "Fuck me now!"

Drey Fon laughed at Kapali's startled gasp.

"She looks just like Serena."

"I trapped her in this form during the summoning." He grabbed her ankle and pulled her clear of the flames. "If you want more, fire whore, you're going to have to suck me." She didn't hesitate. Rolling to her side, she got her legs beneath her and licked her lips.

"Is she always this demanding?"

She spread the lower half of Drey Fon's robe and sucked his shaft into her mouth. "You have no idea." He groaned as her hot, wet lips and swirling tongue went to work on his burgeoning cock.

It was a dangerous cycle. The stronger she grew, the more he lusted, which made her more powerful. Kapali trembled, obviously feeling the sexual compulsion as well. Sweat dotted his brow and his cock hardened with preternatural speed. He cried out, grasping the swollen appendage with both hands.

"Did you do this or did she?" Kapali's tone was hoarse and disbelieving.

"She has a way of getting exactly what she wants." Drey Fon took her face between his hands and thrust faster. Ratauni wiggled her ass, needful whimpers escaping around his shaft. "The pressure will increase until you're in agony. I'd make use of that fine white ass if I were you."

"She's a demon!" Stroking himself with frantic desperation, Kapali attempted to solve the problem himself. He grabbed the firmine salve and closed his eyes.

"She won't allow you to come like that. You sensed her hunger. Pretend she's Baylott and you can both have what you want."

Picking up on his subtle suggestion, Ratauni surrounded herself in illusion. Drey Fon no longer thrust into Serena's mouth, he held Baylott, punishing him for his part in Serena's ascension.

"Suck me harder you worthless Perrlain dog," Drey Fon said dramatically. "You will rue the day you touched my mate."

Kapali's hand stilled and his eyes opened. Fear twisted his features. "This isn't real."

"Thrust your cock into his ass and say that again."

Moving toward them with stilted steps, Kapali shook his head. "I will not fuck a demon."

"You'll be fucking Baylott. This is what you want, what you're risking so much to attain."

Kapali barely got his cock into position and Ratauni bucked, impaling herself with one violent thrust. The high priest screamed. "It burns! I am being consumed."

Baylott dissolved and Drey Fon was in Serena's mouth again. Until the full moon rose, he would be content with this illusion. Kapali, on the other hand, twisted and howled. Ratauni easily followed his frenzied movements.

"She needs your cum," Drey Fon muttered, concentrating on his own pleasure. "Thrusting decreases the burning." Her mouth sucked and slid, commanding his senses. Fire gathered in his balls and he relished the searing pleasure. How could he be content with human passion after this intensity? As if to answer his silent question, Ratauni transformed her eyes. He stared into Serena's shimmering blue gaze as he pumped his seed down the throat of the demon.

Staggering back, Drey Fon wasn't surprised when his cock immediately hardened. Ratauni's adventures beyond the lodge always left her ravenous. He watched Kapali stuff her ass, each thrust a bitter surrender.

Memories of Serena's ascension lingered in Drey Fon's mind. This bastard had taken her virginity, had felt the firm grip of her cunt before any other. He deserved to die!

"Death or submission," he said in a calm, clear tone.

“Alliance. I will not be your slave.”

“Submission is not slavery. A slave has no choice. You will willingly obey my every command or Ratauni will suck the life out of your body.”

“That’s not a choice; it’s an ultimatum.” Ratauni must have increased the heat because the high priest screamed. “Tell this bitch to release me and I’ll do anything.”

“Come and she’ll let go.”

“I can’t!”

“Ratauni, flood his mind with images. I have other plans for him right now.”

Kapali tossed his head and guttural sounds more growl than groan tore from his throat. He slammed into her again and again, suddenly wild and demanding. Drey Fon crossed his arms over his chest, amused by the spectacle. Ratauni was the best negotiation tool he’d ever procured. With an infuriated roar, the high priest thrust deep and came in hard, wracking spasms. The demon shivered and sighed, collapsing onto her belly.

Still on his hands and knees, Kapali panted and gasped.

“Offer me your ass.”

Kapali looked over his shoulder, his gaze burning with hatred and resentment. “There is no reason --”

“I will never repeat a directive. If you truly want to become my apprentice, you must obey me in all things.”

“Get away from me,” Kapali shouted at the demon. Once she had moved to the far side of the fire, the high priest reached back and opened himself for Drey Fon.

## Chapter Five

Matt licked his lips, savoring the delicious taste of Serena's cream. She pressed her mound against his thigh, all but begging him to continue what they'd began.

*They have sex with...machines?*

The revulsion in her tone echoed through his mind even now. If she knew he was an android, would she shrink away and shudder? His body was biometric, but his memories and personality had not been programmed, they'd been transferred.

He stroked her hair away from her face and kissed her brow. "I think we've made enough progress for one night."

"Progress?"

The hurt in her tone was unmistakable. Still, he reinforced his determination. It was hurt her now or destroy her later. If she found out what he was after they had sex, she might never recover from the shock. He wasn't sure exactly what happened during her ascension, but her fear was grounded in mistrust. He couldn't fuck her until she knew the truth and he had no idea how to prepare her for such a revelation.

"Serena, I find you extremely attractive, but we have to focus on our goals. You need to be able to express your sexuality so you can freely access your gift. I'm more than willing to help you, but anything more will cause needless complications."

"You're right." She disentangled their legs and wiggled away from him. "Objectivity is crucial for both of us. I apologize. I should have been more --"

He placed his fingers against her lips. "You don't need to apologize. This is an exchange. You heal my spirit and I make sure you're ready for your celebration."

She nodded, her eyes wide and luminous. He could no longer see her disappointment, but he suspected she'd suppressed the hurt, not accepted the situation.

Scooting off the end of the bed, she retrieved her robe from its hook on the wall. He longed to stop her, to draw her back into his arms. No, it was better for them both, if they maintained an emotional distance. He reached over the side of the bed and found his simple garment, draping it across his lap.

“Did Miranda tell you I was a soul seer?” She returned, sitting on the foot of the bed with her legs curved to the side and her robe tucked around her.

“Lutton first used the term. After Miranda decided she couldn’t help me, she suggested I come here and continue my treatment.”

“Why did you first start seeing Miranda?”

“I suffered an illness that nearly killed me. While I believed I was going to die, I reevaluated my life.” Miranda had a way of extracting details without specifically demanding information. Would Serena use the same tactic? How much did she need to know? “What exactly does a soul seer do?”

“I see a representation of a person’s inner being. Many cultures report a similar phenomenon. Some see rings, some claim the shadow reveals a person’s true nature, others sense what lies beneath the physical appearance.”

“What form does this representation take?”

“I see strands of color, interlacing and flowing with pulses of energy. The patterns, along with the rhythm of the flow, are as important as the color of the strands.”

“You’re able to look at these soul strands and determine... What exactly do these strands tell you? Are you able to see them around every person you meet?”

“I’ve yet to encounter anyone I couldn’t read, but Hyalee warned me that it will happen.”

“You’re able to read my soul strands?”

“They’re faint, but I can see them.” She smiled and glanced at her hands. “We’ve got some work to do.”

Did this mean he still had a soul? Faint and convoluted was better than no soul at all. He was sentient and adaptable, but many would not consider him alive. He took a moment to compose his expression. It wouldn’t do for her to realize how pleased he was by her comment. He couldn’t admit his dilemma without explaining the cause of his uncertainty.

“How does your ability help me? I already know I’m screwed up.”

Her gaze sparkled with some secret amusement. How he wished he could read her mind.

“I’m not only able to see soul strands, I’m able to manipulate them. If we work together, we should be able to untangle your strands and balance your energy stream.”



He raked his hair with one hand and released a weary sigh. "I think you got the short end of the stick. Helping a passionate woman feel pleasure is a whole lot easier than untangling what's inside of me."

She didn't argue and she didn't press him for details about his past. They spoke of Halley Prime and his relationship with Miranda. She explained more about the Order's structure and everyday life in the Perrlain village. It was one step more productive than small talk, yet light years away from the things they needed to say.

Her gaze stared past him from time to time, though she remained attentive. Not exactly past him, it was more like she stared at the space surrounding him. "What are you looking at?" he asked as her expression clouded for the fourth time.

"Much can be learned by watching a person's response to inane conversation."

"You're studying my soul strands? Are they visible all the time?"

"I have to activate the ability. Soul strands can be hypnotizing. I wouldn't want to see them all the time."

"What have you learned so far?"

"Not much. You're a very guarded person." She fiddled with the end of her belt. "May I ask a rude question?"

"I suspect you'll have to ask many, if we have any hope of working through this mess."

"How old are you?"

"Much older than I look."

She nodded. "There are far too many experiences in your strands for a man in his late twenties. How have you maintained your youthful appearance?"

"Technology. Many procedures are available on Halley Prime that extend life and youthfulness."

"Was technology responsible for your recovery?"

"Very much so." He opened his mouth, then closed it. It was better to ease her into this a little at a time. "The illness I battled would have destroyed your entire village, ruthlessly crippling those it did not kill. You believe in divine providence, don't you? Would the Order's teachings have condemned me to death?"

"We treat our ill and tend our wounded. I'm not sure what you mean."

"Ashton VinDerley is a friend of mine."

Resentment filled her gaze, making her eyes gleam like blue crystal. "Is this some sort of game to you people? We treated Ashton with respect. He was unfamiliar with our customs, so Lutton mentored him. As a result we have been flooded with *tourists*! Pilgrims gawk and snicker and sully the things we hold sacred."

“That wasn’t Ashton’s fault. Well, not entirely. A young man named Palmer Boehme was involved in the crisis that brought Ashton to your village. Palmer circulated stories about their adventures, hoping to increase awareness about the outposts.”

“Why did awareness need to be increased?”

“The conditions on Temple-Tuttle are primitive by design. Many of the other outposts were suffering horribly from neglect. Palmer meant well, but he didn’t anticipate the long-range consequences of his actions.”

She tucked her robe more snugly around her legs, clearly uncomfortable with the current topic. “The village is closed to pilgrims. No permanent damage was done. What does this have to do with you?”

“When the malignari shot its quills into Ashton, the elders wanted to let him die, correct?”

“Ashton’s spaceship crashed into the jungle. When that didn’t kill him, the Deity sent a malignari to finish the job. Is it so hard to understand why the elders believed he was meant to die?”

“If someone contracted an aggressive illness while they conducted business with criminals, would they be getting what they deserved?”

She didn’t answer immediately. He hadn’t even told Miranda how he’d contracted the virus, only that he had nearly lost his life. Would Serena agree with the elders? Her opinion shouldn’t matter. Regardless of how it had been accomplished, he was alive. Why did he care what she thought?

“Do you think you should have paid for your bad behavior with your life?” Her tone was hushed and thoughtful.

Part of him must, or he wouldn’t be plagued with spontaneous memory loops and disjointed images. Who would have thought an android capable of nightmares? But he wasn’t an ordinary android. His body didn’t require sleep. He simulated the state as he simulated so many human processes. For the past few months, when he activated the subroutine, his intuitive programming accessed his memory files, forming images both real and extrapolated.

The intuitive programming in his neuro-processor was his greatest achievement. Not only could he experience emotions and access memories, he could learn from experiences, adapt and change. Or at least that was his hope.

“What I think is irrelevant.” His tone mirrored hers. “I asked what your Order teaches. Was it the Deity’s will that I die?”

“Apparently not. You’re still very much alive.”

“I’m alive because of technology, not because of a higher power.”

“The Deity reveals which plants ease pain and how to brew teas that lower fevers. Lutton learned many things during his seasons at the university and we have embraced them all.”

"But the Perrlain are opposed to technology."

"We're not opposed to technology; we simply have different priorities."

He wanted to believe her, but Ashton's experience with these people told a different story. "If Orillia became ill and the healers were unable to cure her, would someone seek medical treatment for her elsewhere?"

"Few of our people ever leave the valley, but there is no ordinance prohibiting such an action. Has your illness relapsed? Do you need medical treatment?"

"No. It's nothing like that." He was silent for a long time, considering all she'd told him. There was so much more to his conflict than his cybernetic body. He needed to focus on the other components contributing to his discontent. He scrubbed his hair with both hands and rested his head against the wall. "You said your final assessment will take place with the next full moon. When is that?"

"The last full moon was eight nights ago."

"Then we have three weeks, give or take a night?"

"How many nights are in a -- week?" She hesitated over the unfamiliar word.

He smiled. Time had far less relevance to the Perrlain. "Seven nights make up a week. Four weeks make up a month. And there are twelve months in each year."

"Why do you need so many designations? How do you keep track of them all?"

"We often chart our activities on something called a calendar or enter appointments into our computers."

She licked her lips in a futile attempt to hide her smile. "It all seems rather silly."

"Have you ever been out of the valley?" She shook her head. "It's hard to understand something when you've never experienced it." Scooting down, he relaxed against the mound of soft pillows. He felt as out of place in this primitive cottage as she would in one of the opulent suites at the Pleasure Palace. "It's been an eventful day. Why don't we try and get some sleep?"

Her gaze swept down his body, lingering on his mouth, his chest, and finally his groin. "I've never slept with a man before."

"Has your fear returned?"

"Of course not." She crawled across the mattress and curled up against his side. Even through her robe, her body was warm and inviting. "You're going to have to allow me to touch you at some point."

He'd thought of little else since he first saw her. Still, maintaining an emotional detachment would be that much harder if she touched him. "Why is that?"

"After I've demonstrated my abilities, the celebration unfolds in three stages. I'm expected to give pleasure and receive pleasure before the other priests and priestesses. Then

pleasure will be shared by the entire tribe. It is the customary format for most of our rituals. This is why it is imperative that I overcome my fear.”

“You have to share yourself with every member of the tribe?”

“Not necessarily. They witness my pleasure and the demonstration of my abilities. My partner or partners are entirely up to me.”

“Are all your ceremonies so...erotic? Ashton refused to talk about the specifics, but everyone knew the Celebration of Life involved sex.”

“The culmination of this ceremony is nearly identical to what Ashton and Corry went through.”

He didn’t speak the words out loud, but the thought of anyone else touching her left him cold. The urge to sweep her beneath him and push into her welcoming heat was nearly overwhelming. Desire smoldered within her eyes. He didn’t want to lose the momentum they’d gained, but he refused to rush her.

“Give, receive, and share,” he said with a smile. “I think we can handle that.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Serena propped herself on her elbow and stared at Matt’s peaceful face. Moonlight revealed the planes and angles of his rugged features, and gleamed off the lighter streaks in his hair. She’d curled against his side until his breathing slowed and deepened. Even then, she’d waited until the faintest snore escaped his throat before she shifted position, so she could look at him.

She felt free and empowered, eager to explore. Orillia warned her that she would feel a special bond with the first person she took into her body. Matt hadn’t actually fucked her, but the feelings he’d released were even more intense than what she’d experienced during her ascension.

Was this warm lethargy nothing more than a novelty? She couldn’t make herself accept such a discouraging conclusion. If Matt had allowed it, she was certain they’d have spent the rest of the night indulging their mutual desire.

Brushing his rugged cheek with the backs of her fingers, she enjoyed the slight bristle along his jawline. Those whiskers had rasped against her inner thighs as he devoured her pussy. How would he react if she used her mouth to draw him gradually from sleep? Having his thick shaft sliding against her tongue was more than appealing. She longed for his taste and the thrill of watching him lose control.

Out of habit, she summoned his soul strands. Several places were tightly knotted and so faint she could barely see the colors. What had caused the constrictions? Had he done more than interact with criminals? Shame was a prominent player in his psychological makeup, shame and regret.

He stirred and shifted, the sheet dipping low over his hips. Ignoring the temptation of his muscular body, she brushed his hair back from his forehead and whispered his name. Nightmares were a common affliction for restless spirits. Should she wake him or would it be more productive to attempt a dream meld? Both Miranda and their mother could effortlessly join their consciousness with others. During her ascension, Serena had sensed what Baylott and Kapali were experiencing. This was different, yet likely within her power.

She focused on his strands, allowing the colorful flow to lull her. Terror blasted across the telepathic link and she gasped. She sensed the emotion, understood how profoundly it affected Matt, yet remained isolated from the fear.

His strands curled around her fingers, then sank through her flesh. She groaned as the intensity increased. Determination drove back the fear and a faint image flickered within her mind. Hazy, the scene remained unfocused, despite her struggle to clarify the image.

She saw a bed, not the wide comfortable resting place of a healthy man, but the narrow adjustable treatment table of an invalid. A man sagged against the mattress, emaciated, dying. Despite the tubes protruding from his face and body, he struggled for breath and shuddered with pain.

Who was he? Why was Matt dreaming of this old man?

A shadow fell across the bed. The old man shifted his weary gaze to a person Serena couldn't see.

"Did you come to gloat?" His voice was thin and raspy.

"My life will not begin until yours ends." Serena couldn't see Matt, but she recognized his voice.

"Then get on with it. What are you waiting for?"

Strong, long fingers wrapped around the old man's throat. His eyes widened and then he went wild, writhing and clawing at the hands, arching and bucking.

Serena had seen enough. Easing out of the meld, she rocked back on her heels. Matt twisted on the bed, fighting off the unseen assailant. He moved as if he were the man being strangled. He gasped, his breath wheezing and constrained.

"Matt." She shook his shoulders. "Wake up. You're dreaming." He batted her hands aside and shoved her backward. "Matt, wake up!" Not wanting to find herself beneath him with his hands around her throat, she smacked him with a pillow.

The second blow brought him out of the nightmare. He shot up in bed and blinked repeatedly. "Where...what happened?"

"You were thrashing around like a wild thing, muttering in your sleep. Do you remember what the dream was about?"

He looked at her with wide, cautious eyes, then shook his head. "It was just a dream."

She couldn't ask him about the old man without admitting she'd been in his mind. "That was a pretty violent dream. You don't remember any of it?"

"I think someone was trying to strangle me."

*Or you were trying to strangle someone.* His strands pulsed rhythmically, drawing attention to the unnatural constrictions. There was no indication of deceit, just frustration and conflict.

"Why would someone want to strangle you? Do you have enemies?"

"Not the sort who hunt you down and strangle you in your sleep." He expelled a ragged breath. "I've always been my own worst enemy."

"How often do you have nightmares?"

"Far more often than I'd thought possible." Keeping the sheet pulled to his waist, he propped himself against the wall. "Give my mind a minute to clear and I'll be fine."

"Would you like something to drink? If I mix tersatta juice with hertinel tea it has a soothing quality."

He shook his head. "Just talk to me."

She sat facing him with her legs folded in front of her. The fullness of her robe covered her legs, despite her immodest position. "You know more about me than I know about you. Do you have family? What do you do when you're not designing fully functioning pleasure bots?"

"There's not a lot to tell." The tension eased from his posture, but the shadows remained in his eyes. "You know about my work and my work was my life for far too long."

"Do you have siblings? Are your parents still alive?"

"I was accepted for citizenship on Haley Prime when I was nineteen. My father had been assigned to Chiron during the evacuation, but the life of a farmer held no appeal for me."

She'd heard stories of the destruction of their homeworld, but it all took place before she'd been born. Each outpost served a unique purpose within the coalition, supplying a specific need. At least that's the way it was supposed to work.

Temple-Tuttle, the spiritual center of the coalition, had remained neutral, mercifully removed from the recent rebellion.

"Your father remained on Chiron?"

"Until the day he died." He rubbed his eyes. The fatigue in his expression made Serena think of the old man. "I secured visitor passes for him numerous times. He had no interest in leaving Chiron. Life was hard, but he said it was 'honest labor'."

"Meaning the way you make your living is not?"

"The way I *made* my living. That's why I'm here. I have to let go of my past once and for all, or it will destroy me."

\* \* \* \* \*

In the subterranean level of the Pleasure Palace, Petra picked her way through the rubble of the burned out laboratory. Memories pelted her from every side. Enthusiasm had bubbled within Matthias each time he showed her his latest invention. He smiled readily, yet secrets lurked in his eyes. She had shared his life, perhaps his affection, but never the full devotion of his heart. There was a part of him she'd never been allowed to see, much less experience.

Though soot covered the floor and everything within the rooms had been reduced to charred debris, the walls were structurally sound. When she'd built her empire, she'd built it to last, and Matthias had hidden beneath her skirts, constructing his domain directly under the Pleasure Palace.

The arrangement had worked wonderfully for years. Matthias maintained the anonymity he craved and she had control over the illusive Toymaker. So, how had it all gone so horribly wrong? Her meaningless indiscretions had been an attempt to regain his attention. Why hadn't he been able to see that?

Matthias had ended his career with the elusive drama for which he was well known. He'd literally gone out in a blaze of glory, leaving her isolated and alone.

"I thought I might find you down here."

The deep, rumbling voice belonged to Ebon, her head of security. He had been a popular pleasure master before announcing his retirement. Knowing the Palace inside and out had allowed him to slip effortlessly into his new role. Petra, on the other hand, was still smarting from his predecessor's betrayal. She had no reason to doubt Ebon. He had served her faithfully for years. Still, it would be a very long time before she offered her trust to anyone.

"Was there something in particular you needed?" She turned to face Ebon, fighting to suppress the sorrow in her eyes. He was tall and heavily muscled, a handsome man ten years beyond his prime.

"Why don't you seal off this level and be done with it?" He crossed his arms over his chest, a hint of impatience gleaming in his dark gaze. "There's nothing here but bad memories."

"I can't stand loose ends. I need to know how he did it."

"How he did what? You saw his body, Petra. Matthias is dead."

"There is no way he slipped into oblivion without a parting shot." She turned in a slow circle, visually searching the charred remains. No clue, no scrap of research. Matthias had left nothing behind. "The only thing that makes sense is if disappearing was his parting shot."

"You need to let it go. Even if he is alive -- which is impossible -- this obsession is unhealthy. Matthias is part of your past. Focus on your future."

"Matthias is out there. I can sense him."

“Just for the sake of argument, let’s say you locate him. What good will it do? I’ve been around almost as long as you have. I know Matthias considered your relationship over long before he disappeared.”

She glared at him and flipped her hair out of her eyes. “Are you trying to piss me off?”

“No, I’m trying to make you stop wasting time on memories. Life doesn’t hold much appeal when you continually stare into the past.”

He turned and departed as abruptly as he’d come. She knew he was right, but it didn’t help. She’d tried getting over Matthias. She’d busied herself with work and torrid affairs. Nothing eased the ache. No matter what she did, her stubborn heart refused to let go.



## Chapter Six

Serena and Matt spent the following day in casual conversation. Each time she brought up the nightmare, he changed the subject and all her questions regarding his past received polite evasions. In turn, she avoided the details of her ascension. It was a frustrating dance. They circled each other at a constant distance, neither willing to be vulnerable.

After a hearty midday meal, she suggested they climb to one of her favorite locations, a plateau overlooking the valley. They gathered basic supplies for the long hike and he put everything into his backpack. As they started through the jungle, Serena was disappointed by Matt's quiet. He trailed behind her, his mood sullen and introspective.

"Have I done something to offend you?" She faced him, hands planted on her hips. In deference to the rugged terrain, she'd donned a short-sleeved jacket of red and gold with matching black shorts. Leather half boots protected her feet, and she'd braided her long hair.

"Your guards are making me uncomfortable." Matt wore shorts and a T-shirt with the same boots she'd noticed when he originally stepped out of the jungle.

"What guards? Lutton dismissed my guards."

"They were outside your cottage last night and have been trailing us all day. Do you doubt my ability to protect you?"

Before she could reassure him, he shrugged off his backpack and swung it to the ground near her feet, then darted off through the trees. Branches snapped and grunts ensued. What was he doing? As if to answer her question, Matt reappeared a short time later, holding Fyn by the scruff of the neck.

Matt shoved the struggling guard to his knees, as Vitik flew at him from the opposite direction. With a firm kick, Matt sent Vitik flying backward into the bushes. Matt snatched Vitik's spear away from the stunned guard and snapped it over his thigh.

"I am fully capable of guarding Serena. Leave us the hell alone!"

Fyn struggled to his feet, chest heaving. She repeated Matt's order in Perrlain.

"We will not leave you with this stranger." Fyn handed Vitik the broken halves of his spear and stared at Matt with a combination of humiliation and mistrust. "It is our sworn duty to ensure your safety."

"And it is my duty to balance his soul stream. How am I supposed to accomplish that if you're distracting him?"

"We will not leave you," Vitik insisted. "The order comes from Chief Amayis himself."

"Then back off. Follow at a distance. You only need to be close enough to hear me scream."

"There are many kinds of screams," Fyn said with a smirk. "Which shall we interrupt?"

"If I am in need of your assistance, I'll make sure you know it."

They left the guards grumbling in the middle of the path. Matt grabbed his backpack, shot the guards a scathing glower, then followed her up the narrow trail.

"Are you really in danger, or is your father being paranoid?" he asked some time later. "Tell me what's going on."

Perhaps if she trusted him with her secrets, he would open up to her. Hyalee had already given him a general idea of what transpired. Serena only needed to fill in the details to be free of the incident forever.

"Chief Amayis is not being paranoid and he is not my father."

He paused and looked at her. "What are you talking about?"

"I was conceived when one of the Wikoli sorcerers forced himself on Naneka. He appeared to her as Chief Amayis, but she saw through the illusion and did her best to fight him off."

"I'm sorry." He sounded sincere. "I had no idea."

"It was not a random act of violence. We believe it was a carefully planned violation, one meant to result in my birth."

He reached for her hand, his tenderness uncharacteristic, yet welcome. "Does your mother know who attacked her?"

She shook her head. Having lived with the shame her entire life, she was able to distance herself from the events. "She only knows he was Wikoli."

He glanced off into the shadows. "It's almost too horrible to suggest, but could the same man..."

She knew what he was thinking. The vile possibility that her biological father had invaded her ascension had crossed her mind more than once. "I sensed the villain before he could harm me. I'm safe. That's all that matters."

"I agree, but why have the Wikoli gone to all this trouble. Are soul seers so unique?"

"I'm not sure this has anything to do with my ability. The person who attacked my mother had no way of knowing what gift I would possess."

"He knew the women of your family are strongly gifted by the Deity. As you said, this smacks of premeditation."

She studied his profile for a moment, comforted by his strength, yet undeniably aware of his masculinity. "You almost sound like you believe all this superstitious nonsense."

"If I hadn't met Miranda and witnessed her abilities, I might be more skeptical."

They walked for a time in silence. He held back branches when the path was overgrown and helped her over craggy rocks on their way to the summit. She found his care charming, yet his reluctance to talk frustrated her.

A fresh breeze cooled her cheeks and dried the perspiration trickling between her breasts. She glanced at the clear blue sky, half afraid she'd see the hawk circling.

"How do the Wikoli differ from the Perrlain?" His musing tone drew her gaze from the sky. "How long have the two tribes been at war?"

"At one time, not that long ago, we were all one tribe," she told him. He hiked behind her as the trail steepened. His hand cupped her elbow or pressed against her back from time to time, keeping the current of awareness flowing. "Temple-Tuttle was settled before Shadrake was struck by the comet. My ancestors came here seeking a simple, spiritually focused life."

"Who instigated the hostilities?"

"The Wikoli have taken our beliefs and twisted them. They shun materialism, as do we, but their focus is no longer bringing honor to the Deity. The Wikoli live only to please themselves."

"I'm not sure that answers my question."

"We are not actually at war with the Wikoli. There have been no aggressive campaigns or violent battles. As time progressed, we developed different philosophies. We drew closer as a community, unwilling to allow outsiders to taint our beliefs. The Wikoli looked for ways to benefit from offworld curiosity."

"So the Wikoli encourage tourists?"

"Definitely. They eagerly bartered and... This is all beside the point. You will not be interacting with the Wikoli and neither will I." She glanced over her shoulder with a sigh. "Twice now, I've offered you insight and candor. Both times, you've responded by moving farther away from me."

He chuckled. "You slept in my arms last night after I kissed you in one of the most intimate ways a man can kiss a woman. I don't see how we can get much closer."

"Tell me about Halley Prime." She kept her tone light and conversational, not wanting this to become an argument. "What was the name of this place where you invented your..."

“Toys? I was once the finest toymaker in the entire galaxy. My inventions were in great demand. No one could equal their craftsmanship or ingenuity.”

“Did knowing others found pleasure with your toys fulfill you as a person?”

“As my reputation grew, I was able to network with other scientists. We applied my technologies to nonsexual applications.”

She tried to keep the confusion from her expression, not wanting to return his attention to how different her world was from his. He glanced at her and chuckled.

“I’m not explaining this very well. Biometric technology can be used to replace arms, legs, even internal organs.”

“I’ve never seen someone with an artificial limb.”

“Not that you’re aware of. Biometric limbs are designed to be indistinguishable from the real thing. The really sophisticated ones even sweat and bleed.”

They reached the summit a short time later. Serena watched Matt’s reaction to her home. The wonder in his expression made it all seem new again. He took in verdant hills and meandering rivers before his gaze settled on the distant splendor of the Cliffs of Enarre.

“This is amazing,” he murmured, leaning his hip against a rock outcropping as he took a drink of water from the pouch slung over his shoulder.

“It’s an arduous trek, but I’ve always found it worth the effort.”

He nodded, staring out across the majestic vista.

She’d allowed him to dodge her questions long enough. Many people wanted to reshape their lives after facing death. She needed to understand why so much regret was threaded through his soul strands.

“Were others harmed when you became ill?” He didn’t immediately reply, so she asked, “Did you lose someone important to you?”

“You showed me yours, now it’s time to show you mine?” He continued to stare out over the valley, but a smile curved his lips.

“In more ways than one.”

After a quick sidelong glance, he began his tale. “The Pleasure Palace caters to the most affluent citizens of Halley Prime. For the right price, they’ll provide any imaginable pleasure.”

She couldn’t imagine paying for sexual pleasure, but she kept the objection to herself. They had already established the glaring differences between their worlds.

“My business was legal. Many would argue the morality of what I did. Still, I was careful to remain on the right side of the law.” He blew out a sigh and turned to face her, resting his hip against the massive rock. “Petra owns the Pleasure Palace and her moral convictions were far different from mine. Her only criterion was the correct amount of

credits. She didn't ask questions and she ensured the anonymity of all her clients no matter how corrupt."

"You worked for Petra, so you were --"

"I worked *with* Petra. She didn't control me nearly as much as she liked to think, and she sure as hell didn't own me. However, your point is valid. Because she chose to do business with elements I would have refused, I was drawn deeper and deeper into..." He shook his head and stepped away from the rock, anxiety revealed by his restlessness. "It would take me years to detail my downward spiral. Suffice it to say, small compromises led to larger compromises, until I hardly recognized myself. I don't blame this on Petra. I want to make that clear. I'm responsible for my decisions. All she did was provide opportunities for me to misbehave."

"Were you romantically involved with her?"

"I don't know if what we had was ever romantic. It was sexual and intense and destructive."

"Who ended the relationship?"

"I did -- in a rather cruel way. We had ended the affair and gotten back together several times before I had finally had enough. I wanted to make sure she understood there was no hope of reconciliation."

Serena didn't ask for specifics. She would be able to gently maneuver his soul strands with the information he'd given her. Curiosity demanded every detail, but this was an encouraging start.

"Tell me about the criminals. Was this the first time you'd agreed to do business with such people?"

"They weren't just criminals. They were amoral and extremely violent. Their main business was weapons, but they'd found a market for my toys. I knew I was sinking to an all-time low, but I made the deal. When I delivered the first shipment, they gave me an unexpected bonus along with my generous payment."

"They intentionally infected you?"

"No. I didn't realize they dealt in biological weapons as well as the more traditional kind. Their leader had just mutated an ancient Terran virus called paralytic poliomyelitis." He smiled, accepting a momentary reprieve from the tension. "I'm sure that means nothing to you. It's more commonly known as degenerative polio. It was a nasty disease before he messed with it. By the time he finished, it was fast acting and lethal."

"How did this person keep from becoming ill?"

"He'd vaccinated himself and his team before they started manipulating the virus. The vaccination kept them from suffering the effects of the illness, but they became carriers. On the return trip to Halley Prime, I fell ill, as did my crew. The space station's biosensors detected the contamination and we were quarantined."

“Was the arms dealer apprehended?”

“Yes, but none of the crewmembers survived.”

“Except for you.” He responded with a stiff nod. Understanding his regret was only the beginning. He must forgive himself for living when the others had died. “When did the nightmares begin?”

“After the radical treatment that saved my life.”

No surprise there. “This treatment was not available to the others on your ship?”

“They deteriorated too quickly.” He released a long breath, as if to purge his body of the unpleasantness. “I was responsible for their deaths, yet I was the only one to survive the fiasco. After I accepted that I had a second chance, I knew I had to change my life. If I went on as I had before, they would have died for nothing.”

She paused for a moment, giving him the opportunity to compose himself as she considered how to proceed. “What specifically are you determined to change?”

“Everything.” He finger combed his hair, sending the gold streaked mass into untidy waves. “I want my life to mean more than helping people to fuck.”

Choosing her words carefully, she prepared to oppose him. Why did offworlders disregard the importance of sex, while they built palaces to fulfill their need for pleasure? They squandered fortunes to satisfying a simple bodily function -- through technology! The contradiction made no sense. Sex was about touching and being touched, connecting and sharing with another living, breathing person.

“If you had spent your life learning how to cook and perfecting your recipes, so people could savor your food, would you feel ashamed?” He just stared at her, so she completed the analogy. “You provided people with sustenance for their carnal appetites. Is sexual desire any less relevant than physical hunger?”

“A person can survive without sex. They will die without food.”

“Survive perhaps, not experience life the way the Deity intended. If we were not meant to enjoy expressing our sexuality, it wouldn’t feel so good, and we wouldn’t want it so badly. We laugh, we cry, we eat, we fuck, and ultimately, we die. They are all natural parts of life’s unending cycle.”

He returned to the outcropping and folded his arms over his chest, staring out across the valley. “You’re not at all what I expected.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.”

She stayed back for a moment, content to look at him. By helping -- propelling -- her through her fear, he’d left her feeling confident and bold. He was as constrained by regret as she’d been by fear. It was time they both let go.

“I wanted to share this with you, because you shared something amazing with me.” Careful not to intrude on his view, she moved closer. “Let me touch you, Matt. Let me give you pleasure, while you revel in the Deity’s handiwork.”

Their gazes locked and her heartbeat faltered. He parted his lips as if he meant to say something important. With the blink of his eyes the intensity was gone, replaced by simple desire.

"I'd like that very much," he said instead. "Unfortunately, your watchdogs are still watching and I've always been more of a voyeur than an exhibitionist."

Puzzled by his statement, she looked around. She hadn't seen or heard her guards since she ordered them to give her some privacy. The outcropping behind Matt was the only inconsistency in an otherwise rounded summit. "We're the only ones here."

"They're hiding at the trailhead and have been since we arrived. They're trying to be inconspicuous, but I can hear their voices."

She called out in a sharp, succinct tone. After an awkward pause, Fyn stood, brushed off his knees, and waited for her command. Vitik took a moment longer to appear.

"Start down the mountain," she told them firmly in Perrlain. "We will meet you at the bottom when we've finished enjoying the view."

Vitik started forward. "I'm not comfortable leaving you here with --"

"It was not a suggestion. The trail is the only way up here. I'm perfectly safe."

"Intruders are not my only concern," he persisted.

"Go." She waited until they disappeared from view before turning back to Matt. "Are they gone?"

He nodded. "I wouldn't be surprised if they double back, but they're headed down the mountainside."

"Was your hearing always so acute," she hesitated before adding, "or are your ears..."

"My ears were improved during one of the procedures."

She accepted the answer with a vague nod. What sort of technology enabled a person to hear sounds half a mountain away? Curious, yet unwilling to digress, she returned to the outcropping and touched his arm.

"Even if they double back, I don't want it to distract you. My guards are well aware of the challenges awaiting me. As long as they know I'm participating willingly, they won't interfere."

"How comforting," he grumbled.

Moving in front of him, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed against his tall form. "Let me see if I can help you release some of your inhibitions. We enjoy watching and being watched. There is no shame in expressing our sexuality, so there are erotic elements in most of our traditions." She had to stand on her tiptoes to reach his mouth, which rubbed her breasts against his chest. His lips parted at the first brush of her tongue and her pulse leapt. Never before had she taken the initiative, never been the one in control.

He parted his thighs, fitting her body more snugly to his. His cock throbbed against her belly and his hands rubbed her back. Curling and stroking, their tongues danced from his mouth to hers and back. She rocked her hips and his hands moved to her bottom, lifting her slightly so her mound aligned with the base of his shaft.

Her core pulsed with anticipation, yet determination subdued her need. She wanted to touch him and taste him, pleasure him as selflessly as he had pleased her.

Tearing her mouth away from his, she kissed a trail down his neck and onto the wide expanse of his chest. She pulled his shirt up and explored his warm skin, wandering ever downward. Leaving his shirt bunched around his torso, she knelt and unfastened his shorts. He grabbed the rock on either side of his hips, his gaze boring into hers.

"You're supposed to be enjoying the view," she reminded him with a smile.

"I am."

Joy surged through her, unexpected and intoxicating. She'd dreamed of tasting him, feeling the demanding slide of his cock against her tongue ever since she saw him naked the first time. Bowing her head, she hid the hunger in her eyes and focused on his pleasure. She wanted this to be as good for him as his carnal kiss had been for her.

She caressed each ripple in his abdomen. How had a scientist sculpted his body to such perfection? Separating the front of his shorts, she tugged them past his hips. He wore nothing beneath.

The tops of his thighs were lightly tanned and dusted with light brown hair. His balls rested against the rock, while his cock rose to meet her. She slipped one hand between his thighs and cradled his sac, amazed by the warm weighty feel of him.

"Do you like being touched here?" Her voice sounded tremulous.

"I like being touched."

She licked her other hand, wetting her palm as well as her fingers. "You have an amazing body." Closing her fingers around his shaft, she slid from tip to base then reversed direction. "I've wanted to touch you since you pressed against me at the bathing pools."

Up and down, she stroked, shifting her gaze between his rugged face and his growing erection.

"You have no idea how hard it was for me not to throw you to the grass that day." He chuckled, a deep, throaty sound. "And every time we've been alone since then. You tease like a nymph, yet you're so innocent."

She leaned in and breathed across the flared head of his cock. "I'm not as innocent as you think."

He caught her face between his hands and drew her gaze to his. "You're more innocent than you realize. Don't be in a hurry to give that away."

His gaze took on a sadness, a world weary haze that made her want to weep. Like his soul strands, his eyes were far older than his face.



Keeping one hand on his erection, she pressed the other to the center of his chest. "Here there is no past or future. No fear or regret. For as long as we stay on this mountaintop, no one else exists."

Framing her face with his hands, he stared into her eyes. "We should have brought more food. I may never want to leave."

She parted her lips as his face descended. Kissing had never held much appeal until she met Matt. So many things had been unimpressive before Matt stumbled into her life. His lips moved against hers and she wished they were naked. Even caressing his cock wasn't as thrilling as having him covering her, rubbing against her, and thrusting into her.

"I want you naked." His urgent whisper echoed her thoughts.

Not bothering with all her buttons, he unfastened the first few, then pulled her top off over her head. He stood and kicked his shorts aside before spreading her shirt across the rock. He tugged off his shirt and placed it beside hers. This left only their footwear and her pants.

"The ground is pretty rough," he muttered. "We better leave our shoes on."

"Our feet need protection from the ground?" She glanced from the clothing draped rock to their feet and back. "How do you intend to do this?"

"I intend to sit on this rock and watch the most amazing woman I've ever met pleasure me with her mouth. Beyond that, we'll decide together." He sat on the edge of the rock, arms braced to the side, legs spread, waiting.

The sun bathed his body in golden light, accenting the streaks in his hair and the raw power of his physique. Her insides awakened, melting with anticipation and need. She shed her pants and dropped them between his feet, kneeling on the thin barrier.

His intent stare was arousing and intimidating. Was he comparing her to his other lovers? Or was he simply anxious for her to begin? She chose to believe the later and reached out her hand. With his clothing gone there was so much more to explore. She ran her hands up his calves and over his knees. The faint sprinkling of hair tickled her fingers. Dipping her thumbs into the bend beneath his knees, she watched his face. She was sensitive here. Did her caress please him?

He scooted closer, resting against the outcropping, rather than actually sitting on it. She caressed his thighs and hips, watching him harden further and flush. He didn't rush her; he let her discover and tease.

By the time she closed her fingers around his cock, it was rock hard and throbbing. She bent to him, running her tongue up the underside of his shaft. His animalistic groan sent a wave of lust cascading through her body. No wonder he'd enjoyed licking her. Giving pleasure was as thrilling as being aroused.

She sucked on the wide, flared head, swirling her tongue over and around as her lips created a snug seal. He made another needful sound and pushed his hands into her hair. She expected him to take control, to fuck her mouth until he spilled his seed down her throat.

Arching slightly, his ass lifted off the rock then relaxed. His hands remained in her hair, but he made no move and issued no command. Her excitement intensified, trust sweetening the desire already boiling within her. He would force nothing upon her. They would make this journey together.

Her lips loosened and she slid her mouth farther down his shaft. Even with her head tilted back, she couldn't take all of him. She cupped his balls with one hand and stroked his shaft with the other.

Orillia had given her detailed instructions and Serena had seen the act performed countless times. Still, imagining something was never the same as actually doing it. Just the head of his cock almost filled her mouth. How was she ever going to get him into her throat?

"I don't want to come like this." He tried to pull out of her mouth.

She'd barely started. There was no way she was stopping now. Bobbing her head, she savored the contrast of hard flesh and soft skin, masculine power and utter vulnerability.

Sucking firmly as she reached the tip, she stroked the sensitive crease where the tiny slit formed. A salty, sweet liquid coated her tongue. He tasted like firmine wine and something she couldn't quite define. How was that possible? Orillia had warned her to expect a sharp, distinctly salty gush. Had he released his seed? She'd expected there to be more fluid.

"Stop!" Moving his hands to her shoulders, he pushed her back. His cock fell free from her mouth, still fully erect. "I'm almost impossible to swallow. I'd rather come inside you anyway."

"You were inside me." She challenged him.

"You know what I mean." His chest heaved and his cheeks were as flushed as the head of his cock.

"We drank firmine wine with our midday meal. Why does your... You taste like wine."

"Don't do this now." He pulled her to him, hiding his expression with the proximity of their bodies. "Can't we just enjoy each other?"

"Did I imagine the taste?" She wasn't sure why it was important, but some inner voice made her persist.

## Chapter Seven

Matt eased his hold and allowed Serena to rock back on her heels. Everything had been so perfect. Her selfless expression of passion had been more thrilling than anything he could remember. He wanted nothing more than to continue this, to make love to her with the staggering combination of intensity and tenderness that twisted inside him even now. His fragmented honor wouldn't allow him to pretend.

She had to know. Before he joined his body with hers, she had to understand what he was. If she pulled back in revulsion, he'd do everything in his power to overcome her misconceptions, but he had to tell her.

"I..." He sighed, words evaporating as he gazed into her eyes. Not a good start.

"What's the matter?" She rested her hands on his thighs.

There was no artifice in Serena. She said what she thought and fought fiercely for the things in which she believed. He would not deceive her.

"The illness I mentioned was worse than you can imagine. My body wasted away and my internal organs failed until there was no option but to replace them."

Her gaze narrowed and her brow knitted. This must be incredibly hard for her to comprehend. "This is like the artificial arm you mentioned? Parts of your body were manufactured?"

Wanting to see how she reacted to this concept before he revealed any more, he nodded. "My reproductive system couldn't be saved. When I prepare to...release now, the biometric system creates the needed fluid from whatever I most recently drank."

"That's why you tasted like wine?" A hint of distaste crept into her tone. "Isn't that taking recycling a bit too far?"

He chuckled despite the flush creeping up his throat. "If the system had been designed any other way, I would have been required to add the appropriate fluid each time I had sex. That would have been awkward at best. Don't you think?"

Her expression turned distant and thoughtful, the momentary discomfort slipping away. "Are you able to father children or was that ability destroyed by the disease?"

"Conception will be complicated at best. My sperm was harvested and frozen, so there is a limited supply. I carry four microencapsulated bullets within me. If I want to attempt conception, I release one of these bullets when I ejaculate. The capsule dissolves, thawing the sperm, and I hope for the best. If all four bullets fail, I can 'reload' or explore other options until all of my sperm has been used."

She shook her head, looking more confounded than ever. "I understood about half of that."

Encouraged by her calm, he went a bit farther. "*Many* of my systems were destroyed. I have so much technology inside me, I'm not sure your tribe will consider me a person anymore. I told you the treatment was radical. I want you to understand just how radical."

"This is why you asked about Ashton and the malignari. Without these technologies, you would be dead?"

The question went deeper than that, but she knelt between his legs naked. And his cock was not in the mood for a philosophical discussion about the definition of life.

"I didn't want to go any further until you understood that I'm not like other men."

She smiled and wrapped her fingers around his half-hard cock. "I noticed that at the bathing pool."

"That's not what I meant."

"I know. I appreciate your concern. It only reinforces what I've suspected all along. You are extraordinary. We were brought together by the Deity, and I have no intention of refusing the gift." Her hand began a slow pumping motion that made him groan.

He covered her hand, halting its tantalizing movement. "Do you honestly believe this was ordained by some higher power?"

"That higher power might only be Miranda, but that's good enough for me."

Releasing his hold on her hand, he wrestled with the nagging remains of his hesitation. He'd told her. Well, he'd told her most of it and she was still touching him.

"You're still distracted. Do I need to ease your fears?" Closing her lips around the tip of his cock, she sucked with ravenous demand. "I like firmine wine." Her lips moved against him as she spoke. "Give me more."

Temptation tore through him, speeding his pulse and tightening his abdomen. He brushed her hair back from her face as her mouth worked its magic. What she lacked in skill, she made up for with enthusiasm. Her tongue swirled and her lips slid, snug and warm against his aching shaft.

He needed to kiss her and feel her soft breasts press against his chest. "Enough." Hooking his hands under her arms and drew her to her feet.

She wrapped her arms around his neck and offered her mouth with a warm sigh. He tilted his head and kissed her, thrilled by her eagerness. Her breast felt warm and weighty in his hand, the nipple already gathered into a firm peak. He rolled the tender crest between his thumb and forefinger, exalted by her throaty cry.

Her skin was silky beneath his fingers, her taste addictive on his tongue. He inhaled deeply, needing to imprint her scent on his brain, so all he had to do was close his eyes and he'd be surrounded by her.

Kissing his way down her body, he carefully slipped to the ground. The rock abraded his back and his buttocks, the sensation oddly arousing. "Rest your knee on my shoulder and put your hands on top of the rock. It's my turn to taste you."

"I'm tired of teasing and being teased. I want you to fuck me, *really* fuck me."

"I want your cream in my mouth when I fill you with my cock."

She shivered. A startled sound part cry and part squeak escaped when he bent her knee and raised it to his shoulder. Unbalanced by the sudden movement, she leaned forward and braced herself against the rock, ending up in exactly the position he'd described.

"Your pussy is so soft." He traced her with his fingertips, mesmerized by her delicate flesh. "I'll never tire of touching you, never get enough." With slow deliberation, he found her opening and pushed inside. Her passage tightened around his middle finger, hot, slick, and welcoming.

He pulled nearly out, her cream gleaming on his skin. Desire rose within him, swelling and consuming. He cupped her bottom with one hand and added a second finger. She arched over him, her breasts just out of reach.

Finding her clit with his tongue, he circled the puffy little nub. She started, then sighed as he caressed her. He circled and flicked, but an up and down motion made her wild. He licked up one side as he thrust his fingers in and stroked down the other with his withdrawal.

"Oh, oh!" She grabbed his head and angled her hips. He understood what she needed. With his fingers buried deep inside, he closed his lips around her clit and sucked.

She cried out sharply, her hair brushing his hand as her back bowed. Her inner muscles squeezed his fingers, the deep contractions keeping time with his mouth. Cream ran over his fingers and onto his hand. He had to take advantage of her response to ease his way inside.

He guided her down onto his lap, her knees straddling his hips. "You're really tight," he murmured against her hair. "We'll have to go slowly."

"I'm also really wet. You won't hurt me."

"You're right, I won't." It was a vow, even if she didn't realize it. He parted her folds and settled against her entrance. "Kiss me."

As she leaned in to obey, he worked the head of his cock into her. She gasped and her inner muscles tightened. He stroked her back with one hand and caressed her mound with the other. Circling her clit and coating her folds with her cream, he prepared her for more of him.

His kiss was slow and teasing. He nibbled at her lips then sucked on her tongue, encouraging her to play. Taking advantage of her distraction, he cupped her bottom with both hands and pushed farther into her heat.

Serena trembled as Matt impaled her. Wider and wider she stretched. Eased by her arousal, his body blazed a trail into the very heart of her. She tore her mouth from his and dropped her head back on her shoulders. He stretched her beyond pleasure. She ached and burned as he pushed deeper and deeper, relentless, yet incredibly gentle.

“Just a bit more,” he whispered and she laughed. How could there be more? He demonstrated an instant later when her groin pressed against his. “If you don’t want me to move, I can come like this, just keep squeezing me and I’ll come.”

She shifted on his lap. He scooted forward so she could wrap her legs around him as her body adjusted. “Let me catch my breath.”

“Take all the time you need.” He supported her with one arm, bending her backward so he could reach her breasts. His mouth drew on one nipple and then the other, long, deep pulls that made her clit echo the throb.

Rotating her hips, she explored her body’s reaction to the overwhelming fullness. The smallest shift accented her need to move, to feel the unmistakable slide of his hard male flesh inside her.

His hands glided across her damp skin, never lingering in one place for long. The tie slipped off the end of her hair and a cool breeze unraveled the thick braid. Strands swirled around them, silky and caressing.

He grasped her hips and drew her up slowly, testing the ease with which she could move. Her core fluttered and she braced herself against his shoulders.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“You’re huge,” she admitted with a sigh. He held her while she got her legs beneath her. Rolling her hips and lifting with her knees, she dragged her body up the length of his shaft, then lowered herself again.

He caressed her breasts and teased the crease between her bottom cheeks. They stared into each others eyes, lost in the thrill of discovery.

All her life she’d wanted to express herself freely, to abandon inhibition and thought. His gaze burned with passion and tenderness. The combination made her wild.

“Fuck me,” she whispered against his lips. “I want you on top of me now.”

With a wicked chuckle, he clutched her to his chest and flipped her onto her back. His strong arms controlled her descent, giving her a moment to settle in the grass before he took over. Kneeling between her thighs, he draped her legs over his arms.

He pulled his hips back. She raised her arms above her head, savoring the thick slide of his cock. Pausing with just the tip inside her, he stared into her eyes. "Nothing has ever felt this good." He thrust deep, driving the breath from her lungs.

He looked like he might say more, then his lashes lowered and all she could see was desire. He filled her again and again, each stroke a separate possession. His hands grasped her hips, while he moved between her thighs.

She looked past him at the clear blue sky, soaring like a bird on the wind. Pleasure coursed through her, tingling across her skin and gathering in her feminine core. She squeezed him with her inner muscles and surrendered to the joining.

His soul strands burst to life around him, their colors vibrant. She raised her arms and let the strands flow around her fingers. His emotions bombarded her mind as a second level of sensation magnified her pleasure.

Need was clear in his gaze, so the emotion didn't surprise her. He felt lust and possessiveness, but through the darker emotions floated hope, sweet and pure like summer rain. Moving her hands to his face, she brought his mouth down to hers. Hope was precious and fragile, and all too rare.

His movements sped. He pushed her legs up and back, raising her hips off the ground. His thrusts were violent, jarring her body with each impact. She relished the intensity, freed by the depth of their connection.

They came together, Matt clenching his teeth, Serena crying out for both of them. He pressed her against his chest, the force of his release shaking his body. She wrapped her arms and her legs around him, riding the crest on and on.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Cephus to see you, ma'am."

Petra cringed at the title. Ebon knew "ma'am" made her feel old and dowdy. She'd insisted he call her "mistress" countless times since he took over security at the Pleasure Palace. Still, he managed to "forget."

Pushing back from her desk, she stood and straightened the narrow skirt of her bright blue dress. Cephus was one of the few people who could intimidate her. Ebon was merely annoying.

"Send him in."

She tucked her sapphire-tinted hair behind her ears and adjusted her neckline, revealing only the upper curve of her breasts. Usually, she used her physical attributes

without hesitation. Cephus, however, was the last person she wanted to arouse. She'd suspected he'd arrive today. Why hadn't she worn something less flamboyant?

The door opened and Cephus strode into her office. Dressed in an immaculate business suit, his cold gray eyes located her with a glance, then gazed about the room with feigned indolence. She knew from experience that he could strike without warning, fast and lethal. Pronounced cheekbones and a firm jaw created a face both elegant and cruel.

"May I offer you a drink?" The customary question seemed trite given his effortless menace.

"My time is limited. I'd prefer we dispense with the pleasantries."

Sweeping her hand toward the chairs arranged before her desk, she waited until he sat before returning to her seat. "What have you learned?"

"When you contracted my services, I told you my fee was twofold."

She acknowledged the statement with a nod, but said nothing.

"We have agreed upon the monetary compensation. The second portion of my fee is information."

When he'd suggested he wanted more than money, she'd expected his demand to be sexual. Too many years in the pleasure business, apparently. "What do I know that interests you?"

"I insist each of my clients reveal certain information about themselves. This protects me, should any of my clients attempt to manipulate our relationship."

Anger simmered beneath her calm façade. Until she learned what he knew, she had no choice but to play along. "How do I know what you've learned is worth revealing anything about myself?"

"I'll accept half of my fee in advance and half upon your satisfaction." He rested his hands on the arms of the chair and finally met her gaze.

She'd hired two investigators before Cephus and neither had learned anything useful. "What do you want to know?"

"What was the nature of your relationship with Matthias?"

He'd have to do better than that if he hoped to make her uncomfortable. "We were lovers."

He remained still and watchful. Petra wasn't fooled. She knew a predator when she saw one.

"Who ended the relationship?" he asked.

"Which time?" She dismissed the subject with a wave of her hand. "Our affair was unstable from the start."

"What made it unstable?"



A shiver raced down her spine. He'd scratch and prod until she revealed something damning. So be it, she'd give him a glimpse into her jaded soul. The sooner he satisfied his morbid curiosity, the sooner they could move on.

"I like men." She grinned. "Catch me in the right mood and I like women, too. Matthias was too possessive for the sort of relationship I'm able to offer."

"Did you lead him to believe you'd remain faithful to him?"

"It wasn't a deception. I honestly attempted to change for him, but I like men." Despite her casual tone, pain sharpened the admission.

"Did he ever catch you in the act?"

"Yes."

"More than once?"

"Yes."

"And still he took you back?" The shadow of a smile curved his lips. "You must be one hell of a fuck... Or was he just a fool?"

"I'm not indulging you further until you tell me what you've learned."

"Very well." He unbuttoned his jacket and crossed his legs. "I'll tip my hand, but know this. We will not leave this room until I have honest answers to the rest of my questions."

He got off on humiliating others, no doubt about it. Being privy to a person's secrets offered a certain security, but Cephus wanted to watch his "clients" squirm. She'd determine how much she was willing to writhe when she heard his discoveries. She folded her hands on her desktop and waited for him to begin.

"The Renaissance Foundation," she prompted when he continued to study her. "What were you able to learn?"

"Matthias had no living relatives, so he established the Renaissance Foundation when he realized he was dying."

"I already knew that."

He chuckled. "Are you always so impatient?"

"It depends on the situation."

"Let's see what we can do to lighten your mood."

Lightening her mood was the farthest thing from his mind. He either had useful information or he didn't. She was already tired of his games. "I'm listening."

"On the surface, the foundation is a charity devoted to the rehabilitation of amputees and the recovery of those needing artificial organs."

Again, nothing she didn't already know. "You said on the surface."

He inclined his head. "As well as performing its charitable works, the foundation is a mechanism through which the Toymaker's income is filtered."

“Why would Matthias need to filter his money? All of his inventions were patented. His income is legitimate.”

“Legal and legitimate are two different things.” His gaze flashed for a moment before freezing over again. “Many consider the pleasure industry as a whole disreputable.”

Petra rubbed the bridge of her nose. She wasn’t interested in the legitimacy of the pleasure industry. If she cringed every time someone called her a whore, she’d have adapted the posture permanently. “Go on.”

“The everyday workings are overseen by a board of directors. They follow a strict business plan outlined in the foundation’s charter.”

“In other words, they’re puppets with no real power of their own?”

“Basically.” He licked his lips, the gesture undeniably reptilian.

Ignoring her growing aversion, she asked, “If the board is simply going through the motions, who is pulling the strings?”

“After dismantling the foundation and its numerous holding companies, I discovered the silent benefactor beneath it all. Matt Sterling possesses a detailed past and impeccable resume, but like the Renaissance Foundation itself, he is mostly smoke and mirrors.”

She scooted to the edge of her chair, carefully concealing her excitement. Finally! Had she found a criminal worthy of his price? She took a deep breath before she spoke. He must never guess the true reason for her interest.

“Have you located this man? Do you have a physical description?”

“Would I be here if I didn’t?” He pulled a datapad out of his pocket and activated a holimage.

Her gaze widened for an instant before she controlled the reaction. At least she’d kept her jaw from dropping.

“You know this man?” Cephus asked.

“I’ve seen him before. He claimed to be one of Matthias’s employees. Apparently, their relationship was a great deal more intimate than I was led to believe.”

Curiosity melted through his expression. “You’re inferring Matt and Matthias were lovers?”

“Why else would Matthias leave his fortune to a veritable stranger?”

“Why indeed. How certain are you that Matthias is dead? Matt’s emergence perfectly coincides with --”

“I saw his body, and believe me, I know him well enough to verify his identity. The Toymaker is dead, but I’ll be damned before I see his fortune pissed away by some ungrateful pup.”

“Your interest is purely financial?” Cephus didn’t look convinced.

She pushed to her feet. One last question and this unnerving conversation would be over. "Where is he?"

"You must think I'm a fool. I said I'd tip my hand, not throw down my cards."

She swallowed hard. Let the humiliation resume. She endured worse for a far smaller gain. "What do you want to know?"

"Who is Tamara?"

Shock slammed into her so hard her knees went weak. Bracing herself against the edge of her desk, she trembled. For twenty-eight years she'd guarded this secret, sacrificed so much, so Tamara could...

"Where did you hear that name?" She could barely force the question out.

"I know you've been providing for her longer than you've been affluent, yet she has no idea who you are. Are you ashamed of her, or are you worried she'll be ashamed of you?"

"She has nothing to do with this."

"I'm not so sure." He stood as well, resting his hands on the desktop. "Does Matthias know he has a daughter?"

He was way off base with his conclusion, but the details were unimportant. No one threatened Tamara. For a long, strained moment, she glared into his eyes. "Don't threaten me or anyone under my protection. I am not without recourses."

"It's not a threat. Sometimes my clients offer their secrets, other times I find them on my own. I suspected you would be less forthcoming than most. Tamara is only threatened if I am threatened. Do we understand each other?"

"Where is Matt Sterling?" She gritted out the question between clenched teeth, unable to hide her fury.

"I suggest you make a pilgrimage to the wilderness on Temple-Tuttle. It looks like you could use a vacation."

## Chapter Eight

Serena knelt in the grassy clearing at the base of the Cliffs of Enarre. Matt faced her, eyes closed, features relaxed. Triple waterfalls spilled into a murky pool. The rumble was rhythmic and soothing.

She studied his soul strands with tender determination. They'd spent the past three days indulging their sexuality. Each time they touched, she felt her gift unfurl a little more. She'd been able to summon soul strands since her ascension, but she had never attempted to manipulate them before.

Manipulate wasn't an accurate word for what she was trying to do. No one could force another to change, but her gift offered her the insight and sensitivity to guide others through their emotional evolution.

Closing her fingers around one of his constrictions, she intensified the restriction. "Can you feel that?"

"Yes." His tone was breathless and strained.

"I'm going to squeeze even harder. I want you to understand the difference between this knot and the free flow of energy."

"All right."

She used both hands and cringed when he shuddered and groaned. "This is regret. You cannot change the past. No one can. You can only control how much influence the events have on your future."

"I've tried to forget. I can't."

Releasing her hold on his strands, she touched his shoulder and waited until he opened his eyes. "I didn't say anything about forgetting. The only way to move beyond a memory is to accept that it's part of you, and determine that it will no longer be harmful. The harder you try to forget something or someone, the more energy you waste on them."

“You don’t believe in remorse?”

“I never said that. Regret, remorse, shame, whatever you want to call it, allows us to examine our mistakes and learn from them. If we spend all our time and energy reliving the events in our past, nothing ever changes.” She moved closer, her knees pressing against his. “The first step in recovery is often forgiveness, and sometimes it’s ourselves we must forgive. Close your eyes. Let’s try this again.”

It took a moment for him to open his mind. His strands flickered and pulsed, their rhythm stilted and inconsistent. She eased her hands into the stream. His energy flowed through her, revealing his determination and the strength of character locked within the tangles.

“Don’t speak. Listen to my voice and allow your mind to respond.” Her fingers tingled and colors danced before her eyes. “Choose a memory, one incident in your past that made you happy.” His strands brightened and surged. Using the healthy sections as a guide, she untangled the largest cluster, holding them steady while his being registered the change. “Can you feel that?”

“Yes, it’s wonderful.”

“Memorize the sensation. Absorb it into your being.” His shoulders relaxed and he breathed more evenly. “Good. If you feel the past returning, find this moment, this memory. Remember what it felt like to remember something peaceful and calm.”

His eyes opened and his soul strands dimmed. “Why don’t I just remember the happy memory?”

“Because your thinking is more convoluted than that. You must establish new pathways to your memories. It’s important for you to accept the bad with the good, while learning from each.” She waited until his eyes drifted shut again before she added, “Instead of trying to control your memories, we’re going to teach you a different way to remember.”

“I’m not sure I know what you mean, but let’s give it a try.”

His strands intensified with each deep breath. She made a final adjustment, then shifted her hand. “I’m going to let go gradually. Concentrate on the new rhythm. Try and maintain the feeling.” She eased her hold on the wounded area, decreasing the support until his strands flowed freely around her fingers.

He sighed. “I can’t believe the difference.”

She smiled, pleased by their progress. “We’ll make adjustments at the first sign of constriction. Let me know immediately if you feel the pressure return.” He nodded and a dreamy smile curved his lips. It was all she could do not to lean in and kiss him. Once he had stabilized this section, they’d work on the other tangles, but this was a wonderful start.

“You’re sure you’ve never done this before?” He opened his eyes and rolled his shoulders. “That was pretty amazing.”

"This is just the beginning. If you let down your guard, you'll fall back into the old pattern. Think of it as emotional exercise. It won't come naturally at first."

"I understand."

"Good. Let's go back to the village. I need to check in with Hyalee."

He helped her to her feet and closed his fingers around hers. "Do you need a reference? I'd be happy to verify your skill."

They crossed the clearing hand in hand and headed down the narrow path. "Unfortunately, she can't take your word for it. I have to demonstrate my abilities for the entire Order."

"How is that possible, if no one else can see soul strands?"

The past three days had been amazing. She'd learned more about the outside world since meeting Matt than in all the seasons that had gone before. Miranda was reluctant to share the details of her life on Halley Prime. She didn't want to be responsible for her sister's discontent. Lutton's time away had enriched their lives, yet his attitude remained suspicious. Most of the Perrlain felt they would be better off if they never interacted with outsiders and Serena had always agreed. Now, she wasn't so sure.

She had never found anyone as fascinating as Matt. He patiently answered her endless questions, speaking freely of his world. Her curiosity soon moved beyond his environment and settled on the man himself. She wanted to know who he was and what made him happy, not just what pleased him.

"Hyalee is able to project her being into others for a brief period of time." She focused her wayward thoughts on the subject at hand. "She'll be able to see what I see and know what I know."

"That must be interesting." He held up a stray branch and allowed her to pass along the trail.

"It's extremely dangerous. If she stays too long outside her body, she will be unable to return."

"How does she know when her time is up?"

"She can usually sense the connection fading, but there have been times when she felt nothing until she tried to return. It also leaves her vulnerable to other dangers."

"I gather you don't mean the physical kind."

"No, possessing spirits and dark influences have an open door each time she projects."

He shot her a sidelong glance filled with confusion and concern. "Then why does she do it?"

"It's her responsibility as high priestess. That's why the Deity gave her the gift."

"Each high priestess has been able to project her consciousness into others?"

"It's a prerequisite."

"It doesn't seem to matter how much I'm exposed to your abilities; it's still hard to believe these things really happen."

She smiled. "I'm sure I would feel the same, were I to visit Halley Prime." He paused and faced her. Night was rapidly closing in. It was unwise to tarry in the jungle.

"Would you like to visit Halley Prime?"

"I don't know. It was never a possibility before."

He tucked her hand into the curve of his elbow and started walking again. "If I stayed until after the full moon, would you be allowed to accompany me offworld?"

Her heart fluttered at the thought of traveling with him. He could show her things she could hardly imagine and... "Could we visit Miranda?"

"Of course. I know she'd be thrilled to see you."

As rapidly as the excitement surged, it plummeted. She was a soul seer. Her obligation was to the Order, her loyalty must be to her people. "It's a wonderful fantasy, but I have responsibilities."

"Your people can't spare you for a few weeks?"

She suspected the lure of the outside world would keep her away for much longer than that. Matt was certainly a temptation and Miranda's stories had always made her long for...something more.

"Let's focus on your recovery and the conclusion of my ascension. Neither of us can afford to be distracted right now."

They'd reached the outskirts of the village. Matt wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her off the trail. Leaning against a tree trunk, he pressed her against him. "I find you more than distracting. I thought this attraction would lessen once..."

"Once what?" She rubbed his chest, enjoying the hair-roughened texture of his skin. "Once the challenge was gone?"

"I'd like to believe I'm not that shallow, but it's happened before."

"And once I could freely express my sexuality, I should have had no more use for you." She stretched up and kissed his mouth. "Neither of us is responding the way Hyalee and Lutton intended."

"Which leads me back to my original question." His hands dipped beneath her robe and cupped her bare bottom. "Will you be allowed to accompany me?"

"You could always stay here with me."

He didn't immediately make an excuse. He stared into her eyes and moved one hand to her hair. "That's not how I pictured the rest of my life, but I'm willing to consider it."

Maybe had never sounded so sweet.

\* \* \* \* \*

“How can people live like this?” Petra swatted at a massive, flying insect and pressed closer to Ebon. Spaceships weren’t allowed to land within the wilderness preserve, so they’d been forced to set down and hike through the oppressive jungle. She’d had no idea what she was getting herself into when Cephus suggested a pilgrimage.

“I don’t think this is in my job description,” Ebon grumbled, swinging a massive machete with frightening precision. “It’s hard to ensure the security of the Pleasure Palace when I’m on a different outpost.”

“Your primary responsibility is *my* safety. Don’t ever forget it.”

“Even if we find this reclusive tribe, what makes you think Matt will still be there?”

“My source tracked him here and there has been no indication that he left.”

Ebon shot her an impatient glare. “And Cephus couldn’t possibly be wrong?”

“His information has been faultlessly accurate. I have no reason to doubt him.”

“You’re afraid of him.”

“You would be, too, if you knew half of what I know about that man.”

“Fine, so Cephus is a paragon of villainy. What the hell are we doing here?”

“Don’t be daft,” she snapped. “You know good and well why we’re here.”

“I know we’re searching for some person named Matt Sterling. That doesn’t really answer the why?”

“Just do what you’re told, and you’ll keep your job.”

“If we make it out of this alive, I’ll expect a hefty bonus.”

“Fine.”

“And a blowjob.”

“Any of the mistresses will suck you dry anytime you like.”

“I’m well aware of the fact, sweetheart. I want *you* on your knees.”

She didn’t argue or relent. There was no way she could have made this trek alone, but they still needed to find Matt.

A spear flew in front of Ebon’s face and lodged in a nearby tree with a menacing thunk. She watched the shaft wobble as Ebon sprang into motion. Shoving her to the ground, he stood over her, pulse pistol ready to blast their unseen attacker.

*“Drintal pev arnstin caribom talli mon!”*

She had no idea what the words meant, but the deep male voice cracked like a whip. “We are *pilgrims*, come to offer praise.” She’d been told the words would calm even the most aggressive native.

“You don’t look like pilgrims.” The same man responded in heavily accented Shardrake. His form still lost in shadow.



"We came to barter." Ebon motioned toward the hovercart. "Would you like to see what we offer?"

Four natives crept closer, three brandishing spears. The spokesman stayed slightly apart from the others, his dark gaze openly assessing. Ebon retracted the top of the cart and allowed the men to inspect the variety of merchandise they'd assembled: fabric, rope, cooking utensils, and spices.

"Are you Wikoli or Perrlain?" Petra asked, her attention fixed on the spokesman.

"If we were Perrlain, you'd be dead. They have become extremely intolerant of pilgrims lately."

"Do you currently have any other visitors?" she asked. Cephus hadn't known Matt's final destination, just that he was in the wilderness preserve on Temple-Tuttle.

"We were returning from a hunt. I will take you to Drey Fon. He knows everything that transpires in the valley."

"Is he your leader?"

"He likes to think so."

They fell in step behind the Wikoli hunters. A river guided them to the village and Petra gazed around in horror. Huts were separated by dirt trails and fire pits; there was nothing that even faintly resembled civilization. One of the hunters spoke to the leader and all four laughed.

"What did he say?" Petra had the distinct impression she'd been the butt of a joke.

"He was curious to know if all your hair is blue."

She was just annoyed enough to answer, but Ebon placed his hand on her arm.

"You don't know what they will perceive as an invitation," he warned.

They came to a hut slightly larger than the others. The spokesman called out in their native tongue and a dark-haired man with copper-tinted skin emerged from inside. Like the hunters, he wore only a piece of brightly colored material wrapped around his hips. Unlike the hunters, elaborate golden decorations surrounded his upper arms and throat.

"We have visitors," the hunter told him in Shardrake.

"So I see," he responded in the same language.

After bowing from the waist, the hunter turned back the way he'd come.

"What brings you to our village?" The other man's voice was well modulated and nearly free of the hunter's guttural accent. He stalked toward her, his dark eyes settling on her face.

"Stories of your culture have been buzzing about on Halley Prime ever since my nephew encountered some of the Perrlain."

"We are not Perrlain."

The hostility in his tone surprised her. Were the two tribes at war? “Your friend told me I’d probably be dead if you were.”

“He exaggerates. The Perrlain are cowards, content to pretend the rest of the universe doesn’t exist.”

These savages had a thing or two to learn about hospitality. She was exhausted, sweaty, and dying of thirst. “We brought wares to barter, but I’d really like to freshen up before we negotiate.” Hopefully, that was clear enough for this imbecile.

“We have a lodge for visitors. I’ll take you there.” He motioned Ebon off in the direction the hunter had taken. “You may sleep with the men.”

“Where she goes, I go. No exceptions.” His hand covered his pulse pistol, though he didn’t bother drawing the weapon.

“As you wish.”

He led them down another path, this one even less tolerable than the others. What little moonlight they had previously enjoyed was choked out by the dense trees and twisting vines. Ebon flipped on his lightbeam and their host -- she couldn’t remember what the hunter had called him -- snatched it out of his hand.

“Night creatures are best left asleep. Move quickly and quietly.”

“Perhaps it would be better if we stayed in the village.” She’d had about enough of his rudeness.

“We’re almost there.”

“What’s your name again and what role do you play in this tribe?”

“You may call me Drey Fon.”

“I’m Petra; this is Ebon.”

Drey Fon acknowledged the introduction with a stiff nod, still refusing to define his role.

“Did you lock the hovercart?” she asked Ebon. It would be hard to barter if they returned to the village and found all of their goods missing.

“The Wikoli are not thieves.” Drey Fon sounded genuinely affronted.

A faint glow separated a dwelling from the surrounding darkness. Had someone lit a fire in this heat? That would be just her luck to be stuck in a sweat lodge with this disagreeable...

The door opened and firelight spilled out into the night, silhouetting the woman standing in the threshold. There was no doubt she was a woman. Despite her long black hair, her curvaceous shape was revealed in glorious detail.

“Is she naked?” Ebon whispered.

“We find no shame in our nudity. You will find yourselves grossly overdressed for our climate.”

The woman stepped back from the doorway, allowing them to enter the small hut. Though a fire burned in a shallow pit, the interior of the lodge was surprisingly comfortable. A crude table and matching bench were the only furniture. On the far side of the fire pit spread a mound of mismatched bedding. The hand-quilted blankets and embroidered coverlets, as well as animal hides, were likely the result of bartering.

Inventory only took Petra a matter of moments, leaving only the strange woman and the surly man. She's dismissed Drey Fon as unimportant, so her gaze focused on the woman.

"Do you have a name?"

"She doesn't speak your language," Drey Fon said.

"You may call me Ratauni, though that is not my name."

Petra shot Drey Fon a challenging glance as the woman approached. Thick blue-black hair fell in a silken sheet to her hips. She could make a fortune as a pleasure Mistress with that commanding voice and those high, firm breasts. Ratauni took Petra's hand and guided it to her breast. Snatching her hand away, Petra released a nervous laugh.

"You have a beautiful body. I might enjoy looking at you, but I don't want to touch."

"You lie." Blue fire flashed for an instant in the depths of her dark eyes.

"Ratauni, leave her alone. See if her friend is interested."

Ebon's eyes widened as Ratauni turned toward him. "I have seen Petra's face before, but you are unknown to me."

What the hell did that mean? Petra started to protest, then shut her mouth. More than sexual awareness crackled in this room. She sensed...evil. Looking around with new interest, she noted the contents of the simple shelves and the crude instruments arranged on the worktable. Drey Fon was a sorcerer!

"Thanks for your hospitality. We're going to stay in the village." Petra took a step toward the door and Drey Fon slammed it closed with the wave of his hand.

Ebon lunged for him and Drey Fon flung him against the far wall before her guard could even draw his weapon. A low groan escaped Ebon as he crumbled to the dirt floor.

"Ratauni, what do you know of this female?" Drey Fon asked.

"While the golden man licked Serena's pussy, he saw this one's image." Her smile turned cruel as her gaze returned to Petra. "He felt only fury and loathing until he banished you from his mind."

Drey Fon approached Petra so suddenly she didn't see him move. His hand grasped the back of her hair and she cried out. "I haven't hurt you -- yet. Are you looking for someone?"

"Yes. A man with sun-streaked, brown hair. Some might call it golden." His hold was firm; it only hurt if she tugged against him.

"Why do you seek this man?"

"He took something that belongs to me."

"She lies." Ratauni sneered. "She wants to fuck him so badly she trembles at the thought. This one is lusty. I like her."

"Show her the golden man. See if it is the same man she seeks."

Ratauni reached out her hand and Petra twisted, shrinking away from the impending touch. "What does she mean to do? What *is* she?"

"Aren't you curious? You've come all this way."

He held her steady while Ratauni entered her mind. Petra cried out, battling the invasion with everything she had. She sensed Ratauni's power and her demonic nature, and was repulsed by her evil.

"Stop fighting," Drey Fon insisted. "It won't hurt if you just let her."

Revolted as much by her helplessness as by the demon's taint, Petra felt bile rise into the back of her throat.

"Watch," Ratauni whispered. "This is the golden man."

All she saw at first was the woman's slim body, arching and twisting as the man feasted between her thighs. One of her legs draped his shoulder and her black hair fanned out around her like spilled ink. She looked like Ratauni, and yet, she did not. She...

"The man," Ratauni reminded her, "look at the man."

The woman cried out, her body shaking with a powerful orgasm. He let her leg slide down his arm, but he continued to lick her pussy. His lips gleamed with her cream and passion burned in his dark eyes. Iram! That's what he'd called himself when he introduced himself in Matthias' lab.

"Yes, that's the man I'm searching for." She shoved the demon back and turned on Drey Fon "Why don't you tell me why your pet looks just like that woman! Could it be we want the same thing?"

"Ratauni wake up Ebon and have him feed you. Petra and I need to talk."

The she-demon sashayed across the lodge and knelt beside Ebon.

"Will it harm him if he fucks her? I presume that's how she feeds."

"Why would that be your first presumption?" He watched her closely. "I saw recognition in your eyes. Could it be you've dabbled in the dark arts yourself?"

"I've dabbled in many things. Now, tell me about the woman."

Ratauni unfastened Ebon's shorts and woke him with her mouth. After a shocked gasp, he closed his eyes and accepted her eager attention.

"I have a better idea." Drey Fon slipped his arm around Petra's shoulders, refusing to release her as she twisted and arched. "Tell me everything you know about Ratauni's golden man and I might command her to stop before she literally sucks the life out of your companion."

## Chapter Nine

*Matthias stood paralyzed in the doorway, damning himself for a fool as his heart shattered for the second time. Petra grasped one of her lover's hips taking him deep into her mouth as the other fucked her hard and fast from behind. Matthias had known she was growing restless, had sensed her emotional reserve. Why had he ever allowed himself to imagine he could satisfy her when so many others had tried and failed?*

*"Shit!" The man enjoying her mouth jerked backward and reached for his discarded pants.*

*The one fucking her pussy didn't pause. His forceful gyrations jostled her breasts and filled the room with the unmistakable slap of damp flesh against damp flesh.*

*Did she know these men, or had she picked them up on the training floor of the Pleasure Palace? She looked to the side and saw him standing in the doorway. Her brow creased and regret clouded her gaze.*

*"I'm sorry," she murmured an instant before Matthias slammed the door.*

*He ran, fleeing the anger, trying to outdistance his own stupidity. A frustrated yell tore from his throat as hands shook him. A distant voice called his name. But it wasn't his name, not really...*

"Matt, wake up," Serena urged. "You're dreaming again."

Blinking away the past, he sat up in bed. Sweat trickled down his back while his heartbeat echoed in his ears.

"Are you all right?"

"I haven't had that dream in years." He panted. "What is wrong with me?"

"It's not entirely unexpected." She smoothed his hair back from his face and drew his gaze to hers. "As we break down your defenses, the stronger emotions will rebound."

Moonlight streamed in through the window, gleaming off her hair and shining in her eyes. His heart leapt within his chest as her beauty caressed him. How had she come to mean so much to him in such a short time?

He pulled her into his arms, arranging her astride his lap. Her scent soothed him and her warmth enticed. He wanted her taste in his mouth and her shape imprinted on his body. Pressing her against his chest, he wrapped his arms around her and waited for the urgency to pass. It was adrenaline, a side effect of the nightmare.

So why did she feel perfect in his arms?

"Better?" she whispered.

"It took me a lifetime to accumulate these...demons. I guess I can't expect them to disappear overnight."

She eased back, gazing into his eyes. The tenderness he saw there was humbling. He'd done nothing to deserve her affection.

"You're doing very well. Each time I summon your soul strands, they're brighter and flow more smoothly."

He ran his index finger from her temple to her chin. "And you freely express your sexuality each time we touch. I guess Miranda knew what she was doing."

"Can I ask you a question?"

The hesitation in her tone sent dread rippling through his being. "You can always ask."

She smiled. "But you're not obligated to answer?"

"What do you want to know?"

"When I study soul strands, I'm able to absorb what the person is feeling and see images if they are especially strong."

"You read minds, as well as auras?" He teased, wanting to lighten the conversation.

"I suppose that description fits as well as any." She squirmed restlessly, her expression suddenly guarded.

"Did you see my dream?" It didn't take a lot to imagine why she was fidgeting.

"Yes, but I don't understand what I saw."

"I walked in on my former lover with two other men. What's confusing about that?"

"I was able to see the woman." She cupped the side of his face as her gaze searched his features. "I was also able to see you. This is not your natural appearance, is it?"

He'd known this moment would come. He'd done everything he could to prepare her for the final revelation. If she thought of him as an assignment, what he was about to say wouldn't matter. But if her feelings had deepened, she had a right to know the truth -- all of it.

His feelings had transcended mutual desire the first time he sensed her moving through his mind. She was vibrant and intelligent, caring, yet powerful. Falling in love with her had

been the most natural thing in the world -- building a future together might well be the most difficult.

"How do I explain this to you?" Necessity strengthened his resolve. He had to make her understand.

"I've seen other images. I might be closer to understanding than you realize."

"Other nightmares?" She nodded. "What did you see?"

"One scene has reoccurred several times. The man before me now wrestles with the man I saw watching his unfaithful lover. You strangle the other man and tell him you can't live until he dies." She licked her lips and glanced away before asking, "Did you...take over another man's body?"

"In a way. I'd been working on my most sophisticated android ever when I found out I was dying. I know my epiphany wasn't unique. Most people who face death reassess their lives. The difference was I had the ability to give myself a second chance. When my body died, I transferred my memory, my personality, and...my soul into my latest invention."

Following the contour of his face with her fingers, she descended along his neck, then down his arms. He held his breath, waiting for her reaction.

"You're not...real?" she whispered.

He exhaled a shaky breath. "You can see me, touch me, smell me. Of course I'm real."

"But you're not human?"

"Would this have been less upsetting if I had transferred my being into someone else's body?"

She crawled off his lap, moving to the foot of the bed. He'd expected the retreat and still his heart ached... He didn't have a heart. He had a pulmonary pump and a simulated heartbeat. Shaking away the momentary gloom, he gave himself a firm mental shake. How could he help her see beyond his biometric housing if he fixated on it himself?

"Nothing has changed, Serena. I'm the same person I was --"

"Are you a person or a machine?"

"I think, I experience emotions. For God's sake, I have nightmares. Everything that made me Matthias is still present in Matt."

After covering her breasts with her hair, she drew the blanket across her lap. "This is why your soul strands are so faint."

Her comment had been quiet and thoughtful, but his mind latched on to the concept. "But I have soul strands. Does a machine have a soul?"

"I don't know," she whispered.

"Yes you do. You've touched my mind, melded with my spirit. Am I just a machine?"

"I don't know!" Swinging her feet to the floor, she hurried across the room and snatched her robe off its peg. "All my life I've been taught that technology is an outward sign of man's ambition and twisted priorities."

"Do you believe that?"

"Not really. Technology doesn't make people evil, and those who shun technology can be even more twisted than..." Her lips trembled and tears welled in her eyes. "I don't know how I'm supposed to feel. We were brought together for a reason. I have no doubt about that. But..."

"Nothing has changed." He scooted to the edge of the bed, longing to embrace her, yet knowing she wasn't ready for his touch.

"I need to think."

"You need to *feel*. All the answers are there in your heart." There was nothing more to say until she'd had time to analyze her emotions. He donned his soratti and slipped from the cottage, standing guard outside the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Petra wrapped her arms around her torso and rocked back and forth, lost in sexual frenzy. After she told Drey Fon a fragmented version of the truth, he joined the other two on the makeshift bed. Ebon lay on his back, arms raised above his head, while the she-demon rode him vigorously.

Security feeds at the Pleasure Palace continually inundated Petra with sex acts and she seldom felt more than a fleeting tingle. Hunger pulsed around her now, savage and raw. Helpless against the compulsion, she unfastened the front of her shorts and slipped her hand inside, leaning against the rustic table.

"Take them off," Drey Fon ordered. "I won't force you to participate, but I want to see what you're doing." He straddled Ebon's chest and pushed his cock into Ratauni's mouth as he waited for Petra to obey.

The demon grabbed Drey Fon's hips, effortlessly controlling both men with her slender body. She impaled herself on Ebon and swallowed Drey Fon with alternating turns. Tossed by her violent rocking, her hair whipped and swirled around her naked torso.

Petra pushed her shorts past her hips, then kicked them aside. Drey Fon watched her closely. She unbuttoned the top two buttons on her blouse, then pulled it off over her head.

Beneath her sensible hiking gear, she wore a cupless bra and silk thong. Seeing the provocative underwear, Drey Fon pulled out of Ratauni's mouth and returned to Petra's side.

"What sort of garments are these?" His erection bobbed, still wet from the demon's mouth.

"You've never seen lingerie before?"



He caught one of her nipples and pressed until she gasped. "A woman would only wear such garments if she expected a lover to see them. You said Matt was not your lover."

"He isn't. He stole money from my business partner. I explained this to you."

"Then who are these garments meant to entice?" Grasping her other nipple, he pinched both, the sensation rolling from pleasure to pain and back.

"Can't you guess?" She nodded toward Ebon. "He ensures my satisfaction as well as my safety."

"Does he now?" He spun her around and bent her over the table. She expected him to part her thighs and thrust into her pussy. God knew she was wet enough to take him. Instead, he examined her thong. He traced each side, then hooked his finger beneath the middle strap and followed it into the crack between her ass cheeks. "You're soaking wet." His breath stirred her hair as he whispered the words into her ear. He snapped one side and then the other, dragging the scrap of material across her folds as he discarded the ruined thong. "Move your legs apart."

What would he do if she refused? He'd said he wouldn't force her -- until he saw her fuck-me underwear. She ached, needing his fingers, or better yet, his cock, moving fast and hard inside her. With a defeated whimper, she made room for him between her thighs.

He traced her crease and teased her anus, building her arousal without pushing inside. She rocked her hips and shimmied in silent invitation. His free hand grasped the back of her neck, holding her in place, while his fingers parted her folds.

"Do you want my fingers or my cock?"

"Who said I wanted either?" She felt obliged to offer some objection.

In a flash, his hand released her and slapped her ass cheek hard. She cried out, then moaned. Heat suffused the sting, driving the sensation deeper. She shivered and her core rippled. God that felt good!

"Dishonesty is punished. Your cream is running down your thighs. You want me inside you. You can't deny it."

He slapped her other ass cheek, pausing while her body registered the full range of pleasure-pain. Her fingers curled over the far side of the table and she moved her legs farther apart.

"Does your body respond to pain as well as pleasure?"

The second slap had just about made her come. Denial was rather pointless. "Yes."

"Oh, good. Ratauni won't allow me to hurt her." He paused for a moment, then returned with a slim, flexible reed.

Petra quaked, anticipation nearly unbearable. Did he know what he was doing? Could he control himself well enough to prevent real damage? Fear curled through her, every bit as stimulating as lust.

The reed whistled as he brought it down across her ass. She screamed, the pain far more intense than she'd expected. He paused. "Too hard?"

Her clit throbbed and the table abraded her nipples. "Almost." She was shocked that he cared enough to ask. He expertly landed the second blow in the delicate crease where her ass met her thighs. "Yes, oh, God, yes!"

Ebon cried out sharply, the sound of his climax unmistakable.

Petra's core clenched, needful and empty. Drey Fon found her clit and pulled on the nub, accenting the throb deep inside her.

"Ratauni, don't let him rest. Use your mouth to make him hard again. I want to watch Petra fuck him." He accented the comment with the reed.

Lust spiraled through Petra. Her need was so demanding, she didn't care who filled her, as long as she was filled. Even the pain had been a tease. Drey Fon circled her vaginal opening with his fingers, gathering cream to lubricate her ass. She trembled as he pushed past her sphincter. Just a few strokes against her clit and she'd burst into flames.

"Please," she cried.

He slid in and out, in and out, mocking her with his leisurely speed. "Doesn't that feel good? You're tight, but not too tight. You've obviously done this before."

"I need to come."

"I know you do." He pulled his finger out and drew her away from the table. "That's good, Ratauni. Now move out of the way. Petra has need of that cock."

The demon released Ebon with a growl, obviously displeased by the command.

"Get to work before he falls asleep." He gave her a little push. "Ratauni has a tendency to wear people out."

Ebon looked rather dazed, but his cock arched nearly to his navel. He raised his arms as she moved astride his hips. "Are you all right?" His voice was hoarse, his concern endearing.

"I'm fine." She brought his cock to her entrance and sank onto his hardened length. Blissful fullness pushed into her, easing the ache and making her entire body shiver.

Drey Fon rummaged through the shelves on the far side of the hut. Petra had no idea what he was looking for. Ratauni reclined against the wall, her legs spread wide as she thrust her fingers in and out of her pussy.

Ebon matched his movements to Ratauni's, elongating each stroke. Was he aware of the compulsion or was he simply responding to the frenzy? Petra felt the thick slide of his cock as she watched Ratauni's fingers. Reality began to blur.

This was dangerous. If she surrendered completely to Drey Fon and his pet, there was no telling how long they'd control her or what they'd make her do. Petra concentrated on Ebon. He was safe. He was predictable. He was part of her world.

Kneeling behind her, Drey Fon pushed her forward, rocking her against Ebon's chest. Ebon grabbed her hips and kept right on bucking, unable to stop for even a moment. Fear tingled through her desire. Would Drey Fon take his time or thrust in brutally? Her flesh still stung from the reed. He obviously enjoyed inflicting pain.

"Hold still until I get in," Drey Fon snapped.

"Then hurry. Do you have lube?" Ebon sounded muddled. "I won't let you hurt her."

Drey Fon laughed. "As if you could stop me." He separated the halves of her bottom and smeared something cool around and into her opening.

Petra tried to relax, to accept whatever came next. Tensing would only make things worse. She shifted her hips, pushing up against Drey Fon as he drove inward. Her inner muscles stretched, tightening around Ebon as she accommodated both men. Ebon gritted his teeth, his features contorted as he fought for control.

"That feels...so good!" He gasped out the words between ragged breaths.

"Match my thrusts," Drey Fon commanded. "Let's stuff her so full, she can't help but scream."

Their cocks slammed into her, forcing her pleasure higher than it had ever gone before. Lights burst before her eyes and spasms exploded all through her abdomen. She came hard, and then came again, demonic energy compounding her arousal.

A sharp cry escaped Ratauni, drawing Petra's attention. The demon huddled against the wall, shaking visibly. Their gazes locked and Ratauni's thoughts surged. *Help me.* The plea echoed through Petra's mind, anguished and desolate.

\* \* \* \* \*

Serena lifted the charred grill from the ceremonial bowl and filled the dish with fragrant oil. Allowing the familiar scent to soothe her, she threaded a strip of tightly rolled cloth through the center slot in the grill and tightly knotted the end. She rested the grill across the bowl and waited for the fibers to absorb the oil.

Lighting a meditation flame was one of the first skills an acolyte mastered. She gathered energy in her chest and channeled it out through her middle finger. The wick ignited with a subtle pop and Serena rested her hands on her thighs.

She knelt on the floor beside the bed, conflicted and weary. Staring at the tiny flame, she centered her being and cleared her mind.

*Shouldn't you be in bed?* Miranda's familiar voice made Serena smile. *In fact, I figured you'd have company in that bed by now. Where's Matt?*

Serena and Miranda had always shared a close telepathic link. The distance separating them made communication challenging. Still, they interacted far more often than anyone realized.

*Matt is outside and I've never been so confused.*

*I can use my professional skills, or you can just tell me what's going on.*

*How long have you known Matt?* Serena closed her eyes, finding it easier to maintain the mental link.

*Seven, no, eight months. Why?*

*What species is he?*

*Ah. Did he tell you, or did you sense he's not quite human?*

*He's not quite...alive!*

*That's rubbish, and you know it. He is every bit as alive as you or I. You didn't answer my question. Why isn't he with you?*

*He kept having dreams where his robot self strangled his human self.*

*I knew he had nightmares, but he never let me beyond his mental shields.*

A long pause followed. Serena inhaled the scented oil and allowed Matt's image to fill her mind. His eyes gleamed with tenderness and laughter, while his lips parted in a sexy smile.

*What do you know for a fact?*

Serena sighed. It was a long-standing game, a simple way of untangling complex problems. She suspected Miranda had incorporated it into her practice on Halley Prime.

*I know he was honest when lying would have been easier.*

*What else?*

*I know he would protect me with his life. I know he's had only my best interest at heart since he arrived. I know he's kind and gentle when I need him to be, yet there is incredible strength in him, too.*

*Go on.*

*I know he affects me more deeply than anyone I've ever met.*

*It seems like you know a lot already. How does he affect you?*

*That's not one of the magic questions. Serena smiled. You can only ask what I know, what I feel, and what I want.*

*All right, what do you feel about Matt?*

*I'm in love with him.*

*Then why the hell are we having this conversation?* Miranda's temper flared along the telepathic link. *You belong together. I knew that the first moment I saw him. I only kept him in therapy for months, because I wanted to know what he was hiding before I let him near my baby sister.*

*And the fact that he's a replicant didn't give you pause?*

*Not after I found out how dying changed him and what he plans to do with his second chance. Ask him about the Renaissance Foundation. If you let Perrlain prejudice screw this up... Don't make me come get you.*

Serena sent her sister a mental hug. *What would I do without you?*

*A better question is what would Orillia do without you?*

*What does that mean?*

Miranda chuckled. *Don't panic. That was in no way a dire prediction. Just tell Orillia her slacker days are almost over. She'll know what I mean.*

The link faded and Serena blew out the meditation flame. She wasn't sure what that last bit had been about, but she'd deliver the message.

Crossing the cottage, she took a deep breath and opened the door. Matt pivoted to face her, his expression tense. "Would you please come back inside?"

Curiosity creased his brow; then he nodded and entered the cottage. "What smells so good?"

"I was going to meditate, see if I could sort through this jumble in my mind."

"You were 'going to'?"

"No sooner had I ignited the flame, then Miranda reached out to me."

"You and Miranda can speak telepathically?"

She nodded. "She's much more accomplished than I am, but our bond has always been strong."

"What did she have to say?"

"That I'm a fool if I let prejudice ruin my future. She left Temple-Tuttle because of the Order's inflexibility."

A slow, sexy smile bowed his lips. "I knew there was a reason I liked her." He paused and his smile faded. "I don't give a damn what the rest of this tribe thinks about me. What do *you* think about me?"

The question was so similar to one of the "magic" questions, she couldn't help but smile. "I think I'd like to hear about the Renaissance Foundation."

"Miranda has a big mouth," he grumbled.

"Does it have something to do with what the word implies -- putting lives back together?"

"Yes. I've been using a good portion of my Toymaker money helping better the lives of those who can't afford my technology."

"You're giving sex toys to --"

"No! Nothing like that. I'm sponsoring people who need artificial limbs and replacement organs."

She laughed, feeling foolish, yet thrilled that her misconception had obviously horrified him. “Matthias was part of the pleasure industry and Matthias is dead?”

“Exactly. I’m not foolish enough to think my past won’t haunt me. I have a lot of ghosts in my closet. But I’m determined to move my life in a different direction, and I want you by my side.”

## Chapter Ten

Time stood still for Matt as he gazed into Serena's eyes. She had never looked more beautiful and he had never wanted her more. But he waited, waited for her to make the next move, waited for her to accept the replicant, as well as the man.

"I want that, too." Her voice was hushed and uncertainty shadowed her eyes. "My gift belongs to the people. There hasn't been a soul seer for many years."

"I'm not asking you to give up your life so I can live mine. We can find a compromise. I have to be able to communicate with other worlds, but we can stay on Temple-Tuttle. I'll set up an office in Sanctuary and we can travel to the valley as often as you're needed. It might do the others some good to broaden their horizons just a little."

Tears pooled behind her lashes and her lips trembled. "They won't let me keep you. I know they won't."

He brushed away her tears as they fell, then cupped her chin. "If you want me, sweetheart, no power in the universe will keep us apart."

"I've never wanted anything more."

Needing no other encouragement, he swept her into his arms and headed across the small room. His mouth sealed over hers, the kiss intense, yet tender. They had the rest of their lives to explore the ferocity of their passion, tonight was a whispered prayer, a vow. They would worship each other with their hands and consummate their future with their bodies.

He stroked her lips with his tongue, then explored the interior of her mouth. She followed his retreat, her tongue every bit as bold as his.

He set her down beside the bed and parted her robe. She shrugged out of the garment and reached for the ties of his soratti.

"You are so beautiful," she whispered, before he could speak the words out loud.

"That's my line."

She stroked his chest and squeezed his shoulders, her gaze following her hands. "You intoxicate me."

Thrilled by her eagerness, he let her play. She rubbed against him, then moved back so she could see the effect her body had on his anatomy. He hardened immediately, his balls tight and aching.

He sat on the bed and pulled him toward her, mischief shimmering in her crystal blue eyes. "I'm not going to stop this time."

"Such a threat." He chuckled.

"I want you to stand there and shake and moan and trust me with your pleasure."

He clasped his hands behind his back. "I'm entirely at your mercy."

She slipped one hand between his legs and cupped his balls. Her gaze was intent upon his face. Closing her fingers around his shaft, she stroked him from base to tip until his cockhead flushed and prickled with sensation.

"Lick me," he whispered.

"Like this?" She swirled her warm, wet tongue around his engorged tip.

"God, yes." Lifting him up, she traced the pronounced vein on the underside of his shaft, then closed her lips around his crown. "More. Suck harder."

Her gaze promised mayhem as she sucked him into her mouth. The snug circle of her lips slid up and down his shaft, while her fist pumped. He let go of his wrists and clenched his fists, needing to touch her, yet wanting her to explore her newfound power. Control had been wrested from her at her ascension. Matt swore that she would never feel helpless again.

She scooted off the bed and knelt before him, tilting her head to a better angle. He was able to thrust deeper now; still he let her determine the speed. Her fingernails dug into his hips and her mouth demanded his surrender.

Tension gathered in his groin and curled up his cock. Just a few more strokes and he'd be there.

"Are you -- sure?"

She sank lower and tilted her head back farther, taking him into her throat. Her gag reflex tightened; then he slipped deeper. The heat and tension combined in blistering pleasure. He caught her face between his hands and released his seed in rhythmic spurts.

Swallowing and licking, she prolonged the spasms until he could hardly stand.

"Are you trying to kill me?" He groaned and carefully eased out of her mouth.

Serena licked her lips, fascinated by the taste of his passion. Firmine wine and something she couldn't quite define. "Killing you would be rather counterproductive, don't you think? Were you drinking tersatta juice?"



"There was a bowl of bright red berries near the door."

"Orillia must have left them for me." She tried to hide her naughty smile, but he caught her chin and gazed into her eyes.

"Explain."

"The berries are made into a mildly intoxicating juice, but they are also used... If you rub the berry pulp over specific areas of the body, it can be very stimulating."

Without explanation he left the cottage and returned with the berries. The message was clear. He'd let her have her way with him, now it was her turn to submit.

"On the bed."

It wasn't exactly a command, but close enough to send heat cascading through her. His aggression aroused her just as much as his tenderness. She loved all the facets of his personality, the distracted smiles, the rumbling laughter, the fierce possessiveness.

She spread out on her back and raised her arms over her head. If he'd wanted to bind her, she would have had no objection. Perhaps later, when he had accepted that she was not as fragile as she looked, they could explore these darker urges.

He took several berries and crushed them against his palm; then he painted her lips with the juice.

"If you warm it with your breath, my lips will tingle," she explained. After licking off the first coat, he tested her words with the second. He exhaled and her lips heated. "Kiss me."

"No."

She groaned. If she'd posed it as a question or just waited for him to taste her lips, they'd be kissing. Instead, he licked a path down her neck and coated her nipples with the tersatta pulp. The buds gathered and tingled long before his mouth encouraged the response. He left one wet and burning, while he suckled the other, and then switched. Back and forth, sensation and suction, combined to make her wild.

"Open for me. I want to taste the heart of you."

Drawing her knees up, she let her legs rotate out until she was offered brazenly, willingly, unabashedly. His berry-coated fingers caressed her folds, the pulp accenting his slightest touch.

"Wait," she gasped. "It stings."

"Here?" He dragged his tongue from her anus to her clit, easing the burn and encouraging the tingle. Reversing direction, he discovered every crease and delicate fold.

Tangling her fingers in his hair, she tried to guide his mouth where she needed it most. He ignored her whimpers and the beseeching rise of her hips and reached for more berries. Crushing them between his fingers, he pushed them into her core. She only felt a slight heat for a moment, then her inner muscles constricted forcefully.

She cried out and he lifted her to his mouth, sucking and licking, soothing and arousing, devouring her with his hunger for her passion. An abrupt orgasm tore through her, arching her back. He lapped at the juices streaming from her cunt. Her head spun and she trembled, limp and weightless in his hands.

"Fuck, you taste good." He thrust his tongue deep several times, before he went on. "Did I use too much?"

"I thought so at first, but that was pretty amazing."

With comforting strokes, he licked his way to her clit. He passed his tongue over and around her, reawakening the sensitive nub. His lips gently tugged, while he pushed two fingers into her core.

"I already came. Why are you still teasing me?"

"I like teasing you." He sucked a bit firmer. "And you like being teased." As if to prove his point, his hand moved farther down, coating a path to her back passage.

She knew men and women used this other passage as they used a pussy, but Matt was massive. "You're not going to..." His finger slipped inside her and tingles spiraled up through her body. "Oh my."

"Trust me with your pleasure."

How could she argue with her own words?

He gently suckled her clit while he slid his finger in and out. After the initial shock, the sensations were pleasant. He continued slow and steady for a long while; then he raised his head and looked into her eyes.

"Let go."

It felt odd. It felt alien. Why was he... His fingers rolled her clit, the pressure significantly harder than his lips. He thrust in fast and pulled out slow, twisting his wrist so his finger dragged different areas inside her.

"Trust me." It was an order this time, his gaze demanding her surrender.

His fingers squeezed hard and the spike of pain launched her orgasm. Sparks of tingling pleasure showered down upon her. She cried out, shuddering as sensations buffeted her body. He drew his finger out, extending the last ripple.

Cupping her ass with both hands, he found her pussy with his cock and pushed inside. She wasn't sure if the orgasm continued or if a whole new climax burst, but her inner muscles tightened around him and her sharp cry made him smile.

"Do you need a minute?"

"No! Now. Hard. Please." She added the last word in a breathless murmur as his gaze narrowed on her face. He pulled back and thrust his entire length into her trembling body. She raised her legs high against his sides, offering him everything.

Strong, deep drives robbed her of breath and filled her with wonder. He was perfect. *They* were perfect.

He moved faster, extending his arms as his hips drove more forcefully. Her breasts jostled and she tossed her head from side to side. With flawless timing, he leaned down and captured her scream of pleasure with his open mouth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Petra stood in the open doorway letting the night wind caress her naked body. After the latest bout of hedonistic sex, the others sprawled on the makeshift bed. They'd fucked each other in every way possible. No partner had gone unsatisfied, no combination unexplored. Time had blurred into a continuous blending of fingers, tongues, and cocks. She honestly couldn't say who had touched her where, or how long she'd been lost in this sexual abyss. Was this still the same night or had the sorcerer somehow distorted time?

With a trembling hand, she reached for freedom. Her fingertips crossed the threshold and searing pain shot up her arm. She ignored the sensation, forcing her hand through the invisible barrier. Her skin blistered and the stench of burning flesh filled her nose.

It was only an illusion! She closed her eyes, but the pain intensified and the image manifested in her mind.

"You're wasting your time."

Someone touched Petra's leg and she snatched her hand back from the doorway. Glancing down through tears of frustration, she found Ratauni kneeling beside her. The demon's arm encircled Petra's thigh and Ratauni pressed her cheek against Petra's hip.

"I know it's not really burning me." Petra rubbed her arm. The skin was smooth and unharmed, yet the sting lingered. "If I can just force my way through..."

"The spell will attach. You will run through the jungle screaming as flames consume your flesh."

"I can't stay here." She covered her eyes to hide her tears as hopelessness crowded in around her. "Why is he keeping us here?"

"He isn't. I am."

Startled by the casual announcement, Petra disentangled the demon and shoved her back. "Why? What do you gain by keeping us prisoner?"

"I want to go home."

It was the same pathetic voice Petra had heard in her mind the night they arrived. Was this some cruel trick? She looked at Drey Fon. He was sound asleep, one arm resting across Ebon's abdomen.

“What’s stopping you?” She knew the answer. If Drey Fon had summoned Ratauni from one of the outer realms, she was linked to him. Though far from powerless, she was bound by his will until he released her or died.

“Your voice is familiar to me. I’ve even seen your face a time or two.” Blue light burst within the demon’s eyes and all traces of the helpless little girl vanished. “You are no stranger to our ways.”

“That was a long time ago.” Petra swallowed hard, unable to suppress the memories. One of her pleasure masters had been using spells and mental compulsions to increase his popularity. When she’d tried to terminate his employment, he’d offered to teach her how to harness the power of the outer realms. The temptation had been too much to resist -- at first. “I learned quickly that there is nothing in any of your dimensions that interests me.”

“You know what I am. You know what he is doing to me.” Ratauni crouched in front of her, demonic nature twisting beneath her human façade.

“How is this helping? I’m not strong enough to kill him.”

“Serena is, or she will be soon.” Ratauni hissed and shook her head as if memories of the person caused physical pain.

“Who is Serena?”

“Drey Fon’s obsession. She doesn’t know it, of course, but he despises her almost as much as he wants her. Rather like you and the golden man.”

“Is she the woman Matt was with when you showed me his image, the woman you look so much like?”

“Yes.” She rocked forward onto her hands and knees, her head cocked to one side. “She grows stronger with each passing day. We must let her power build.”

“And then what? How do we get Serena to...” She glanced at Drey Fon. He’d rolled onto his back, but his eyes were still closed. “Why would she help us?”

“She already has the motivation. We only need to give her the opportunity.”

Petra shook her head. “Few people are as willing to kill as you presume.”

“Then Drey Fon must threaten the golden man. Serena would kill for him without hesitation. I have never seen a connection as strong as theirs, never tasted love so vile.” Ratauni shuddered again. “It was disgusting.”

Petra felt a shiver slip down her spine. Had she ever inspired that sort of connection? Would a demon have been disgusted by their love? It didn’t matter. She was here to bring Matthias home. They’d sort out the rest once they returned to the Pleasure Palace.

“What are you two plotting?” Drey Fon grumbled in a sleep roughened voice. “If you want to lick her, Ratauni, bring her over here.”

"Do you ever get enough?" Petra snapped, her posture mostly bravado. She was trapped between a demon and the mirror image of herself, and she couldn't decide which revolted her more.

He yawned and stretched his arms over his head. "Last night was rather muddled. I didn't get to watch you two pleasure each other." Struggling to his feet, he wobbled a bit before his stride stabilized. "Lean against the door and let Ratauni lick you. Her tongue feels just like fire."

"I've had enough fire to last a lifetime." She rubbed her arm and turned her head, looking out at the moonlit night. "I've had enough of just about everything."

Coming up behind her, he wrapped his arm around her waist. "Then we can find something we haven't done before."

"Are you really that daft? There is nothing we haven't done!" She shoved at his chest. "We've been stuck here for God knows how long while your pet mind fucked us all!"

He released Petra so suddenly, she stumbled into the worktable.

"What have you done?" He grabbed Ratauni by the hair and dragged her to her feet.

Trepidation squeezed Petra's heart. Had she just made the biggest mistake of her life? Even Ratauni spoke of Serena as if she were some sort of goddess. How was she supposed to compete with that? No, it worked to her advantage if Drey Fon got the goddess and she got the golden man.

"The moon is nearly full," he snarled. "Did you honestly think I wouldn't notice?"

"I didn't open the door." She offered a completely unrepentant smile and he slapped her to the floor.

"Do not interfere in my plans again, or I will never release you."

"You have no intention of releasing me and we both know it."

"Try any more of your tricks, and you will never find out. You will do exactly what I tell you, nothing more and nothing less. Do you understand me?"

She glared at Petra for a long silent moment before she answered, "I understand."

## Chapter Eleven

Serena sat up in bed with a startled gasp.

“What’s wrong?” Matt pulled her into arms, putting his body between her and the door.

The protective instinct was almost enough to soothe her fears. “The shields just dropped. Something’s wrong.”

“What shields?”

“The Order has maintained a protective shield around me ever since my ascension. They weren’t supposed to dissolve until the full moon rises.”

“That’s still three nights from now.”

“I know.” She reluctantly wiggled away from him. “So what happened to the shield?”

He swung his feet to the floor and gathered their garments. After handing her the robe, he fastened the soratti around his hips. “We must move you to safety until we’ve determined what caused the change.”

“The Order uses --”

“No. If the shield is down, the Order has been compromised.”

A pounding on the door seemed to verify his words. Serena tightened the belt at her waist and stood beside the bed.

“It’s Hyalee,” the high priestess called out in warning before barging into the cottage. “Listen carefully, and do not ask questions until you’ve heard all I have to say. We set a trap for Drey Fon, but something went horribly wrong. We intended to use your final assessment to flush him out, but he --”

"Drey Fon attacked me?" Serena's stomach lurched as memories surged to the surface. Having a face to put with the burning blue eyes made everything seem more real. "How long have you known?"

"We had suspicions from the beginning. It was only when Kapali pretended to form an alliance with Drey Fon that we were able --"

"You intended to use Serena as bait *again*?" Matt's hands clenched into fists and stepped closer to Serena.

"He will be here before I'm able to explain if you keep interrupting me. Kapali approached Drey Fon and gained his confidence. As we suspected, Drey Fon has delved deeply into the forbidden rites. He has summoned a demon. That is how he was able to create such a massive illusion the night of your ascension."

Serena crossed her arms over her chest and let determination burn through the memories. Never again would she be controlled by fear. "How do we stop him?"

"*We* is the operative word. It will take every member of the Order working together to end this threat."

"I'm a soul seer -- beyond enticing him to the fight -- what can I do?"

"Have you begun manipulations with Matt?"

"I have."

"How have they gone?"

"Extremely well," he told her. "She is amazing."

Hyalee acknowledged his comment with a nod, then turned back to Serena. "As you have loosed constrictions within Matt, you will be called upon to create them in others. When a person feels too much anger, they must learn to decrease the flow of energy through that soul strand."

"That makes sense," Serena said.

"Depending on the size of the constriction, you can render a person powerless."

Serena laughed, the sound a bit brittle in her own ears. "And Drey Fon and *his demon* are just going to stand there while I tie his soul strands in knots?"

"You won't see them, but every member of the Order has been dispatched to different places along the trail."

"The trail to where?" Matt demanded.

"We've waited long enough and gotten nowhere." The high priestess motioned toward the open door. "Tonight, we take the fight to the enemy."

They paused long enough to put on their shoes and grab Matt's weapons. Serena had longed to face her attacker since he ran away into the night. She was stronger, far more confident, and she was no longer alone. Matt walked at her side, his posture loose and watchful.

“Where is Kapali?” Serena asked as they entered the jungle. The trees swallowed the moonlight, making the trail nearly impossible to see. Night creatures scurried about and a cool breeze wrestles the leaves.

“Drey Fon summoned him shortly after nightfall. He warned me to make preparations, that he might be required to make a show of his loyalty.”

“You believe he deactivated the shield?” Matt asked, sounding none too pleased.

“He is the only one strong enough to bring them down. Not even I could have accomplished that.”

Serena didn’t miss the catch in Hyalee’s tone. She placed her hand on the high priestess’ arm. “Has Drey Fon harmed him? What aren’t you telling us?”

“Shortly after the shields fell, I sensed... I think I sensed his passing.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“Let his death not be in vain,” Hyalee insisted.

They trudged on together, deeper into the darkness. A bird called from the canopy of twisting vines. Moonlight slashed through the shadows, then disappeared.

“This is a horrible place to stage a fight,” Matt grumbled. “Even a scientist can figure that out.”

“A scientist?” Hyalee glanced over her shoulder. “I thought you were a warrior.”

Muttered voices warned Serena that they weren’t alone. The high priestess had said other members of the Order had been dispatched to assist them. So why were they being so careless?

“Make him move,” though spoken in a frustrated whisper, Serena picked up the words.

“It’s not as easy as it sounds.”

A small scuffle ensued and Hyalee rushed them toward the riverbank. The area was less cluttered, yet the tree line offered cover directly behind them. Hyalee’s strategy hadn’t been as flawed as Matt feared.

The river wasn’t especially deep here, but the current was swift. And Matt was terrified of water. Serena tried not to be discouraged by the realization. Drey Fon had yet to appear on the opposite bank.

“I know you’re there you Wikoli coward,” Hyalee called out. “Show yourself!”

A lone figure emerged from the tree cover on the far side of the river. Serena squinted. The moonlight was brighter here, but all she could make out was a silhouette. This was not Drey Fon. Her heart lurched within her chest. Could this be the demon?

Light gleamed off the woman’s sleek hair. Her face was still in shadow.

“Matthias, is that really you? Move into the moonlight so I can see you.”

Shock rocked Serena back a step. This was the unfaithful lover from Matt’s nightmares. The owner of the Pleasure Palace. What was she doing here?



"Grief is a horrible thing, ma'am," Matt said as he took a step closer to the river. "I know how much Matthias meant to you, but you have to accept the fact that he's gone."

"Gone? Not dead?" She put her hands on her hips. "You created yourself in your own image. Does anyone else get the irony? The first time I saw you, I said you looked like his son. I had no idea how close I was to the truth."

"Petra, it's over. Matthias is dead. I can't be any clearer than that."

"You can accompany me to Halley Prime as my guest, or I'll have you arrested as a fraud and racketeer. I know you're laundering money through the Renaissance Foundation."

"Have your lawyers com my lawyers. They can fight it out over lunch."

She made an exasperated sound and turned toward the trees on her side of the river.

"He's not as enamored of you as you thought. Is he?" Drey Fon mocked. He emerged from the shadows with Kapali clasped in front of him. Moonlight gleamed off the blade he held to the high priest's neck. "I've got something you want and you've got something I want. How about a straight across trade?"

"I don't barter with criminals," Hyalee said calmly. "Release my brother immediately, or we'll attack."

"Make a move and his life ends before your feet get wet."

Kapali twisted and tugged against Drey Fon's hold, yet his movements seemed sluggish and haphazard. Had Drey Fon drugged him?

Serena summoned his soul strands and blinked. Knotted and twisted as she had ever seen before, every strand was the same inhuman blue. "That's not Kapali," she whispered.

The demon laughed and shook off Drey Fon's restraining hands. "And she's not as easily intimidated as you thought. Is she?"

"Where is my brother?" Hyalee demanded.

"I fucked him to death, right after I drained Petra's guard. It takes a lot of energy for this sort of transformation. Of all possible deaths, it's not a bad way to go."

Hyalee screamed in anguished rage and lunged toward the river. Serena grabbed her arm and held her back. "Not yet." *I don't sense the others.*

"What others?"

Serena's heart missed a beat. How had a demon intercepted her thoughts? Only priests and priestess could access that link. Matt took the grieving high priestess away from Serena so she could concentrate on the conflict. She studied the Kapali apparition more closely and carefully hid her reaction. Beneath the bright blue knots curved a second set of strands, faint, yet distinct.

"What do you want with me?" she asked the demon.

"I want nothing with you. Your fight is with Drey Fon." She said the words with precise emphasis, as if Serena were supposed to gain special significance from the simple claim.

"Enough," Drey Fon snapped. "Come to me now and no one else will be harmed."

Matt scoffed. "Except Serena, of course."

"She doesn't belong to you, and she never will. My mentor created her especially for me."

Serena gasped. All her life, she'd heard rumors and she knew that her mother wouldn't lie about something so hurtful, but to hear him brag about the violation was more than she could bear. "I will end my own life before I belong to you for even a single night."

"We shall see. Ratauni, bring her to me."

The demon splashed across the river as if it were no hindrance. Matt stepped in front of Serena and Hyalee dragged her back nearly to the trees.

Matt raised his pulse pistol and the demon sent it flying from his hand. An annoyed grunt was all Matt achieved with his powerful punches. Ratauni shoved Matt to the side and advanced. Matt tackled the demon from behind, wrapping both arms around Ratauni's legs. They rolled across the grass in a flurry of kicks and tight jabs.

*Go get Drey Fon, you fool!*

The demon's order startled Serena out of her stupor. Drey Fon paced on the riverbank, his gaze focused on the fight. She summoned his soul strands. His pattern was nearly as twisted as the demons. Carefully choosing the most strategic location for the constrictions, she braced herself against the current and waded across the river.

A violent shiver escaped her as the water reached her thighs. Her foot slipped and she extended her arms for balance. Priests and priestesses slipped into her mind, offering support and comfort. She accepted the assistance without being distracted by the meld.

"Call off your creature," she said as Drey Fon pulled her from the river.

"A wise decision."

Serena got her footing on the riverbank and thrust her hands into Drey Fon's soul strands. Summoning all her strength and confidence, she squeezed.

"What are you doing?" He gasped and grabbed her wrists. The connection held, dragging her with him no matter how violently he twisted. "Stop it! What... Ratauni, make her stop!"

He shook and groaned, color bleeding from his face. Wrapping his hands around her throat, he choked her as she was choking him. Strength flowed into her, feeding her vital organs despite his bruising pressure. She remained focused, utterly unflappable.

"You can't kill me," he gritted out the words as his face turned gray. "You're a healer."

Strong arms reached around her and snapped Drey Fon's neck. "I'm not!" Fury roughed Matt's voice.

Serena released Drey Fon and let him slump to the ground. Energy faded from his strands, flickering for a moment, then dissolving completely. She'd never seen a person die before, but she had to know that it was really over.

Matt turned her around and pressed her against his chest. She wrapped her arms around his back and his soratti brushed her legs. "You're all wet."

"I dove into the river as soon as I saw his hands around your throat."

"You swam across the river for me?"

"Why does that surprise you?" He eased her back and kissed her forehead. "I told you no power in the universe will keep us apart."

A pulse of energy ached over their heads. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

"Petra, you really need to get a life," Matt said. "You're wealthy, attractive, and you have files on all the powerful people. Why can't you let this go?"

"She's as obsessed with you as Drey Fon was with Serena." The demon walked past them, advancing on Petra with obvious menace. "All she had to do was wait a few more days and I would have delivered Drey Fon into Kapali's trap."

"Stay away from me." Petra punctuated the command with a blast from her weapon as she backed away.

"There's only one cure for this sort of obsession." A blue nimbus formed around Kapali; his body trembled and a groan escaped his throat. The haze coalesced in an instant, shooting through the middle of Petra's abdomen before disappearing into the night.

Petra's mouth gaped, her pulse pistol tumbling from fingers gone slack. She pressed both hands over the wound in her belly and sank to her knees. "It wasn't...supposed to end...like this."

Serena covered her mouth with her hand as Matt knelt beside the dying woman. Hyalee rushed across the river, reaching Kapali as he sank to the ground. Matt eased Petra onto her side and stroked her hair back from her face.

"Tamara."

"What did you say?"

"You must protect Tamara."

"Petra, your sister is..." Matt seemed to realize the futility of his argument and he said, "I'll protect her. You don't need to worry about a thing."

"She's not dead." Petra caught his wrist with her hand, smearing his skin with blood. "Cephus found her when he found you."

"You hired Cephus. Shit. Where is she?"

"D'Arrest."

"She's at Shadrake University? Isn't she too old to --"

"Professor. Take her to Jericho...Jones."

Matt smiled, despite the grief filling his eyes with tears. "You want me to stash her with the competition?"

"Promise me!"

"I promise. No one will harm Tamara."

Her fingers slipped off his wrist and her head lolled to the side.

Serena closed her eyes and said a prayer for Petra's passing.

Rhythmic chanting filled the air, drawing her attention to the riverbank. Healers surrounded Kapali now. Hyalee cradled his head in her lap as the others fed him energy. His soul strands were still faint, but all traces of the demon were gone.

"Will he recover?" Matt asked.

"I believe so."

Two priests rushed past them, moving farther into the jungle.

"Where are they going?"

"To burn Drey Fon's possessions," she explained. "The demon might not have been his only source of tainted energy."

"Can the demon find another host?"

"It doesn't work that way. Drey Fon summoned the spirit from one of the outer dimensions. The link was severed with his death."

"Have you ever --"

"No! Disturbing the outer dimensions is forbidden for a reason. We are taught the fundamentals as a warning." She glanced at Petra's prone form, feeling only relief. A belated pang of shame reminded her that all life was precious, regardless of how corrupt. Petra's dying thought had been for the safety of another. Some fragment of humanity had remained within her. "Is Tamara alive, and who is Cephus?"

"Cephus is the henchmen for a group of ruthless criminals. No one hires him, unless they're willing to sacrifice a piece of their soul." He held a small object in his hand and used his soratti to wipe off the blood. "As for Tamara, I don't know. Petra's mother was murdered when she was fifteen, leaving her to care for her infant sister. I never actually knew Tamara."

He kept fiddling with the tiny device, so Serena asked, "What is that?"

"The remote to Petra's shuttle." He looked at Petra and sighed. "I can activate autopilot and the shuttle will return to the Pleasure Palace. I hate to do this to her, but the best way to ensure Tamara's safety is for Cephus to learn that Petra is dead."

"If Petra's body arrives at the Pleasure Palace, won't you be blamed for her death?"

"Cephus might be the only one who knew why Petra was here. She tended to be very secretive."

“Will Cephus come after you?”

“His business was with Petra. He has no reason to involve himself further if she’s dead.”

“Which brings us back to Tamara. Once Cephus learns of her sister’s death, is Tamara still in danger?”

“I don’t even know if she’s still alive.”

“But you need to find out.”

He nodded.

She wrapped her arm around his waist torn between joy and torment. “You promised you would protect her. You have to honor your word.”

“I promised to protect you, too.” He framed her face with his hands and brushed his lips over hers. “How do I do both?”

“I’m no longer in danger. How long will this take?”

“A couple of days, no more. I’ll be back for your final assessment.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.” He sealed the vow with a lingering kiss.

## Epilogue

Serena stood at the window to her cottage and stared at the full moon with a heavy heart. Night had fallen and Matt had yet to return. She had no doubt that he would, but she longed for him to share in this monumental event.

Someone tapped on the door and she released a frustrated sigh. Hyalee would escort her to the sacred clearing and the ceremony would begin. Time had officially run out.

Pulling open the door, Serena found Orillia waiting for her. Confusion knitted her brow and she asked, "What are you doing here?"

Orillia laughed. "I love you, too."

"I was expecting Hyalee."

"We sent her on ahead to explain that there's been a slight delay."

Completely confused now, Serena shook her head. "What delay and who is we?"

"I have a surprise for you." Orillia moved to one side and Miranda stepped into view.

"Miranda!" Serena threw her arms around Miranda and hugged her tightly.

"You get squeals of delight, and I get 'what are you doing here.' That doesn't seem quite fair."

They filed into Serena's cottage, leaving the door open to the breeze. "I can't believe you're actually here. This is wonderful."

"And Orillia had absolutely nothing to do with it." Miranda pointed out with a smile. "We had to set down inside the wilderness reserve to get Matt here in time."

"Matt is here?" Serena headed for the door, a beaming smile parting her lips. Her sisters pulled her back.

"The priests are preparing him to participate in your celebration," Orillia explained. "He'll meet you in the clearing."

Tears blurred her vision and Serena hugged her sisters, an arm around each one. "My heart is going to explode."

Miranda chuckled. "I hope that's a good thing."

"I have never been this happy." Serena stepped back and tried to regain some semblance of composure. "Do you know if he...accomplished what he set out to do?"

"He refused to explain, but he seemed satisfied with the result."

"Good." She couldn't stop smiling. "This is the most wonderful night of my life."

"No, this is the beginning of your new life." All playfulness left Miranda's expression and she shot Orillia a meaningful glance. "Your future is wide open. It can be whatever you want it to be."

The final assessment was meant to solidify her life path. She would accept her calling and spend her days in service to the tribe. "I'm a soul seer. My gift belongs to the people."

"Bullshit."

Orillia laughed at Miranda's profanity. "I have a confession to make."

"A confession you should have made years ago," Miranda insisted.

Serena looked from Miranda to Orillia as tension gathered in her belly. "What is this about?"

"I started seeing soul strands the first time I had sex," Orillia admitted. "Unlike Miranda, I had no desire to leave the valley, but I sure as hell wasn't going to become a slave to the Order. It was selfish of me to deny my gift. I will be glad to help anyone who needs my help as long as Hyalee and her minions leave me alone."

"What she is telling you," Miranda stressed, "is that you are free to follow your heart. If you leave the valley, you are not robbing the tribe of its only soul seer."

"Does anyone else know about this?"

"Mother knew. And Fyn has been teaching me some basic control principles." Orillia's secretive smile hinted at other lessons as well.

Serena threw her hands up in the air. "What am I supposed to do now? The whole Order is waiting in the clearing, expecting me to finalize my calling."

"What do you know?" Miranda's brow arched in subtle challenge.

"I know I love him."

"What do you feel?" Orillia joined in.

"I feel whole when I'm with him. I feel important and strong."

"And what do you want?" Miranda asked.

"I want to make him as happy as he makes me. I want to spend the rest of my life by his side."

“Then the rest is easy,” Orillia told her. “You stand before the Order and tell him everything you just told us.”

“Will you come with me?” It wasn’t that she needed support; she wanted to share her happiness.

Miranda shook her head. “Neither of us is welcomed by the Order. We’ll be waiting here when you get back.”

After another round of hugs, Serena set off toward the sacred clearing. When she’d made this trek at Hyalee’s side, she’d been filled with apprehension, now her heart soared with anticipation and joy.

Torchlight flickered in the distance. She inhaled the verdant scents of night, smoke, rain washed vegetation, and rich fertile earth. The Deity was generous and understanding. She was truly blessed.

The ring of priests and priestesses parted, admitting her to the clearing. Her gaze immediately located Matt, tall, distinct, and ruggedly handsome. Her pulse leapt and desire sizzled through her bloodstream. He’d donned a ceremonial headdress and a red and gold soratti.

Kapali stood on one side of Matt, Hyalee on the other. The high priest motioned her closer. “We have gathered to celebrate Sister Serena’s final assessment.” His voice lacked its usual power. He’d been in seclusion for the past few days. Serena was thrilled to see how well he’d recovered. He gazed into her eyes, his expression solemn as this part of the ceremony dictated. “Are you ready for the ceremony to begin?”

She started to say that the ceremony was canceled, when his soul strands flared to life. Appalled by the damage left behind by the demon, she postponed her explanation. She would use this night to purge the last of Drey Fon’s taint.

“I am ready,” she said.

“Have you chosen a person with whom you will give and receive pleasure?” Hyalee asked.

Serena looked at Matt and smiled. “Oh, yes.” She held out her hand toward him.

“Let us witness your offering.” Kapali’s voice rang out across the clearing and the priests and priestesses began to chant.

Matt took her face between his hands and brushed his mouth over hers. “I told you I’d be here.”

“I missed you.” She rubbed against him and parted her lips for his tongue. He helped her out of her robe and shed his soratti without breaking contact with her lips. His hands moved boldly over her body, cupping her breasts and rubbing her back.

“Is there some particular way we’re supposed to do this?” he whispered against her lips.

Anxious to share her news with him, she decided to speed things along. “I say we give and receive at the same time.”



“I’ll never argue with that suggestion.”

He pulled her with him as he lay down in the grass. She turned around and arranged herself on top of him, her knees straddling his face. His hands grasped her hips and drew her pussy down to his mouth before she could rock forward and capture his cock.

She created a private haven with her hair, allowing him to enjoy her attention while minimizing the actual display. His shaft rose hard and heavy, ready for her attention. Parting her lips, she took him into her mouth and sucked firmly on the flared tip. Desire coursed through her. They were concluding one stage in her life and launching another.

His lips moved over and against her as his tongue delved between her folds. She loved the way he held her firmly as his mouth devoured her. It was as if he couldn’t get enough, as if she sustained him with her cream. She shivered and rocked against him, thrilled by his enthusiasm.

She took him as deeply as she could, using her tongue to drive him crazy. Sucking and swirling, she felt him grow harder.

He settled his mouth over her clit as he pushed into her with his finger. She tightened her inner muscles. No, that was two fingers. Still not nearly enough. Fucking her gently with those two long fingers, he soon had her lunging into each stroke, desperate for more than this teasing hint of penetration.

Working his cock with ruthless determination, she sucked hard and used one hand while she held herself up with the other. The chanting grew louder, an occasional cry indicating the other’s active participation in their offering.

Suddenly, Matt switched his approach. He thrust his tongue into her core, and rolled her clit with his fingers. An orgasm detonated within her. She cried out around his cock as hard, rhythmic bursts ricocheted through her body.

As the last spasm passed, she scooted onto his chest and concentrated entirely on his pleasure. The new angle allowed her to move more freely and take him deeper. He throbbed against her tongue and arched as his climax neared. Knowing the others needed to witness his release she tossed her head and sent her hair flying.

An unfamiliar taste announced his impending orgasm and she pulled her mouth away. She pumped him fast and hard with her hand and his seed burst from him like a geyser. A chorus of cheer followed his eruption and she climbed off his chest.

He reached immediately for his soratti, confirming her suspicion that he was doing this because he loved her. She dressed as well, and waited for Kapali to ask his next question.

“Are you ready to demonstrate your abilities as a soul seer?”

“I am.”

“Part of the value of a soul seer is their ability to know who needs their help even when they don’t come forward,” Hyalee said. “Look around you. Is there anyone here who would benefit from your help?”

"There are many." Serena softened the boast with a playful smile. "I see one in particular."

"Please proceed."

She took a deep breath and approached Kapali. Everyone here knew of his recent trauma, but she didn't want to embarrass him. "I never got to thank you for what you did for me. Will you please allow my assistance?"

He closed his eyes for a moment, then inclined his head.

Summoning his soul strands, she found the areas most mangled and moved closer to the high priest. "I won't actually touch you, but you'll sense my presence in an unusual way. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes." He kept his eyes closed.

She slowly eased her fingers into his soul stream. Expecting a furious rush of volatile emotions, she was pleasantly surprised by what she sensed. Much of the emotional chaos had been dispersed by his own well-disciplined mind.

Untangling the worst of the snares, she felt a sudden burst of fury. Disjointed images revealed the degradation he had endured in Drey Fon's lodge. She meticulously suppressed her reaction and focused entirely on Kapali. Working the strands into their natural pattern, she held them cradled between her palms.

"Is that better?" she whispered.

He blew out a shaky breath and nodded. "Much." Without having to be told, he absorbed the sensation, unraveling several smaller tangles in the process.

"Very good."

Reality faded as she worked. She meticulously reworked his strands, repairing the damage and strengthening the weave. After a long time, his hands closed around her wrists and she looked up into his eyes.

"You'll exhaust yourself," he said with a smile.

She nodded and stepped back, allowing his soul strands to fade from view.

"Her skill is undeniable," Kapali said in a strong voice.

"I bear witness to her skill," Hyalee added with a beaming smile.

Matt slipped his arm around her waist and pulled her snuggle against his side. "Why don't you look happy? You just passed your final assessment."

"Because they're not going to like what I'm about to say."

"Are you ready to embrace your life path?" Hyalee asked. It was the final question. If Serena agreed, she would become a permanent member of the Order.

Strengthening her resolve with a long look into Matt's dark eyes, Serena replied, "I am more than ready to embrace my life path, but my life path has taken an unexpected turn."

“Serena,” Hyalee cautioned. “Think carefully before you speak. Words spoken in the sacred circle are binding for life.”

“I understand that. I have been given a rare and wonderful gift, and I am truly grateful. I will dedicate my life to serving others as the Deity intended. I will ease suffering where I can and help others to restore balance when it is lost. However,” she paused and smiled at Matt, “I am being called beyond the valley. I’m not sure yet where I will travel, but I know with absolute certainty who will accompany me.”

She expected Matt to return her smile. Instead, he drew her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. “I don’t want you to make this sacrifice for me. I told you we would find a compromise, some way for --”

“It has recently come to light that I am not the only soul seer in the valley.”

Hyalee gasped. “Are you certain? Who would conceal such a gift?” She looked at her brother and they came to the same conclusion at exactly the same time. “Orillia!”

“Orillia has assured me she will make her gift available to anyone in need.”

“She must enter the Order,” Hyalee insisted.

“No.” Kapali placed his hand on his sister’s shoulder. “She should be allowed to follow her life path, and so should Serena. Those too inflexible to bend often break.”

Matt cupped her chin with one hand. His features were still tense, but tenderness shone in his eyes. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

“I want nothing more.” She wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed against his warm chest. “I didn’t know what contentment was until you stepped into my life. I want to wake in your arms and grow old at your side. I have shown you the wonders of my world -- along with a few of the horrors. I’m ready to experience life beyond the valley.”

His mouth claimed hers in a deep, consuming kiss. She responded with equal fervor, her devotion growing with every beat of her heart.

 THE END 

## **Aubrey Ross**

Multi-award-winning author Aubrey Ross writes under several pen names, according to genre. Though her stories can take unconventional turns, they're filled with passion, intrigue, and emotional realism. Whether her stories are set in Hell, Valhalla, or an alien planet, Aubrey is sure to entertain. For more information about her other titles, visit her website: <https://www.aubreyross.com>.