

Brides of the Kindred

Book 2: Hunted

Evangeline Anderson

*Dedicated to Barb for being a fabulous editor and wonderful friend.
And to all the readers who wrote me asking for the next book.*

SMASHWORDS EDITION

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Brides of the Kindred

Book 1: Claimed

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Author's Note #1—Though I have tried to handle the subject sensitively, parts of this book may be disturbing to anyone who has experienced sexual abuse in the past.

Author's Note #2—Even if you have already read the excerpt of *Hunted*, please don't skip chapter one. A few subtle changes were added to Sophie's part which will help you understand her character better. Also, you don't want to miss Sylvan's part. ;)

Author's Note #3—You've probably already figured this out but this is the second book in the *Brides of the Kindred* series. I recommend that you read *Claimed*, the first book in the series, before attempting to dive into *Hunted*.

Hugs and Happy Reading to you all!
Evangeline Anderson

Prologue

“It iss time. The Kindred ceremony iss today and the protection grid around the entire planet will be relaxed.” The AllFather waved one skeletal hand, causing his shadowy sleeve to billow in the stagnant air of the Scourge Fathership. He was seated on a throne of metal inscribed with strange alien script in glowing green letters. It was a foul and ancient language, forgotten by all but a few who were high in the Order.

“Not enough for our ships to get through. They’ve changed it—modified it to allow only their own ships to pass.” Xairn ran a hand over his sleek, black hair in agitation. Being the true son of the AllFather, he was able to read the words written on the throne. They spoke of pain. Pain, submission and the dominance of the strong over the weak. His life was based on such principles—he had learned them at his father’s knee. When the AllFather’s cruel black boot wasn’t digging into his neck, that was.

There was a hiss of displeasure from the hooded figure. “Then you must do your work in space instead.”

“As you wish. What would you have me do?” Xairn asked, staring at the massive viewscreen which had been erected behind the metal throne.

On it was projected a misty blue planet with a single tiny moon. Earth. Such a small world—such an insignificant little speck in the arm of a far-flung galaxy on the edge of the universe. But it might hold the secret to the resurrection of their race. *If the prophesy holds true.* He kept that thought to himself. His father did not tolerate doubt.

“What would I have you do? Capture the girl, of course. Ssshe is essential to our cause.” The AllFather’s eyes glowed red within his cloak.

“Yes, but how will I know which shuttle she’s on? It’s a large ceremony—there will be many coming and going between the Kindred ship.”

“Asss to that, I will tell you which to ssseek. I have tasted her twin’s mind and her own mental flavor is sssimilar. Just be ready to act when I tell you.”

“To hear is to obey,” Xairn said neutrally. It was best not to get his father upset when he was in a mood for conquest. The result was never pleasant and often bloody. “Shall I prepare a squadron to surround the shuttle?”

“Prepare it but do not let it be ssseen until you have the shuttle sssecurely in our net. They must have no idea what isss happening until they are caught.”

“Of course.” Xairn bowed before lifting his red-on-black eyes, much like his father’s, to the viewscreen again. “There will be no warning. Sophia Waterhouse will be ours.”

Chapter One

“You can’t be serious. It’s the bride and groom who are supposed to kiss—not the best man and maid of honor.” Sophia Waterhouse looked at her sister in horror but Olivia just smiled happily. Clearly she was too firmly cocooned in nearly-wedded bliss to worry about the severe emotional trauma she was about to inflict on her twin.

“Don’t be silly, Sophie,” she said, adjusting her veil for the fourteenth time and peering anxiously at her reflection in the full-length holo-viewer. It had been specially set up in the dressing tent for the bride and her attendants and it was getting a lot of use. “It’s not a big deal—Sylvan doesn’t bite.”

“Oh yes he does! He’s a Blood Kindred, or did you forget?” Sophie put a hand on her hip causing the long, form-fitting bridesmaid’s gown to make a soft swishing sound. She had to admit the deep emerald color looked great with her green eyes and the cut was very becoming to her hourglass figure. But no dress, no matter how gorgeous, was enough to distract her from the matter at hand. “I mean, he’s got fangs,” she pointed out, still glaring at her sister. “Honest to God *fangs*.”

“Yes, but they won’t get sharp enough to pierce flesh until he finds a woman he wants to mate.” Jillian Holms, an old high school friend who had also been “drafted” or called as a bride to the Kindred Mother ship, smiled smugly and adjusted her neckline. Her bridesmaid’s gown was a deep violet which went well with her tan skin. Green and purple were holy colors to the Kindred—the colors of the sacred grove where Olivia and Baird, the Kindred warrior who had called her, were about to say their vows.

Sophie shot the other woman a resentful look. Jillian had been no more than a passing acquaintance back when they all attended Hillsborough High. Now she was practically Olivia’s best friend—or at least that was how it felt to Sophie, who was used to being her sister’s closest confidant. “How do you know so much

about the Tranq Kindred?” she asked, trying to keep the irritation she felt out of her voice. “I thought you were called by two of the Twin Kindred?”

“I was—and you’ll never meet a sweeter pair of guys than my two hubbies.” Jillian giggled. “Everyone thinks they’re these ferocious warriors when actually they’re just big teddy bears. Well, except in bed. They can be plenty ferocious *there*.”

“How nice for you,” Sophie said dryly. “But I still don’t see how you can know about Blood Kindred when your husbands are Twins.”

“Oh, that.” Jillian made a shooping gesture. “You get to know things up here. I mean, the mating habits of the different Kindred are practically all we brides ever talk about— isn’t that right, Livvy?” She nudged Olivia and let out another high-pitched giggle.

Sophie frowned. *There she goes again*. Jillian’s “look at me, I’m such a perfect little Kindred wife” routine was getting pretty damned old. It was enough to make Sophie wish she’d never *heard* of the Kindred. Although if she hadn’t, she and the rest of the people on Earth would probably be dead or enslaved.

The Kindred were a race of alien warriors, humanoid in form but much more massive in scale than the average human male. They had come to the rescue at the eleventh hour, when Earth was attacked by a menacing force from space called the Scourge. The Kindred Mother ship still orbited the planet, keeping the attackers at bay, but there was a hitch. In exchange for their continued protection, the Kindred had demanded a genetic trade.

From previous trades the Kindred were divided into three separate races: the Beast Kindred who had animalistic lusts, the Twin Kindred who always shared a bride and could not be separated, and the Blood or Tranq Kindred who bit and drew blood when they had sex. *Like freaking vampires*. Sophie shuddered at the thought. She’d had a serious illness when she was a little girl that meant she was constantly at the doctor. As a result, she had always hated shots and needles and anything to do with blood—which was why Olivia was a nurse while *she* was an Elementary art teacher.

Because their race was ninety-five percent male the Kindred needed willing females to mate with. Accordingly, an Earth-wide draft was established. All women between the ages of nineteen and thirty-five were required to participate. Though it was rare to be called as a Kindred bride, it did happen on a regular basis.

It had happened to Olivia and Jillian both. While Olivia had fought it at first, she was blissfully happy now. Of course it was her wedding day—or bonding day as the Kindred called it. So Sophie supposed she could excuse her sister's blissed-out state. Although she wished Olivia would have consulted with her before adding the Luck Kiss to her bonding ceremony.

"Liv," she said, trying to get back on point. "It's not that I want to ruin your ceremony—I mean, it's your special day and you should have anything you want. But Sylvan doesn't even *like* me. He's not going to want to kiss me anymore than I want to kiss him."

"What are you talking about?" Olivia was fussing with her train now. "Why wouldn't he like you? He barely knows you."

"He knows me well enough to hate me, I bet," Sophie said gloomily. "I was pretty rude to him during your claiming period. I was so angry at Baird for trying to take you away from me and, well, I kind of took it out on Sylvan. A *lot*." She cringed with embarrassment when she remembered the way she'd yelled at him and accused him of trying to steal her twin sister away on several occasions. Oh yeah, he *definitely* hated her. Not that Sophie blamed him.

Olivia waved her fears away with a flip of her train. "I'm sure that's all forgotten now. And besides, the Luck Kiss is just a quick peck on the lips—it's really not a big deal."

"Actually, it's a lot more than just a peck," Jillian spoke up. "And doing it right is a big deal. If you don't give it everything you've got, it's bad luck for the bride and groom. So you better really lay one on him Sophia, because it's up to the girl to kiss the guy in this case, not the other way around."

“Are you *serious*?” Sophie put a hand to her head, actually feeling a little faint. “You mean I’m really supposed to give some guy I’m not even on speaking terms with a passionate kiss in the middle of the bonding ceremony?”

“It’s at the end of the ceremony, actually. Right after the bride and groom kiss.” Jillian smiled. “Some couples make it a contest. You know—to see who can put on the best show?” She giggled again in a way that Sophie was beginning to find *really* annoying. *How do her two husbands stand it? They must want to strangle her half the time.*

“How do you know so much about it?” she demanded. “Was it part of your ceremony too? I mean, is it some kind of sacred Kindred tradition or something? Because this is the first I’ve heard of it.” Which really wasn’t fair. Her twin could have at least *warned* her she was expected to lock lips with the best man in front of God and everybody instead of just springing it on her at the last minute.

“Of *course* I had it in my ceremony—it’s a Twin Moons rite.” Jillian primped in front of the holo-viewer, fussing with her long blonde curls. “More and more of the other Kindred are picking it up because it’s so *romantic*. In fact, I’m the one who convinced Livvy to put it in.”

“Oh you *did*, did you?” Sophie was normally mild-mannered in the extreme but just now she could cheerfully have strangled the overly-perky Jillian.

“Yes, Jillian has been a big help in incorporating Kindred culture into the traditional ceremony. I just want everything to be a mixture—the perfect blend of Earth and Kindred traditions.” Olivia smiled dreamily. “That way when I tell our sons about it, they can understand that they truly are the children of both worlds.”

“Listen to her—not even married yet and she’s already thinking of babies.” Jillian gave Olivia a sisterly squeeze that made Sophie wince. It wasn’t that she was jealous of the other woman it was just...*Oh hell, just admit it. You **are** jealous*, muttered a little voice in her head. After all, before Olivia had been called as a bride she and Sophie had been inseparable. And now, even though Sophie and her twin spoke on the Think-me—the Kindred version of a telepathic cell phone—constantly, she still didn’t get to see her every day the way Jillian did.

I miss her, she thought sadly. *She's moving on with her life, leaving me behind. I wouldn't mind so much if she wasn't so far away. But the only way we could go back to being in each other's lives on a daily basis is if I got drafted too.* Just the thought of it—of being called as a bride to one of the huge, muscular Kindred—made her shiver. She was really glad that her twin was so happy but that didn't mean she wanted the same kind of life for herself.

The Kindred were so *big* for one thing and their levels of sexual aggression were off the charts—at least to hear Olivia and Jillian tell it. Olivia hadn't had much experience before being called by Baird but she'd managed all right. Unfortunately, compared with her twin, Sophie was practically a virgin. She'd only been with two guys. Her first had been forgettable enough—just a guy she'd fallen for at summer camp. But the other... Sophie pushed the memory quickly away.

The point was, sex was bad enough without adding biting to the mix. Not that all the Kindred warriors bit their brides—only the Blood Kindred did that. *And of course that's the kind I'm supposed to kiss!* Sophie thought, staring at her reflection in the holo-viewer. Next to her radiantly happy sister she looked positively gloomy.

Olivia seemed to think the same thing because she finally snapped out of her bridal bliss long enough to notice her sister's distress. "Sophie," she said, turning away from Jillian and giving her twin a searching look. "What is it? Is this Luck Kiss thing making you *that* unhappy? I mean, is there some other reason besides a few hard words that you don't want to kiss Sylvan?"

As a matter of fact, there *was*—an extremely big and embarrassing reason as far as Sophie was concerned. But there was no way she was going to come right out and divulge such humiliating information—not in front of the smug Jillian, who had a knowing little smile pasted on her perfectly made-up face.

How could Sophie explain that Sylvan had been on her mind a lot recently? A lot more than a prospective brother-in-law should be, anyway. Not that she *wanted* to think of him—somehow he just...intruded. And lately his spiky dark blond hair and ice-blue eyes had been cropping up everywhere—including

Sophie's art. She hadn't painted a single picture in the past month that didn't include him. Even if she tried purposefully to leave him out, he always snuck in somehow. She'd be painting a landscape and realize that he was there, under a tree. Or a bowl of fruit and suddenly he was taking a bite out of one of the apples. It was bizarre, and not in a good way as far as Sophie was concerned.

"I..." she tried, but couldn't think how to put it. *He's ruining my art and I can't stop thinking about him* just sounded...weird. Like she had some kind of mental problem—Kindred inspired OCD or something equally bizarre. "It's nothing," she said at last. "Nothing, really."

"Yes, it is. Come on, fess up womb-mate." Olivia took her hands. "Please?"

Sophie couldn't help wishing Kat was there instead of Jillian. *She* was a close friend and a much better choice for a second bridesmaid in Sophie's opinion. The three of them had been close since grade school. But Kat had decided to use her organizational skills to pull the ceremony and reception together so Olivia didn't have to worry about anything on her special day. She was probably in the sacred grove somewhere, bustling around making sure everything was perfect and directing the guests to their seats. Sophie wished she had such a fearless, take-charge personality but she couldn't help it—she was terminally shy.

"It's nothing," she lied bravely. "Just that...that I don't think he likes me. That's all. And you know how I get stage fright. Remember that time in third grade when the teacher picked me to play Princess Primrose in the school play?"

"And you went completely white and fainted the minute the curtain went up." Olivia put a hand to her head. "You know, I had forgotten about that. I'm so sorry, Sophie—what was I thinking? I don't want you to be miserable. We'll just cut the kiss."

"You can't do that," said Jillian, butting in where she was least wanted—at least in Sophie's opinion. "It's been added to the printed program. If they don't do it you'll have bad luck for your entire marriage. And besides, people will talk and talk and—"

“I don’t care if they talk—I care about Sophie.” Olivia frowned. “And I don’t believe in bad luck. That’s just silly.”

Jillian rolled her eyes and gave Sophie a pitying glance. “All right then, if you really feel like you can’t handle it...”

“Enough.” Sophie raised her hand. “I’ll do it.”

“No, you *won’t*,” Olivia said decisively.

“Oh, yes I *will*.” Sophie shot Jillian a glare. There was no way she was backing down now. “It’s just one kiss. I can manage that,” she said, hoping it was true.

“Are you sure?” Olivia looked at her uncertainly.

“Sure, I’m sure. We’re not in third grade anymore you know, Liv.”

“No, we’re not, are we?” Olivia sighed. “I can’t believe how fast the time has gone. It seems like yesterday you were fainting in that stupid play. And now we’re all grown up and I’m about to get married. I just wish...” Her voice wavered. “I wish Mom and Dad were here to see it.”

“Oh, honey, I know.” Sophia put an arm around her sister’s waist and gave her a hug. Their parents had died in a car wreck—victims of a drunk driver—when the girls were in their last year of high school. “But I know they’d be proud,” she said, giving her twin another squeeze. “Look at you—you’re so beautiful in Mom’s wedding dress.” She nodded at the viewer again where they were both reflected.

The twins looked so much alike in the face it was hard to tell them apart. Only the fact that Sophia had brown hair and green eyes while her twin had blonde hair and gray eyes let people know who was who. Today the white lace dress had transformed Olivia’s appearance—making her look radiantly happy and so gorgeous Sophie wanted to cry. Blinking back tears, she kissed her sister’s cheek. “Baird is going to go crazy when he sees you. I hope he knows how lucky he is to be getting my sister as his bride.”

“He knows.” Olivia gave her a watery smile and then sniffed. “Oh God, I can’t cry—I’ll ruin my make-up!”

“Then cheer up,” Sophie commanded. “You’re not allowed to cry—that’s my job, remember?”

The soft strains of Pachelbel's canon began drifting through the air, signaling the start of the ceremony and pulling her out of her sisterly reverie. She'd been so caught up in the moment with Olivia she'd almost forgotten what she had agreed to do. Now it all came rushing back. *The Luck Kiss...crap—why did I say yes?*

"Hey, enough with the heart to heart sister stuff," Jillian hissed. "It's starting."

"Oh my God, it is." Olivia fluttered nervously. "Is my veil straight? Does everything look all right?"

Her sister's nerves helped steady Sophie. "You look wonderful and everything is going to be fine," she said firmly. "It's your day of all days. And it's going to be perfect—I just know it." *All except the part where I have to lay a hot one on my future brother-in-law.* But she refused to let herself think about that. If she did, she was liable to freak out like she had way back in third grade. And she was determined not to ruin her beloved sister's wedding—not even if she had to kiss a hundred huge Kindred warriors. Except she only had to kiss *one*—the one who just happened to invade her every waking thought.

God, what was she going to do?

* * * * *

"What's this?" Sylvan stared down with dismay at the thick, creamy sheet of vellum the bonding-ceremony program was printed on.

"What's what?" Baird was busy buttoning his crimson formal uniform shirt up to his chin, but he spared a glance at his half-brother as he worked.

"This." Sylvan pointed to a part of the program. "You told me you *weren't* going to have the Luck Kiss in your ceremony. You practically guaranteed it."

"Really? Olivia put it in?" Finished with his buttons, Baird took the program and glanced over it rapidly before handing it back. "Guess she must have decided she liked it after all."

"Decided she liked it? You didn't even tell me she was *considering* it." Sylvan kept his voice low and controlled with an effort that usually wasn't necessary.

Almost nothing phased him—Tranq Kindred were known for having ice water in their veins and he was no exception to his kind. But his natural calm had left him the minute he found out he'd be kissing Sophia. "I can't do this," he said, gesturing with the program. "She hates me."

"Oh come on, no she doesn't." Baird blew out a breath and tugged at his collar. "This damn thing's so tight I can hardly breathe. Sure will be glad when this is all over and I can get Olivia back to our suite and take it off"

"You haven't even had the bonding ceremony yet," Sylvan said dryly. "I'm afraid you've got a while to go before you can strip down."

Baird's golden eyes lit up with a mixture of love and lust. "Believe me, I won't be the only one stripping. Olivia hasn't let me have any for the last Earth week—said it's some kind of tradition so we'll be ready for the wedding night. I tell you, Brother, at this point I'm so ready I'm about to *explode* if you know what I mean." He arched an eyebrow and did an impromptu bump and grind which made Sylvan hope that no one was sneaking a peek into the male's tent.

"Baird, please—is that all you think about?"

"Sex? Making love to my beautiful mate? Hell, yes." Baird was clearly unashamed of his one track mind. "And that's all you'd be thinkin' about too if you'd have the good sense to call a bride."

"How many times do I have to say it?" Sylvan said through gritted teeth. "I have vowed never—"

"Never to call a bride," Baird finished for him. "I know, I know. I just wish you would change your mind, Brother. Wish you could experience the joy I feel when I hold Olivia in my arms."

"I wish it too," Sylvan admitted in a low voice. "But even if I hadn't made a sacred vow to the Mother of All Life, I could never call a bride. That part of me is...broken. Damaged beyond repair."

"Don't you think I was broken too?" Baird demanded, frowning at him. "After what I went through on the Scourge Fathership? Hell, I was shattered into a

thousand pieces but Olivia *fixed* me. I'm telling you, Sylvan, the right female can heal your wounds if you'd just give her a chance."

"No such female exists." Sylvan stared down at the program clutched tightly in his hand. "Not for me."

Baird sighed. "I'm sorry, Brother. I get so caught up in my love for my bride and I can't help wishing the same love for you."

"Enough about that—I want to get back to *this*." Sylvan rattled the piece of vellum in his half-brother's face. "You should have informed me about the Luck Kiss. It's going to be excruciatingly embarrassing for both Sophia and myself."

Baird frowned at him. "You really don't want to kiss her, do you? What's wrong—don't you find her attractive? She looks just like Olivia in the face, even if they do have totally different personalities."

"No, no—it's not that," Sylvan protested. "She's beautiful—gorgeous." In fact, just the thought of Sophia's curvy figure and lovely face made his shaft harden uncomfortably in his dress slacks and the double set of fangs in his upper teeth sharpen alarmingly. And then there was the matter of those troubling dreams he'd been having lately...but it was better not to think about that. "I just don't want to kiss a female who doesn't want me to kiss her," he ended stiffly.

"Loosen up, Sylvan—it's just one kiss. And it isn't like you two are going to be spending a lot of time together afterwards." Baird slapped him on the back. "Come on—I hear the music starting and my bride is waiting for me. Are you going to stand with me or not?"

"Of course I will." Sylvan frowned, stung that his half-brother would think he might go back on his promise. "I'll always stand by you, Brother—in danger, darkness or despair." It was a warrior's pledge and Baird smiled when he heard it.

"I appreciate that. But why do I get the feeling you'd be more comfortable going back to the Scourge Fathership with me than standing beside me at my bonding ceremony?"

"Probably because I would," Sylvan admitted with a sigh. "But today is about joy. Yours and Olivia's. Come—let's go celebrate it."

“It’s the celebration afterwards I’m more interested in,” Baird rumbled. He had that hungry look in his amber eyes—the gleam he’d had the very first time he’d seen Olivia, when he’d called her to be his bride. Sylvan couldn’t help wishing a little wistfully that he himself might feel such deep emotions for a female, but his one chance had passed and he knew it would never come again.

With another deep sigh, he followed his half-brother out of the tent and across the wide green and purple lawn to the sacred grove where the bonding ceremony was beginning.

It was going to be a long, *long* afternoon.

Chapter Two

The ceremony was actually quite beautiful. The pale green artificial sun shone through the leaves of the blessed trees, making magical patterns on the ground and the green and purple grass was springy under Sophie's bare feet. Shoes were forbidden in the sacred grove, so the entire wedding party was barefoot. The guests—mostly other Kindred and their families, since the sisters didn't have many relatives—were seated on rows of purple metal benches arranged in a semi-circle around the happy couple and their attendants.

Olivia's bouquet of rare lavender roses was beautiful and her white lace dress looked simple yet elegant next to Baird's dress uniform of black pants and a dark crimson shirt. The statue of the Mother of Life which stood at the head of the sacred grove seemed to preside over everything with an aura of peace and love. Even the stern Kindred priestess who was conducting the ceremony had a look of approval in her green-on-green eyes.

It was picture-perfect and Sophie knew she would have enjoyed it immensely if the damn Luck Kiss hadn't been hanging over her head. The entire time while the priestess intoned the words of bonding, first in English and then in the guttural Kindred universal language, Sophie kept stealing glances in Sylvan's direction.

Though she'd had several visits to the Kindred ship in the past month, she hadn't seen her future brother-in-law since the last time she'd yelled at him and stormed out of the Human/Kindred relations building back on Earth. Just the memory of it made her cheeks hot with shame. *I really laid into him. He probably can't wait for this to be over.*

Despite her fear, or maybe because of it, Sophie couldn't seem to stop looking at him. He looked as handsome as ever and even bigger than she remembered, if that was possible.

Did he grow or something? No, probably not. He's just freaking huge is all. She wished the Kindred weren't so physically imposing. Sylvan's shoulders were

fully twice as broad as her own and the muscles bulging under his uniform shirt made it clear he was strong enough to break her in half with one hand. Not that she thought he would hurt her but it certainly would have been easier to kiss him if he was more normal sized instead of being so ginormous.

He was wearing black tight fitting pants identical to Baird's, but instead of deep crimson, the material of his uniform shirt was a pale azure blue that complemented his eyes. His hair was a darker shade of blond than Olivia's and it was still cut short and spiky. Looking at him, Sophie couldn't help thinking that despite the severe cut, his hair looked like it would be soft to touch. In fact, she could almost feel the feathery brush of those blond spikes whispering against her fingers...

She snapped out of the strange fantasy in time to realize two things. One, the ceremony was almost over—in fact, Baird had Olivia bent over one arm and was kissing her for all he was worth. And two, she'd been staring at Sylvan and he was staring right back with an unreadable look in his pale eyes.

Sophie dropped her gaze quickly, feeling her cheeks get even hotter. She wished she knew what he was thinking but it was impossible to guess when he kept his features under such tight control. *Probably thinking how much he hates me and how unpleasant it's going to be to kiss me. God, this is awful.*

"And now," the priestess intoned, breaking her train of thought. "For the future good fortune of the happy couple the unmated male and female who stand with them will perform the Luck Kiss."

Oh my God, the kiss. It's time for the kiss! Sophie had thought she would be ready for it when the time came, but somehow the moment had snuck up on her without warning. Sylvan took a step forward but she remained rooted to the spot, staring at him in terror.

He stared back at her and then held out a hand. There was a breathless silence from the assembled crowd, but when Sophie made no move go to him, a soft murmuring began. Staring out at the sea of faces Sophie saw, or thought she saw, looks of disapproval everywhere. Even Kat, her closest friend besides Olivia, was looking at her with uncertainty in her big blue eyes.

Oh my God, Sophie thought, panicking. It's just like Jillian said—if I don't do this everyone is going to talk about it and say I gave Liv and Baird bad luck. And just listen to them—it's already starting. I have to do this. I have to kiss him NOW.

But somehow she just couldn't.

* * * * *

Just look at her—she's frightened to death. I'm going to kill Baird for making me do this to her! Sylvan stared in dismay at the female he was supposed to kiss, though he tried to keep the negative emotion off his face. He held out a hand to her but she didn't come—just kept staring at him like a terrified animal caught in the glare of a shuttle craft's high beams. It was clear that kissing him was the last thing in the universe she wanted to do.

People were beginning to talk. *I'll have to go to her. Maybe she doesn't know it's the female who comes to the male for the kiss?* Or maybe she was just frozen with terror. Sylvan's heart ached at the thought. He was about to step toward her again when her paralysis apparently broke and she ran over to him. But when she reached him she just stood there, her small cool hand clutching his and a look of panic in her large green eyes.

I held her hands once before, Sylvan couldn't help remembering. In the Human/Kindred relations building back on Earth. I was trying to prepare her to lose her sister to Baird and she was so angry with me—she hated me. No doubt she hates me still. But Gods, I wish she didn't have so much fear in her eyes. If only I could make her understand that I would never harm her...

"Sophia?" he asked softly, trying to make his voice non-threatening. "Are you all right?"

"I...I..." She shook her head, looking so lost and terrified that Sylvan was almost overcome with a desire to gather her into his arms and comfort her. It was an irrational reaction. *He* was the one she was terrified of, so how could he possibly give her comfort? Yet he couldn't help it—the need to protect and soothe the little human female was almost overwhelming.

Just as the whispering from the crowd was beginning again he saw a change on her face. It went suddenly from terrified to determined. Then, rising on her tiptoes she whispered something that pierced his heart.

“I’m sorry. “I know you don’t want this—don’t want *me*—but we *have* to do it.”

“I—” Sylvan began, meaning to protest the idea that he didn’t want her. But before he could speak he felt her small, warm mouth covering his and he was suddenly lost.

She was inexperienced—he could tell that much from the way she trembled in his arms. For some reason that only fanned the flame of lust and need that flared suddenly to life inside him.

Sylvan pulled her closer, slanting his mouth over hers for greater contact. He forgot that the woman he held didn’t want him, forgot that they were engaged in a ceremonial kiss that was purely for show. All his brain registered was the delicious feel of her soft, luscious curves against his own hard warrior’s body. The press of her ripe breasts against his chest, the sweet taste of her tongue as he parted her lips and entered her. Her warm secret female scent filled his senses and his cock hardened, pressing against her belly shamelessly, but Sylvan didn’t care. He was consumed with a new sensation—a pleasurable pain he had never felt before.

It was a hot, prickling feeling centered around the double set of vestigial fangs which grew in his mouth where a human’s canine teeth would be. They were joined together, rather like a cat’s back teeth, and the second set was slightly shorter than the longer, more prominent fangs in front. Sylvan had felt them sharpen before but this was different—suddenly and without warning they lengthened into finely honed daggers that filled his mouth as surely and completely as desire filled his body.

Careful, he thought or tried to think through the haze of lust that clouded his reason. *Sophia’s so small, so delicate. If I’m not careful I’ll crush her or—*

“Ow! You bit me!” Sophia pushed against his chest with one hand and cupped her wounded mouth with the other. For a moment he couldn’t make himself let her go but then the expression on her face finally registered. The fear was back in her large green eyes and this time it was mixed with pain. “That really *hurt*,” she whispered.

“I’m so sorry.” Sylvan’s voice sounded strange even in his own ears as he tried to get used to talking with his new fangs. Damn it, why wouldn’t they shrink again? And why had they grown in the first place? Anyone would think he wanted to bond her to him. But that wasn’t true—*couldn’t* be true.

He was aware of the whispering going on around them again but he didn’t care. All he cared about was the wounded look in Sophia’s eyes. The look that said she was in pain and he was the cause of it. It was almost more than he could bear.

“Please,” he said, reaching for her. “I’m truly sorry. It was an accident.”

She pulled away before he could touch her. “It’s all right.” But her voice and actions said it wasn’t. Said that it would never be all right. And why did that tear at his heart so?

“Hey, what’s happening over here? That was some kiss.” Apparently the ceremony was over because Kat, one of Olivia’s best friends from Earth, was suddenly beside them. Her full curves were draped in a sapphire blue gown and her deep red hair was piled becomingly atop her head. She was followed by two warriors that Sylvan knew well, though he hadn’t seen them in several cycles.

“Deep, Lock,” he greeted the Twin Kindred, relieved to find that his fangs had finally returned to their normal size. “It’s good to see you, brothers.”

“We had to witness our brother’s bonding.” Stabs Deep, the dark twin of the two, nodded formally. He had black hair and eyes and a brooding look on his strong features.

“We had to see what kind of female would agree to take Baird as a mate.” The gleam of good humor in the warm brown eyes of Locks Tight, the light twin of the pair, let Sylvan know he was joking. Though he resembled his twin closely in the face, he had dark blond hair and stood about an inch shorter than Deep. Both of

them towered over Kat and Sophie however—like all Kindred males they were muscular and well over six and a half feet in height.

“Baird’s bride is a worthy female,” Sylvan said, trying to sound normal, though he was still disturbed over what had happened during the Luck Kiss. “Her name is Olivia. Would you care to meet her before she and Baird cut the bonding confection—er wedding cake?”

“Lead the way, Brother.” Deep made an expansive gesture with one hand. “But before we go...” He turned to Kat. “Forgive me but what did you say your name was my lady?”

“Katrina. But I usually go by Kat.” She smiled in an open, friendly manner. “And you two are...?”

“Stabs Deep and Locks Tight,” Sylvan supplied the introduction politely. “They are second brothers to Baird and myself. Our father married their mother.”

Lock frowned. “So you said your name was *Cat*? Like the Earth animal you humans keep as a pet?”

“Not quite. It’s spelled K-A-T, not...oh never mind. It doesn’t matter.” Kat shrugged.

“About cats...” Deep leaned closer and gave Kat a speculative look. “Isn’t that the lovely little animal that makes soft sounds of pleasure when you stroke it?”

For some reason Kat’s cheeks grew pink and she seemed embarrassed, though it was a simple enough question in Sylvan’s estimation. Maybe it was the intent way both Deep and Lock were looking at her that made her blush.

“I...I suppose. Yes, they d-do,” she stammered. “It’s called purring.”

“I see.” Deep smiled at her. “I’ve often wanted to stroke a cat just to hear those sounds. I’m certain the vids we have of it on Twin Moons don’t do it justice.”

“I—” Kat began but before she could say more Lock grabbed hold of his twin’s arm and began towing him away.

“Forgive him, my lady,” he said, winking at Kat. “Extreme beauty makes him extremely stupid. Come on,” he said when Deep started to protest. “You’re making her uncomfortable.”

“I’m not—”

“Just come on.” Lock looked at Sylvan. “I believe you were about to introduce us to the bride?”

“Oh, of course. This way.” Sylvan cast one last look over at Sophia, but she had already turned away and was talking quietly with Kat.

He wished desperately that he could apologize one more time, that he could explain to her what had happened. Unfortunately, he still couldn’t explain it to himself. Why had he reacted so strangely to a simple Luck Kiss? And why could he still taste the single, salty drop of blood he’d drawn from her lower lip on his tongue?

With an unhappy sigh, he decided to let the matter rest and turned toward the place where Baird and Olivia were receiving the well wishes of their guests and kin. He still had no idea why the kiss had gone so strangely, but of one thing he was certain—if Sophia hadn’t hated him before, she certainly did now.

Chapter Three

“What was *that* all about with the Twin Kindred?” Sophia asked as they made their way to the refreshment pavilion which had been set up on the far side of the sacred grove. They’d spent the last hour watching the cake cutting ceremony and then Liv had thrown her bouquet. Kat had been reaching for it but it was Lock, Sylvan’s light haired step brother—or second brother, whichever—who had caught it. He had handed it to Kat with a courtly bow which made Deep, his twin scowl. Kat had blushing accepted the lovely bunch of lavender roses and then she and Sophie had beat a hasty retreat.

“I could ask you the same thing. What was going on during that Luck Kiss? At first you looked like you were going to die of fright and then you got really into it—right before you jerked away, anyway. What happened?” Kat asked, squeezing her arm.

“I...I don’t exactly know. I *was* scared to death at first,” Sophia admitted. “I didn’t even know I was supposed to kiss him until we got into the bride’s tent and started helping Liv get ready.”

“I can’t believe she did that to you.” Kat frowned. “She *knows* what a shrinking violet you are. Well, sorry hon but you *are*,” she added when Sophie made a face at her. “I mean it’s not like I’m burning up the sheets either, but if you look up ‘shy’ in a dictionary you’d find your picture there.”

“I’m not *that* bad,” Sophie protested. “Okay, well maybe I am. But it wasn’t all Liv’s fault—Jillian talked her into adding it. Apparently the Luck Kiss is some kind of Twin Moons Kindred thing. She had it in her ceremony and she thought it was so romantic she wanted Liv to have it too.”

“It looked more awkward than romantic, I’m afraid.”

“Did it really?” Sophie felt sick. “Oh please tell me I didn’t ruin the ceremony! I wanted so much to do things right for Liv—it would kill me to think I hurt her special day.”

“No, no—it was fine.” Kat rubbed her arm soothingly. “Here, have some punch.” They had reached the pavilion at last and she handed Sophie a tall fluted glass filled with some kind of dark blue liquid.

“What’s this?” Sophie eyed it uncertainly. It looked like dishwashing soap but the fumes coming off it were definitely alcoholic.

Kat shrugged. “Dunno. Some delicacy from Rageron. Liv wanted me to get something called ‘fireflower juice’ but the supplier I talked to said they were all out. This is the next best thing apparently—and with twice the alcohol content. Bottoms up!” With a grin she downed half the contents of her glass. “Wow, that really packs a punch,” she gasped, her eyes watering.

Sophie sniffed the thick blue liquid, which smelled strangely of almonds and some kind of spice, and took a careful sip. The flavor exploded across her tongue and burned her wounded lip like fire. “Ow!” She nearly dropped her glass. “That stings! Like drinking freaking *Tabasco* sauce.”

“I’m sorry—I should have warned you it was hot.” Kat gave her a worried look. “Hey, are you all right?”

“I’m okay—it just burned my lip where Sylvan bit me.” Sophie licked the lip in question, sucking it to get the last traces of the alien alcohol off.

“Wait a minute, he *what*? He bit you? Is that why you jerked away so fast at the end of the kiss?”

Sophie shrugged uneasily. “I’m sure he didn’t mean to—he said it was an accident.”

“Accident or not, he should have apologized.” Kat was still angry on her behalf.

“He *did*. Seriously, Kat, it’s all right. But I was afraid something like that was going to happen. I mean, what with his fangs and all. Even though Jillian said they wouldn’t get sharp enough to hurt anyone unless...”

“Unless what?” Kat frowned.

“Never mind.” Sophie twirled her glass by the stem, watching the thick blue liquid slosh gently from side to side. “It’s nothing. It just proves that Jillian isn’t the expert on all things Kindred she thinks she is.”

“She always was a know-it-all,” Kat agreed, much to Sophie’s relief. “I was really surprised when Liv asked her to be a bridesmaid. She’s so—oh look, they’re starting a dance. I better go over and make sure the DJ has the right mix of music.” Patting Sophie’s arm a final time she put down her glass and rushed over to the far side of the pavilion to where a tall Beast Kindred was standing behind a wall of sound-conducting glass manipulating some kind of audio equipment.

Glad to be alone, Sophie went and took a seat in the shade of one of the green and purple trees. One of the nice things about having the wedding “outside” in the wide park-like area which was the center of the Kindred ship, was that there were no biting ants or stinging bees to worry about. She could wiggle her bare toes in the grass without fear of something creepy-crawly coming after her.

Gingerly, she touched the hurt place on her bottom lip where Sylvan’s fang had cut her. *It wasn’t really a bite—not really. He just cut me by accident when his fangs got so sharp and long. I could feel them growing while we kissed.* But why had they grown in the first place? And why had she felt so strange when he was kissing her? Did the growth of his fangs have anything to do with the other “growth” she’d felt lower down? *He was hard and pressing against me.* Sophie felt hot all over at the thought. *And his body felt so big and warm...*

The press of his large, male body had been both scary and exciting. Sophie had to admit she’d *almost* been enjoying herself until the bite. Sylvan really was very handsome except for those *fangs*. They’d been so long and sharp—like double bladed daggers in his mouth. They transformed him from a large, very attractive man to something completely different. Something alien and frightening...

She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself though it was warm in the artificial sunlight. She had an intense phobia of needles and she’d always hated horror movies—especially anything to do with vampires. And what were

Blood Kindred if not modern day vampires who just happened to come from a different galaxy?

“You look troubled, daughter of another star.”

“Huh?” Sophie looked up, shading her eyes against the pale green sunlight to see who was talking.

The priestess who had presided over the ceremony was standing there, staring down at her with a thoughtful look in her green-on-green eyes. The irises were a dark olive, Sophie couldn't help noticing, while the whites of the priestess's eyes were a pale shade that was almost lime. It should have been a strange combination but somehow it looked right in the Kindred woman's face.

“Do you need counsel?” the priestess asked, still staring at Sophie patiently.

“Uh, counsel about what? Ma'am?” Sophie added at the last minute, uncertain how to address the priestess. *God, she's so tall!* Kindred women were very rare as she understood it, but if this one was any indication of the rest, they were certainly able to stand up to their men.

“About whatever is troubling you.” The priestess settled across from her on the grass and took Sophie's hands without asking. “I saw the Luck Kiss you performed with the Tranq male—it bothered you greatly, did it not?”

“Oh no, not a bit,” Sophie said quickly. She was intensely uncomfortable and wished she could pull her hands away from the other woman but she was afraid of being rude. Also, the Kindred priestess had a pretty strong grip and Sophie wasn't sure she *could* pull away even if she tried. “I'm fine, honestly,” she said, hoping to get rid of the woman. “And I really need to go see my sister so—”

“You lie.” The green-on-green eyes narrowed and the priestess frowned. “That is forbidden in the sacred grove but I will forgive it this once since you are not of our people.”

“Please,” Sophie begged, tugging at the unbreakable grip on her hands. God but the woman was *strong*. “I don't want any trouble.”

“But trouble will find you whether you wish for it or not. Indeed, it is stalking you as we speak.” The priestess leaned forward staring into her eyes. “In order to help you I must look into you.”

Sophie had no idea what that might entail but it didn’t sound at all enjoyable. “Look,” she babbled, still trying to pull away. “I appreciate your concern but I’m really not ready to perform any kind of uh, religious ritual or whatever it is you’re talking about. I mean, I’m Methodist and we don’t really believe in—”

“I will look into you now.”

“I—” Before Sophie could protest further the strange green eyes seemed to grow until they filled her entire field of vision. And then she felt a sensation like cool, delicate fingers prying into her mind and suddenly all she could see was the past.

Memories of her childhood swept over her: the closeness she shared with Olivia, the love she’d felt for her wonderful parents. Days, months and years blurred together until Sophie felt dizzy. She was just beginning to hope that the priestess was almost done when the blur suddenly stopped and one particular memory was brought to the forefront of her mind.

Oh no, not that! Cringing mentally, Sophie tried to push the memory away. It was awful—so awful she tried not to think about it. She had buried it deep but somehow the Kindred priestess dug it up and brought it into the light.

“No!” Sophie gasped. “Please, please not that. Not—”

“What’s going on here?”

The loud masculine voice seemed to break the connection between the priestess and herself. Sophie’s eyes, which had been shut tight while she fought the awful memory, flew open and she looked up.

Sylvan was standing over her with an angry look on his face. No, not angry—*enraged*, Sophia realized. His ice blue eyes were blazing and his fangs were out again, razor sharp and ready. The expression on his chiseled features made him look like an avenging angel towering over her.

“Oh,” she gasped, unable to stop looking at his fangs. “I don’t know. I—”

“What are you subjecting her to?” Sylvan demanded of the priestess who still looked completely calm.

“I am simply looking into her. There is a shadow around her heart—it is my duty to see into it.”

“Not if your seeing causes her pain.” Sylvan’s voice was a low, menacing growl. “Release her.”

The calm expression on the Kindred woman’s face turned to anger and her grip on Sophie’s hands tightened until she squeaked in pain. “You overstep yourself, Warrior.”

“That may be, but I will not see you hurt her.” Leaning down Sylvan put himself on the priestess’s level and looked into her eyes. “Release her *now*.”

The grip on Sophie’s hands loosened and she pulled them away gratefully. The priestess still glared at Sylvan, her green-on-green eyes narrowed. “You have a shadow on your heart as well. A secret pain that taints your very existence—I see it in your eyes.”

“My pain is not your concern.” Gripping Sophie’s hand, he pulled her to her feet and pushed her behind him protectively. “Now what do you have to say?”

“Only this—have a care, Warrior.” The priestess rose smoothly to her feet and frowned up at him. “Danger dogs your steps—the shadow on your heart draws it to you. Even the shielding of your Kindred mind is no protection if you allow the darkness to overcome you. Ignore my warning at your own peril.” Then she turned and walked away, her head held regally high and her bare feet whispering over the green and purple grass.

When she was gone Sylvan relaxed his protective stance and turned to Sophie. To her intense relief, she saw that his fangs had gone back to their normal length. “Are you all right?” he asked anxiously. “You sounded upset.”

“I...she...she was making me remember—” She realized what she was saying and stopped abruptly.

“Remember what?” Sylvan was still staring at her but she shook her head.

“Nothing. I’m fine, really. Uh, thank you for rescuing me,” she added, hoping to change the subject.

One corner of his thin but sensual mouth quirked up. It was the closest Sophie had ever seen him come to smiling. “Well, you looked like you needed rescuing.”

“Unfortunately.” She was shaking her hands which had gone numb in the priestess’s punishing grip. “Wow, she was really *strong*.”

“All of my people are but most of us are taught to temper our strength with compassion. Here.” He took her hands in his and began rubbing her fingers.

“Th-thank you.” Sophie’s heart felt like it was trying to knock its way through her ribs and her fingers started tingling for a whole different reason. *He doesn’t even like me. He’s just being nice*, she reminded herself sternly. “What...what was she talking about?” she asked, looking up to meet his eyes.

Sylvan sighed. “The Mother alone knows. Kindred females have uncharted psychic abilities but they tend to speak in riddles.”

“But...she said you had pain...a shadow on your heart,” Sophie said.

A look of anguish flitted across his face and was gone so fast she thought she must have imagined it. “The priestess said *you* had a shadowed heart as well.” His deep voice was harsh. “Do you *really* want to speculate about what she meant?”

Sophie felt cold all over. “No.” She yanked her hands out of his and crossed her arms over her chest. “No, I don’t.”

Sylvan ran a hand through his hair in a very human gesture of frustration. “Forgive me, Sophia. I didn’t mean to offend you. I was just coming over to apologize for hurting you during the, er, ceremony.”

“It’s all right.” She looked down at the ground, feeling awkward all over again when she remembered the strange sensations that had flooded her body during the Luck Kiss.

“No, it’s not. I drew your blood and for that I must beg your forgiveness.” He sounded formal again, just as he had when he was talking to the priestess. “The gift of blood must be freely given—never taken or forced.”

“The...the gift of blood?” She looked up at him uncertainly. “Is that some kind of Kindred ceremony?”

He looked uncomfortable. “It is part of the mating ritual of the Blood Kindred. And since you have made it abundantly clear you have no wish to be called as a bride, I shouldn’t have taken your blood.”

“So if you *did* call a bride that would be part of it—of your relationship, I mean? You’d always be...biting her?” She couldn’t help looking at his fangs again and feeling glad they were still small.

“Only when we made love,” Sylvan assured her as though that made it all right.

Sophie felt her stomach do a slow forward flip but she tried not to show her dismay. “That’s...uh interesting.”

“And off the point.” Sylvan frowned, as though irritated with himself. “What I’m trying to say is, please accept my apologies and my best wishes for your health and happiness. I truly did not mean to bite you.”

“It’s...I know it was an accident but...” She wanted to ask him more. Wanted to know why his fangs had grown when he kissed her. *It wasn’t just his fangs that grew*, whispered a little voice in her head and a wave of embarrassment swept over her.

“Yes?” Sylvan looked at her earnestly but she shook her head.

“It’s okay,” she mumbled, not meeting his eyes. “Seriously, I’m fine. Let’s just...leave it at that.”

“I appreciate your willingness to put the incident behind us but I need to examine the wound.”

“Why?” Sophie asked. “I know you’re a doctor...er medic but—”

“I need to know how serious the injury I inflicted was.” He looked so stern that she tilted her chin up to allow the examination.

“It’s not bad at all. See?” she pointed at her bottom lip which, to tell the truth, was still pretty sore.

Sylvan cupped her cheek in one hand and leaned forward, studying her hurt lip. For some reason Sophie’s face got hot at the gentle touch and she had to close her eyes. *What is he looking for? What’s taking so long?* She wished he would hurry up and finish the examination. His hand was so warm and the feel of his skin on hers made her nervous. “Is...is everything all right?” she asked at last.

“It appears to be.” He sounded cautiously relieved. “I nicked you pretty badly but I don’t think you got any of my essence.”

“Your what?” She opened her eyes to see him looking at her intently. Blushing, she looked quickly away.

“My essence. It’s...never mind. You should recover normally.” His voice dropped. “I *would* offer to heal it for you but I don’t think you’d care for my method of healing.”

“What do you mean?” She looked up at him again but suddenly Olivia was standing beside her with a radiant smile on her face.

“Hey you guys, looks like you survived the Luck Kiss after all.” She arched an eyebrow, clearly taking in the way Sylvan was touching Sophie. “Going for round two?”

“No!” Sophie exclaimed, jumping away from the large warm hand cupping her cheek. “I mean...Sylvan was just, uh, examining me.”

“So I saw,” Olivia said dryly. Then she grinned. “Well, I’m a married woman now. Do I look any different?”

“You look more beautiful than ever,” Sylvan said, but he was looking at Sophie when he said it.

“Thank you, Sylvan. That’s sweet of you.” Olivia smiled at him and glanced at Sophie inquiringly. *What’s going on?* the look said.

Sophie shrugged her shoulders. *I don’t know.* She felt hot and uncomfortable, as though her twin had caught her and Sylvan doing something forbidden or wrong. Wanting to change the subject she gave her sister a hug. “Are you happy?”

Did you think...everything went all right?" She wanted to ask if Olivia thought she'd screwed up the Luck Kiss but she couldn't exactly come right out and say it with Sylvan still standing there looking at her.

Liv, as always, knew what she meant. "It was *beautiful*," she said reassuringly, giving Sophie a squeeze. "And I've never been happier."

"I'll be happy when this damn after-party is over with." Baird came sauntering up behind her and placed a proprietary hand on his bride's shoulder. The bright green sunlight made the gold buttons on his uniform shirt sparkle. "How long did you say we have to stay, *Lilenta*?"

Olivia turned and gave him a reproving look. "You know, on Earth the reception sometimes goes on for *hours*. People dance and drink and celebrate all night."

"Let 'em." Baird drew her close and looked down into her eyes. "They can celebrate until the damn sun falls outta the sky for all I care. As long as I get to take you back to our suite while they do it."

"*Baird*." Olivia threw an apologetic look over her shoulder. "I'm sorry you guys—he's incorrigible."

"Don't apologize," Sylvan said smoothly. "This is your bonding day. You should, ah, *celebrate* in whatever way you choose."

"I would but I hate leaving everyone alone." Olivia bit her lip. "Especially you, Sophie. It's been so long since we had any good sister time."

"That's okay." Sophie tried to smile even though she missed her sister more than she could bear. She wanted to catch up with Liv but it was clear her twin needed time alone with her new husband more than she needed a gab fest. "We'll get other chances," she told Olivia. "But right now I need to get home—I have to work tomorrow."

"Oh, has school started again already?" Olivia put a hand to her head where her blonde hair was swept into an elegant up-do. "I can't believe it."

"First day tomorrow," Sophie said. "And you know what a mess that always is."

“I must have lost all track of time up here planning the wedding.”

“That’s what being in love will do to you,” Baird rumbled. Nodding at Sophie he said, “I’ll find a pilot for you, kin of my mate. I’d take you back to Earth myself but...” He grinned and nuzzled Olivia’s neck, his amber eyes glowing.

“Baird!” she protested, laughing. “You are so *bad*. Leave me alone for a minute and go find someone to take Sophie home.”

“I’ll take her,” Sylvan said unexpectedly.

Sophie’s stomach did a flip. “Oh no, really,” she protested. “I couldn’t ask you to leave the party.”

“I don’t mind.” He gave her a penetrating look. “I’d be pleased to take you back to Earth.”

There was no way she could say “no” without offending him. “Uh, thank you,” she mumbled, trying not to think about being cooped up with the huge blond warrior in one of the tiny Kindred transport shuttles. “That would be nice...if you really don’t mind.”

“Not at all,” Sylvan assured her.

Baird raised an eyebrow and looked at his half-brother speculatively. “Very well then, Brother. I charge you with the safety of the kin of my mate.”

Sylvan nodded gravely. “I accept your charge. I will see her safely home.”

Olivia smiled. “Sounds like it’s all settled then.”

“I guess so.” Sophie smiled weakly. The whole “I charge you with her safety” thing seemed weirdly formal but maybe it was just a Kindred expression.

“Give me one more hug before you go.” Liv disentangled herself from Baird and held out her arms. “Are you sure you’re all right?” she whispered in Sophie’s ear. “You look really upset.”

“Do I?” Sophie made an effort to smooth out her features. “I’m fine really—don’t worry about me. Just go...have fun with your new hubby.”

“If you’re *sure*.” Olivia drew back and looked at her eyes one more time.

“I’m sure.” Sophie gave her twin what she hoped was a bright, sunny smile. “Just thinking about work tomorrow. The first day of school is always such a disaster. You know.”

“Only from what you’ve told me.” Liv made a face. “I’d rather work in the ER or the med station any day than deal with a bunch of five year olds finger painting.”

Sophie shivered. “Better finger paint than *blood*. I don’t know how you stand it.”

Liv grinned. “Funny, that’s exactly what *I* was going to say to *you*.” She laughed and gave Sophie one more squeeze before letting her go. “Have a safe flight back and I’ll bespeak you on the Think-me later.” She glanced up at Baird who was staring down at her possessively. “Uh, *much* later.”

“No problem, womb-mate.” Sophia smiled and turned back to Sylvan who was watching her with an unreadable look on his face. “Are we ready?” she asked, trying to keep the nervousness out of her voice.

“Certainly.” Sylvan made an ‘after you’ gesture with one hand.

Sophie started for the edge of the sacred grove but he stopped her with a light touch on the shoulder. “Don’t you think we should get our footwear before we go?”

“Oh, uh, right. Shoes, of course.” Feeling flustered, Sophie followed him to the area around the side of the grove where everyone participating in the ceremony had left their shoes. She slipped on the kitten heels she’d gotten to match her dress before learning that no shoes were allowed, and waited while Sylvan put on the tall black boots all the Kindred warriors seemed to favor. “You know, I thought of something I forgot to tell Liv,” she said as he was putting on his second boot. “Do you mind?”

“Of course not.” He gestured for her to go on ahead.

Sophie ran back to the sacred grove but her sister’s name died on her lips. Baird’s broad back was already receding in the distance as he carried Olivia away.

“Uh, looks like Baird took matters into his own hands,” she said, laughing nervously as Sylvan came up behind her.

“Apparently.”

“Okay, so...” Sophie wasn’t sure what to say. “Uh, I guess we should go get some Take-mes, huh?”

She’d ridden on one of the two headed animals—which looked rather like the push-me/pull-you from Dr. Dolittle—for the first time on the way to the wedding and wasn’t exactly looking forward to repeating the experience. It was a bumpy ride made worse by the fact that the front head of her Take-me kept flirting with the back-facing head of Jillian’s.

Sophie had no idea how to tell which Take-me was male and which was female or how in the world they mated since they didn’t appear to have any reproductive equipment. But the attraction between the two animals had made getting to the sacred grove a slow and uncomfortable process. They kept stopping to twist their necks together and staring lovingly into each other’s purple eyes until Sophie had wanted to scream. In the end the problem had gotten so bad they were almost late to the wedding.

Well hopefully Sylvan and I can find some that aren’t in heat or whatever it was that made them such a pain, she told herself. But I swear to God if they make me late getting home... All she wanted to do after the stressful day was relax with a glass of wine and take a long hot bubble bath. And no stupid alien horse in the mood for love was going to get in her way—at least she hoped not.

They went to the area where the Take-mes were kept—a long row of small box-like structures that looked more like dog kennels than stables. The animals, which were native to Twin Moons, were able to expand and contract their mass at will, which meant they could be kept in small areas. But to Sophie’s dismay, there was only one shaggy green animal standing outside the row of Take-me stalls, munching grass with both heads.

“Where did they all go?” She looked around, hoping to see more. Maybe they had made themselves small and were hiding in one of the kennels? But when she bent down to peer into the small dark box-like structures they were all empty.

“Probably in use by the other guests. It doesn’t matter—one Take-me can carry us both.” Sylvan was standing right behind her and his deep voice in her ear made Sophie jump.

“Oh!” She put a hand on her heart. “You scared me. I...they can take that much weight?”

“Easily.” He frowned. “If you don’t mind riding with me, of course.”

“Oh, uh...” Sophie had a sudden mental image of riding on the shaggy green animal with Sylvan behind her. The way the Take-me’s backward bending legs moved meant that it swayed a great deal. There would be no way she could keep from touching him—in fact she would be practically surrounded by his muscular bulk as they jostled together on the animal’s broad back. *I’ll be pressed up against him, what if he puts his arms around me?* For some reason the thought made her hot and cold all over.

“Well?” Sylvan asked and Sophie realized she’d been taking way too long to answer.

“No, no—of course I don’t mind,” she said hastily. “I’m sorry I was just...just thinking. But of course it’s not like I mind touching you or being close to you or having you close to me or—” Realizing she was babbling, she stopped abruptly.

He raised an eyebrow and looked at her for a long moment. “Of course, if you’re really in a hurry we could just take a transport tube straight to the docking bay.”

“We can?” Sophie felt a rush of relief. “There’s some other mode of transportation around here? Why don’t you use it all the time?”

“Well, it’s actually used more for transporting small equipment around the ship than people.” Sylvan was heading away from the Take-me stables as he spoke and Sophie hurried to keep up with him. “And it’s not very comfortable.

But it only takes about five minutes whereas riding a Take-me will take us close to an hour to get to the edge of the ship and the docking bay.”

“Oh, well let’s ride the transport-tube. Absolutely.” Sophie smiled brightly. This was perfect—not only would she get home and into a warm bubble bath sooner but she wouldn’t have to be pressed up against Sylvan in a way that was sure to be horribly embarrassing for them both.

“Here we are.” Sylvan came to a stop in front of a large tree.

“We are?” Sophie looked around in confusion. “Where’s the transport thingy?”

He gave her his one-sided smile and pressed part of the tree’s bark. “Right here.”

To Sophie’s surprise the entire trunk of the tree faded and became as transparent as glass. Sylvan pushed something else and there was a whooshing sound. Suddenly a cylindrical compartment rushed up and lodged itself in the trunk of the tree. It reminded Sophie of the old fashioned telephone booth she’d seen in a museum once, only it was smaller...*much* smaller.

Sylvan pushed a third thing—she couldn’t tell what since the entire trunk was transparent and nearly invisible—and a side panel slid open, allowing them access to the tiny tube compartment.

Maneuvering carefully, Sylvan ducked his head and somehow managed to fit his tall frame inside the small space. His broad shoulders were pressed against the walls and when he stood Sophie could see there was less than an inch of clearance between his spiky blond hair and the ceiling of the compartment.

“I’m afraid it’s a bit of a tight fit.” He shrugged apologetically—or tried to—there was no room even for such a small movement in the confining space. “Well?” He gestured as well as he was able. “Getting in?”

“Uh...” Sophie stood staring for a moment. Sylvan was so big there was barely any space left inside. She was going to be pressed up against the length of his hard body, in a much more intimate way than if she’d agreed to share the Take-me.

“Are you all right?” Sylvan frowned.

“Fine.” She hesitated. *How do I get myself into these things?* “I’m just...uh, wondering what’s the best way to get in.”

“Just come in.” Sylvan gestured a touch impatiently. “Unless you’d rather ride the Take-me after all?”

“No, I guess not.” *It’s only for five minutes*, she lectured herself. *You can stand anything for five minutes, no matter how embarrassing it is. Maybe if I squeeze up against the wall...*

Hesitantly, she stepped into the tiny cramped space. With a sinking heart, she found that there really was no way to stand without touching the big warrior. In fact, though they both maneuvered politely and exchanged embarrassed apologies, she wound up plastered against his chest with her arms around his waist. “I’m sorry,” she said, trying to look up at him. But they were so close the top of her head bumped his chin. “Ouch!”

“Are you all right?” She could feel the rumble of his deep voice in her entire body—it seemed to vibrate through her in a way that was strangely pleasant and incredibly awkward at the same time.

“I...I’m fine.” Sophie was doing her best to stay calm but she had never liked confined spaces. A fact she remembered only *after* the door slid shut, trapping them both in the slender cylinder. “I’m just...a little claustrophobic is all.”

“We’ll be there soon,” Sylvan said comfortingly. “Hold on—this can be a little bumpy.” He pressed something on the wall and the transport tube started with a jerk. Then it rushed straight up at an enormous speed, making Sophie feel like her stomach had been left behind in the sacred grove. She squeaked in surprise.

“Are you all right?” he asked again.

“I’m fi—” The car jerked sideways with a suddenness that made her gasp. The transport tube was like one of those scary rides that traveling carnivals brought with them—the kind that Olivia loved and Sophie hated. They always had names like “the double wheels of doom” or “the falling star” and they jerked you all

around and used centrifugal force to plaster you against the wall. Only in this case she was plastered against Sylvan and hanging on for dear life.

Previously she'd been trying to keep at least some room between them—pushing her pelvis out as far as she was able to avoid making intimate contact. But now mortification had gone out the window in favor of self-preservation. Sylvan was the only thing to hold on to as the tube jerked and lunged through the bowels of the Kindred Mother ship and Sophie wasn't about to let go.

Please just let me get through this, she prayed, her eyes squeezed shut. Please, please, please and I swear I'll always ride a Take-me from now on. Or maybe I'll just walk. Yes, walking is good...walking is great. I'll never go anywhere again except on my own two feet. I—

“Sophia? Sophia?”

Gradually she became aware that Sylvan was calling her name and he sounded worried. Arms like warm steel cables were wrapped around her shoulders and a large, warm hand was stroking her hair.

“Uh, Sylvan?” She dared to look up and this time their heads didn't collide.

“It's all right,” he murmured, looking relieved that she'd answered him. “The tube has stopped. We're there.”

“We are?” She wanted to let go of him but her hands were fisted in the heavy, satin-like material of his pale blue uniform shirt and she couldn't make her fingers unclench. “I...I'm sorry,” she muttered, pressing her cheek to his chest again. “Just give me a minute. That was kind of rough.”

Sylvan, for his part, seemed contented to hold her for as long as she needed to be held. “It's all right,” he rumbled, still stroking her hair. “I should have warned you better. I didn't know tube travel would upset you so much.”

“I...I'm not upset,” she protested but her voice sounded high and squeaky even in her own ears. “I was just surprised,” she added, trying to sound more normal.

“We’re at the docking bay now.” His deep voice was gentle and soothing, like his hand in her hair. Sophie felt herself relaxing in stages but still she didn’t let go.

“Oh yes, the docking bay.” Slowly she became aware that the tiny compartment was filled with a sharp, spicy scent. It was like nothing she had ever smelled before—wild and somehow completely masculine. *Mmm, nice.* Her nose twitched—it seemed to be coming from Sylvan. *But when did he have time to put on cologne?* “Are you wearing aftershave?” she asked dreamily.

“Aftershave?” He sounded confused.

“You know—cologne. Perfume. A scent you put on your skin to make you smell good. Don’t the Kindred have anything like that?”

“No, we have a very enhanced sense of smell. We don’t like anything that covers up our natural scent.”

“Then what smells so good?” She was rubbing her cheek against the warm, hard wall of his chest in a way that would have seemed terminally wrong and uncomfortable just a few minutes ago. Yet now it seemed perfectly natural and right. Why was that? And why didn’t she want to let him go? She could feel the hard ridge of his cock branding her belly, just as it had during the Luck Kiss but even that didn’t alarm her. Instead, she felt herself responding.

Her nipples were suddenly tight and achy and the small pair of bikini underwear she had on under her green bridesmaid’s dress felt too tight. Their lace crotch seemed to rub against her in a way that was both irritating and pleasurable. She took another deep breath. “Mmm...smells like...I don’t know what, but *incredible*,” she murmured, still rubbing against him like a cat.

Sylvan stiffened against her. “Sophia, you’re not acting like yourself. This scent...you say it smells extremely good?”

“Yes, can’t you smell it? I—” She looked up as she spoke and saw that he was looking down at her again. There was a troubled look in his pale blue eyes, but it wasn’t his eyes that bothered her—it was his mouth.

His fangs were out.

Long and sharp and prominent, they gleamed in the dim light of the tube like daggers ready to pierce flesh. *My flesh!* she realized in a flash.

“Oh!” She jumped away from him and would have fallen backwards out of the transport tube if he hadn’t caught her by the arm. “Let me go!” She pulled away from his hand and took another step back. Her kitten heels made clattering echoes in the vast open space of the docking bay.

“What? What’s wrong?” Sylvan frowned at her as he unfolded himself from the small space and stepped out of the tube.

“Y-your fangs.” Sophie pointed with a trembling finger.

With a muffled curse he clapped a hand over his mouth. A look of painful concentration crossed his face and then he took his palm away from his lips and she saw that his fangs were back to their normal length. “Forgive me.” He spoke as though it hurt to get the words out. “I didn’t...didn’t realize...”

“It’s okay.” She shifted uncomfortably, not sure what to do or say. It was clear she’d offended him by pointing out his fangs. Was it something like telling a human guy his fly was unzipped? *Well what was I supposed to say? And anyway, it just slipped out—he looks so damn scary when they grow like that!*

Sylvan didn’t seem to know what to say either. Finally he turned on his heel. “Come on. We need to get to the shuttle.”

Chapter Four

“You’re so bad!” Liv slapped playfully at her new husband as he carried her into their suite and deposited her on the bed. “Making me leave the reception early—we barely got to cut the cake. Couldn’t you have waited a few more minutes?”

“No.” Baird’s eyes glowed gold with lust. “Not after waiting a whole damn week. You really know how to torture a male. But that’s all right.” He gave her a hot grin. “Because I’m about to return the favor.”

“What...what are you going to do?” Liv heard the breathless quality in her own voice but she couldn’t seem to help it—didn’t *want* to help it. All she wanted was the male in front of her.

Baird leaned over the bed and lifted her chin to look into her eyes. “I’m going to bond you all over again,” he rumbled. “Gonna fill your sweet little cunt with my cock and fuck you all night long. So I hope you weren’t planning on going back to the party any time soon.”

Liv’s breath caught in her throat. “I don’t want to go back,” she whispered.

“Good.” He straightened up and crossed his arms over his broad chest. “That dress is special to you, right?”

“Of course.” Liv ran a hand over the white lace. “It was my mother’s.”

His eyes softened. “And you look beautiful in it, *Lilenta*. But you need to get out of it *now*.”

It was an order, not a request and the low growling voice he used when he said it made Liv’s heart start beating a mile a minute. It reminded her of the way he’d spoken after she had gone to visit Jillian the first time—disobeying his orders and winding up in the unmated males’ territory. Baird had been forced to show his ownership of her in front of a whole group of warriors and afterwards he’d taken her back to his suite and commanded her to strip so that he could taste her. It was both an embarrassing memory and a hot one. And it made Liv all the more eager to do what he wanted now.

But there was no reason *he* had to know that.

Lifting her chin she looked him in the eye. “So you think now that we’re officially bonded you can tell me exactly what to do?”

The look in his eyes was so hot it was molten. “What I’m telling you, *Lilenta*, is to take that damn dress off before I *rip* it off.” Leaning down, he grasped her shoulders and pulled her up for a heated kiss that left her panting and breathless.

“Baird...” she protested, struggling weakly. She had never seen him quite so *hungry* before, even during the first time they’d made love.

“I don’t think you understand exactly how much I need you, Olivia,” he growled softly, looking her in the eyes. “Up ‘til now I’ve been holding back because I didn’t want to scare you off at the last minute.”

“What? Don’t be silly,” she protested. “You could never scare me off.”

“Not now, I can’t.” He flashed her a hungry grin. “Because now you’re mine forever. And I need you, *Lilenta*. Need to be inside you for a long, long time tonight.” He kissed her again, running his big hands over her body, cupping her breasts and then moving down to press hard against her sex. “But before I do that, I want to taste you. So get naked now or I’m going to *make* you naked.”

Liv’s heart was going crazy and her mouth was almost too dry to answer. She couldn’t believe that Baird had been holding back on her. But the desperate need she saw in those glowing amber eyes proved he was telling the truth. What agony she must have put him through, denying him for the past week so that the night after their bonding would be special. *Well, I’ll make it up to him tonight*, she promised herself. *But all in good time*.

“Let me go in the bathroom and take my dress off,” she told Baird with a little smile. “And in the mean time, maybe you should start getting naked yourself.”

“Just hurry.” He gave her another smoldering look. “I need to lick your pussy and feel you come all over my face.”

His words made her weak in the knees but she tried not to show it as she sauntered past him to the bathroom. She had something hidden there that she hoped would make the night even more memorable.

With a little maneuvering she was out of her wedding dress and into something a lot more comfortable—and much less confining. Though he'd told her to get naked, she decided to disobey orders and wear the naughty little ensemble she'd been saving for their wedding night.

It was something Kat had helped her pick out via Think-me conversation just the week before. As Liv shimmied into it, she reflected that her friend really did have good taste—too bad she didn't have a Kindred warrior of her own. But then, maybe that would change by the time she got done with the reception. Liv hadn't been so completely caught up in her own bliss that she'd missed the little details around her—such as the tension between Sophie and Sylvan or the hungry way the two Twin Kindred that Baird had said were his “second brothers” had been eyeing Kat.

But the only detail she was interested in right now was getting her new hubby all hot and bothered. Eyeing herself in the viewer she was sure her outfit would do the trick.

It consisted of a white lace quarter-cup bustier with panties and garters to match and sheer white thigh-high hose. Black spike heeled pumps so high she would never have dared to wear them out in public completed the look, making her legs look fabulously long and lean.

Liv felt deliciously exposed as she adjusted the tiny cups of the bustier which didn't even cover her nipples. They just pushed her breasts up and out, making them look like some exotic fruit on a tray. As a final touch, she took down her elaborate up-do and shook out her hair, letting it swing free around her bare shoulders. Then, feeling exquisitely naughty, she opened the bathroom door and made her way back to Baird.

He was sitting on the bed waiting for her but when she came in, he stood at once. Liv's eyes were drawn to him just as they had been the very first time he'd taken off his shirt to drape it around her. The muscular planes of his chest and abdomen led down to a truly impressive cock which had scared the daylights out of her the first time she'd seen it. Now she couldn't wait to feel it inside her.

“Well?” She gave him a cool little smile as she sauntered into the room. “Like what you see?” The cool air teased her exposed nipples as she moved, her breasts jiggling gently as she swayed her hips provocatively.

“Gods, *Lilenta*.” His deep voice was hoarse with lust as his gaze traveled over her body. “You look amazing.”

“Thank you.” She smiled up at him—even though she was wearing the ridiculously high heels, he was still several inches taller.

He frowned. “But I thought I told you to get naked.”

“You did. But *I* thought this would be more fun. And look...” Spreading her legs, she parted the open seam that ran down the middle of the panties to reveal her bare sex. “So you don’t have to rip them off,” she explained, smiling. Baird had ruined a number of her favorite panties with his caveman ways and though she always enjoyed it at the time, it was leaving Liv woefully short of sexy underwear.

He gave her a stern look. “Just because I don’t have to rip them off to get to you doesn’t mean they’re not coming down.”

Liv put a hand on her hip. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about how you disobeyed a direct order.” He raised an eyebrow. “Tell me something, Olivia, have you ever heard of the Law of Conduct?”

She frowned. “No, of course not. What are you talking about?”

“It’s a Kindred law which says every warrior is responsible for the good behavior of his bride.”

“Good behavior? What does that have to do with anything?”

“Basically it gives me the right to punish you for disobeying orders or doing anything that might endanger yourself or others,” he rumbled. “Remember how you wound up at the unmated males territory back during our claiming period after I specifically told you not to leave the suite? I would have been well within my rights under the Law of Conduct to punish you then.”

“As a matter of fact, I was just thinking of that a minute ago.” Liv raised her chin. “But I’m not endangering anyone by wearing this.” She motioned to the white lace outfit.

Baird grinned. “But you *did* disobey my orders. And I’m afraid you’ll have to pay for that, *Lilenta*. Pay dearly.”

“What...what do you mean? What are you going to do?” The look on his face was making her distinctly nervous. She’d come out in the naughty little outfit meaning to seduce him, just as she had the first time they had really made love. But now it looked like Baird intended to turn the tables on her.

“I’m going to spank you,” he said matter-of-factly. Walking back to the bed, he seated himself and patted his lap. “Come here.”

“You have *got* to be kidding me.” Liv frowned. “Look, Baird, I know I swore to ‘honor and obey’ you but that was just for the ceremony. I’m not actually going to let you put me over your knee and give me a spanking.”

“Oh, no?” Quick as a flash he was pulling her onto his lap. As always, it was surprising to Liv how fast he could move for such a large man. Probably his warrior’s reflexes helped him—but it was going to take more than fast reflexes to get him out of this if he didn’t stop *now*.

“Hey, let me go!” She struggled against him but Baird held her down easily with one hand. With the other, he parted the seam in her lace panties and began a slow stroking caress of her bare buttocks. “Baird!” she protested but his large, warm hand was taking some of the wind out of her sails. “Baird, seriously, *don’t*.”

“Don’t punish you or don’t tease you while I do it?” he asked in a low voice. He sounded half amused, half serious but he still didn’t let her off his lap. Then, with no warning, he gave her bare ass a sharp *smack*.

Liv yelped and wiggled in protest, trying not to notice how she could feel the broad head of his cock rubbing against the top of her mound with the motion. “I don’t...I’m not into this,” she protested. “And I’m not some little girl who needs a spanking to be made to behave.”

“You look pretty little to me,” he returned, giving her another swat. “And maybe I *like* spanking you.” Obviously he wasn’t hitting her nearly as hard as he could—though the blows stung, they were hardly painful. Still, it was the principle of the thing that Liv objected to.

“You can’t do this,” she protested. “I...I don’t like it.”

“Oh, no?” Baird shifted on the bed, repositioning her on his lap and spreading her thighs so that the head of his cock was now rubbing right between her pussy lips. Liv gasped as she felt him part her slippery folds and slide against her clit. The open-crotch panties were beginning to seem like a mistake but it was too late to do anything about it now.

“No, I...I don’t,” she gasped but then Baird gave her ass another slap and she jumped and squeaked. The movement rubbed his cock over her pussy again, making the squeak turn into a moan.

“Are you *sure* you don’t like this, Olivia?” he growled softly, spanking her again and then again, rubbing against her each time until she was moaning steadily. “Sure you want me to stop spanking you?”

“It...it’s un...undignified,” she finally managed to gasp out. God, between the sharp little pain in her ass and the delicious tingling in her clit, she could barely think, let alone talk!

“But delicious,” he murmured. “I can feel how hot and wet your little pussy is getting for me. And it’s not just because I’m rubbing against you, either.”

“Why...why else would it be?” Liv demanded, trying to keep some of her dignity.

“I think it’s because, whether you admit it or not, you like this,” he told her. “Not the pain maybe, but being held down and dominated. Punished.”

“I...I do not.” Liv tried to sound indignant. “I’m a modern woman. I don’t need anyone to pun...puni...” But she couldn’t get the word out because every time she tried, Baird gave her another firm but loving slap on the behind. She felt like her cheeks must be on fire by now but strangely enough, her pussy was also

wetter than it had ever been. She was just wondering how long this was going to go on when Baird suddenly repositioned her on her hands and knees on the bed.

Instinctively Liv tried to get up but he held her down, trapping her arms gently behind her back with one hand.

The awkward position pressed her cheek to the mattress and put her ass high in the air, with her legs spread wide to show the white lace panties. Their crotch was still open, putting her pussy on display in a way she found both embarrassing and incredibly erotic. She could feel her cunt lips parting, opening to show her slippery pink folds and her clit which throbbed deliciously in the center.

“Very nice,” Baird rumbled, tracing the outer edge of the white lace with one gentle finger. “You know, I really *do* like these. It’s going to be a real pleasure to fuck you in them.”

“Baird!” Liv wiggled appealingly, trying and failing to break his grip. He had her exactly where he wanted her and it was clear he wasn’t letting go. But even worse than holding her down was the way he was teasing her. That one, slow finger traveling around and around her center, without ever actually touching her where she needed him the most, was maddening. She could feel her clit throbbing for release and her pussy felt so *empty*. God, she needed him in her!

“What’s wrong, *Lilenta*? Discovering that you like being punished more than you thought?” Baird leaned over her from behind and she suddenly felt his cock nudging the inside of her thigh. “Admit it,” he breathed in her ear. “You like it—hell, you fucking *love* it. Being held down. Being forced to submit.”

“No,” Liv protested wiggling again, “No, I...I never...”

“Don’t lie to me.” His voice was a growl. “I can tell—I’ve never smelled you so hot before. Besides, how do you explain this?” His finger stopped tracing her panties and slipped deep into her pussy instead, drawing a strangled cry from Liv’s throat. “That’s right, *Lilenta*,” he told her, thrusting in deep, using two fingers this time. “Ride my fingers the way you’re going to ride my cock. Let yourself go while I fingerfuck you.”

If anyone had ever told Liv she would enjoy being held down and taken, she would have called them a liar. She was a strong, independent woman who liked taking charge during sex. But this...this was an entirely new experience. And though part of her was still outraged at Baird's actions, another, deeper part couldn't deny that she had never been so turned on in her life. She couldn't help herself—she had to wiggle and moan, pumping her hips in time with his thrusts as he pushed her toward the peak.

But before she could get anywhere near orgasm, Baird disappointed her by removing his fingers.

"What?" she tried to look around at him but he was still holding her firmly down.

"Uh-uh-uh, Olivia, I'm not done with you yet," he murmured, giving her ass another sharp spank. "Not nearly done. I want to fuck you in this position. Want to watch while my cock fills you up and my mating fist swells in your tight little cunt. I'm going to fill you over and over again tonight, do you know that?" he continued, leaning over to murmur in her ear. "Gonna fuck you deep and hard and come in you again and again until your pussy is overflowing with my seed."

"Please!" Liv gasped but she didn't know if she was begging him to stop or to hurry up and start. Being so out of control was affecting her strangely, making her crazy. Her pussy throbbed at his dirty words and she could feel her juices leaking down her thighs in a mute sign of submission.

"But before I do all that," Baird continued, stroking her pussy again lightly with his fingertips. "Before I fill you up and fuck you, I'm going to taste your sweet little cunt again and lap up all this delicious honey you're making."

Liv shivered under his light touch. "You...you're going to taste me like...like this?" He'd never gone down on her from behind before, though once or twice he'd had Liv sit on his face and ride his tongue. That had seemed exotic enough to her but this...letting him lick her from behind just seemed *dirty*. *Forget about letting him though*, whispered a little voice in her head. *He's going to do it whether you want him to or not*. The thought made her darkly excited and she

couldn't help quivering as Baird knelt behind her and spread her thighs even wider.

"Just like this," he growled. "And you're going to hold still and let me lick your pussy like a good girl or I'm going to spank you again. Do you understand me, Olivia?"

The dominance in his deep voice did something to her—touched some buried part of her psyche that might never have seen the light of day otherwise. Though it embarrassed her greatly, Liv could feel her pussy getting even wetter, her folds swollen and hot as she waited for his tongue.

"I said, do you understand me?" Baird barked and she jumped, realizing that he wanted a verbal answer.

"Y-yes," she almost whispered, pressing her cheek hard into the mattress.

"Yes, *Sir*," he corrected her sternly. "Say it, Olivia. In fact, I want you to do more than that. Say, 'I promise to hold still and let you lick my pussy until I come, Sir.'"

"I..." Liv felt her cheeks heating. "I can't say *that*," she objected.

"Oh, yes you can." He gave her another stinging slap on the rear. "Say it, Olivia or so help me I'll go down on you all night and you won't get to feel my cock in your tight little cunt until I get done making you come over and over."

As much as she loved it when Baird serviced her with his tongue, Liv loved having him in her even more. She knew it had to do with his mating scent and the need it created in her to have his thick cock filling her, marking her as his—but she didn't care. She only knew what she craved. Slowly, haltingly she whispered the words he'd demanded she say. "I...I promise to hold still and let you...let you lick my pussy until I...I come. *Sir*," she added quickly before he could say anything.

"That's good. Very good," he rumbled approvingly. "Now get ready, *Lilenta*. I'm going to taste you."

With the broad pads of his thumbs he parted her pussy lips, exposing her clit completely and making her want to squirm. But she had promised to hold still, to

let him taste her, so she tried not to move too much, even when she felt his warm, wet tongue invading and opening her.

Baird licked from the top of her slit to the tender entrance—long, slow licks that somehow managed to avoid her clit each time. Liv knew he was building her up, teasing her on purpose but it was almost more than she could take.

“God, Baird, please...you’re making me *insane*,” she gasped as his tongue continued to slip to one side or the other of her sensitive button without actually making contact.

“That’s because you need this as much as I do,” he growled. “More, even. This punishment has been a long time in coming but I think we both know you deserve it.”

“So this is what you meant when you said you’d been...ah! Holding back,” she gasped as he licked her again.

“No, *this* is what I meant.” Suddenly she felt his thick thumb slip deep into her pussy and swirl around, as though he was gathering her moisture. Before Liv could ask what he was doing, she felt him withdraw it and slide gently upwards until he was just pressing against her rosebud.

“Baird?” There was real panic in her voice now as she tried to look back and see him. “Baird, what are you doing? You know I don’t—”

“Don’t worry, *Lilenta*,” His deep voice was soothing even as he pressed against the tight ring of muscle that guarded her nether entrance. “I know you’re a virgin here. I’ll be careful.”

“It’s not an issue of being careful,” Liv protested as she felt the tip of his thumb slip inside her. “It’s just that I don’t, uh, *do* this. I mean—”

“Now you do,” he interrupted her in that commanding tone that made her weak in the knees despite her fear.

“But...but I...” Liv couldn’t finish.

“It’s okay,” Baird continued in a softer voice. “It’s all right, Olivia. Just open up and let me in. Just wanna fingerfuck your sweet little ass while I taste your pussy. I swear I won’t go any further.”

“So...just your thumb?” She was still clenched tightly closed, resisting the intimate invasion.

“I promise,” he murmured, pressing a little deeper. “Let me in, *Lilenta*. Trust me and I swear you won’t be sorry.”

That deep, soft voice was more than she could fight against. Baird could have forced the issue easily but she knew he would never do that. Suddenly she understood that he wanted her submission even more than he wanted to touch her in this new way. By opening to him here, she was giving him a part of herself that she’d never given anyone. By allowing him to pierce her virgin entrance, she was admitting that she wanted him everywhere inside her. *And I do. Want him everywhere—even if it’s a kind of scary at first.*

Though it was another thing Liv would have sworn she would never do, she knew she was going to give in. With a shuddering sigh she relaxed her muscles as well as she could and submitted.

Baird must have felt the release of tension because he stroked her back soothingly with his other hand. “Good girl,” he murmured softly in her ear. “Such a good girl to let me fingerfuck your sweet ass, Olivia.”

As he spoke she felt his thumb breach her completely, sliding deep into her rosebud and filling her in a way she’d never been filled before. It felt strange and a little scary but not as dirty as she had feared. After all, she’d just gotten through vowing that she would give herself to him completely in front of a crowd full of witnesses. She just hadn’t known she’d be called upon to fulfill her wedding vows quite so soon.

“That’s good,” Baird murmured again. Liv felt his hot breath on the back of her thighs and knew he was about to taste her again. She just hoped he stopped teasing her by avoiding her clit. She was wound so tight with sexual tension she felt like she was about to *explode*.

Baird seemed to hesitate for a long time and then suddenly dove in again. Even knowing what was coming couldn’t stop the moan from breaking past her lips as his tongue pressed deeply into her pussy, tasting her juices right from the

source. God, being filled this way in both her pussy and ass was so strange and yet she had never been so hot. She felt opened completely and the way he finally sucked her swollen clit into his mouth as he thrust deeply into her rosebud only heightened the sensation. In fact, the pleasure was so intense she felt herself reaching the peak almost immediately.

Baird must have felt her quiver because he pulled back for just a moment. “That’s right, *Lilenta*, come,” he urged her in a voice rough with lust. “Come on my tongue while I fuck your sweet ass.”

His breath was hot against her open pussy and the moment his tongue lashed over her clit again, Liv felt herself letting go and obeying his order. “*Baird*,” she gasped as the orgasm rolled over her. She could feel herself clenching around him, squeezing him as though her body was begging for more. *Because I **do** need more*, she thought half deliriously as Baird rode out her orgasm, eagerly lapping the fresh honey that flowed from her pussy. *I need him inside me. Not just his tongue or his fingers—I need his cock, filling me up, coming in me...*

Baird obviously had the same need. As soon as the last aftershocks of her pleasure ended, he pulled out of her and positioned himself against the entrance of her pussy. “Gonna fuck you now, *Lilenta*,” he rasped, rubbing the broad head of his shaft over her slippery folds. “Need to fill you up with my cock and mating fist. Need to mark you, bond you to me all over again.”

“Please! God, please, *yes*,” Liv heard herself begging shamelessly but she couldn’t seem to stop it. Couldn’t seem to do anything but spread her thighs wider in submission for the thick rod that was already invading her pussy.

She’d had him in her before—many times already. But still she felt the slight, stretching pain that came with accommodating such a large male. It was a good feeling—the feeling of being owned and opened and she welcomed it completely as he slid smoothly into her, inch by thick inch. But even when the head of his cock touched bottom inside her, she knew he wasn’t completely in. She still had his mating fist—the thick ridge of muscle that surrounded the base of his cock nearly doubling its diameter—to take inside her pussy.

The mating fist was a physical characteristic only Beast Kindred had. Its purpose was to swell inside the female the warrior was fucking and tie them together for hours until enough cum had been pumped into her pussy to ensure a complete bonding. Liv had been deathly afraid of it at first and she was still a little nervous as she felt the thick ridge pressing against her entrance. But Baird's body instinctively made chemicals that worked on hers, allowing her to open enough to take him in, though it was a very, *very* tight fit.

Baird knew she was still a little shy of his fist and he stopped his forward motion to stroke her back soothingly. "You all right?" he murmured. "Can you handle it, *Lilenta*?"

"Yes..." Liv whispered, spreading her thighs wider, trying to be open enough to take him. "I'm okay. I've had you in me before."

"I'm especially thick tonight, though." He sounded apologetic. "Been needing you so bad this past week. I'm afraid you might have a hard time taking me in."

Remind me never to deprive him again, no matter how good or romantic the reason, Liv thought a bit wildly. But she was never one to back down from a challenge and besides, she needed him in her every bit as much as he needed to be there.

"It's okay," she whispered, pressing back against him, deliberately spreading her pussy for his cock. "Put it in me, Baird. I...I want you to."

"And I want to, *Lilenta*. Just don't want to hurt you."

"You won't," she insisted. "Go ahead Baird, *fuck* me."

Her words seemed to inflame him beyond reason. With a low growl, he gripped her hips and pressed deep and hard inside her.

Liv moaned in mingled pleasure and pain as the thick mating fist, swollen with his pent up need, finally breached her pussy and entered her, filling her completely. God, it hurt so *good* she could hardly breathe. There was nothing better than this, than submitting to the man she loved, opening herself for him and taking him—all of him—into her body.

Baird groaned at the pleasure of entering her but once in, he held perfectly still for a moment, caressing her hips. “Gods, *Lilenta*,” he murmured. “Wish you could see this. My cock buried so deep inside you and your little pussy stretched so tight around my fist. Think I’m gonna come just looking at it.”

“Come then,” Liv moaned, pressing back against him. The Kindred were multi-orgasmic so Baird’s orgasm wouldn’t end their fun. In fact, it would help. With such a tight fit, every extra bit of lubrication was needed.

“Gonna fill you up,” Baird promised her, pressing hard against the end of her channel, and it was no idle threat. Though she’d never felt anything at this moment with a human lover, Liv could feel the hot jets as his seed coated the inside of her unprotected pussy as well as the warm liquid leaking out around the edges of where they were joined so tightly.

“Baird!” she moaned as several pearly drops of his cum slid down to coat her clit. She didn’t know if it was the same with other Kindred but with Beast Kindred, their seed seemed to act as an aphrodisiac. Her pussy was immediately more swollen and sensitive, insuring that the lightest touch would make her come again and again.

“You like that, *Lilenta*?” His voice was rough with lust and need. “Like the feel of my cock filling you? My cum leaking out of your hot little pussy?”

“You know I do,” she whispered, pressing back against him again. “More, Baird. Come in me again and then fuck me. Fuck me *hard*.”

“I’ll give it to you as hard as you need, *Lilenta*,” he promised, gripping her hips again. “Gonna fill you with my cum over and over tonight. Make you mine forever.”

“I’m already yours,” Liv protested breathlessly, but even as she spoke she felt a new rush of heat inside her and more of the warming liquid slipped out to flow over her folds.

With a low roar, Baird began to pump inside her, still coming as he did so. Liv moaned and gripped the duvet, trying to keep from falling over with the force of his fucking. She was so close...so close to coming again. If he would only...

Baird, she sent through the mental link which had been forged the first time they bonded. *Touch me! Need you to touch me...make me come.*

How about this? He varied his angle slightly and she felt something else coming into play. It was the part of him she'd learned was called the flange—a sort of extension that rose from the very base of his mating fist. The only part of it, in fact, that didn't fit inside her. It didn't seem to matter what position they were in, the flange was always there, ready and waiting. It cupped her clit like a firm but gentle finger and rubbed the swollen, supersensitive button just the right way as Baird rocked inside her.

It was exactly what she needed. With a moaning cry, Liv felt herself falling over the edge again, her orgasm washing through her like a warm wave as she lost herself completely in the moment.

"You like that, *Lilenta*?" he growled softly, gripping her hips harder. "Like it when I fuck you and make you come?"

"You...you know I do," she gasped, barely able to breathe.

"That's good," he rumbled. "Because it's going to be a long...*long* night. And we're just getting started." His voice softened and he stroked her back soothingly. "I love you, Olivia. Love you so much."

"Show me how much." Despite her orgasm she still wanted more. She could never get enough of him—never. Pressing back against him, she worked herself on his still-hard shaft. "Show me, Baird," she whispered in a low, breathless voice.

"With pleasure, *Lilenta*."

And he proceeded to do exactly that.

Chapter Five

Sylvan didn't know what in the seven hells was happening to him. First his fangs had come out—not once, but *twice*. And the second time he hadn't even noticed. Thankfully he'd been able to force them to retract, though the feeling was akin to having his erect cock bound in a too-tight pair of pants. But now his mating scent was apparently emanating from every pore. He could barely smell it himself—it was too much a part of him. But why else would Sophia have rubbed herself against him like that?

Her soft, curvy body. The fullness of her breasts against my chest. Her warm secret scent... She even seemed to like the press of my shaft against her—at least she didn't move away. He shook his head. No, there was no way the shy, obviously inexperienced Sophia would have made such a wanton display if his mating scent wasn't out in full force.

But it shouldn't be! I have sworn never to call a bride. Sworn it in the sacred grove before the statue of the Mother herself. Why is this happening to me? He didn't know.

His boots clicked and echoed as he strode along the endless lines of docked vehicles, looking for the shuttle that he and Baird shared. Finally, he found it at the end of a short row of similar craft. It was long and sleek and silver—with a very small enclosed space inside. He threw a glance back at Sophia who was nearly running to keep up with his long strides. What if his mating scent filled the cabin of the shuttle as it had the compartment of the transport tube? Was there any way to suppress it?

Sylvan wished he knew but he had never heard of a warrior with his problem before. Usually when a Blood Kindred's fangs came out and his mating scent began exuding, he was mentally and emotionally ready to claim his bride. *But I'm not ready. I'll never be ready. And even if I was, even if I would dream of breaking my vow, Sophia would never have me.*

He remembered the look of horror on her face when she had pointed to his fangs. Well, he supposed he couldn't blame her. He *had* cut her lip quite badly with them. But still, did she have to look at him as though he was some kind of monster? He had seen that expression on a female face before—that rejection. And even though he didn't want her—not with his mind anyway, his foolish body was a different story—seeing that look hurt.

“Sylvan?” A soft hand rested lightly on his elbow and he realized he'd been standing there with his arms crossed, brooding down at the sleek silver shuttle. “Sylvan?” she said again in her soft, musical voice.

Reluctantly, he turned his head to look down at her. “Yes?”

“I...I'm sorry.” She was as pale as paper but there was a determined look in her eyes. In fact, she looked the same way she had just before she'd forced herself to kiss him.

“Sorry for what?” Sylvan made an effort to soften his voice. “You don't have anything to be sorry for, Sophia.”

“Yes, I do,” she said stubbornly. “I shouldn't have...shouldn't have jumped away like that. I don't know why, uh, what happened but I know you were just trying to, er, comfort me.”

The look on her beautiful face was both fearful and pleading. For some reason it made Sylvan feel as though she'd reached into his chest and was holding his heart in her soft little hand. “Sophia...” He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to push back the tension headache that was pulsing in his temples. “I don't know why it happened either. I don't know why my fangs have suddenly come out twice in the past—”

“Three times,” she said faintly.

“What?” He opened his eyes and stared at her.

“You...they came out in the sacred grove, too. When you were, um, rescuing me from that priestess.”

Sylvan nearly groaned. *This is not good.* The fact that his fangs were coming out in response to his lust for her was one thing. But to know that they were also

coming out when his protective instincts were aroused was something else again. *I'm acting like we're already mated and I have to protect her! What in the seven hells is wrong with me?*

"I'm sorry," he said at last, not knowing what else to say. "I beg your forgiveness if I frightened you."

"It's all right." But the look on her face said it wasn't. "Uh...maybe we should just get back to Earth. If...if you still don't mind taking me?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to make some excuse and find her another pilot. Preferably one who was already happily mated and wouldn't exude the heady pheromone-laden mist he was currently putting out like a steam bath. But he had offered to see her home and accepted Baird's charge for her safety. A Kindred did not make idle promises—if he gave her over to someone else's care now, he would be guilty of the worst kind of unfaithfulness. Besides, just the *thought* of her in close proximity to another male, even one who was mated and would have no interest in her, made Sylvan feel enraged. *Mine*, he thought before he could stop himself. *Damn it, she's mine!*

His fangs ached and so did his cock.

Oh, I'm in trouble here, he thought as he concentrated on keeping his fangs from growing—Gods, it was *painful* to hold them back. *So much trouble*. But it couldn't be helped—he would just have to take her back to Earth as quickly as possible and then try never to see her again.

"Sylvan?" she said hesitantly and he realized she was still waiting for an answer.

"Don't worry," he said heavily. "I'll take you. But if you think you smell something good again, just ignore it. All right?"

"What?" She frowned at him, clearly puzzled.

"Nothing." Sylvan shook his head, feeling slightly relieved. He had explained to her about a male Kindred's mating scent before—back when they had spoken during Baird and Olivia's claiming period. Either she had forgotten the conversation or she still hadn't connected it to what had happened—or almost

happened—between them in the transport tube. Of that, Sylvan was immeasurably glad. It was bad enough that his fangs were coming out with no warning—he didn't want to have to explain why his mating scent had been activated as well. Especially since he had no explanation to give. "Let's just get you home," he said, planting his hand against the side of the craft. "And then I think both of us should try to forget any of this ever happened."

For a moment she looked hurt but then she nodded. "All right, fine with me."

Sylvan sighed inwardly. The tone of her voice and the grim set of her shapely lips told him he had offended her somehow. But he didn't have the time or inclination to find out why or how. He had to get her back as quickly as possible and get away from her sweet scent and soft, curvy body.

The smart metal the craft was made of molded to his palm and then a door appeared on the side of the shuttle. Sylvan swung open the hatch and gestured for Sophia to climb inside. When she was safely belted in, he got in himself and started the hydrogen-scoop engine. He waited until the last moment to pull the door shut, but when the oxygen grid klaxon sounded he had no choice. Sighing, he pulled it closed and the smart metal molded closed around them as the shuttle lifted into the air. *Goddess help us, here we go.*

He just hoped the trip back to her home would be a short and uneventful one.

* * * * *

Sophie was getting more and more frustrated. *First he holds me and pets my hair and acts like he actually cares—I mean, it was almost like we were having a little moment there. Not that I wanted to have a moment with him, but still it was sort of...nice. And then I look up and see his freaking fangs have gone crazy. Okay, so that was awkward, but give me a break—I was scared. Anybody would have been. He's six and a half feet tall and built like a pro wrestler, the fangs are pretty much the icing on the cake. But still, he was acting so sweet before and now he says we should forget anything ever happened. What's his problem, anyway?*

It wasn't like she *wanted* anything to happen with the huge warrior—she and Sylvan had been at odds since the moment Olivia had been dragged against her will from their apartment to her claiming ceremony with Baird. Of course, Baird hadn't been available during their claiming period, so Sophie had taken her anger and frustration out on Sylvan. Every time they talked, it ended badly.

But despite their differences, the way he'd stroked her hair and held her after she was so shaken from the tube ride had been so...gentle. No one looking at his muscular frame and ice blue eyes would have guessed Sylvan had that kind of tenderness in him. And he smelled so *good*.

Sophie stopped herself right there. *Where are you going with this? Please tell me you're not actually having feelings for him because how stupid would that be? After all, he's made it abundantly clear that he doesn't like you.*

It wasn't that she cared for him in any kind of romantic way, she told herself. In fact, at the moment she was pretty damn pissed off at the big warrior. But there was no denying he was attractive—or would have been if it wasn't for the scary dental daggers he was packing. Being with Sylvan was like stroking a cat and suddenly finding it had turned into a tiger in your lap. A *saber tooth* tiger.

Her mind churned on and she fumed silently as the doors of the docking bay irised open and the shuttle rose out into the blackness of space. To their right she saw the gray, pocked face of the moon which the Kindred mother ship was orbiting. Far above them was what looked like a blue ball swirled with white.

The Earth. Who would have ever guessed that I would see it from this perspective? She'd made the trip to visit Olivia before but she'd been too nervous to really relax and enjoy the scenery. This time she wasn't a bit concerned about the flight—it was the *pilot* who was making her feel tense. She kept her eyes on the Earth, slowly growing closer in their viewscreen, mainly so she wouldn't have to look at Sylvan.

Apparently he felt that he had to make small talk to entertain her because she heard him clear his throat. "You have a lovely home world," he said stiffly.

“Uh, thank you.” Sophie glanced at him quickly out of the corner of her eye but he was staring straight ahead, paying attention to the complicated looking control panel. “It looks so small from here,” she said. “So...insignificant.”

“Everyone thinks that when they first see their home world from space.” He sounded a little more calm—maybe piloting relaxed him. “The universe is so vast and you realize for the first time that your entire planet is a single grain of sand on the ocean floor.”

“Did you think that?” Sophie looked at him more directly. “The first time you saw your home world—Tranq Prime—from a space ship?”

He laughed grimly. “More or less. But I thought of it more as a single ice crystal in a glacier. We don’t have beaches on Tranq Prime. Not the kind you’re used to, anyway.”

“So you have snow all the time? What is that like?”

He threw her a glance. “Cold. Extremely cold.”

“No, really, I want to know.” Sophie’s curiosity overcame her irritation at least for the moment. “I mean, I’ve lived in Florida all my life so I’ve only ever seen snow once. My senior class took a ski trip to Colorado but I twisted my ankle in the first five minutes and spent the rest of the trip drinking nasty instant cocoa while the rest of the class had fun. So I pretty much missed everything. The snowball fights, the snowman building contest, the ice skating...” She trailed off. Sylvan was giving her his full attention now and the look on his chiseled features was incredulous. “What?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I think you have a different idea of cold than I do. We don’t go out to ‘play’ in the snow on my planet any more than you would swim in shark-infested waters on Earth for fun. The conditions are incredibly harsh and unforgiving.”

“Oh. I didn’t know.” Sophie looked down at her hands.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about us.” His deep voice was harsh. Was he *angry* with her? Did he seriously have that much nerve?

Her frustration returned in a rush.

“Apparently there’s a lot you don’t know about *yourself*.”

He raised an eyebrow. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, what’s the deal with your fangs?” Sophie knew she shouldn’t be asking—clearly a sensitive subject with him. But somehow the words came flying out. “Jillian told me it was safe to kiss you because they wouldn’t come out until you met a woman you wanted to...to...”

“To mate. To bond. To *fuck*,” he finished for her, his voice harsh.

“Yes.” Sophie could feel her cheeks getting hot but she lifted her chin and went on anyway. “So why would they come out around me? I mean, you don’t even *like* me.”

“Is that what you think? That I don’t like you?” He frowned.

“What else am I supposed to think?” she flared. “First you were acting so nice and then you got angry—”

“I’m not angry at you.”

“Well you could have fooled me, the way you’re acting. What about the way you said you wanted to take me home and forget about...just forget?” she ended rather lamely.

“That’s because forgetting is my only option.” He stared straight ahead as he talked. “I took a vow never to call a bride, Sophia. A vow I must never break.”

“Nobody’s asking you to break it,” she protested.

“Even if I wanted to it would do me no good.” He looked at her for a long moment and then looked away.

Sophie threw up her hands. “I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

“And it’s better we keep it that way.” He glared straight ahead, apparently focusing on his piloting. “You clearly want nothing to do with me and I...I *should* feel the same way about you. So...”

“So what?” she demanded but he didn’t answer. Glancing at him she saw he was staring at the instrument panel with a worried frown on his face. “Sylvan?” she asked. “Is everything okay?”

“No.” His voice was calm but his fingers on the steering yoke had tightened until they were white.

“What...what’s wrong?” Sophie glanced out the broad, window-like viewscreen and saw that the Earth, which had been growing larger and larger as they approached it, was suddenly veering away to one side. *No*, she realized. *It’s not the Earth that’s veering away—it’s us!* “Sylvan?” she asked in a low, trembling voice. “Why...why are you taking us away from Earth?”

“I’m not.” His voice was still distant and calm but his thick arms were rigid now, held straight out as he gripped the yoke. Clearly he was fighting with the controls.

“But then what...who...?”

“The Scourge.” He jerked his head in the direction they were being pulled. “They must have cast some kind of energy net and now we’re caught in it.”

“Oh my God,” Sophia whispered, feeling faint. She’d never seen a member of the Scourge herself but she had heard plenty about them. Olivia had been taken by the alien race and had her mind scanned by their evil AllFather. Even after she’d been released and was reunited with Baird, she’d still had horrible nightmares about it. “*God*,” she moaned softly again.

“You may well pray to whatever deity you choose.” Sylvan’s voice was grim. “They have us locked in.”

“So we’re trapped?” Sophie bit her lip and looked out the viewscreen where Earth was rapidly receding.

“Not...quite.” Sylvan cast her a quick look. “There’s a chance I can get us out but it’s going to be hard on the ship.”

“Who cares about the ship? Just *do it*,” Sophie urged him.

“I don’t think you understand me.” He spoke through gritted teeth as he wrestled with the controls. “What I meant to say is the maneuver I’m considering may tear the ship apart. We’ll get out of the Scourge net but the ship may disintegrate around us before we reach Earth.”

For a moment, Sophie didn't know what to say. Then Liv's voice echoed in her mind. *I thought I was going to die. The minute the AllFather got into my head with his cold slimy claws and started digging around, making me relive my worst memories, I thought I was **just going to die.***

It would be like the priestess in the sacred grove all over again, Sophie realized. Only a thousand times worse. And Liv said that sometimes they project your memories up on a huge viewscreen so everyone can watch—that's what they did to Baird, anyway. What if they caught us and they hooked me up to that machine? What if everybody saw... But she couldn't make herself finish.

"Sophia?" Sylvan's deep voice was strained now, cracks showing in his calm. "I have been charged with your safety—this has to be your choice."

Sophie felt cold all over. "We're dead anyway if they take us. Isn't that right?"

He gave a short, jerky nod. "Surrender might buy us a little time but eventually, yes."

He means eventually after they torture us. After they let everyone see what's in my head All my worst memories including what happened that night when... "I'd rather die trying to escape," she said decisively. "Do what you have to do but don't let them take us alive."

He threw her a look of approval. "You have a warrior's spirit."

No, I'd just rather die than have you or anyone else see inside my head. Than have to relive that horrible night. But she didn't say it out loud. She just tightened the straps holding her in place and nodded at the viewscreen. "Go on—punch it!"

"All right then. We're going through the center of the web where the energy is strongest." The muscles under his blue uniform shirt bunched and his jaw clenched in grim determination. "Hold on, Sophia. Here...we...go."

* * * * *

They were both going to die.

Sylvan wished he'd had time to tell Sophia how he really felt—that he didn't hate her even if *she* hated *him*. He wished he had time to explore what was happening between them even if it led nowhere. Most of all he wished he had met her before he'd made his vow. But there was no time for regret now.

Gritting his teeth, he jerked the steering yoke to one side and punched the accelerator at the same time. For a moment there was a sudden lack of resistance and then a shattering jolt that threw them both forward. Sylvan kept the accelerator down, grateful for the safety harnesses that held them both in place.

The shuttle shivered violently and there was a shrieking scream as metal sheered away from its top and sides. Still he kept the accelerator to the floor, pushing through the resistance a micrometer at a time. Layer by layer, the ship was being peeled like the Earth vegetable called an onion. The smart metal was incredibly strong and resistant to heat but their chances of getting through Earth's atmosphere alive instead of being burned to a cinder lessened with every layer that left the ship's outer surface.

It was a suicide maneuver and one Sylvan knew the enemy wouldn't expect. He hoped it would throw them off guard long enough for the shuttle to get free and be on its way. Going back to the Kindred mother ship was impossible. Once they got through the net it would block their way. But they might just make it to Earth—if the shuttle wasn't stripped completely by the time it bored through the center of the enemy's trap.

Though Sylvan had known her to be emotional in the past, Sophia sat silent and dry-eyed beside him. He cast her a quick glance and saw that her fingers were white, clenching the armrests of her flight seat and her lips were tight. But though her lovely green eyes were filled with terror, she didn't make a sound.

The sight of her sitting there, so courageous in the face of almost certain death squeezed his heart. Gods, how he longed to gather her close and simply hold her as he had after their journey in the transport tube. Those few seconds before she had been frightened by his fangs had been the best of his life. The way she had melted against him, trusting him completely to keep her safe, to comfort

her. The press of her body against his...he wanted that again. Wanted it in the worst possible way. And now he would never have it.

You wouldn't have it anyway, even if you survive this crazy maneuver—which is looking less and less likely, a little voice in his brain pointed out. *She wants nothing to do with you.* But then why had she seemed so upset about the idea of him disliking her? And why—

With a jolt the net parted and they were through. The shuttle jumped forward like a horse that had been spurred and Sylvan twisted the yoke, aiming for Earth once more. But as the round blue ball began to grow in the viewscreen he saw something to his left. It was like an oil spot in space, an ill defined mass so incredibly black it actually seemed to suck up all the light around it.

His heart sank as he recognized it for what it was—a Scourge fighter. They used a kind of black hole technology that made their ships impossible to actually see, although his ship's sensors could spot them well enough. To the naked eye they showed up more as an absence of light than any real, definable shape that the eye could trace. *How many of them? And why do they want us in the first place?* Aloud he said, “Hold on, Sophia—we have company.”

“What? Who?” Her eyes were wide as she peered at the viewscreen.

“Scourge ships. You can't really see them.” Sylvan began evasive action, forcing the wounded shuttle through all kinds of maneuvers, trying to make them a more difficult target. “But they're there. I'm just telling you to be prepared in case—”

Before he could finish the ship jerked and something metal scraped the outside of the hull. There was no sound in space, of course, but the impact reverberated through the pressurized flight compartment making a hollow clang they could hear clearly inside the ship.

“What was that?” Sophia's voice was high and breathless.

Sylvan cursed. “They're using grappling hooks to try and pull is in. Hold on.” He twisted the yoke again, flying as wildly as possible while still keeping Earth in

his sights. Suddenly, though he hadn't touched it, his communicator crackled to life.

"Warrior," said a cold male voice from the central speaker. "Know this, we do not seek your life. We only want the girl—Sophia Waterhouse. Surrender her and you will be allowed to go back to your ship unmolested. You have my word as a commander of the Scourge that it is so." The words were spoken in English rather than the Kindred universal language—proof that the Scourge had been studying their prey.

Sylvan bared his teeth, his fangs punching out in sheer rage. This time he didn't try to hold them back. "Never," he snarled, squeezing the yoke as though it was the Scourge commander's neck. "Sophia is *mine*. I'll never give her up—to you or anyone."

Sophia gave him a wide-eyed look but he didn't care. He was too busy avoiding the grappling hooks that were clanging off the weakened hull at regular intervals.

"Don't be foolish." The cold voice sounded angry now. "You can find another female. The planet below is full of them."

"I have given my word to keep her safe." Sylvan dived and swerved as Earth grew bigger in the viewscreen. "But what would you know about that, you motherless bastard? You Scourge filth have no females and spawn in tanks like bacteria. What would you know about protecting and caring for a female?"

"It is because of *you*, because of the Kindred that we have no females! For that insult alone her torment will be all the more." The words were filled with fury and Sylvan could almost see the Scourge commander's dark face twisting with hatred. "We will strip her naked before we take her to the AllFather. Strip her and take her in front of you where you stand, helpless to do anything but watch as she begs for release."

"The hell you will!" Rage was like a red cloud in front of his eyes. Normally in battle he was as cold as ice but not now. Not when they were threatening Sophia. Threatening *his* female. "You listen to me," he told the Scourge commander as he

flew toward Earth. “You’ll never have her. And if I ever meet you face to face I’ll make you pay for those words. I’ll fucking rip your throat out with my *teeth*.”

Angry laughter filled the small cabin. “With your teeth, eh? You must be a Blood Kindred to speak so, warrior. I’ll be sure to pull your fangs out by the roots and bring them to the AllFather as a trophy after I finish with your female. I—”

Sylvan took one hand from the yoke and punched the speaker. There was a crunching sound and his fist made a surprisingly large hole in the metal console. His hand hurt and he started bleeding at once but he felt immediately better. He and Sophia might die—they probably would—but he would be damned if he’d go down with that sick bastard’s voice in his ears.

He became aware that Sophia was staring at him, her face as white as new fallen snow, but there was no time to explain. There was another *clang* against the side of the hull and the ship jerked alarmingly. Sylvan felt sick. *One of the hooks caught!* There was only one thing to do—keep going.

Praying to the Mother of Life for help, he forced the crippled ship into a roll, hoping to lose the hook. Earth was looming before them now, filling the entire screen. They were close...so *close*...

With a grinding screech, the little ship jerked free of the grappling hook and catapulted forward. They were in the upper atmosphere now and barreling down fast toward the ground, leaving the Scourge ships far behind. The smart metal hull was holding so far, but they weren’t in the clear yet. When Sylvan tried to slow their descent the ship was sluggish and unresponsive.

“Uh, Sylvan?” Sophie’s voice was a whisper of pure terror as the ground rushed up to meet them. “We’re, uh, going awfully fast. Any chance of slowing down?”

“Not much, sorry.” He flashed her a grim half-smile. “Part of the landing and guidance system is out. Either it was burned up by the net or that last grappling hook ripped it off. Either way it looks like a crash landing.”

“Oh,” she gasped. “Can...can we survive that?”

“If we’re lucky and I can find a big enough mountain.” He had managed to level off and was heading for a ridge right now. If they could just hit hard enough the ship’s maximum impact safety cushioning would be activated. If not...well...

Clearly Sophia didn’t know about the cushioning. “A mountain? You’re *trying* to hit a *mountain*?”

“Not trying to—*about* to,” Sylvan told her. “Hang on.”

He saw her eyes grow wider as the craggy wall of sheer rock filled the viewscreen. She opened her mouth to scream and...

Impact.

*I’m sorry, Sophia. Sorry I didn’t have time to tell you I—*They were both jolted forward...into a seething wall of blue gel that gushed from every crack, crevice, and cranny in the console. As the hull of the shuttle crumpled the cushioning gel filled the cabin, cocooning them both as it absorbed the force of their impact.

Despite the gel, Sylvan managed to hit his head on something hard—maybe the ceiling of the ship which had folded in on itself—and everything went black.

* * * * *

When he came to it was dark and silent. The ship’s systems were gone, clearly damaged beyond repair and the gooey gel was just beginning to melt and foam away. Sylvan struggled out of his restraints, thanking the Mother that the hull had, for the most part, kept its integrity. There were scattered pieces of metal and glass everywhere. But though the top of the ship had been peeled up and out so that the night sky was clearly visible, the walls and floor were still together.

The hole in the ceiling was actually quite fortuitous—now he wouldn’t have to try to force a way out of the damaged shuttle. It would save some time since he and Sophia would have to get to safety on foot. Sylvan wasn’t sure, but he had a feeling they had a long way to go. He didn’t even know the name of the mountain range he’d crashed into—only that it was far north of their original intended target of Tampa, Florida.

Wherever they were, they had to go and quickly. He didn't know how long he'd been out but he was sure of one thing—the Scourge were going to be after them. They might not be able to get their ships through the protective grid the Kindred had placed around the Earth, but they had other, smaller probes which probably *could* get through. And if they sent down some of their hellish sniffers... Sylvan shook his head. He had to pack some supplies and get Sophia as far from the crash site as possible before they were found.

“Sophia?” he said, freeing himself from the last of the gel and turning toward her. “Soph—” Her name died on his lips—she was gone.

For a moment Sylvan stared blankly at the empty straps. There was a smear of blood where she'd been sitting but no other sign of her. He couldn't even smell her—the air was still filled with the acrid reek of scorched metal and the sharp scent of the cushioning safety gel.

Had she been thrown clear of the wreckage somehow? Or had the gel not been enough to cushion her impact? He realized with dread that the safety features of the shuttle were geared for a Kindred warrior who would naturally be piloting it—not for a fragile human female like Sophia. Was she lying crushed and mangled somewhere? Or had the Scourge already gotten through while he was blacked out, leaving her helpless and unprotected? Fear filled him like black water. *Goddess, please no. No!*

“Sophia!” Her name broke from him a full throated roar. “Sophia! So—”

He nearly tripped on her prone form. She was lying on her face near the back of the cabin, crumpled into a small heap. Gasping in relief, Sylvan knelt beside her. “Sophia,” he murmured, running one hand up her back and neck to check the alignment of her spine. Nothing seemed damaged or out of place, but she didn't respond to his voice or touch. Troubled, he shook her shoulder gently. “Sophia? It's time to wake up. We have to get out of here quickly.” Still no response.

Dreading the worst, Sylvan reached beneath her to turn her over. His seeking fingers found something warm and wet. Hesitantly, he brought his hand up to his

face. The liquid on his fingers looked black in the starlight and he didn't have to smell it to know it was blood.

Sophia's blood.

Chapter Six

Kat was supervising the clean up after the reception—when the Kindred partied, they *really* partied—when a deep male voice behind her startled her.

“Excuse me, my lady?”

“Huh?” It took her a minute to realize that whoever was speaking was addressing her. Turning, she found herself face to face with the two Twin Kindred warriors Sylvan had introduced as his ‘second brothers.’ “Oh uh, hi,” she said, smiling. “Deep and Lock, right?”

“Yes, my lady.” Lock made a courtly bow while Deep simply nodded his head. There was a scowl on his face that seemed to center in his jet black eyes and Kat wondered if he ever smiled. It was easy to see that he must be the “dark twin” and not just from his coloring. She’d had to listen to enough of Jillian’s prattling to know a lot more about Twin Kindred than she ever wanted to. Besides the fact that they always came in pairs, she knew that they also had very different temperaments—hence the “light” and “dark” classification.

The brothers were dressed in the tight fitting black flight pants all the Kindred warriors favored and they were wearing dark green uniform shirts that buttoned up to the chin with shiny gold buttons. The color looked outstanding on both of them but Kat couldn’t help thinking that *any* color would. Both green uniform shirts were obviously hiding six pack abs and arms of steel and they had muscles to match everywhere else too. *Yum.*

“Nice to see you both again. Did you come over to help clear tables?” Kat motioned to the refreshment pavilion, where over half the tables were still stacked with empty plates and half filled glasses.

“Regrettably no, my lady.” Lock, obviously the “light twin” of the pair had a handsome, open face. With his wheat colored hair and big brown eyes he was what Kat’s grandmother had always called ‘an October blond’—but now he looked troubled. “We have...bad news,” he said, hesitating as though he didn’t know how to say it.

“Very bad news.” Deep crossed his arms over his broad chest. “Our Flight Control has lost contact with Sylvan and the human female he was taking back to her home on Earth.”

“With Sophie, you mean?” Kat felt her heart freeze. She’d seen the two of them leaving together earlier—much earlier now that she thought about it—but she’d been too busy keeping the reception on track to think about it.

“The twin of Baird’s bride, yes.” Lock nodded. “There was a disturbance in space—a kind of energy field we’d never seen before—shortly after their shuttle left the docking bay. Flight Control couldn’t tell what it was and it masked all other signals. By the time it cleared, Sylvan’s ship was nowhere to be seen.”

Kat felt sick. “But couldn’t they have already landed in Tampa?”

Deep shook his head. “Tampa HKR reported no shuttles have docked in the past twenty-four Earth hours.”

“So that’s it? They’re gone? Poof! Just like that?” Kat demanded.

“Not exactly.” Deep frowned. “We actually believe they may have landed somewhere else on Earth. A forced landing, perhaps. If the energy field was generated by the Scourge, as we believe, they may have had to change their flight plans considerably.”

“My God! Sophie is somewhere down there, who knows where, lost and alone —”

“Not alone.” Deep’s black eyes flashed. “Sylvan is with her. Our second brother would not abandon a female placed in his care—not even if his life depended on it.”

“Look,” said Kat, beginning to feel exasperated. “Nobody’s disputing that Sylvan is a great guy. But he’s just *one guy*. What if the Scourge send a something or someone after them—or a whole bunch of someones? Even Sylvan, as big as he is, can’t hold off a dozen attackers.”

“Then he will die trying,” Lock said quietly. “I don’t think you quite understand the depths of a Kindred warrior’s devotion, my lady. Sylvan has been

charged with Sophia's safety. If need be he will gladly lay down his life to protect her."

Kat frowned. "Even though they're not dating or engaged or anything like that? I mean...I'm sorry, but I don't even think she likes him very much. And to hear her tell it, he's not her number one fan either."

"That doesn't matter," Lock said. "When the safety of a female is at stake the warrior shielding her will go to any extreme to be certain she is protected."

Kat tried to smile. "It's nice to know chivalry isn't dead, at least among the Kindred."

Deep raised one black eyebrow at her. "Chivalry?"

"Never mind." Kat shook her head. "Look, the main thing is, what's being done to find them? I mean, why doesn't somebody put on a Think-me and bespeak them?"

"We've tried that already," Lock said. "Either something is blocking their thought signals or..."

"Or what?" Kat put a hand to her throat.

"Or they're dead," Deep said harshly.

Kat sucked in a breath, feeling like someone had punched her in the stomach. "Oh God, *no*," she whispered.

"Deep!" Lock rounded on his brother angrily. "Did you have to put it so bluntly?"

Deep shrugged his broad shoulders. "Just stating the facts, Brother. It's time we all faced them—Sylvan has been out of contact for hours now."

Kat glared at the black haired warrior. "I don't care how long it's been since anyone saw them or spoke to them, we can't just give up!"

"We're not going to," Lock said quickly. "We still have hope no matter what my brother says. You must forgive him, my lady—he always looks at the worst possibility first."

Kat looked at Deep speculatively. “Hope for the best, prepare for the worst, huh?”

“Indeed.” He made an overly elaborate bow.

Kat frowned. *What is it with these guys and the bowing, anyway?* “All right, fine,” she told Deep. “But just because you’re a pessimist doesn’t mean you have to be an asshole.”

Deep frowned. “Excuse me? A what? I’m not completely familiar with Earth vernacular yet.”

Lock grinned. “I think you’ve just been insulted, brother. And by one of the elite, no less. You should feel honored.”

“By one of the *who*?” Kat waved her hand when he started to answer. “No, never mind—whatever. Just tell me what we can do to find them.”

“There is actually another way to locate them,” Lock said. “Deep and I are seeker/finders.”

“Excuse me, you’re what?” Kat asked.

“Seeker/finders,” he repeated. “We have the gift of far-looking.”

“Okay, sorry boys, but it still does not compute. In English, please—what does that mean?”

“It means we can use the power of our combined minds to locate people who are lost,” Deep drawled. “Is that clear enough for you?”

Kat gave the brothers a skeptical look. “Sounds kind of ‘psychic network’ if you ask me. But okay, I’ll bite if we don’t have anything else. So why don’t you two just go to it?”

“We would but we need someone who knows either Sylvan or Sophia intimately in order to get a lock on them,” Lock said. “To act as a focus.”

“But don’t *you* know Sylvan well enough to contact him?” Kat looked at both of them. “I mean, you’re step—er—second brothers, aren’t you?”

“We are, but since we’re providing the means of location, we need someone else to help focus in on their energy,” Lock explained. “We were hoping you might

know of someone close to Sylvan or Sophia who is familiar with the way they think. Of course, Baird would be the best candidate, but he left the after party with Olivia some time ago and we didn't want to bother them."

"Not bother them? Of course you have to *bother* them!" Kat put her hands on her hips. "Liv needs to know what's going on. You can't imagine how close she and Sophie are—they're twins."

Deep and Lock looked at each other and something seemed to pass between them. "Actually, yes we can." Deep gave her a sardonic smile. "We're twins too, remember my lady?"

"Right." They looked so different and seemed to have such different temperaments that she'd almost forgotten. "Well then, you two should understand. No matter what she's doing, Liv will want to know that something's happened to her sister."

Lock looked pained. "My lady...I don't think you understand. You see, Baird and his bride have retired to their suite."

Kat gave them a blank look. "Yes, *and?* That was ages ago. I know they were probably, uh, *celebrating* but they have to be done by now."

The two men exchanged looks again. "Not necessarily," Deep began. "You see with the Beast Kindred—"

Kat made a *come on already* gesture with her hand. "Yeah, yeah, I know—you Kindred guys are all stellar lovers and it takes awhile to do the deed. Whoop-de-do, lucky Liv. But she and Baird have been gone for hours—they're bound to be done having sex by now."

Deep shook his head. "Not if it's bonding sex."

Kat frowned. "I thought that was a one time thing—the way you guys, uh, tied your chosen brides to you."

"But the bond must be renewed from time to time," Deep said. "And since this is the night of their bonding ceremony, I'm sure they're renewing their bond as we speak."

Kat crossed her arms. "Well this is ridiculous—how long can it possibly take?"

Lock frowned. “How much do you know about Beast Kindred anatomy?”

“Well, I...” Kat shook her head. Though Liv had dished to both her and Sophie that Baird was an amazing lover, she had been strangely shy about specifics. Of course Kat knew the *general* details of the different types of Kindred and their various physical endowments—most Earth girls did. But as for the exact details of how everything worked...

“They have a swelling at the base of their shaft called the mating fist,” Deep said, interrupting her train of thought. “When a Beast Kindred’s cock is lodged completely within his bride’s body it expands to lock them together so they can fuck for literally *hours*. And they cannot be separated until he’s finished.” He leaned forward. “Are you beginning to understand why we can’t interrupt them?”

To her intense irritation Kat felt her cheeks getting warm with a blush. “I see you’ve got at least *some* ‘Earth vernacular’ under your belt,” she said tartly.

“Some,” he admitted, his black eyes dancing. Apparently he was enjoying their verbal sparring. *Jerk*, Kat thought. *He’s hot all right, but what a bastard!*

She turned back to Lock who seemed to be the reasonable twin. “Okay, well if Baird and Liv are out then I guess that leaves me. What do you want me to do?”

Deep’s eyebrows shot up. “Do you mean we should use *you*?” he asked incredulously before his brother could answer. “As a focus? Are you *serious*?”

“Why not?” Kat demanded turning back to him. “I admit I don’t know Sylvan all that well but Sophie is practically a sister to me. We’ve been friends since grade school—doesn’t that make me qualified to help, uh, ‘zero in’ on her?”

“It doesn’t have anything to do with how *qualified* you are.” Deep frowned. “It has to do with you being an unmated female offering to open yourself to two unmated males.”

“What makes you think I’m ‘unmated?’” Kat snapped. Her single state was a sore spot with her, especially since the dry spell she was currently going through was in its sixth month. Men in Tampa just didn’t appreciate women with curves. “For your information I have a boyfriend back home,” she told Deep. “A big, mean, scary one who gets pissed off when his girlfriend is insulted.”

“Is that so?” Before she could answer, Deep was suddenly on his knees before her. Starting at her right ankle, he ran his nose up her inner thigh until he got to her crotch where he inhaled deeply.

It was such a shockingly animalistic thing to do that Kat was frozen in place for a minute. But when the big Kindred pressed his face between her legs and she felt his hot breath against her sex through her silky sapphire gown, the paralysis broke. “Hey!” She jumped back, feeling as though he had burned her somehow. “You son of a bitch, how dare you?”

Still on his knees, Deep looked up at her, black eyes burning. “I’m just verifying your information.”

“By *smelling* me?” Kat had heard from Liv and Sophie both that the sense of smell was very important to the Kindred. But hearing it and seeing evidence of it in action were two different things.

“Deep,” Lock murmured warningly. “Brother...”

“She lies.” Deep looked at his twin and something—some understanding or silent communication—passed between them. “There is no other male. There hasn’t been for months.” Slowly he rose to his feet and took a step toward Kat. Towering over her, he looked down into her eyes. “No male in your bed to hold you, to stroke your luscious, curvy body and make you purr. Now why would you lie about something like that, little Kat?”

Kat had taken enough of his crap. Reaching up, she slapped him as hard as she could. “I don’t know what your problem is,” she told Deep, breathing hard. “But my personal life is none of your goddamn business.”

Deep rubbed his jaw and gave her a sardonic smile. “Forgive me. I was just making a point.”

“What point is that?”

Lock looked uncomfortable. “My lady,” he said hesitantly. “I don’t think you really understand what you’re offering. My brother is trying to show you—though I don’t approve of his methods.” He shot Deep an angry look and his twin looked back blankly.

“Show me what?” Kat demanded. She wondered if all Twin Kindred were this irritating. If so, Jillian and her husbands really deserved each other.

“What you’re letting yourself in for,” Deep rumbled.

“Whatever it is, if it will get us closer to finding Sophie and Sylvan, I’m up for it. Now, are you going to let me help or not?”

Deep rubbed his jaw again and gave her an appraising glance. “I for one have no objection to letting you help,” he rumbled. “But *you* might, once you find out what it requires.”

“Okay, so *tell* me what it requires. But do it fast—Sophie might be in trouble *right now*.” Kat turned to Lock who was watching her with an uncertain expression on his face. “Well?”

“You’ll have to let us into your mind,” he said in a low voice. “And since you aren’t bonded to a male who can shield you, it’s apt to be a very *intimate* experience.”

Kat felt cold. “Uh, intimate how?”

“Imagine all your deepest fantasies and most secret desires laid bare.” Deep took a step toward her, his eyes boring into her. “Are you prepared to deal with that?”

Was she? Suddenly Kat’s heart was beating double time. How could she let these two men who she’d just met into her head? And yet, how could she not? *I’m the only one who can do this and the longer we wait, the more trouble Sophie and Sylvan might be in.* Also, she knew Sophie or Liv would do the same thing for her in a heartbeat. *And besides, she told herself uneasily, it’s not like I’ll be having sex with these two. It’s just some kind of weird mind-melding Star Trek kind of thing. That’s all—right?* She certainly hoped so.

“Well?” Deep raised an eyebrow at her and she could tell he thought he’d scared her off.

Lifting her chin she gave him a level stare. “I’m in. How do we start?”

Chapter Seven

Sophie came to consciousness with something warm and wet pressed against the underside of her left breast. As her eyelids fluttered she felt it slide upward, tracing along the outer ring of her areola and drawing a low moan from her lips. *What's going on?* She didn't know and at the moment, she didn't care. She only cared about the deliciously pleasurable sensation that was centered in her breast.

The warm wet something—a *tongue. Feels like a tongue*—continued its journey over her nipple, making her gasp as the hard little nub tightened. She moaned again and the tongue repeated its action, seeming to take its time, laving her nipple gently, sending sparks of pleasure through her entire body and building a slow, hot fire between her legs.

Who...why...? For some reason the pleasurable sensations made her bottom lip throb. Sophie licked it tentatively and found it was incredibly sensitive to touch, as it never had been before. *Why am I so sensitive there?* Slowly the answer began to form in her brain. *Got hurt...someone bit me. Who?* A picture appeared in her mind's eye. The image of a tall, broad shouldered man with spiky blond hair and ice blue eyes like a husky's. *Sylvan...he bit my lip during the Luck Kiss. And then we were in the tube together and he smelled so good...*

Come to think of it, that delicious sharp, spicy scent was filling her senses now. It smelled so delicious Sophie wanted to wrap it around her like a blanket. It made her feel safe and warm but at the same time it made her nipples ache and her pussy wet. How could one smell do so many things? *Mating scent...* The words drifted through her brain but Sophie pushed them away. The very idea was ridiculous—why would Sylvan give off his mating scent for her when he didn't even like her? He—

The warm wet tongue bathing her nipple broke her train of thought completely, shattering everything into shards of pleasure. God, no one had ever touched her like this before. No one had ever been this tender, this gentle. After what had happened to her in the past, Sophie had never dreamed she'd want any man to touch her again. But this man...*Wait a minute, who is this man? The man who's licking me?* Her eyes were shut tight but for some reason she knew

whoever was lavng her breast and nipples so gently was male. Could it be... Sylvan? *But why would he...?*

“Sophia?” murmured a low voice in her ear.

Her eyes flew open and she looked up to see a dark shape bending over her. He seemed huge in the surrounding blackness, a mountain of muscle and she was cradled in his lap. Cradled in his lap *half naked!* Her hands went immediately to her bare breasts, trying to cover herself from the man.

“Don’t.” He caught her hands and held them gently but firmly, keeping her exposed. “You’re not quite healed yet,” he said in a deep, familiar voice. As he spoke, starlight glinted off a double set of white, curving teeth that looked razor sharp in his upper jaw. *Fangs! His fangs!* It was *Sylvan’s* lap she was on, *his* tongue she had felt licking her so gently. His voice echoed in her brain, the words he’d spoken to the Scourge commander, *I’ll fucking rip your throat out with my teeth!*

All the pleasure she’d been feeling suddenly turned to horror and she tried to scramble off his lap.

“Sophia, don’t—” He held her but she fought like a wild cat, scratching and kicking until he let her go.

Sophie rolled off his lap and onto hard, stony ground. Sharp pebbles shredded her palms and cut her knees through the ragged remains of her bridesmaid’s dress, but she didn’t care. She only knew she had to get away from him—away from those horror-movie fangs that looked so utterly lethal.

“Be careful!” His voice was sharp. “You’ll go over the edge!”

“The edge?” Sophie risked a glance behind her and saw that she was crouching on a rocky ledge which ended abruptly, diving down into a black chasm just inches away. For a moment her fear of heights warred with her fear of his fangs. Then her weight shifted and her foot slipped. Pebbles clattered down into the blackness and she felt herself falling...

“Come *here.*” A strong hand grabbed her wrist and she was yanked from the crumbling cliff and back into Sylvan’s lap. “Hold still!” he commanded in a low,

rough voice, very different from his earlier gentle tone. “You’re disoriented. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

“Well I know what *you’re* doing!” Sophie struggled against him, beating at his broad chest uselessly.

“What are you talking about? I’m trying to save you.”

“By stripping me naked and licking me while I was unconscious?” She gave him an incredulous look. “Yeah, right. Now let me go!”

“Not until you listen.” Sylvan held her tightly, refusing to let go. At last, when she stopped struggling, he spoke again in a slightly softer tone. “You were wounded in the crash. I had to do something to stop the bleeding.”

“And you picked *licking*?” She tugged at her tattered dress and glared up at him, completely furious now. “I mean, you’re a *doctor* for God’s sake. What ever happened to a tourniquet or a compress? Or anything else that doesn’t involve your mouth on my...my bare...” She trailed off, feeling her cheeks get hot.

“My saliva has healing agents in it,” he said, sounding completely reasonable. “Also coagulants to stop blood flow.”

Sophie wasn’t buying it. “It wasn’t just *licking*,” she said accusingly. “Your fangs were out and you were going to bite me—admit it!”

It was hard to read his face in the darkness but she thought he looked pained. “Yes,” he admitted heavily. “I was prepared to bite you if I had to.”

“If you *had* to? Why the hell would you *have* to bite me?”

“I thought your wounds might be too deep or deadly to heal any other way,” he said in a low voice. “I know you fear and dislike my fangs and for that I am sorry. But they secrete a chemical we of the Blood Kindred call *essence*—that’s the closest I can come to a translation in your language, anyway.”

The word rang a bell. “Wait a minute, essence? Didn’t you say it was a *good* thing I didn’t get any of that in my system earlier, when you examined my lip?”

“Biting isn’t something we do lightly.” He hesitated. “The act of biting, the gift of blood and essence...these things are usually reserved exclusively for a Blood

Kindred's mate. But in this case I thought it might be necessary, because the compounds in essence can heal almost any hurt or disease."

"So you were going to *bite* me to *heal* me?" Sophie frowned, still not buying it. "Why should I believe you? How do I know you don't just like the taste of my blood like some kind of perverted vampire?"

"Vampire?" He frowned. "Are you referring to the fictional characters your people write stories about? The ones who rip out their victim's throats in order to drink their blood?"

Sophie crossed her arms over her breasts. "Uh, when you say it like *that* it sounds really bad. But, yeah, I guess so."

"I am not a 'vampire,'" he said dryly. "And the purpose of a Blood Kindred's bite is not to wound or drink anyone dry."

"So what is the purpose then? Besides healing?" She still wasn't sure she believed *that*.

"A Blood Kindred bites to heal if his mate is injured or to arouse her sexually if she is well," he said matter-of-factly.

Sophia coughed and shifted in his arms. "Uh...*really*. And you think that turns a woman on? Being *bitten*?"

His eyes flashed in the darkness. "Clearly you find the idea disgusting."

"Not so much disgusting as frightening." She couldn't help the shiver that went through her at the thought. "I...uh...biting and blood and anything like that...I don't like it. I don't like the idea of it being that...that painful."

Sylvan frowned. "Who said anything about it being painful?"

"How could it not be?" Sophie objected. "I mean you've got the poor girl pinned down and you're *biting* her while you...while you..." She shook her head, feeling her face get hot. "Never mind. Can you please just let me up?" Being so close to him while they talked about this kind of thing was making her nervous.

"It isn't like that," Sylvan said quietly, making no move to release her.

"How do you know? You've never, uh, bonded with anyone."

“And I never will.” Sylvan’s deep voice was soft. “But no Kindred would ever hurt his bride or do anything she found objectionable.”

“Well I find this—*all* this...” She made a motion with her hand to encompass the entire situation they found themselves in. “*Completely* objectionable. I mean I wake up topless and find you, uh, licking me and then you tell me it’s all for my own good. And if you bite me, *that* will be for my own good too. So I’m just supposed to say ‘Oh thanks, Sylvan. Keep up the good work.’ Is that it?”

“Think about it, Sophia.” His voice was a soft growl. “Was I touching you between your legs or stroking your soft little sex? Was I sucking your nipples to arouse you and make you want me? No, I was only licking one breast—your *wounded* breast—to heal you.”

“I...I...” She couldn’t think what to say.

Sylvan’s eyes were suddenly hard. “Don’t you think if I had intended to rape and despoil you, I could have done it by now? If I was the kind of male to do something like that you would have woken up to find my cock buried to the hilt in your pussy. Not my tongue on your breast,” he said roughly.

His words started echoes inside her. Echoes of memories best left forgotten. Sophie sucked in a breath. “I think you’d better let me go *right now*,” she whispered in a trembling voice.

He must have heard the fear in her tone because Sylvan loosened his grip on her with obvious reluctance and let her slide from his arms.

Sophie scooted back, careful to keep away from the edge of the cliff, and tried to pull the tattered remains of her dress back in place. A gust of wind whipped her hair across her face and for the first time she realized how cold it was outside the shelter of his arms. Crossing her arms over her chest, she shivered.

“Here.” Unbuttoning his pale blue uniform shirt, he shrugged it off and held it out to her. His broad chest gleamed pale in the starlight.

Sophie frowned stubbornly. “I don’t want it.”

“Well, you’ll take it anyway.” Leaning forward he draped the heavy, satin-like material around her shoulders. It was still warm from his skin and she could

smell his scent on it—that sharp, spicy fragrance that seemed to go straight to her head.

“You’ll be cold,” Sophie objected, clutching the shirt around her despite her words.

He laughed grimly. “At this temperature? I don’t think so. This would be a warm summer day where I come from.”

A warm summer day? Seriously? It had to be in the low sixties, if not the mid fifties. To a Florida girl like Sophie, it was freezing. What kind of place was Tranq Prime, anyway? She hoped she never got a chance to find out.

“Come on.” Sylvan rose abruptly.

Spooked by his sudden move, Sophie cringed back and away from him. “Come where? Where are we going?”

“The Scourge are still hunting you. We have to get away—as far from the crash site as we can.” His voice dropped suddenly. “I won’t hurt you, Sophia. Please don’t look at me like that.”

“Like...like what?” she whispered, still crouching on the ground.

“Like I’m some evil monster come to devour and defile you.” There was pain in his deep voice, an agony that seemed to pierce her heart for some reason. Although why she should feel sorry for him she didn’t know.

“I’m sorry,” she said defensively. “It’s just...you’re so *big*. And your *fangs*...”

He sighed heavily. “Neither of which I can do anything about. Come. We have a long way to go before we can safely rest.” Turning, he led the way, not waiting to see if she would follow.

* * * * *

Sylvan heard her stumbling along behind him as they made their way down the side of the mountain and every instinct he possessed shouted that he needed to go back and help her. Needed to hold her in his arms and carry her to safety. But he forced himself to go on. *She doesn’t want me, doesn’t want my help or my touch.*

It was true and he knew it. The rejection he could handle. But the fear in her eyes...

Sylvan clenched his jaw. *Goddess, that she could ever think I would hurt her.* The very idea was like a fist in his gut. He would rather be hurt himself, would rather be wounded a thousand times over than allow her to get a single scratch.

Should have left her alone. Shouldn't have healed her. That was what scared her the most, waking up and seeing me bending over her with my fangs out.

But he had been so worried. And besides, it was impossible for him to see her hurt and not want to heal her. He had told her once, the second time they met, that as a doctor he had no emotional attachment to his patients. But it was different with her—so very different. And those few moments before she'd woken up completely, before she'd started fearing him, had been beyond compare.

He closed his eyes briefly, his cock and fangs throbbing as he remembered the way she'd moaned and arched her back, responding to his touch. It was almost as though she was offering herself, opening herself in the way a female would when she was willing to be bonded. Truly his intent hadn't been sexual, but he couldn't help becoming aroused by her reaction. The way her nipple had tightened under his tongue as he healed her and the warm secret scent of her sex getting wet and ready for him was enough to make him ache with desire.

And then she saw me and realized who it was that was touching her, giving her pleasure, he thought sadly. After that all she wanted was to get away from me. From my fangs. She wouldn't even let me finish healing her.

Even now he could smell her blood on the wind. She must have scraped her hands and knees when she was scrambling to get away from him. He wanted in the worst way to examine them—to take away her pain. But he knew he would only add to it and increase her fear and panic if he tried. *Sophia, I'm so sorry... Your pain is my pain. Your wounds, mine to heal. I give you the blood of my body, the heart from my chest. The—*

Sylvan stopped himself. Why had the words from the Blood Kindred bonding ceremony come to his mind? Words he was destined never to speak?

Stupid, he told himself angrily, kicking a large rock out of the way. *Stupid to let yourself have any kind of feelings for her. Even if your vow wasn't in the way she'd never want you. Never stop fearing you long enough to let you in. Just forget about her—be cold as a Tranq should be.*

But he couldn't. Sophia's soft little hands had warmed his cold heart, even if she hadn't meant to. And it seemed there was no freezing it again.

* * * * *

Sophia tried to keep up but it was hard to see in the darkness and her feet hurt. Her shoes were long gone—not that the low kitten heels would have been much good for hiking in the mountains but still, anything would have been better than nothing. The only thing that saved her was the fact that she had been walking barefoot outside on the hot Florida concrete since she was a little girl. Without that experience to toughen the soles of her feet, they would have been cut to ribbons within a matter of minutes.

But it wasn't just her feet that worried her—she was wondering where in the world they were. Because it sure as hell wasn't Florida. *Where are we and how are we ever going to get home? Does Sylvan know where he's going, or are we just trying to get away from the shuttle?*

They were scrambling down the side of a mountain, that much was clear she thought, eyeing Sylvan's muscular bare back as she went. The same mountain he had crashed them into, she was pretty sure. She still wasn't sure why the big warrior had had to aim for a mountain in the first place, but at least they'd survived it.

Now that she had a moment to think about it, she remembered the crash in horrible detail. The way the craggy rock face had gotten bigger and bigger in the viewscreen and the moment of impact when she felt something hard and sharp pierce her flesh, slicing across her breast like a line of fire. Then she'd been drowning in some kind of blue gel. It had dissipated but she could still feel the sticky remains of it on her skin...

Once she started thinking about the crash she couldn't stop—the details kept playing over and over again in her head like a horror movie. *Just stop it, stop thinking about it. You survived, didn't you? So what are you getting so upset about?*

But no matter how sternly she talked to herself, she kept seeing the side of the mountain rushing toward her again and again. Kept feeling the horrible impact and the sensation of suffocating in thick blue gel over and over. The endless loop got stuck in her head and made her feel shaky.

Too much had happened in the past twenty-four hours. Too much trauma and drama and pain and fear crammed into too little time. The stress of it was like a ticking time-bomb in her chest, ready to explode. But somehow she had to contain it. The last thing she wanted was to have a meltdown in front of Sylvan. *Strong, I have to be stro—*

A loose rock shifted treacherously under her bare foot and she felt a sharp pain in her ankle. With a low cry, she fell to one side, hitting the side of her head.

Sylvan was beside her at once. "Don't try to get up," he ordered when she scrambled to rise. "Lie still for a minute and let me see how badly you're hurt."

"I'm *not* hurt," Sophie objected, though her ankle was throbbing and something warm and wet was trickling down the side of her cheek.

He frowned. "Don't lie—to me or to yourself, Sophia. That was a bad fall." Lifting her chin, he stared intently into her face. "Look up and open your eyes wide, I need to see your pupils and there isn't much light."

Sophia stared up into the night sky, trying not to tremble under his touch. She could feel the tears welling up inside her until she felt like a cup that was about to overflow. The sharp stinging in her head and the dull throb in her ankle were the last straw. The physical pain in her body combined with her emotional turmoil, pushing her over the edge. Though she didn't want to in the worst way, Sophie began to cry.

“Sophia?” Sylvan’s voice was a harsh whisper in the darkness. “Please don’t cry. I know you don’t want me touching you, but I have to make sure you’re all right.”

The pain in his voice made things worse somehow. “I...I’m sorry,” she gasped, trying to slow her tears and failing. “I just...I can’t...it’s too much.”

“It won’t take much longer.” He was feeling her ankle now. Sophia hissed and jerked away from his gently probing fingers. “Sorry,” he muttered. “I don’t think it’s broken but you have a bad sprain. It’s already swelling—you’re not going to be able to walk on it.”

Fresh tears came to her eyes and she arched them away angrily. Why did she have to be so weak? “That’s it then. You’ll have to go on without me.” She tried to sound brave, but her voice betrayed her by trembling.

“Go on without you?” Sylvan looked at her incredulously. “What kind of male do you think I am?”

“I’ll be fine,” she insisted, knowing it wasn’t true. “You can go for help and come back for me.”

“Do you really think I’d leave you here alone, helpless in the dark with the Scourge hunting you?” His voice had dropped to a low growl. “*Never.*”

“Sylvan!” she protested but he was already gathering her up into his arms. “Sylvan, put me down. Be reasonable,” she pleaded. “I know you’re a big strong guy but I’m not exactly tiny. You can’t carry me all the way down the side of the mountain.”

“Watch me.” He was already walking, holding her cradled in his arms as though she was a baby. He looked down at her briefly. “I’m sorry, Sophia. I know you dislike being close to me, but it can’t be helped. You’ll have to endure my touch until we find someplace safe to rest.”

“It’s not that,” she protested weakly. “Not that I don’t like, uh, touching you. I just...don’t want you *biting* me. That’s all.”

She had been hoping to make him feel better but if anything, the pain on his chiseled features intensified.

“Rest,” he said after a moment. “We may have a long way to go. You need to conserve your strength.”

*What about **your** strength?* she wanted to say, but the closed look on his face said the subject wasn’t up for further discussion. There was literally nothing else she could do but relax and let him carry her.

At least the hated tears had dried up. But the crying spell had left her feeling horribly depleted and aching tired. Though she tried to stay awake, she felt her head drooping against the broad plane of his chest. The first few times she jerked up, but the third time it happened Sylvan spoke again.

“It’s all right, Sophia,” he murmured, looking down at her. “Let yourself relax. Sleep if you can—I don’t mind.”

“I shouldn’t,” she said drowsily. But she couldn’t help it—her head drifted down again. How could something as hard and muscular as his chest make such a comfortable pillow? “Shouldn’t...not when you’re doing all the work. Carrying me.”

“It is my very great privilege and pleasure to carry you, *Talana*.” His deep voice rumbled through her, making her safe and reassured. And his scent—the same scent she’d noticed earlier when he had held her on the ship, now seemed incredibly soothing.

Sophia yawned. “What’s...*talana*?” she asked, her eyelids drooping.

“A nickname in my native tongue. An endearment.”

“And what...” She yawned again. “What does it mean?”

Before he could answer, sleep claimed her and everything faded to black.

Chapter Eight

“What in the seven hells do you think you’re doing?” Lock shoved his brother up against the wall of the guest suite they were staying in and glared into Deep’s bottomless black eyes. “Why are you acting this way? Are you *trying* to scare her off?”

Deep laughed harshly and brushed off his brother’s hands. “As if we had a shot with her. Did you see those curves? She’s fucking gorgeous—an elite.”

“We’re not bad looking,” Lock objected. “I’ve heard Earth females find our kind attractive.”

“The other Kindred races, maybe. But not the Twin Kindred. We scare them, Lock. The idea of one woman with two males at once frightens them out of their skulls.”

“They can’t *all* be scared—there are plenty of Twin Kindred with brides aboard the Mother ship.”

“Not nearly as many as Beast Kindred and Blood Kindred. Why don’t you just face it, brother? Calling an Earth female as a bride is a bad idea.”

“You didn’t used to think so.” Lock narrowed his eyes at his twin. “Come on, Deep—what is this *really* about?”

“I told you.” Deep leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes. “It’s a bad idea, that’s all.”

“And it wouldn’t have anything at all to do with what happened with Miranda?”

A spasm of pain passed over Deep’s dark features and was gone almost at once. “That was over two cycles ago. Why are you even bringing it up?”

“Because, Brother, I can feel your hurt—the pain still festers inside you.” Lock’s voice dropped and he went to the other man. “I know how you feel,” he murmured, squeezing Deep’s broad shoulder gently. “I felt the same agony when we lost her. But you can’t let that keep us from ever trying again.”

Deep shook off his hand. “Why are you so eager, anyway? We just met this girl—this *Kat*. What makes her so special that you’re already thinking of claiming her?”

Lock ran a hand through his dark blond hair. “Because she is, as you said, gorgeous. But it isn’t just that—she’s special, Deep. Couldn’t you feel it when you spoke to her?”

“I didn’t feel a damn thing and there’s no way you could have either,” Deep growled. “Our minds aren’t even aligned with hers—we haven’t shared a single dream.”

“But we *could*.” Lock glared at his twin in frustration. Deep had always been a pessimist, but ever since Miranda he’d closed himself off almost entirely. It was like he thought if he didn’t allow himself to feel anything he could never be hurt again. “Kat has potential,” he told his twin. “If you don’t scare her off, that is.”

Deep narrowed his eyes. “Define *potential*.”

“She’s beautiful, single, and she can stand up to *you*. The way she slapped you when you scented her...” Lock shook his head, laughing softly. “If that’s not potential, I don’t know what is.”

“She does have spirit, I’ll give you that.” Deep smiled grudgingly and Lock felt something loosen in his heart. He seldom saw a genuine smile on his twin’s face anymore. “But Brother,” Deep continued, “If you don’t want to scare her off, you shouldn’t have agreed to let her act as our focus. If there’s anything more frightening than having two males inside her body, it would have to be having two males inside her *mind*. She’ll have to have a will of iron to withstand our joining.”

Lock nodded, feeling troubled. “You’re right. But you saw her, Deep—she wouldn’t be denied.” He went and dropped down onto the extra long couch which was standard for all Twin Kindred suites. “And she’s right—she may make the difference between finding Sylvan in time or losing him and the Earth female he was with forever.”

“True.” Deep seated himself beside his twin and put an arm over the other man’s shoulders in a rare gesture of affection. “Take heart, Brother. If she survives the joining and still comes back for more, I’ll admit she has potential.”

“Very comforting.” Lock sighed and looked at his brother morosely. “I just wish F’lir was here to help us. We’ve never joined with a female mind before—hell, no male finder/seeker team has as far as I know. And the fact that she’s unmated just makes it that much more complicated.”

F’lir, their old focus, had also been their mentor but he had gone to be with the Mother of Life over a cycle ago. The brothers had been searching for another focus—someone to channel their considerable power and talent and point it in the right direction—ever since. But it was a rare skill and so far they hadn’t found anyone who had anything near their old mentor’s ability.

“F’lir’s gone,” Deep said shortly. “If he was alive we wouldn’t need Kat in the first place. But until we find another focus, using her memories and feelings for her friend is the best we’re going to do.”

“Just promise me you’ll stop acting like a bastard,” Lock pleaded. “Having her hate us won’t help the process any.”

Deep gave him a sardonic smile. “Don’t worry—I’ll be on my best behavior.” He looked at the chronometer on his wrist. “Shouldn’t she be here by now? Maybe she has less *potential* than you thought.”

Just as he spoke, a sharp rapping came at the suite’s wide silver door.

“That’s her!” Lock jumped up and headed for the door. “Remember your promise,” he said, pointing at Deep.

Deep raised a hand. “Warrior’s honor. Go ahead, let our lovely little Kat in.”

Taking a deep breath and praying to the Mother of Life that his brother would behave, Lock turned toward the door and pressed the release.

* * * * *

Kat was slightly relieved to see it was Lock standing at the door instead of Deep. Then again, she reminded herself, she would have to deal with the dark twin eventually. She'd agreed to do this...whatever it was, with both of them.

"Hi." She smiled brightly as she stepped into their suite. It was large and roomy, with a fireplace in one corner and deep blue carpeting on the floor. Paintings featuring a wide golden ocean dotted with craggy islands were hung on the light blue walls. *Not bad for a guest room.* She hadn't been issued one herself because she'd expected to leave right after the reception. Now it looked like she would be on board the Kindred Mother ship for quite some time which made her wish she'd brought a change of clothes. The silk sapphire dress she'd worn to Liv's wedding looked outstanding with her creamy skin and auburn hair, but she'd been wearing it for hours now and she was dying to get into something more comfortable.

"Welcome." Lock smiled at her and the expression reached all the way down to the bottom of his eyes. Looking at him, Kat realized there was heat in those chocolate brown depths. He might not be as forward as his brother, but it was clear he liked what he saw when he looked at her.

Fighting the urge to blush, Kat looked at the couch where Deep was sprawled like a lazy panther. "Hello," she said in a much colder tone—more because she thought it was polite than because she really wanted to talk to the big bastard.

To her surprise, Deep rose and made her a formal bow. "You are very welcome to our place of residence, my lady," he murmured.

Kat blinked in surprise. Was it her imagination or had he actually sounded sincere? "Thank you," she said. "I'm, uh, pleased to be here." Clearing her throat, she looked back at Lock. "Well? I'm ready so let's get started."

"My lady—" Lock began but Kat held up a hand.

"Okay, I just have to say this. Before we go any farther, could both of you *please* stop calling me 'my lady'? It's getting *really* old. We're not at the freaking Renaissance Fair, you know. I mean, what's next? Are you going to offer to buy me a tankard of mead and joust for my honor?"

Both the brothers looked thoroughly confused.

“Buy you what?” Deep said.

“What’s a joust?” Lock asked.

Kat blew out a breath in frustration. “Never mind. The point is, I want you to stop calling me ‘my lady.’ All right?”

Lock frowned. “But it’s the only proper term of address for an elite female.”

Kat had a feeling she was getting in deeper and deeper, but she couldn’t help asking. “What’s an elite female?”

Lock’s dark brown eyes were suddenly as hot as his brother’s had been earlier when he’d scented her. “One with a shape like yours, my lady.” His big hands described a generous hourglass in the air. “Most of the females on Twin Moons are lean and tough—our lifestyle and diet make them that way.”

“But there are a few,” Deep went on, taking up where his brother had left off. “A lucky few whom the Mother has marked with curving hips and ripe breasts, full to overflowing.” His black eyes flickered hungrily over her body as he spoke and Kat had to fight the urge to cover herself. She suddenly felt naked under the blue silk gown.

“They are blessed by the Mother—goddesses who walk among us. We call them the elite,” Lock continued, still eyeing her. “And naturally we thought *you* were an Earth elite. Were we wrong?”

Kat stared at them, unbelieving. “Uh, I guess so. But on Earth we call it ‘plus sized.’”

“Plus sized?” Deep raised an eyebrow at her.

“You know—more to love? Pleasingly plump? Big beautiful woman?”

His eyes gleamed. “Most intriguing. I like all those descriptions.”

“I do, too.” Lock gave her a ravenous look.

Kat felt the sudden urge to pinch herself. *Are they seriously saying they come from a planet of skinny-minnies but they think plus sized girls are hotter? Did somebody slip me some crazy pills?* She shook her head, trying to clear away

the mental images the brothers' words brought to mind. "Look," she said sternly. "It's great you're so into women with curves, but we are getting way, way, *way* off point here. One, I'd prefer if you just called me Kat. And two, we need to do this... whatever it is we're going to do and try to locate Sophie and Sylvan. They've been missing for hours now."

"Very true my...Kat," Lock said, coming over to her. "But the fact is, one doesn't just jump headfirst into a joining with no preparation."

She looked up at him, refusing to let herself be intimidated. "A joining? Is that the name of what we're doing?"

He nodded. "Indeed."

Kat took a deep breath. "Okay, what's the prep? Do we have to do some kind of special exercises or what?"

"You're not far off." Deep came to stand directly behind her, which made Kat nervous since Lock was standing directly in front. Even though they weren't touching her, she could feel the heat of their large, male bodies radiating against her skin through the thin dress. Suddenly she felt surrounded.

"Okay, hold on a minute." Kat took a step to the side and faced both of them. "Look, I don't know what you're up to, but I did *not* come here for some kind of a booty call."

Lock frowned. "I'm sorry, a what?"

"More Earth vernacular," Deep rumbled. "I believe our little Kat is saying she's not prepared to surrender herself to us sexually."

"That's right." Kat crossed her arms over her breasts protectively. "I'm not about to have sex with either one of you, so you can just get that out of your heads right now."

Lock looked confused. "But we didn't ask you here to have sex."

"And you *couldn't* make love to either one of us individually," Deep said, arching an eyebrow. "You'd have to take both of us at once. We *come* as a pair."

Kat felt her cheeks heating at his double entendre. "Good to know—now I have *twice* as much reason not to get physical. Because I am *not* interested in

being the filling in your sex sandwich—I'm only here to do the uh, joining. So you can stop it with the whole surrounding me thing."

Lock shook his head. "Surrounding you? Do you mean the way we were standing?"

"Exactly." Kat nodded. "I don't like that. It makes me...nervous."

"But that's the traditional grouping for a joining," Lock protested. "The finder in the front, the seeker in the back, and the focus in the middle. Sometimes the finder and seeker switch places, but the focus must always be between them."

"We're usually lying down when we do a joining," Deep added. "But we thought you'd be more comfortable standing up."

"Oh, uh..." Kat cleared her throat. "Well yes, standing is better than...it's definitely better. But...we don't have to touch each other, do we?"

"Skin to skin contact generally makes the joining better and more effective," Lock said gently. "But we don't have to remove any clothing if you'd rather not. We can just hold hands."

Coming to stand in front of Kat again, he held out a hand. Hesitantly, Kat took it. It was warm and large and enveloped hers completely.

"See?" Lock smiled. "That's not so bad, is it?"

She smiled back. "No, not bad at all."

"Good, then it's my turn." Deep moved up behind her again and Kat could feel him looming over her in a way that felt almost predatory.

Taking a deep breath, she reached behind her with her free hand. "Here."

"I prefer it like this." Deep wound an arm around the front of her body and took her hand. Entwining their fingers, he rested his chin on the top of her head. "So much nicer this way."

Kat wanted to answer but she was frozen to the spot. From the moment Deep had taken her hand in his own, a strange sensation had started inside her.

It felt like a warm tingling that started in her hands and ran up both arms like a low level electric current. The sensation, while strange, wasn't too bad until it

reached her torso. There it became a warm glow in the pit of her stomach—like the best buzz she'd ever had. Then, however, it moved to the tips of her breasts and the vee between her legs. Suddenly her nipples were painfully hard and her pussy felt swollen and wet. And the current didn't stop there—it stroked her like a knowing hand, tugging at her nipples and caressing her clit until she felt like she was going to explode.

Finally her paralysis broke and she pushed away from the brothers. "What the hell?" she demanded, glaring at them. "What the *hell* did you just do to me?"

"What do you mean?" Deep asked at the same time Lock said,

"We didn't do anything but touch you."

Kat's entire body was still tingling like she'd touched a live wire, but at least the more intense sensations in her nipples and between her legs were gone. She put her hands on her hips. "You're going to stand there and tell me you didn't do that?"

"Do what?" they asked together.

Kat put a hand to her forehead. *Give me strength! These two are going to drive me crazy!* "That...that weird *tingling*. You mean you didn't feel it?"

"Feel what?" Deep stepped toward her and frowned, his nose wrinkling. "Why do you suddenly smell so hot?"

"What?" Kat crossed her arms over her chest protectively.

"Hot—in heat. In need." Deep's black eyes were positively glowing. "Come smell her, Brother," he told Lock, who was still standing a little distance away. "It's as though she went from being disinterested to panting to be bred and bonded in the space of an instant."

Lock took a step forward and leaned in to sniff Kat's neck. When he straightened up, his eyes were half-lidded with lust. "My lady, er Kat, Deep is right. You smell delicious and very, very...ready."

"R-ready for what?" she asked in a voice that trembled more than she liked.

Deep's eyes flashed. "Why, ready to be *fucked*, little Kat."

Kat took a step away from both of them. “Look, I’m not... I don’t know what you’re talking about—I only know what I felt.”

Deep gave her a lazy smile. “And what exactly did you feel?”

“I told you—just a tingling sensation.” Kat felt her cheeks getting hot and cursed her fair complexion that showed a blush so easily. “Look, are you seriously going to stand there and tell me this has never happened to you two before with some other, uh, focus?”

“Our only other focus was our mentor, F’lir, who was male,” Deep told her.

“Really? Was he gay?” Kat couldn’t imagine a straight guy wanting to get such intense sexual sensations from two other males.

“Gay? Meaning did he enjoy the company of other males?” Lock shook his head. “No. He was old enough to be our grandfather—he taught us to harness our talents in the first place.”

“But, I mean, he never felt anything *strange*? Like I just did? Maybe you could call him up, uh *bespeak* him, and ask him,” Kat suggested.

“Not unless you can place a Think-me call to the Mother herself. F’lir is dead,” Deep said soberly. “And we have been without a focus since he died over a cycle ago.”

“Maybe that’s it then.” Kat was still looking for an explanation. “Maybe your power kind of...built up over that amount of time and it sort of...came out when you two, uh, touched me.”

Lock looked thoughtful. “I don’t think so. I think it’s more likely to have to do with the fact that you’re female.”

“So you’ve never had a female between you before?” Kat asked.

“I wouldn’t say *that*, exactly.” Deep gave her a lazy smile. “But Lock and I have certainly never had a female as *lovely* as you between us, little Kat.”

Kat frowned, wishing she could stop blushing. “You know what I mean.”

“Yes, we know what you mean.” Lock gave his brother a warning look. “And the answer is no—we’ve never tried to mesh our minds with a female’s before.”

“So...is this even doable?” She looked at them. “I mean, is my mind too different from yours to make it work?”

Deep raised his eyebrows. “There’s only one way to find out. And you jerked away from us before we could even get a good connection.”

“But...” Kat bit her lip. “Am I...will it feel like that every time?”

“We don’t know.” Lock looked concerned. “Was our connection causing you pain?”

“Not...exactly. It was...it was...” Kat was sure her face had to be crimson by now. “It was pretty much the exact opposite of pain, actually.”

Deep smirked. “Which explains why you smell like a female in heat.”

“*Deep.*” Lock frowned at his brother. “Remember your promise.”

Deep held up his hands. “Forgive me, brother. I know I swore to be on my best behavior but I had no idea our joining would be such an...interesting experience.”

“I had no idea either.” Lock turned to Kat. “Please believe me, my lady. Neither Deep nor myself had any intention of harming or upsetting you. We just want to find Sylvan.”

“And I want to find Sophie.” Kat hugged herself nervously. *Oh Sophie, you are going to owe me when we find you. Owe me BIG.* “Which means we need to try again, I guess,” she said.

“Only if you’re comfortable,” Lock said seriously. “There are no long term effects to being a focus that Deep and I have ever run across, but I hate the idea of you being uncomfortable the entire time we’re joined.”

“Thanks, but it looks like I’ll just have to put up with it.” Kat took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Okay boys, round two.”

Chapter Nine

A jolt and a loud cracking sound woke Sophie up. “Wha...?” She looked around uncertainly. It was still dark, the stars winking faintly in the sky above. Sylvan was holding her and he had a look of grim concentration on his face. Sophie blinked, trying to remember what was going on. *Where are we? Why is Sylvan carrying me?*

“Hold on. We’re almost in.” There was another jolt and more cracking. Suddenly she realized they were standing in front of a cabin and Sylvan was kicking the door in.

“Hey, wait a minute!” she protested as he pushed open the now-crooked door and shouldered his way inside. “You can’t do this—it’s not our property.”

He gave her a stern look. “We need a place to rest. A place I can defend if necessary.”

“But...but what if whoever owns this place comes back?” she protested. “They’re not going to be very happy to see us.”

“We’ll deal with that problem when we come to it.” Sylvan was scanning the dark room as he spoke, his pale eyes flickering from left to right, obviously looking for threats. “I’m more concerned about the Scourge right now than any disgruntled home owner.”

Sophie’s heart skipped a beat. “You really think they’re following us?”

“I know they are.” Walking across the room, he laid her down gently on a bed. The comforter on it smelled a little musty but it was soft and deliciously comfortable. Still Sophie couldn’t relax.

“How do you know?” she asked, sitting up and wincing at the renewed pain in her ankle.

“I saw the lights of their probes landing while you were sleeping.” Sylvan sat on the side of the bed beside her legs and sighed wearily. “To humans they probably looked like what you call ‘shooting stars,’ but their pattern was much too regular to be a meteorite shower.”

“I thought the Kindred had set up a protection grid all around the Earth,” she protested.

“We have. So at least their ships can’t land and we won’t have to deal with any Scourge soldiers. But the probes are small enough to get through and they can carry other things. Things that...” He broke off, shaking his head. “Never mind.”

“No, no—what things? Things that what?” Sophie sat up, wincing again, and moved to sit beside him so she could see his face. “Come on, Sylvan,” she said softly. “It’s *me* they’re after, for whatever reason. I have a right to know.”

He sighed again and ran a hand through his hair. “All right. What I’m mainly worried about are the *urlich*.”

“The what?”

“It translates into your language as ‘sniffers.’ They’re a little bit like your Earth dogs, but they’ve been hybridized and genetically mutated by the Scourge until most of them are more machine than animal.”

“Sniffers. So...they’re like some kind of cyborg bloodhound or something?”

Sylvan nodded. “That’s actually a really accurate description. And if they find your scent...” He shook his head.

“Go on,” she urged anxiously.

Sylvan pinched the bridge of his nose. “Let’s just say they’re incredibly fast and strong and very, *very* hard to kill, since most of them aren’t really alive after the Scourge get done with them.”

Sophie felt like someone had dumped a bucket of ice cubes into her stomach. “And they’re searching for *me*.”

He gave her a sidelong look. “Yes. In all probability the AllFather has programmed your scent exclusively into their brains. So they’re going to be very focused on finding you.”

“But...why? What do they—the Scourge—want with me, anyway?”

Sylvan shook his head. “I don’t know. If I had to guess I’d say it has something to do with their prophesy. No one really knows what it’s about, but

Baird and I have speculated that they're searching for an Earth female because of it. They thought Olivia was the one they wanted, but she wasn't. Maybe because you're so closely related to her—"

"They think *I'm* the one. But the one what?" Sophie shook her head, feeling sick. "I guess it doesn't matter *why* they want me. The main thing is to not...not let them get me."

Sylvan's eyes flashed like cold fire. "As long as I am alive they shall not have you. I will stand by you and defend you unto death, Sophia. I give you my word as a warrior and a Blood Kindred."

"Oh Sylvan..." She didn't know what to say. The way he spoke, she could tell he'd just sworn a formal oath to her. One that would bind him as surely as his vow to never claim a bride. "You don't...don't have to do that for me," she said softly.

His eyes blazed again. "But I want to. Even if you don't want me to."

"I just...don't want you to get hurt on my account," she protested but he only looked at her gravely.

"It would be my honor to die defending you."

Sophia felt her breath catch in her throat and for a long, long moment she couldn't look away from his ice blue eyes. She could smell his scent again—even stronger this time, surrounding her, making her dizzy. Warm, spicy, sharp, with that indefinably masculine note that made her want to lean toward him, to touch him, to let him touch her...

Wait a minute—what are you doing? Get hold of yourself, Sophie!

She jerked back and sat stiffly upright on the side of the bed. Had she really almost kissed him? What was wrong with her? "So, uh, what can we do?" she asked, trying to cover her awkwardness. "Do you really think we'll be safe here?"

He looked around the darkened cabin again as if assessing it. "Probably not, but it's better than being in the open. Our best hope is that the sniffers just pass us by and miss this place completely."

"Do you think that's possible?"

He shrugged, his broad shoulders rolling with the motion. “I don’t know. It should help that I carried you the past several miles, so you didn’t leave any scent on the ground.”

Sophia wondered exactly how many miles he’d carried her while she slept like a baby in his arms. It must have been a far distance. *No wonder he looks so beat. Poor guy!*

“What...what do we do if they *do* find us?” she asked, looking down at her hands which were still scraped and raw from her fall.

His face was grim. “We have to do our best to make sure that doesn’t happen. I might be able to handle one or two, but a whole pack...” He shook his head. “All I could do is die defending you.”

“Well then what—?”

“We may have to mask your scent.” He looked at her soberly. “Did Olivia tell you anything about scent marking?”

“Scent marking?” Sophie wracked her brain, trying to remember. It seemed vaguely familiar though she couldn’t remember exactly what it involved. Still, how bad could it be? “Oh, uh, sure. Scent marking.” She nodded.

“Good. Because in the last extremity, if I hear the sniffers around this cabin, I may have to scent mark you—to mask your scent with my own.”

“Can you do that? I mean, is your scent *that* much stronger than mine, especially when they’re focused on me?”

Sylvan looked down at his hands. “Normally it isn’t but right now...ever since the trip we took in the transport tube...”

Sophie thought of the warm, spicy scent that seemed to go to her head, the way it made her react to him... “It’s your mating scent, isn’t it?” she asked in a low voice, not daring to look at him.

“Yes.” He sounded ashamed.

“But why...” She risked a sidelong glance at him. “Why is it coming out now? I, uh, thought it only happened during the claiming period. But you’re not, um, claiming me or anything. I mean, we’re not... you know.”

"I know." He shook his head. "I don't understand what's going on either. We haven't even been dream sharing. Well, that is, I mean..." He cleared his throat. "I've had a few dreams of you. But nothing out of the ordinary." He glanced at her. "Have you...had any strange dreams?"

"No." Sophie shook her head and a look of mingled disappointment and relief passed over his stern features. "I have been, uh, having problems with my art, though," she admitted in a low voice.

"Problems with your art?" He frowned. "What do you mean?"

"I paint," Sophie explained. "You know—with a paintbrush and easel?" She made a painting motion in the air and his eyes widened.

"That was what I dreamed. That you were painting a picture of...of me."

Sophie nearly choked. "But I *have* been! You're all I've been able to paint lately. Even when I try *not* to, you always sneak in there. It's so *annoying*." Then she realized what she'd said. "Uh, I mean—"

"It doesn't matter." Sylvan cut her off, shaking his head. "So we *have* been dream sharing, in a way."

Sophie felt herself go cold all over. "Does...does that mean you're going to try to...to claim me? The way Baird claimed Liv?" *Oh my God, if he does, if he claims me, then he'll want to bite me! That's the way his people do it.* She had horror-movie visions of being held down under his muscular bulk, held down and pierced multiple times and in multiple ways. *God, his teeth in my throat at the same time he's inside me, filling me, holding me down and biting and thrusting. He's so big, so strong—I'd never be able to get away.*

The horror she felt must have showed on her face, because Sylvan's voice was rough when he spoke. "Don't worry, Sophia. Even if I wanted to claim you, I couldn't."

"Oh right." She felt a small measure of relief. "Your vow."

"My vow," he agreed.

“Sylvan,” she said softly. “It’s...it’s not you. It’s just...I don’t want to be claimed by anyone. And the whole biting thing...” She shuddered. “I’m sorry, I can’t handle that. I mean, I get faint every time I have to get a *shot*.”

“As I said, you don’t have to worry.” His face was an unreadable mask now and his tone was perfectly bland.

I’ve really offended him, Sophie thought unhappily. *And after he was so good to me. Getting me out of the crash and carrying me for miles and miles. He must think I’m such a horrible, ungrateful person.* “I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

Sylvan shook his head. “You have no reason to be. I just...don’t understand why this is happening. Why my body is reacting this way. I took my vow before the Mother of Life in the sacred grove and I *know* she would never wish me to break it. My body as well as my mind and spirit should be bound by my oath.”

“Maybe...maybe there’s a reason you can’t see,” Sophie offered. “I mean, I don’t know much about your religion but on Earth we have a saying—‘God works in mysterious ways, his wonders to perform.’ Could it be...something like that?”

A look of dawning comprehension lit Sylvan’s face. “You know, you could be right. Perhaps the Mother knew we would be in this situation. That I would have to protect you by masking your scent with my own. Only my mating scent would be strong enough to do that, so...” He nodded decisively. “Yes, that must be it. That must be why my body is reacting to yours so strongly.”

“Of course,” Sophie agreed. “And probably when this is all over and we get out of here, everything will, uh, go back to normal.”

“I’m sure it will.” He looked relieved.

“So...” Sophie looked at him uncertainly. “Nothing we’re...I mean, *you’re* feeling is real?”

“I suppose not.” But the look he gave her seemed real. *Very* real.

“Uh...okay.” Sophie nibbled her bottom lip and squeaked with pain. She’d forgotten about the small wound on her lip from the Luck Kiss. God, it seemed a hundred years ago now, but it had only been earlier that day. Unless it was past

midnight now. She had no idea since she'd left her cell phone at home, wanting no distractions during Liv's wedding.

Sylvan was staring at her lower lip with an unreadable expression on his face. "I wish you'd let me heal that for you. Your palms too." He nodded down at the scrapes she'd gotten when she fell. "And your knees and temple."

Sophie put a hand to the side of her head self consciously and realized that her hair on that side was stiff with blood. *Must have really hit that rock hard!*

"Will you let me?" Sylvan's deep voice was filled with longing. "Will you allow me to heal you, *Talana?*"

There's that word again—what does it mean? And how in the world is he going to—oh! The memory of how he'd healed the gash across her breast sprang to her mind and she suddenly felt hot and cold all over. *He means can he lick me. That's how he wants to heal me. Oh my God...*

"I...uh...I wonder if there's any power in this cabin," she said, looking down at her hands to avoid his burning gaze. "I mean, if they have a working hot water heater. Because I would *kill* for a shower."

Sylvan rose. "I'll see what I can do."

"No, no, it's all right." Sophie tried to get off the bed and nearly fell over when she felt the stabbing pain in her ankle. "Ouch!"

"Are you all right?" Sylvan looked at her anxiously.

"Fine, it's just my ankle." It was true that her twisted ankle was still throbbing, but she *could* stand to put some weight on it now. And she was going to have to if she didn't want him carrying her everywhere. Her eyes had adjusted to the dim light coming through the windows and she could see a small room to one side. "That must be the bathroom. Think I'll go check out the hot water situation."

He reached for her. "I'll carry you."

"No, no! It's better already—see?" Sophie put her foot flat down on the floor and tried to smile despite the pain.

Sylvan frowned. "If you're certain you're all right. I must have misjudged the severity of your injury."

"I'm perfectly fine," Sophie said, trying to make her voice cheerful and light. "I mean, aside from being chased by evil cyborg dogs from hell who want to drag me back to the Scourge overlord, I couldn't be better."

Sylvan's eyes were suddenly dark. "Don't even joke about that."

"Sorry." She shrugged. "I was just trying to lighten the mood. I'll just..." She motioned at the bathroom and he nodded. Because he was still watching her, Sophie forced herself to walk without limping, even though her ankle was still so tender and it felt like someone was sticking a knife into it with every step. Finally she got to the bathroom and breathed a sigh of relief as she closed the door.

* * * * *

Sylvan sat in the darkness for a long moment, listening to Sophia rustle around in the bathroom. *So now I know why my body has been reacting to hers, despite my vow. It is the will of the Mother. She knew I would need to protect Sophia. Knew that we would be put in this situation together.* He wasn't zealously religious but he did believe, as most Kindred did, that the Goddess they worshipped had a hand in even the smallest details of her children's lives. So it wasn't hard to believe that she had placed them together like this for a reason. And hadn't the priestess on the Mother ship warned him that they would be in danger? *Should have listened to her, I guess. But I was so angry at the way she was treating Sophia, I didn't care about anything else.*

It was a relief to have a reason for his body's irrational behavior. And yet...if none of the feelings he had for Sophia were real, then why did he long to hold her? It wasn't just lust he felt for her, although the Mother knew, he had plenty of that. But he yearned to protect and comfort her too. To heal her wounds and shield her from danger with his body. *I've always been cold and emotionless as a Tranq should be. I've never felt this way for anyone before. Will all of this—the feelings I have for her—just disappear when we're safe again on the Mother ship?*

The thought of that, of losing what he felt for Sophia, was like a dagger in his heart. And yet...wouldn't it be better that way? *She doesn't want me*, he reminded himself yet again. The look on her face when she'd thought he might claim her had spoken volumes. The very idea of being his bride was frightening and repugnant to her.

But then, why does her body react to me? Just a few minutes before, when I gave her my word to defend her or die trying, I would swear she almost kissed me. Why do I see longing in her eyes? Why did she react so willingly when I healed her breast?

His fangs and cock ached at the memory, but Sylvan tried to push the need that rose in him like a tidal wave away. *It's just my mating scent working on her. Nothing more than that.*

It was time he got up and explored the cabin. He needed to know if there were any hidden weaknesses he would have to defend. And he needed to build a fire in the small fireplace he saw across from the bed. The *urlich* might not fear much, but they hated fire.

Sylvan wished he had his blazer—a weapon that shot a finely collimated beam of energy, strong enough to cut any enemy in half. But he hadn't had it on him at the wedding—no weapons were permitted in the sacred grove. And it hadn't crossed his mind that he would need it when he was simply taking Sophia home through what he thought was friendly space. *I'll never be caught without it again*, he told himself grimly. *If we get out of this, that is.*

But if they *did* get out of the situation, Sophia would no longer be his to protect and defend. To mark as his own...Sylvan felt his whole body grow tight at the thought of that, of holding her naked body close while he rubbed against her, branding her with his scent. *I want her so badly. Goddess help me, I almost hope the urlich **do** find our trail.*

It was wrong and he knew it, but he couldn't help himself. He just kept picturing it in his mind's eye—the way Sophia's pale cheeks would flush with passion, the feel of her soft breasts pressing against his chest. And most of all, the wet, warm slide of her pussy against his shaft as he rubbed against her with

deliciously long, slow strokes. *I want to make her come. Want to hear her gasp and moan, want to feel her lose control under me.* And as he pleasured her, he would be changing her scent, overwriting it with his own until it became something new, a fragrance that would announce to the universe that she was his. His forever...

Or at least until they got safely back to the Mother ship.

The thought brought him back to reality with a *thud*. It was time to stop daydreaming and see to more practical matters than his runaway emotions. Sighing deeply, he went to check the cabin.

Chapter Ten

“You have failed.”

It wasn't a question. Xairn bowed his head submissively, though darkness churned inside his chest. Fear, hatred, loathing and worst of all the desire to just *once* not be a disappointment, to not have his father hate him, filled him to overflowing. But the AllFather was cold to everyone, he reminded himself. It wasn't as though he deserved to be an exception.

“The Kindred warrior piloting the shuttle wouldn't give the girl up,” he said, looking down. “I tried everything but he executed a suicide maneuver. They crashed on the planet's surface—we don't even know if the girl still lives.”

“Ssshe livesss.” The AllFather's eyes glowed like hot coals. “I feel her in my mind. You mussst retrieve her.”

“But the protection grid—”

“Hasss flawsss in it. Gaps large enough for our probesss to get through.”

Xairn nodded. “I will dispatch some at once.”

“I have done sssso already, while you were returning from your *failed* mission.” The AllFather's voice turned harsh. “Do you not know that the fate of our entire race hangs upon thiss? We mussst obtain the girl! Or you—my incompetent ssson—will be the last of our order.”

“The vat-grown warriors—”

“Lack both initiative and intelligence. We need fresh female DNA that iss compatible with our own—not ancient eggs that have been replicated sssso many times that any virtue they once had hasss been leached away. We need a female who can breed with uss—with *me*.” The flame red eyes flashed. “Do you understand?”

“I understand,” Xairn said in a low voice.

“Good. Then be ready to assist when the *urlich* capture the girl. Isss the molecular transport beam ready?”

“Almost.” Xairn cleared his throat. “We have been working on it night and day. I’m trying—”

“No *trying* and no more excusesss. Sssee to it that the beam is ready. We’ll need a way to take her once the *urlich* have her surrounded.”

“Yes, of course.” Xairn bowed and turned away.

“Xairn?” His name spoken in that cold tone froze him in his tracks. Reluctantly he turned back to face the AllFather.

“Yes, Father?”

“I want you to know, there will be a punishment for this day’sss failure.” Red eyes gleamed in the folds of his hood and the AllFather tapped one skeletal finger against the arm of his metal throne for emphasis. “It isss not forgotten—only delayed.”

Xairn knew the kind of punishment his father spoke of—what lay in store for him. The numbing sting of a mind invasion, the horror of having his memories, dreams, and hopes manipulated and twisted, until the mental anguish was so great he felt like he must explode. Physical torture would be kinder by far, but that was not the AllFather’s way.

There was nothing he could say to get out of it. Nothing he could do but try to forget it until it was upon him. Otherwise dread would eat into his mind, making it impossible to concentrate on the task he had been assigned. “I understand, Father,” he said in a low voice. “As always, I await your pleasure.”

And that was the problem—the AllFather drew much pleasure from the pain of others and no one was exempt from feeding his monstrous appetite.

Not even his son.

Chapter Eleven

Sophie flipped the light switch on the wall but there was no change in the darkness. *Great, no electricity.* Which meant she was probably going to be taking a cold shower. But no matter how freezing the water was, she *had* to wash off. She felt horribly dirty and grimy—especially the places where she could feel dried blood flaking off her skin. Ugh—she must look like a complete *mess*.

But how am I going to see what I'm doing in the dark? There was a single small window in one wall of the bathroom that showed the ghostly outlines of a sink, toilet, and shower stall, but it certainly didn't shed enough light to take a shower by.

A faint gleam told her there was a mirrored medicine chest above the sink. Hoping to find a flashlight, Sophie opened it carefully and began feeling the shelves inside. She had never been the type to snoop into other people's things and she said a silent apology to the absent owner of the cabin as she went.

She didn't find a flashlight but there *was* a small pack of matches in one dark corner. *Now if only there was a candle to go with them. If this cabin belonged to a woman or if whoever owns it has a wife, there ought to be some around somewhere...*

Striking a match, she found what she was looking for. On the back of the toilet was a tall pillar candle that smelled faintly of vanilla. With a happy little cry, Sophia lit it, sending a silent thank you to the woman who had left it there.

Her eyes had grown so accustomed to the dark that the single candle seemed positively brilliant. A pink flowered shower curtain that matched a fuzzy pink bathmat and toilet seat cover were revealed in the flickering light. There was even a fluffy pink towel hanging from a tiny rack beside the shower. *Definitely a woman's touch*, she thought approvingly. *Thank you, whoever you are. I'll try not to mess up your stuff too much!*

Without much hope she turned to the small shower stall and fiddled with the knobs. To her intense delight, after a moment the water actually began to steam.

Hot water! Oh, thank God. They must have a gas or oil water heater or something else that doesn't depend on electricity.

Sophie couldn't remember the last time she'd wanted a shower so badly. Peeling off Sylvan's uniform shirt and the ragged remains of her bridesmaid's dress, she stepped gratefully under the steamy flow.

She would have liked to wash her hair but she didn't see any shampoo so she twisted the long strands into a loose knot at the back of her neck instead. There was a rather dried cake of soap in the dish mounted on one wall and she rubbed it between her palms, working up a lather. *Mmm, jasmine and honey.*

The smell of the soap was surprisingly strong and it gave her an idea. Maybe she could mask her smell without any of the embarrassing sounding "scent marking" Sylvan had been talking about. If she used enough of the strong smelling soap, there was no way the horrible Scourge sniffers could find her—right? Sophie lathered liberally and repeated twice, making sure to get every part of herself squeaky clean—even the side of her head where she'd hit the rock. Then, reluctantly, she turned off the water and wrapped herself in the towel.

*No sense putting it off anymore...*She was going to have to face Sylvan again. At least the long cut along her chest and breast appeared to be completely healed, so she didn't have to go through *that* again.

Just the memory of that, of his hot tongue lapping gently over her nipple, made her knees feel weak. *I won't think about it*, she told herself sternly. *After all, it's not like there's anything between us. He **has** to protect me—he swore he would. That's the only reason his mating scent is coming out and once we're back in the Kindred mother ship everything will go back to normal. In the mean time, he's just doing whatever he can to make sure I'm safe.*

Pushing her confusion about the big warrior to the back of her mind, Sophie turned her attention to more practical matters. She thought about putting the ragged blood-stained dress back on, but she just couldn't face it. She pulled on her lace panties and put the uniform shirt back on instead. Her bra had been torn in half along with the dress and was a complete loss—she didn't even try to wear it. The heavy, silky material of Sylvan's shirt rubbed her nipples, making them

throb sensitively. Again she thought of his mouth on her there and again she pushed the thought away. *Stop remembering it. You're only making it worse.*

Opening the bathroom door, she peered hesitantly into the cabin. Sylvan had apparently been busy while she was taking a shower. There was a crackling fire in the fireplace across from the bed and a heavy chair had been propped against the broken door.

Sylvan was sitting in front of the fire on a heavy black fur rug, staring into the flames with an unreadable look in his eyes. He looked up when Sophie came out. "You look refreshed."

"They actually have hot water. Well, if I didn't use it all." She nodded at the bathroom. "You want a shower?"

He shook his head. "The running water might mask sounds I need to hear."

"Oh, well...okay then." Trying not to limp on her still-sore ankle, she made her way over and sat down gingerly beside him. The fur of the rug ticked her bare thighs uncomfortably and her skinned knees and the raw palms of her hands stung. God, even after a shower she was *still* a mess. "Sorry I'm still wearing your shirt," she said, since he was staring at her. "I, uh...my dress was ruined."

"It's yours to keep for as long as you want it." But still his eyes didn't leave her face.

"Is everything okay?" Sophie put a hand to her throat self-consciously. "I mean, you keep, uh looking at me. Do I look strange or something?"

He shook his head. "No, you look perfect. Just...perfect."

"Oh." Sophie had no idea what to say. "I, uh, I wonder if there's anything to eat," she said, wanting to change the subject. "I mean, there's probably nothing in the fridge, but there might be something worth having in the cabinets." She nodded at the small kitchenette which was separated from the bedroom/living area of the cabin by a low bar.

"There are a few cylinders of different foodstuffs. I saw them when I was looking for something to use as a weapon." Sylvan shrugged. "There are no knives, unfortunately. And nothing edible that looked worth bothering with—

except this.” He lifted a mug that had been sitting to one side of him and handed it to her. “I heated the water on the fire to make it. I hope you like it.”

“What is it?” Sophie sniffed suspiciously at the contents of the blue glass mug. It wasn’t that she didn’t trust Sylvan—just that Kindred had been known to mix up human foods on occasion. She would never forget Liv telling her about Baird’s first attempt to make pizza. Ugh. But the scent that met her nose was surprisingly pleasing. *Mint and some kind of cream?* She took an experimental sip. “Hey, pretty good.”

“There were some bags full of herbs that smelled pleasant. I let them soak in the hot water.” He smiled at her. “We make a similar drink on Tranq Prime.”

“It’s called tea.” Sophie smiled at him and took another sip. “Well, that’s what we call it, anyway. And it’s really good—thank you for making it.”

He nodded gravely. “I wish I had more to offer. I *did* bring some protein paste.” He produced a strange oblong tube and cracked it open. Holding out half to Sophia he said, “Go ahead. It might not be to your taste but it will keep you on your feet for days.”

“Uh, okay.” Taking the half tube she sniffed experimentally. A rich, meaty smell rose to her nostrils. It was strong but not exactly unpleasant.

“Well?” Sylvan was watching her.

“Smells like...beef jerky.” Sophie took another sniff. “Actually, it smells pretty good. What kind of animal is it from?”

Sylvan stared into the fire as he spoke. “Mostly it’s ground up *fleeta* beadle larva.”

“*What?*” Sophie nearly gagged. *Thank God I didn’t try any!*

“*Fleeta* beattles. We call them blood bugs on Tranq Prime because even though they’re a delicacy, eating them was the cause of Blood Fever.”

Sophie made a face. “Blood fever? What’s that?”

“A disease that only affects unmated females. It nearly decimated the Tranq Prime natives before the Kindred came to make a trade with them and brought a cure.” He looked into the fire as he spoke. “Now, of course, we know the cause of

Blood Fever was a parasite that lives in the beadle's digestive tract—it reacts with a compound found in the Tranq Prime water supply. But since all females are now inoculated against it, we can eat them again.”

“Ugh!” Sophie handed back the half finished tube. “Maybe *you* can eat them. *I’m* not going to.”

“What’s wrong?” He gave her a surprised look. “I thought you said it smelled good.”

“I, uh, changed my mind.” Shuddering, Sophie took another sip of mint tea. “So anyway, I don’t think we have to worry about the cyborg bloodhounds now,” she said, wanting to steer the conversation away from beadle larva paste.

“Oh?” Sylvan raised an eyebrow at her. “And why is that?”

“Can’t you tell?” She leaned a little closer to him. “Smell me.”

His eyes seemed to glow in the firelight. “Are you inviting me to scent you?”

“Uh...I guess so.” Sophie shrugged. “I just...” But the words died in her mouth.

Sylvan was on his hands and knees before her and his nose was pressed to her inner ankle. As she watched, her heart pounding, he traced a path up, following her leg to the back of her knee and then straight to her inner thigh. For a moment Sophie thought he was going to press his face right between her legs. But to her intense relief, after a long pause, he continued up her body, ending at her neck.

“You smell delicious.” His deep voice in her ear and his warm breath against the sensitive side of her neck sent a shiver through her. For some reason her nipples were tight under the silky shirt and she felt uncomfortably sensitive between her legs.

“Um...thanks.” She wished her voice wouldn’t come out sounding so squeaky. “I, uh, didn’t mean for you to do...do *that*. What I meant to say was that I used some really strong soap when I took a shower. So there’s no way the uh, sniffers can find me now.”

“I’m afraid you’re wrong.” Sylvan sat back, looking at her.

“What do you mean? You can’t seriously tell me you could smell any of my personal, uh, scent past all that soap I used. I mean, I lathered up *three times*.”

Sylvan gave her an intent look. “The scent they’re following can’t be eradicated with soap, no matter how much you use. They search for the overlying fragrance—your skin, your hair—but the underlying note is what draws them to you. And it is what will keep them coming if they find us.”

“But what...where...?” Sophie shook her head.

“It’s the scent of your sex.” One large hand drifted between her legs and he brushed her inner thigh lightly with his fingertips, as though illustrating his point. Sophie gasped at the gentle touch. “Your female essence,” he murmured. “The sweet, warm scent that is completely and utterly *you*, Sophia.”

“They...they can smell me *there*?”

“I can. And if *I* can, the *urlich* certainly can.”

“Oh my God!” Sophie was appalled. She clamped her thighs together and drew her knees up to her chin. “I...I don’t know what to say. Personal hygiene is very, *very* important to me. I—”

“Stop.” Sylvan put a large warm hand on her thigh. “Did you think I meant they were following an *unpleasant* scent?”

“Well how else could it be strong enough to follow in the first place? I mean, my God...” Sophie shook her head, unable to go on.

“Sophia, no.” Sylvan ducked his head so that he could look into her eyes. “Your scent is distinctive as any female’s scent is. But yours is also the most beautiful, delicious, heady aroma I have ever smelled.”

“What?” She looked at him, wide-eyed and uncertain. “Are you actually saying you like the scent of my...of my...”

“Of your sex. Your pussy.” His ice-blue eyes were hot now, half-lidded with lust. “It’s warm and rich and completely feminine. It fills me with desire.” His voice dropped to a soft growl. “And makes me wonder how you would taste.”

“You...you want to taste me there?”

Slowly, he nodded. "If we really were in our claiming period, I would need to taste you often and thoroughly."

"Is that...a Kindred thing?" Her heart was pounding now and she was very aware of his mating scent. God, they were getting into dangerous territory here but she couldn't seem to stop.

"We like to keep our mates satisfied and mark them as our own." His voice was a soft growl.

Sophie raised an eyebrow. "So...it's all about possession. Keeping your woman with you and proving she's yours?"

"It's not just that." Sylvan's eyes traveled down her body and she could almost feel the heat from his gaze wherever he looked. "It's about spreading your female open and mapping her most secret places. Tasting her honey and thrusting your tongue deep in her tight, wet pussy until she moans and cries your name...pulling your hair and scratching your shoulders as she loses control completely from the pleasure you're giving her."

"I...I..." Sophie was speechless. The words he used painted an incredibly vivid picture in her mind. She could almost see herself lying on the bed with Sylvan between her legs, opening her, tasting her... *No! Stop it.* She shook her head, trying to get the embarrassing and enticing image out of her brain.

Sylvan must have sensed her unease because he shook his head. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. It's just that your scent is so delicious and I can't...can't help responding to it."

"I can't help responding to yours either," Sophie admitted in a low voice. "We...we should probably be careful that we don't...you know, do something we might regret."

"And would you regret it?" he murmured. "Would you regret giving yourself to me, *Talana*?"

"I..." Sophie's mouth felt too dry to answer. "I'd be afraid to," she said at last. "You...you'd want to bite me if I...if we did that. Wouldn't you?"

Sylvan sighed. "Biting is part of bonding sex for the Blood Kindred, yes."

“But not just bonding sex,” Sophie said. “If we...if you really did claim me—I mean, I know you don’t really want to any more than I want you to—but if you did... you’d want to bite me every time.”

“Love making is not complete without the gift of blood,” he said heavily. “Not for us.”

Sophie shivered. “I’m sorry, but sex is bad enough without adding biting and blood to it. I’m not a masochist, Sylvan—I don’t *like* pain. I don’t, uh, get off on being hurt.”

“I would never hurt you,” he said in a low voice that did strange things to her insides.

Sophie looked into the fire, trying not to meet his eyes. “I don’t see how you could avoid it. If you were, uh, biting me, I mean. Anyway, if I ever *do* get married or bonded or whatever you want to call it, it couldn’t be with someone like you. I mean, you’re a really nice guy but...”

He raised an eyebrow. “But?”

Sophie felt awkward but somehow it had to be said. She needed to let him know how she felt before things went any further. “Well it’s not just because of the biting thing, really it’s not,” she said. “It’s because you’re so *big*. So *aggressive*. I mean, the things you said to that Scourge guy in the shuttle...”

Sylvan frowned. “He was threatening you. I had to make it clear you were off limits.”

“And I appreciate that,” Sophie said earnestly. “But I don’t know who you scared more, me or him.” She thought of the way he’d looked, with his fangs out and that blood-thirsty look in his eyes—*terrifying*. Even though they’d been about to crash, she hadn’t been able to stop staring at him.

Sylvan nodded thoughtfully. “And if you ever do get bonded, what kind of male would you look for?”

“Probably not a Kindred. I don’t want any kind of alpha male,” Sophie said decisively.

He frowned. “Alpha male?”

“Big, strong, angry, aggressive. You know like...like the captain of the football team.” Sophie looked down at her hands. “If I ever end up with someone he’ll have to be quiet and gentle.”

“I can be those things.” Taking one of her hands, he raised it to his mouth and kissed her wounded palm gently. Sophie felt her breath catch in her throat as he bathed the raw skin with his tongue, his eyes never leaving hers while he did it. “There,” he murmured, finally releasing her hand.

“Th-there what?” Sophie couldn’t stop looking at him. For some reason she felt as though her heart was beating in every part of her body at once and her palm was tingling like crazy.

“Your hand.” He nodded at it. “It’s healed.”

“What?” She finally broke his gaze and looked down at her palm. “Wow! It really is.”

He smiled. “I told you. May I have your permission to heal the rest of you as well?”

“I...I guess so.” Sophie held her breath as he lapped gently at her other palm. But when he turned his attention to her skinned knees, she tried to stop him. “No, really,” she said, trying to inch away when he knelt before her. “I...they don’t hurt that bad. Honestly.”

“Sophia,” he said sternly. “It is not only my pleasure and privilege to heal your wounds, it’s my duty too. I was charged with your safety and well being—I must fulfill that charge.”

“You really take it that seriously?”

He nodded. “A Kindred never goes back on his word.” His voice turned slightly wistful. “Do you really fear me so much you won’t even allow me to heal a few small wounds?”

“No, I guess not. It’s just...embarrassing.”

“Don’t be embarrassed.” Kneeling down he ran his warm, wet tongue slowly across her injured knee. Looking up at her he whispered, “You’re beautiful, Sophia. I *want* to heal you.”

“Th-thank you,” she murmured, her heart pounding.

“You’re more than welcome.” He licked her other knee, taking his time, obviously savoring the moment.

When he finally drew back, Sophie was almost panting. The feel of his hot mouth on her legs was stimulating and embarrassing at the same time. She kept thinking of how he’d said he wanted to taste her. Imagining his hot mouth further up—a *lot* further up—was all she could think of.

Then suddenly he was leaning in as if for a kiss. Sophie couldn’t help herself. Her heart was banging against her ribs from the feel of his tongue on her skin and his mating scent was invading her senses. She leaned in to meet him, closing her eyes...And felt his mouth on her temple instead of against her lips.

“What? What are you doing?” she asked uncertainly.

“You’re wounded here too. You hit your head on a rock—remember?” His voice was low and intimate in her ear and the feel of his tongue against her temple made her shiver helplessly.

“Of...of course.” Sophie felt foolish. To think she’d believed he wanted to kiss her after she just finished telling him he wasn’t her type. He was obviously just being nice—a lot nicer than most guys would be after an unequivocal rejection.

Finally Sylvan sat back and looked at her. “Was that gentle enough for you?”

“It...was very nice.” Which was the understatement of the year. She could still feel her newly healed skin tingling everywhere he’d licked. Could still feel the heat of his tongue caressing her so gently... “I...I mean you were very gentle. Very sweet.” Sophie could feel herself blushing. “Thank you. I...I thought for a minute there that you were going to, uh, heal my lip. Where you bit me earlier.”

Sylvan looked at her seriously. “Nothing would give me greater pleasure than tasting your lips, *Talana*. But I didn’t want to offend you.”

You should stop now. This is a really bad idea, whispered a little voice in her head. *Weren’t you the one who didn’t want to go too far? Well guess what, it’s nice now but a man like this is hard to stop once you get him started. And you*

know exactly how badly this situation can end. Yes, she knew only too well. But somehow she couldn't help herself.

"I...I'm not offended," she breathed.

"Then I'll gladly heal you." Sylvan leaned toward her...and froze.

"Is something wrong?" Sophie looked at him expectantly. "I, uh, told you I wasn't offended."

"It isn't that." Sylvan turned from side to side, his head cocked in a listening angle. "*Urlich*," he murmured at last in a voice so low Sophie felt it more than heard it. "Can't you smell the foul stench?"

Sophie inhaled deeply but all she could smell was his mating scent. Then she heard it. A deep snuffling sound was coming from just outside the splintered door. Sylvan had blocked it with a chair but for someone or *something* really determined to get in, that would present only a momentary distraction, she was sure.

Sylvan put his mouth to her ear. "Not a sound," he breathed. "If they break through run to the bathroom and go out the window."

Sophie shook her head frantically. "I don't want to leave you," she protested in a whisper.

"Do it." Sylvan's eyes blazed. "I'll kill as many as I can before they take me down. You get as far from here as possible. If you hear them catching up, climb a tree. They're only good on the ground."

"But...but Sylvan..."

Shaking his head, he moved from her side and crouched facing the door. To Sophie he looked like a tiger poised to spring.

He's getting ready to fight...to die if necessary to protect me, she realized. *What did I ever do to deserve that kind of sacrifice?*

And how in the world was she going to manage without him?

Chapter Twelve

This time the tingling pleasure in her breasts and pussy started at once and Kat had to clamp her lips shut to stop a moan. She squeezed the large male hands holding hers convulsively as the hot sensations rushed through her.

It's all right, she heard Lock whisper. Only instead of hearing him with her ears, she heard him...

Inside my mind, she thought and heard Deep reply,

Yes, we enter the mind of the focus, both of us at once.

The same way you'd— Kat tried to cut the thought off but an image passed before her mind's eye too quickly to stop.

It was a picture she'd seen on one of those porn-for-women websites that were popping up all over lately. In it, two dark haired men were holding a blonde woman between them. One of the men was standing behind the woman, kissing her neck and his large hand was cupped between her legs. The other man was kneeling in front of her, sucking one of her nipples into his mouth and spreading her thighs wide to give his friend easier access. The girl had her head thrown back and her eyes closed in ecstasy as she allowed both men to do what they wanted.

Well, well—not quite so resistant to being the “filling” in our sandwich after all, are you little Kat? Deep's mental voice sounded like a hungry growl.

Damn it—that's just something I saw once. I didn't...didn't mean to send it to you, Kat protested. *It's not like I actually **like** it or anything.*

It's all right, Kat. Lock's mental tone was reassuring. *We know you didn't mean to. It's hard to keep your thoughts to yourself when your mind is unshielded.*

It's just...it's not something I wanted you to see. Kat was mortified.

*I can't speak for Lock, but it doesn't bother **me** at all*, Deep murmured. *Only I picture it a little more like this...* He sent the image back to her but this time he and Lock were the men in the picture and Kat recognized herself as the female between them. Her long red hair was down around her shoulders and her mouth

was open in a silent moan. Looking further, she saw that Deep's fingers weren't just cupping her pussy, they were actually sliding into her, filling her, fucking her, opening her... *Opening you for our cocks*, she heard him growl. *Spreading your soft little pussy so that Lock and I can fill you as one.*

Kat shivered involuntarily. *Oh my God, I couldn't! I could never...*

Deep, that's enough! Lock's mental voice was almost a shout and the image was abruptly gone. *We're trying to teach her to focus—not confirm her idea that we're sexually depraved.*

I...I never said I thought that, Kat protested, her mental voice sounding breathless somehow. Between the tingling stimulation she was feeling the entire time they touched and the erotic imagery flying back and forth between the three of them, she was getting overheated fast.

You didn't have to say it. We can feel it, Lock murmured and she thought he sounded sad.

But we feel your curiosity too, Deep added. *You wonder what it's like to be the center. To be pleased and filled by two males at once...*

No, I never... Kat protested. *I don't...don't want that.*

Not even a little? Deep sounded amused.

No, not even a little, Kat sent, trying to make her mental voice firm and unyielding. *Now are we going to look for Sylvan and Sophie or not?*

I second that. We need to concentrate on the task at hand, Lock sent. *Kat, imagine that we are going to cast a net—a vast, all-encompassing net over your entire world. Deep is the seeker, he will get us to where we need to go and provide the power to generate the net. I am the finder so I will weave it, strand by strand and cast it over the target area.*

And what am I going to do? Kat asked, relieved to finally get off the subject of sex—especially scary-as-hell three-way sex.

You're the focus. When our net finds its intended targets, you'll help pinpoint their exact location. You'll focus in on their general area and generate

an image we can all see. Deep's mental voice was all business now, which made it easier to concentrate.

Okay, I'll try, I guess, Kat told them.

As we build and cast the net, concentrate on Sophia, Lock sent. *Remember your fondest memories of her. Try to get a clear picture of her in your mind.*

Her eyes shut tight, Kat did as he said. *Sophie...Sophie...Always so shy, so sensitive...I remember that time in fourth grade when that bully made you cry. Liv and I wanted to beat him up or go to the teacher...But you stood up to him on your own instead. We were so surprised but he never bothered you again. And your art—so beautiful, so delicate. You're so talented but you spend your time teaching children instead of pursuing your own career because you love them so much. Sensitive too—remember that time Liv made you watch The Exorcist with her? You couldn't sleep for a month! You always hated horror movies or anything scary...Selfless and giving, you're always there when I need someone to talk to or just to hang out...*

The memories went on and on, filling her mind with love and affection, making her almost cry with emotion. *Sophie please, don't be dead or gone beyond my reach. Let me find you—you and Liv were always the sisters I never had. Please...*

We're ready, Lock sent softly, interrupting the flow only a little. *The net is cast, Kat. It's up to you to feel the location of Sophia and try to focus in on her.*

All right, she sent back. *But how do I start?*

Feel the net—feel our power and let it flow through you, Deep instructed her.

Taking a deep breath, Kat tried to do as they instructed. And then she saw something amazing...

It was the Earth—a round blue and white ball floating in space, just as she had seen it from the Kindred shuttle window. And it was covered with a glowing net made of golden light, so beautiful and bright it almost hurt to look at it. But despite its brilliance, or maybe because of it, she couldn't look away.

It...it's beautiful, she whispered to both brothers. *Breathtaking.*

Thank you. Lock sounded as though he was smiling. *We were taught by the best.*

Your mentor would have been proud, Kat told them.

Or surprised. Deep sounded amused. *If he knew we were using an unmated female as a focus. Speaking of which, Kat, now it's up to you. You need to narrow our search—feel the net and see if you can find your friend.*

Concentrate on moving in closer, Lock added. *If they're anywhere in the net you'll feel them as a kind of tugging in the corner of your mind. Once you feel that, try to focus on where it's coming from.*

And don't worry if you can't get very close to their actual location, Deep added. *It's a very difficult skill to learn. Even if you can just verify that they're alive and somewhere on the planet it will be a good start.*

Got it. Taking a deep breath, Kat concentrated on the net. Its shining surface covered the entire globe but she could still see the shapes of landmasses and oceans through its golden threads.

She looked at Florida first but she felt nothing at all from the long, peninsular state. However there was something further north... *The tugging, follow the tugging...* Suddenly it was as though she was a bird flying high and fast above the world. Cities and lakes and rivers sped by under her invisible wings, going faster and faster...

Kat? Lock sounded almost panicked. *Kat slow down, you're going too fast...*

Let her, Deep commanded. *Let her, Lock. She's onto something. Let her follow it.*

Kat ignored them both. The sensation of flying was immediately addictive and she could feel herself getting nearer and nearer to her target. *Mountains!* she thought as she flew over craggy peaks. There was a winding road cutting through them and a large green directional sign she could almost see on one side of it. *Blu...idge...kway,* she caught. And then, just below her, a steaming heap of wreckage.

Oh no. Oh God. She stopped suddenly, hovering over what was obviously the remains of the shuttle.

*So they **did** crash.* Deep's mental voice was flat.

That doesn't mean they're dead, Lock sent. *Do you feel them there in the wreckage, Kat?*

No. She felt a huge measure of relief. *No, I don't. They're further on, somewhere else.*

And then she was flying again, going even faster, zeroing in on her target, feeling the tugging in her mind she knew was Sophie.

Sophie! Sophie, where are you?

Don't worry if you can't see her exact location, Lock began. *It's very rare for a focus to be able to pinpoint—*

There—she's in that cabin on the side of the mountain, Kat interrupted him excitedly. *I can feel her!*

Can you show her to us? Deep asked.

Deep, you know she won't be able to. No focus—

Here. There was something strange outside the cabin—something with red eyes filled with hunger—but it wasn't what she was looking for so Kat ignored it. Instead, she dove in through a wide crack in the wooden door, which looked like someone had kicked it in. Maybe Sylvan had forced his way inside?

They're both here. Both alive, she reported, feeling an immense surge of relief. And yet...*Something's wrong. Look at Sophie's face—she's scared to death.* As she hovered over the room like a noiseless, unseen bird, she saw her friend, who was wearing nothing but Sylvan's blue uniform shirt. Sophie was edging toward the bathroom with terror in her large green eyes. Turning her attention to the big Kindred warrior, Kat thought she could see why.

Sylvan was crouched in the middle of the room, glaring at the doorway as though he was waiting for some threat to come bursting through it at any moment. And the look on his face...

Holy crap! Kat shook herself mentally. Look at him! What the hell is going on? I haven't seen anything that scary since the last time Liv and I had a horror-movie marathon.

They must be in danger and he's preparing to defend her, Deep sent.

Looking like that? Kat asked. Because Sylvan was no longer recognizable as the utterly logical, slightly cold male she'd met on several other occasions. Now his eyes were blazing and his fangs were fully extended—and who the hell knew those things could get so long in the first place? They weren't the pretty, petite little points that movie vampires had—these were freaking weapons and it was abundantly obvious that Sylvan could wound or even kill with them. No wonder Sophie looked scared. She hated that kind of thing.

The urge to protect is incredibly strong in us, Lock sent. When danger threatens a female we have claimed as our own, it induces a state of altered consciousness.

Have you ever heard the term "berserker rage?" asked Deep.

My God! Kat couldn't stop staring at Sylvan. Shirtless as he was with his broad shoulders hunched and ready to attack, he looked like a mountain of muscle—a mountain of very lethal muscle. What is he going to do? she couldn't help asking.

Whatever he has to in order to keep Sophia safe. Deep's mental voice was grim. It's like we told you, Kat—he'll die protecting her if necessary. But he's not going down without a fight.

No, I guess not, Kat murmured. Uh, do all of you—all Kindred—get that way when someone you're protecting is threatened?

Actually, it's rare to see such an extreme response unless it's our mate who is in danger, Lock said. But yes, the protective rage is part of the Kindred biological makeup. It can turn any warrior into a killing machine—inciting us to violence like nothing else.

Kat couldn't stop the feeling of unease that settled over her at his words. *So all of you have this...this other person inside you? Like the incredible Hulk or something?*

The incredible who? Deep asked.

This guy—he got shot up with too much gamma radiation so he turns huge and green and angry whenever someone pisses him off and... Kat shook her head. *Never mind. It's a pop culture thing. You wouldn't understand.*

Actually, I'd say that pretty much sums us up. Lock sounded thoughtful.

Aside from the turning green part, anyway, Deep said dryly. *Threaten our chosen female and prepare to die. It's a lesson many have learned the hard way.*

I bet. Kat shivered.

You should be glad to see Sylvan's response, Lock said gently. *Obviously he cares for your friend—cares deeply—if the rage has come over him. He will protect her or die trying.*

And a Kindred warrior is not easy to kill, Deep added. *Especially one in the grip of the rage.*

Kat wanted to say more, to see more. Who or what was threatening Sophie? And why was Sylvan being so protective of her when Sophie had been sure he didn't even like her? And how—

Suddenly, she was being pulled back like a rubber band that has been stretched to the limit and then let go.

No, wait! No, no, no! Please!

But the world was rushing outward and away from her, the shining net fading as the blue and white Earth receded into the distance...

And then she was back, stuck in her own body which suddenly felt horribly tired and weak. "God!" she gasped and her legs gave way under her. She would have fallen for sure, but four strong hands held her up and a deep voice was whispering in her ear.

"It's all right, Kat. You're all right. You just overdid it, that's all. You'll recover in a moment."

The world spun around her and Kat closed her eyes to shut it out. When she opened them she found herself lying on the extra long couch with her head in Lock's lap and her feet propped up on Deep's knees. Both men were staring at her anxiously, which made her feel incredibly nervous for some reason.

"What...what happened?" She tried to sit up but the brothers held her down gently but firmly.

"Relax awhile longer," Lock urged her. "You've just had a very intense experience."

"Intense?" Deep laughed. "I'll say. I've never seen or heard of a focus being able to get so close so fast. And to stay there for so long, too! That was *amazing*."

"No, it wasn't." Kat put a hand to her head which was beginning to throb. "I didn't even get their exact location. Although I *think* the sign I saw might have said Blue Ridge Parkway. But I'm pretty sure the parkway runs through several different states. So what good is that?"

"It's damn good, believe me," Deep assured her.

"And you don't have to worry about finding their exact location. Deep and I will use what you gave us to extrapolate it when we join with each other later," Lock explained. "Truly, Kat, what you did was amazing. I've never seen its like, even with our old mentor and he had been a focus for over sixty years when he trained Deep and myself."

"Yeah, I feel really amazing." Kat rubbed her throbbing forehead. It was funny, she could almost *feel* their admiration like sunshine on her back, but it didn't do a thing for her head. "Is it normal for joining to give you such a headache?"

Both brothers looked concerned. "No, not at all," Lock said. "Maybe your head hurts because it's all new to you?"

"Or maybe you just went too fast." Deep chuckled. "Never saw a focus rush right to the spot like that. Usually it takes forever to get to where the target is. But you just went right to it."

“That ‘target’ is my friend,” Kat reminded him tartly. “And it looked like she was in a pretty tight spot.”

“They must have crashed somewhere in the mountains and made their way to the cabin,” Lock said thoughtfully. “At least they’re someplace they can defend. Don’t worry, Kat—Sylvan will protect her.”

“Lock is right.” Deep patted her legs in what he probably thought was a soothing way. But his hand happened to land on her bare skin and Lock was already touching her bare shoulder.

“Ah!” Kat jumped as the strange connection she felt when she had skin to skin contact with both of them at once suddenly sizzled to life. *Great, now I not only have the mother of all headaches, I’m horny too. How is that even possible? God, I **so** don’t need this right now.*

“What’s wrong?” Deep asked at the same time Lock said,

“Are you all right, my lady?”

“Fine, just fine.” Kat scrambled up and off the couch and this time they let her. “I just...I need to get out of here.”

“And go where?” Lock asked reasonably. “It’s very late now. Do you have anyplace to sleep?”

“No, but I can find a place.” Kat was already headed for the door.

“Wait.” Deep was suddenly in front of her and she wondered how such a large male could move so fast. “Don’t go.” His voice was harsh but his black eyes were almost pleading. “Not...not after what we shared. Stay with my brother and me tonight.”

Kat’s heart was suddenly in her throat. The need in his dark face was intense—overwhelming and so palpable she could almost *feel* it. Her heart started pounding triple time and she didn’t know what to say. “I’m sorry, I can’t. Can’t stay,” she whispered, trying desperately to think of an excuse. “I...somebody has to tell Olivia what’s going on. I mean, if she and Baird ever finish... uh, ever finish,” she ended lamely.

“Kat...” Lock came up to her, standing shoulder to shoulder with his brother. “I can sense your unease, it rolls within you like a wave about to break. But—”

Kat rounded on him. “Wait a minute—what do you mean you can *sense* my unease?”

“I can feel it. Here.” Lock tapped his broad chest. “The same way I sense my brother’s emotions.”

“As can I,” Deep rumbled.

“But...but we’re not joined anymore,” she protested. “We’re not even touching.”

Lock shook his head. “It doesn’t matter. We had an intense joining.”

“*Very* intense,” Deep rumbled and the hunger was back in his black eyes again. A hunger so vast and deep Kat felt like he might gobble her up in one mouthful. It felt like...*Oh my God, I’m **feeling** it! Feeling **him**—just the way Lock said he could feel me.*

Come to think of it, she could *feel* Lock as well. There was an emptiness in him, a yearning so sharp it almost brought tears to her eyes. It was like there was a piece missing out of his soul. A piece that was exactly her shape and size...

She stared at both of them. “What the hell is going on here? Is this a permanent condition?”

“Is *what* a permanent condition?” Deep asked.

“Having the two of you inside my head. All of us knowing exactly what the others are feeling, are *thinking* at any given moment, even after the connection is broken.”

“No, of course not,” Lock said.

“Oh, good.” She put a hand to her throbbing head. “Because for a minute there I was kind of freaking out—”

“Thought sharing wouldn’t occur unless we were fully bonded to you,” Deep said, obviously continuing where his twin had left off.

“So you *could* hear my thoughts, even when we’re not touching or joined?”

“Only if we were bonded. Right now all we can do is sense your emotions—as you can sense ours.” Lock made it sound like it was perfectly normal to be feeling someone else’s emotions—**two** *someone elses*, Kat reminded herself.

“Oh my God—okay, this is too much.” She shook her head. “I mean, I like sci-fi and everything but this is all just a little too Vulcan mind-meldy for me.”

“What?” they both said together.

Kat took a deep breath. “What I’m trying to say is, I was good with us sharing thoughts while we were joined—well, maybe not good, but *okay*. It was actually pretty damned uncomfortable letting you two into my head but whatever, it was for a good cause—we had to find Sylvan and Sophie. But you didn’t tell me it was never going to end! That I would still feel you *in* me after it was over and done with.”

“You don’t understand, do you, little Kat?” Deep took a step toward her, looking at her intently. “When you pair with Twin Kindred, the joining never ends. Not really.”

“Stop it! Can’t you see you’re scaring her?” Lock turned on his brother looking really angry.

*Scratch that—**feeling** really angry. Because I can feel the anger and frustration like lava bubbling up inside him, Kat thought dismally. And Deep is even worse. He’s so **hungry**. There’s a vast, black chasm in his soul. Oh God, I can’t handle this right now!*

“Please don’t leave.” The look in Lock’s eyes when he turned back to her was pleading. “I feel your fear but we would never hurt you, Kat. And we don’t like the idea of you wandering around the ship with nowhere to go.”

“I’ll go back to the sacred grove,” Kat said, trying to keep her voice steady. “I’ll be fine there.”

“No.” Deep was positively glowering now, his black brows pulled low over burning eyes. “You’ll have to go through the unmated males’ territory to get to the sacred grove. You can’t go there.”

“What my brother means is that it wouldn’t be safe for you to go near unmated males in the state you’re in,” Lock said apologetically.

“What state?” Kat demanded. “What are you talking about?”

“Your scent.” Deep leaned forward and inhaled deeply before looking into her eyes. “You smell too *hot*. You need to stay away from unmated males.”

“But...but you two are unmated males,” she objected, her voice trembling. *And the way you’re feeling about me makes me think I should stay the hell away from **you**.* But she didn’t say it out loud. The burning lust she felt coming in waves from both brothers was too frightening, too intense.

“We know you,” Lock said in a soothing voice that belied the vortex of need inside him. “And you know us—you know deep down we won’t hurt you. Don’t you, Kat?”

“I...I don’t know,” she faltered. “I know you *want* me. I can feel it coming off both of you like...like heat.”

“We can’t help what we feel,” Deep said roughly. “How can we help wanting you between us, beautiful little Kat? How can we help wanting to fill you again?”

Somehow Kat knew he wasn’t talking about filling her with his mind this time. No, this time he and Lock wanted more. Much more. And that scared the ever loving crap out of her.

“Just stay the night,” Lock urged quietly when she didn’t speak. “Don’t listen to Deep, we won’t bother you—you can have the bed all to yourself if you like.”

The thought of getting anywhere near their bed, even if she was the only one in it, gave Kat a bad case of the butterflies. “No, you guys take the bed,” she said, shaking her head. “I’ll take the door, I’m leaving.”

“No!” Deep moved to block her way again but Lock held him back.

“Go then, my lady,” he said and she could feel his sorrow like an ache in her heart. “We won’t try to stop you. Only please, stay away from the unmated males’ territory.”

“Look, I don’t care *where* I go right now as long as I can get away from the two of you and...and your *feelings*!” Kat knew she was being cruel but she

couldn't help herself—she was drowning in emotions that weren't hers. It felt like a giant hand was gripping her, squeezing her for all it was worth and she couldn't breathe...couldn't *breathe*...

Deep gave her a sharp, predatory grin that didn't reach his eyes. "Oh, I think you'd care if you wound up there, little Kat. You'd care a hell of a lot. Because the warriors that live there would listen to what your *scent* was saying, not the words coming out of your pretty little mouth."

"Kat—" Lock started, but Kat had heard—and *felt*—enough to last her a lifetime. Dodging around both large male bodies, she slapped the door switch and squeezed out even before the silver panel had finished opening.

There was a blast of *sorrow/anger/pain/need/hunger* so intense it nearly knocked her over, and then she was running blindly down the corridor, trying to get away. Trying to get anywhere else but where *they* were.

Never. The word pounded in her brain as she ran, gasping for air. *Never going to go through that again. Never, never, never!*

Chapter Thirteen

The snuffling stopped and then there was a low growling sound outside the door that made the short hairs at the back of Sophie's neck stand up. It was answered with a deeper, and even more menacing rumble. After a moment she realized it was coming from Sylvan.

She edged toward the bathroom but she didn't go in yet. Indeed, she couldn't go in—she was too transfixed by the sight of Sylvan, who seemed to be changing before her eyes.

She shivered when she looked at his face. His fangs were out again, deadly and sharp and the pupils of his eyes had grown until the iris was only a thin blue ring around a well of black. But not just black, she saw—his pupils were red. Blood red. And the look on his face was one of pure menace. Completely inhuman.

But then he's not human, she reminded herself. *He's a warrior from another galaxy*. But even telling herself that didn't help—he still looked chillingly animalistic in his anger. She wondered if the *urlich* could see as well as they could smell. If so and they were looking through the crack in the door, they would have to be crazy to confront such a threat.

For a moment the growling rose to a crescendo that made her want to cover her ears. Then, miraculously, the sounds from outside the door began to die. To Sophie's vast relief, in a matter of minutes they faded away to nothing, until even the snuffling was gone. Still, she waited anxiously, watching Sylvan who was still on high alert.

He turned to her at last. "They're gone." His voice was a snarl and he still looked more animal than man.

"Okay." Sophie shrank away from him when he came toward her. God, he looked scary with those blood red eyes and was it her imagination or had his fangs gotten even longer? "So..." She cleared her throat. "So we can relax?"

“No.” He was still glaring at her, his face filled with some emotion she couldn’t read. Maybe raw aggression? “There were only one or two out there,” he continued, still advancing on her. “They weren’t sure of the scent so they went to gather the rest of the pack to reach a consensus. If they decide that the scent they’re looking for is here, we’re done for.”

“Oh.” Sophie put a hand to her throat. “What...how long do we have? What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to mark you. Right now.” Reaching out, he gripped her upper arm before she could dodge away. “On the bed. I need you out of your clothes—*all* of them.”

Sophie’s mouth was so dry she couldn’t even scream—not that it would do her any good even if she could’ve. “Sylvan...Sylvan, please,” she whispered.

“I said *now*.” His voice was a muted roar and his face was still the mask of a beast. Gone was the kind, patient male who had carried her for miles, gone was the gentle soul who had healed her wounds so tenderly. In his place was a monster—at least that was how he looked to Sophie.

“I d-don’t understand,” she stammered, unbuttoning the blue uniform shirt reluctantly. “Why...why do I have to be naked?”

His eyes blazed. “You told me you knew about scent marking.”

“I thought I did,” she protested. “But—” The rest of her words were lost as he stripped the loose shirt from her shoulders and led her forcefully to the bed.

“Lay down.” It was a command, not a request.

Sophie was too frightened to disobey but inside the panic was taking hold. *What is he going to do to me? This is like a nightmare. A horror story. I can’t get away, there’s no place to run. What am I going to do?*

She climbed on the bed and lay there, shivering, with her arms crossed over her breasts. Wondering what he was going to do next.

She didn’t have long to wonder.

With quick, efficient movements, Sylvan stripped off his tight black uniform pants and tall black boots, baring himself with no shame. Clearly he was

completely intent on the task at hand—whatever that was. His mating scent was still strong in the air and Sophie could feel her body responding to it—her nipples were hard and her pussy was wet—but her mind was a seething mass of fear and dismay as she watched him strip.

But as frightening as he was, she couldn't take her eyes off of him.

Sylvan naked was even more imposing than Sylvan clothed. His broad shoulders and chest led down to a set of six pack abs and trim hips that put any other man she'd ever seen to shame. But it was his muscular thighs that held Sophie's attention—or rather what was between them.

Sophie remembered that Kat had once joked that all Kindred were hung like Clydesdales. And to her dawning horror, it was obvious that Sylvan was no exception. Long and hard and fully erect, the club of his sex looked as thick as her wrist and its broad, mushroom shaped head rose to the level of his navel. Sophie hadn't seen much male equipment but to her it looked angry and red—a battering ram ready to breach her defenses whether she wanted it to or not.

He's so big. How is he ever going to fit that thing inside me? Because by now she was sure that was exactly what he planned to do. He was going to take her right here and now and there was nothing she could do to stop him—no way to get away. Outside the *urlich* were hunting her and inside her worst nightmare was about to happen. The cabin, which had been a welcome refuge, was now her cage.

She was trapped.

Her mind ran in circles. *Not again. Please, God, I can't stand it again. Oh please...*

"Take the panties off too." His voice was rough.

"But..." Sophie covered herself protectively. "But Sylvan..."

"I need to completely eradicate your scent—can't do that with a barrier between us." He nodded at her lace panties again. "Take them *off*."

"I...all right," she whispered. She'd been in this situation before and she knew from bitter experience that fighting would do her no good. *I can't stop him. All I*

can do is try to survive it. Sophie sat up, trying to cover her breasts with one arm. Feeling horribly naked and vulnerable she pushed the panties down her hips with one hand. When she had them down to her ankles, Sylvan pulled them off and tossed them carelessly in the corner.

Then he climbed on the bed with her.

“Open yourself,” he ordered in a low growl. “I can’t mark you unless you’re completely open to me.”

Her chest felt unbearably tight, her entire body shaking with fear, but there was nothing else she could do. *Maybe it will be over with quickly. Maybe it won’t hurt that much. Maybe if I just try not to think about it...* But she could think of nothing else.

In a last gesture of despair, Sophie lay back and parted her legs for him, spreading her thighs as he had commanded. The past and the present were blending together now. Her mind was filling with the memory she’d worked so hard to suppress. *The dark room. His hand on my mouth. His body so heavy on mine. The pain between my legs—so sharp it makes me scream. But no one can hear me. No one cares. There’s no way out, nothing I can do to stop it from happening. I’m trapped...trapped...*

The big warrior was about to reenact her worst nightmare and she couldn’t stand to watch. Throwing an arm over her eyes, she turned her head to one side. And as Sylvan lowered himself on top of her, she let out a low, hitching sob.

* * * * *

The soft sound of distress broke through the red haze of anger, aggression, and the territorial need to mark and claim that had taken over Sylvan’s brain. *It was the rage—the rage came over me!* He could scarcely believe it but it must be true. All his life he’d heard other Kindred talk about the all-enveloping protective anger that filled and overpowered them when a bride was threatened but he’d never expected to experience it himself. He was cold, logical, above such things.

Well, apparently not where Sophia is concerned.

From the minute he'd heard the *urlich* at the door all he'd been able to think about was keeping her safe in any way necessary. And since it was her scent they were following, he had to eliminate it—to change it completely by masking it with his own. Instinctively he knew that when faced with the odor of his unleashed aggression, no sniffer would dare to come within a hundred yards of the small cabin they were staying in.

Unfortunately, he'd been so set on his purpose that he'd completely forgotten to consider the human girl he was protecting. Looking down at her now with clear eyes, he suddenly saw how she trembled under him. She had opened herself as he ordered, true, but her entire body spoke of reluctance and fear and her scent was muted with despair.

Look at her. Her shoulders are tense, she's covering her breasts with one arm and her other arm is over her eyes, as though she can't bear to look at me. To see what I'm doing.

"Sophia?" he whispered roughly, rolling to one side. "Sophia, are you all right?"

"Don't..." Her voice was a broken whisper. "Please don't. Don't do it to me again. I can't stand it again."

"Do what to you?" He tried to make his voice soft and non-threatening. "Sophia please..." Gently he pried her arm from her face to find her beautiful green eyes were filled with tears. She looked up at him and Sylvan knew beyond the shadow of a doubt that the horror and fear in her face was all due to him. *Goddess, Mother of All Life, what have I done?* He tried to cup her cheek but she shied away from his touch.

"Please..." She shook her head. "If you're going to do it, can't you just...just get it over with?"

"I was only going to mark you. To use my scent glands to cover your scent with my own," he protested, but it was clear that Sophia was beyond reason. She just kept trembling and crying, the tears running down her flushed cheeks and her shoulders shaking with barely suppressed sobs.

Sylvan felt like his heart was breaking. No, not just breaking—it felt like someone had ripped the beating muscle from his chest and thrust it into a fiery forge. This female—the female he would rather die than hurt—was shaking herself apart and he was the cause of her distress. *She thought I was going to hurt her—to take her by force. Goddess, no wonder she’s so upset.*

“Sophia,” he murmured. “I’m sorry. So damned sorry.” Wanting to remove the threat, he got off the bed and put his pants and boots back on. But when he sat back down beside her and put a hand on her arm, she flinched away from him again, her face drawn with fear.

Again Sylvan felt his heart twist in the flames. It was *agony*—burning in the seven hells couldn’t be worse than this—than seeing that look on her face and knowing he had put it there. “Look,” he whispered brokenly, taking his uniform shirt and draping it over her to cover her nakedness. “I...I’m dressed. I’m not going to hurt you. I won’t even mark you if you don’t want me to. I swear it.”

At last his words seemed to get through to her and she looked up, her eyes red from crying. “B-but I th-thought...you said if they smelled me they’d attack.”

He nodded. “Yes.”

“But...” She blinked up at him. “You’ll be killed.”

“I don’t care.” Sylvan held her eyes with his. “I’d rather die than cause you such pain.”

“I’m sorry...” She wiped at her tears and sat up, clutching the shirt to her. “I just thought...”

“I know what you thought. But I would never take you by force. *Never.*” He let the vehemence he felt creep into his voice and at last she seemed to be convinced.

“Thank you,” she whispered, wiping her eyes again. “You just looked so scary. It was just like when Burke—”

“Who?”

She shook her head and turned her attention to getting the shirt back on without exposing herself. “Never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

It appeared to matter a great deal to Sylvan but now wasn't the time to address it. "Come here," he said, holding out his arms to her. "Please?"

Sophia looked at him doubtfully. "Why?"

"I was about to heal you before the *urlich* showed up," he said quietly, trying to gauge the effect his words had on her. "Would you let me take up where we left off?"

Sophia still didn't look completely willing but at least she was no longer afraid to come to him. When she got close enough, Sylvan gathered her into his arms and held her in his lap. She stiffened against him at first but then, when he didn't do anything but hold her, she began to relax.

Sylvan held her as tightly as he dared, breathing in her scent and feeling his heart burn. Goddess, how he wanted her! He'd never felt this way for any female before. The urgent need to protect, to shelter, to comfort and love and care for her swelled inside him until he could barely breathe. But he didn't want to scare her again, not even if all the *urlich* in the Scourge Fathership were after them.

At last, after a long silence, she spoke. "I...I thought you were going to heal my lip."

Sylvan stroked her hair which had come loose from the knot at the back of her neck and now cascaded down her shoulders in soft chestnut waves. "I thought your heart needed healing first."

She shifted against him, getting more comfortable. "This is nice," she admitted softly. "I...I'm sorry I freaked out on you."

"The fault is entirely mine," Sylvan murmured. "The *urlich* aroused my protective *rage*. And then I got so completely focused on marking you I forgot to consider your feelings. Can you forgive me?"

"I...I think so." She looked up at him. "I guess you can't help the way you get when there's an enemy around. But please just...don't come at me that way again."

"I won't. I swear it." He meant it from the bottom of his heart and Sophia seemed to sense his sincerity.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her gaze still locked with his. “I...I appreciate that.”

“I don’t want you to fear me.” Sylvan heard the break in his own voice but he couldn’t help it. “I would die to protect you, Sophia. To think you would believe I could hurt you in any way—especially *that* way...” But he couldn’t go on.

“Sylvan...” She was looking at him with something like wonder on her face. “You...you’re crying,” she whispered. She sounded like she could hardly believe it.

Sylvan didn’t believe it himself. “No, I’m not.” He had never given in to such emotion, never allowed himself such weakness before. Even after his father’s passing and Feenah’s betrayal, not so much as a single tear had come to his eyes.

But Sophia was nodding. “Yes, you are. Or at least, you’re sort of leaking a little.” Reaching up, she brushed lightly at his cheek. “See?” She held out her hand. To his surprise her fingertips were wet.

“I’m sorry,” he said stiffly.

“Why?” Sophia sounded genuinely curious.

He shook his head. “To show such weakness before one I am supposed to protect...it is unacceptable. Unforgivable.”

“No, it’s not.” Suddenly she put her arms around his neck and hugged him. “It’s not, Sylvan,” she whispered in his ear, pressing her soft cheek against his. “Not at all, I promise you.”

His heart swelled until he thought it might burst and he hugged her back carefully. He no longer cared if the *urlich* and the AllFather with all his hellish legions came upon him and killed him. At that moment, with Sophia willingly in his arms and her sweet feminine fragrance invading his senses, he knew he could die a happy and contented male. *But she’ll die too. Or be captured without you to protect her.*

Sophia must have had the same thought because after a long moment she pulled back and looked at him seriously.

“How long do we have until they come back and find us?” she asked softly.

Sylvan shrugged. "It could be an hour or several hours. It depends on how widely scattered their pack was in the first place and how far away the lead *urlich* is. They won't form a consensus without her."

"Her?" She frowned. "I thought everything to do with the Scourge was male. I mean, they have the AllFather and you were saying they don't have any females..."

He nodded. "This is the one exception. Female *urlich* are craftier and more intelligent. So while the others in the pack might be male, the lead is always a female."

Sophie sat up straighter in his lap and looked him in the eye. "Well, whatever they are, you need to mark me before they get back to us."

"No." He frowned. "No, Sophia. Absolutely not." He'd been looking forward to the feel of her soft, naked body under his but clearly it was not to be.

However, now that she no longer felt threatened, there was a stubborn look in her lovely green eyes. "I don't accept that. I won't let my...my phobia be the cause of your death."

A phobia, is it? They would have to address that later—if there was a later. And he wanted to know who "Burke" was too. But right now he'd barely gained her trust—he wasn't about to throw it away for any reason. "I won't do it," he told her.

"But—"

"Think what you're asking, Sophia," he said gently. "If I mark you the traditional way I'll have to be on top of you, completely naked and you'll have to be naked as well, under me, open for me. I'll have to be touching you, rubbing myself against you. Do you really think you can handle that with your..." He paused, trying to think how to put it. "With your *phobia*?" he finished, using her word.

Sophia paled and he could see she was considering what he'd said. "No," she said at last in a low voice. "No I...I'm pretty sure having you, uh, on top of me would probably set me off again." She looked up at him. "But...didn't you say

earlier there was another way to, uh, to mark a female? I mean...when you were talking about...about wanting to...to taste me..." Her voice had fallen so low that he could barely hear it and her cheeks were a bright pink. "I mean, if you...if that wouldn't bother you too much." She looked down at her small hands as though she couldn't stand to meet his eyes.

Sylvan found her embarrassment both charming and incredibly arousing.

"I *could* mark you with my mouth," he said, a surge of lust rushing through him at the thought. *To kneel before her and spread her open, to taste her sweet juices and lap her soft little pussy until she moans and cries...* Goddess how he wanted that! But he wanted to be careful with her as well. "We Kindred have scent glands around our lips and mouths as well as between our legs," he told her. "But I don't want to hurt or embarrass you."

Sophie looked up at him again, the light of determination in her eyes. "I trust you not to hurt me and, well, being embarrassed is better than being dead," she said in a voice that wavered only a little. "And I mean, you could just kind of...uh, rub against me some? Maybe? I mean you wouldn't have to actually...you know."

"I could," he agreed gravely. "Though I would have to be very, *very* thorough. The scent glands around my mouth aren't as strong as those on my shaft."

"That's all right." She looked down at her hands again. "As long as you're not on top of me, I think...think I can handle it. That is... if...if you really don't mind."

"Sophia, look at me." Lifting her chin gently, he made her look into his eyes. "Nothing on this world or any other would give me more pleasure than spreading you open and tasting your sweet juices," he murmured. "You need never have a question about that."

"Oh," she whispered and her cheeks were nearly crimson now. "I...thank you, I guess."

"But I realize," Sylvan continued, trying to gauge her reaction. "That we're doing this for necessity, not pleasure. So if you'd rather, I can try to keep it..." He frowned. "I don't know the word in your language."

"Businesslike?" she offered. "Professional?"

Sylvan nodded. "Yes, I guess those work. What I'm saying is, I don't want to make you any more uncomfortable than you already are. So I'll just do what is necessary—no more, no less."

"Okay." She was looking a little more comfortable with the idea now, which eased his heart. No matter how much he longed to savor her juices and bring her to orgasm again and again, her comfort was more important than his need. "Just one more thing," she said in a small voice.

"Anything," Sylvan told her. "You have only to ask, *Talana*."

"I...well...I don't want to offend you but..." She hesitated for a long moment but he waited patiently until she went on. "Could you do it...uh mark me...without letting your...your fangs come out?" she asked at last. "I mean, it's not that I don't trust you but that's kind of a very delicate area and...and..."

"No, it's all right. I understand." He nodded, trying to look unconcerned but inside his heart burned again. *She still fears me. Still fears what I am.* "I can do that—hold them back if I concentrate," he said. Though it was going to hurt like a son of a bitch.

"Oh thank you. Thank you for understanding." She looked so relieved that Sylvan couldn't help feeling another twinge. Of course, under normal circumstances, Blood Kindred never made love without his fangs completely extended. Then again, if these were normal circumstances he would be planning to bite her thigh at the moment she came and Sylvan knew she would never agree to that. *It's for necessity, not pleasure*, he reminded himself sternly. *She doesn't actually want you to taste her—just mark her, that's all.*

"It's all right," he said roughly, stroking her hair. "In fact, I'll make you a promise here and now, Sophia. I will never bite you for any reason—unless you ask me to."

Her eyes widened. "Really?"

He nodded. "Really. I swear it as a Blood Kindred and a warrior. And we do not break our oaths."

“I know that well enough, by now.” She smiled and reached out tentatively to brush his cheek. “Thank you, Sylvan. You really know how to put me at ease.”

“I’m glad you feel safe with me again,” he said sincerely. “But we really should get started. We don’t know when the *urlich* will come back.”

“All right.” Slowly she slid from his lap and settled herself on the bed again with her thighs slightly apart. “I guess I’m ready.”

“I’ll try to take things slowly and let you know what I’m doing each step of the way,” Sylvan assured her.

“Thank you,” she whispered, shifting her hips a little, as though trying to get comfortable. “I’ve, uh, just so you know I’ve never done this—or had it done to me, I guess—before. So I’m not quite sure how—”

“Like this.” Lust surged inside him again as he positioned her gently, pulling her down to the end of the bed until her calves and feet hung over the side.

“*Oh.*” She propped herself up on her elbows and watched him anxiously as he knelt on the floor between her legs. “Why...why like that?”

“It’s the best way to open you completely,” Sylvan explained, placing his hands on her inner thighs. “I told you I’ll have to be very thorough. I need to be able to spread you open and stay between your legs for a long, long time. Long enough to mark you completely.”

“Oh,” she whispered again and there was a soft, breathless tone to her voice that told him she was embarrassed and excited at once. He liked hearing that tone—liked it a *lot*.

“You can watch if you want,” he offered, caressing her thighs. Gods but she had such soft, smooth skin... “If you’ve never been tasted before you might want to see what I’m doing.”

Her face was bright pink now but she was watching him with a fascination that belied her embarrassment. “You...you wouldn’t mind?”

“I’d love it,” Sylvan assured her in a low voice. “I’d love to be able to look up and see your face while I’m marking you. In fact...here.” Standing for a moment he took several of the pillows from the head of the bed and propped them behind

her back. “There,” he said, resuming his position between her legs. “Might as well get comfortable. We’re going to be here for awhile.”

“Okay,” she breathed. “Thank you.”

“No.” Sylvan bowed his head briefly. “Thank *you* for allowing me to mark you, Sophia. You honor me with your trust and the gift of your body.”

“Sylvan...” she murmured, lingering over his name in a way that sent another surge of lust through him. Gods, how he wanted to hear her call for him in the throes of passion! *But I’m only here to mark, not taste*, he reminded himself sternly.

“I’m going to begin now, *Talana*,” he told her. Slowly, trying to gauge her reaction, he unbuttoned the last few buttons of the blue uniform shirt and spread it open, baring her completely for him. Sophie shifted a little but said nothing, so he placed both hands on her thighs and began to part them gently but firmly.

At first she trembled under his touch and resisted him but Sylvan looked up and caught her gaze. “Look at me, Sophia,” he commanded softly. “I’m not going to hurt you. I only want to mark you and bring you pleasure. Can you open yourself for me and let me do that?”

She looked at his face for a long moment and what she saw must have reassured her. Slowly she nodded. “...yes.”

“Good.” He applied gentle pressure again and this time her knees parted completely, revealing the soft little mound of her sex.

For a moment Sylvan just looked at her. She was so beautiful, so perfectly formed it took his breath away. His fangs, which had automatically retracted when he’d sensed her fear and anguish, were already aching to come out. Again he had the sensation of his cock being trapped in too-tight pants but he set his teeth and grimly ignored it. This was about pleasing Sophia. Showing her he wasn’t a beast—that he could be gentle and non-threatening and tender. That was all that mattered.

Sophia must have misinterpreted his silence because she cleared her throat and shifted uncomfortably.

“Uh, I’m sorry I’m not waxed or anything. That, uh, area doesn’t really see a lot of action so—”

“You’re perfect.” Sylvan looked up at her, letting her see the admiration and lust in his eyes. “And I like your curls.” He brushed his fingertips over them lightly, making her shiver in response. “They make you more sensitive, I think.”

Sophie looked relieved. “Okay, if you’re sure you don’t mind...”

“I don’t,” Sylvan assured her, looking between her thighs again. Gods but her fragrance was delicious. And the outer lips of her sex were so pink and soft and innocent looking—like the petals of an exotic flower that had yet to bloom.

Sylvan knew she was no virgin—the things she’d said led him to believe as much. And as for her “phobia”—there had to be a cause for it. Possibly a past lover had hurt or frightened her. *Or worse*, he thought darkly. But whatever the case, she couldn’t have had many lovers—or any that knew what they were doing. How could any man have access to such beauty and ignore it? How could he not wish to be between her legs for hours every day, exploring her lush pussy with his tongue?

She shifted again. “Is...is everything okay?”

“Fine.” Sylvan realized he was spending too much time admiring her. “Forgive me,” he told her. “But you’re so beautiful I don’t want to rush things.”

“Yes, but the *urlich*...”

“You’re right.” Bending, he pressed his face to her inner thigh, breathing in her heady aroma before looking up at her. “It’s time we began.”

Chapter Fourteen

Sophie couldn't believe she was letting him do this. After her scare earlier when she'd been sure he was going to do the unthinkable, she wouldn't have thought she could ever trust him again. Let alone trust him enough to spread her legs for him and let him put his mouth on her. But the look on his face when he'd realized how badly he had scared her had changed her mind.

And his tears, she thought watching him as he bent over her. There had only been a few and he had been completely silent as they fell—nothing like her own inconsolable sobbing. But they had touched her deeply. Somehow she knew those ice blue eyes didn't cry often or easily—if at all. Yet he had wept for the pain he'd caused her and she had heard the anguish in his voice when he asked her forgiveness. It touched her heart somehow, made her want to give him another chance.

A long sigh fell out of her as he pressed his face to her inner thigh, rubbing his slightly scratchy cheek against her skin, almost like a cat. *I just can't figure him out—he's such a contradiction. One minute he's this fearsome warrior, scary enough to give anyone nightmares for a month and the next he's utterly gentle and sweet. And patient and kind and...watch it, Sophie*, she told herself sternly. *Don't forget that under those kissable-looking lips are a pair of fangs that would make Dracula jealous. And—*

But just then all coherent thought was driven from her mind because Sylvan was tasting her.

Not her pussy—not yet. But he was running his tongue slowly up her inner thigh in a way that made her heart pound madly against her ribs.

"What..." she whispered uncertainly. "Why...?"

Sylvan looked up. "The moisture will help my scent adhere to your skin. Do you object to me licking you?"

"No, I...no," Sophie whispered.

“Good.” His eyes burned with need. “Because I’m going to have to do a lot of licking to mark you properly.”

“I just...wasn’t expecting it. I guess I just thought you’d, you know, dive right in?”

He frowned slightly. “Where would be the pleasure in that? I want to savor you, Sophia. To burn the memory of you opening for me into my mind forever.”

“Oh,” she gasped as he licked her other thigh, his warm wet tongue stopping just short of her outer pussy lips. God, but he was sexy when he talked like that! She almost felt like she could come just from hearing his deep, warm voice. *But of course I’m not going to be coming*, she told herself sternly. *He’s just marking me—just masking my scent. That’s all.*

Trying to keep that thought in mind, she watched as he continued to bathe her thighs with his tongue, tracing the tender crease where each leg joined her body but never *quite* touching her center, until she felt like she was going to scream with anticipation.

Sylvan must have sensed her impatience because he looked up at her, eyes blazing and murmured, “Are you ready for me to mark your pussy now, Sophia?”

“Y-yes. I guess so,” she stammered. God, she still couldn’t believe he was doing this—even more unbelievable was that she *wanted* him to. Wanted to feel his warm lips and hot breath against her pussy in a way she’d never wanted anything before.

Sylvan was watching her—feeding off the need she was certain he could see on her face. Still, he took things slowly. “I’ll just mark the outside at first,” he promised softly. “I won’t spread you open and mark the inside of your pussy until I’m sure you’re ready.”

“Th-thank you.” God, why couldn’t she speak without stuttering? But her heart was beating so hard it was difficult to talk at all—let alone coherently.

Sylvan gave her a little half smile, then pressed his cheek directly to her mound and inhaled deeply. “Gods, your fragrance is so enticing.” His deep voice

had dropped to a lustful growl that seemed to do strange things to Sophia's insides. "It's almost a shame to mask it. I could breathe you in all day."

"You could?" It seemed hard to believe he liked it so much, but the hungry look in his eyes let her know he was telling the truth. In fact, the aroma of her pussy seemed to act on him like catnip would on a cat.

"Mm-hmm, I could." Turning his face, he rubbed his other cheek against the soft, light brown curls that decorated her mound and then used his lips the same way.

It was all incredibly stimulating but she was beginning to wonder if he would *ever* get around to marking her actual pussy. The need in her was growing stronger. And even though she tried to tell herself he was only doing this out of necessity and she shouldn't get too excited, she couldn't help clutching the bedspread every time he touched her.

Sylvan seemed to sense her impatience because he looked up at her and murmured, "Your outer lips first."

"O-okay." Sophie nodded.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "I'll need to lick you again. A lot."

"That...that's okay." She nodded again, trying to appear unconcerned even though her heart was thundering in her ears.

"Slowly," Sylvan said and she wasn't sure if he was talking to her or himself. But the next minute the question was driven out of her head by his first long, slow lick.

He started on the right side of her pussy, only caressing her outer lips with his tongue, obviously taking his time. First he flattened his tongue and lapped upward, and then he sucked her briefly into his mouth before repeating the slow, upward lick. It was like he was eating a dripping ice cream cone, trying to lap it all up before it melted completely—which was exactly what Sophie felt was happening to her. She was melting into a puddle under his slow, patient tongue, losing herself in the pleasure and anticipation he was creating.

By the time he got around to the left side of her pussy, her breathing was fast and short. She could feel his hot breath on her clit, which was swollen and peeping out from between her outer lips. But Sylvan was careful to avoid touching it, concentrating exclusively on the outside of her pussy, just as he had promised. *Which is fine*, she told herself sternly, trying to control her breathing. *After all, it's not like I **want** him to lick me there—inside. It's probably going to be incredibly embarrassing, anyway. So why would I want it?*

But she *did* want it—she couldn't help herself. Watching Sylvan between her legs, making love to her with his mouth so reverently had done something to her—made her want things she'd never even dreamed of before. And the desire had a momentum of its own—once started, it kept growing until it seemed impossible to turn off.

Sylvan seemed to be enjoying himself as much as she was, making low noises of desire in his throat as he lapped and sucked. Every now and then he looked up and met her eyes as he took another slow, seductive lick. Sophie almost couldn't look at him—at the lust in those pale blue eyes that was wholly directed at her. And yet she couldn't look away, either. Both of them were caught up in the act they were playing out together, she realized. They might be doing it out of necessity but there was no use denying the pleasure it gave her to receive his soft, intimate kisses or the pleasure he took in giving them.

At last, after what seemed like an eternity, he looked up at her again with half-lidded eyes. "It's time, *Talana*," he murmured, his deep voice hoarse. "I need to mark the inside of your pussy. Are you ready to let me spread you open?"

"I...I guess so." Sophie wished her voice wouldn't tremble so much. But it was beyond her control—the anticipation he had built in her like a slow fire felt like it was about to explode and burn her to ashes.

He arched an eyebrow. "You're sure?"

"Yes." Sophie nodded, feeling her cheeks grow hot. "I mean, yes, *please*. I...I don't know what I'd do if you stopped now." She didn't know where she got the boldness to say such a thing—it just somehow came out.

Her timid display of eagerness seemed to please Sylvan because he made a soft, growling sound of approval. “I don’t either. Of course, I need to mark you thoroughly—but I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to taste your sweet inner pussy, Sophia.”

Then slowly, deliberately, he placed his thumbs on her outer lips and spread her wide.

Sophie moaned softly when she felt the cool air caress her heated inner folds. Once again she had the sensation of melting like an ice cream cone and...*Oh no!* She looked down to where Sylvan was holding her open so gently and felt her stomach clench. She really *was* dripping like an ice cream cone. The inside of her pussy was so wet she was literally *leaking*.

“Oh my God!” She struggled to get up, to shut her legs, but Sylvan held her in place gently but firmly.

“What’s wrong?” he asked, looking at her anxiously. “Did I open you too soon?”

“No, I...” Sophie shook her head, her cheeks flaming with embarrassment. “I’m really sorry. I didn’t realize I was getting so...so...”

“So wet?” The lust in his deep voice surprised her. She stopped trying to close her legs and looked at him uncertainly.

“Yes. I mean, I’ve never...I told you no one has ever done this to me so I didn’t know I’d...I’d make such a mess. I mean, I’m so *sorry*.”

“Don’t be.” He looked up at her with that maddening little half-smile of his. “You’re a *numala*. That’s all.”

“A...a what?”

He shook his head. “I don’t think there’s a word for it in your language. But in my native tongue it translates as ‘liquid pussy.’ A female who gets so wet it’s like dipping your face in a tropical ocean when you taste her.”

“And that’s a *bad* thing, right?” Sophie asked anxiously. “I mean to be a nu...a nu-whatever you call it.”

“A *numala* and actually it’s considered a very *good* thing,” he murmured. “Such females are highly prized. Any male that has one as a mate is envied.”

“But...but why?” Sophie asked in a whisper. “I mean, it’s so...so *embarrassing*.”

“It’s beautiful,” he corrected her gently. “Just look at yourself, Sophia.”

“I *am* looking.”

“Look harder—see yourself as I see you. Your soft little pussy is so full and swollen...your folds are such a deep, gorgeous pink.” He looked up at her slowly. “And you’re so *wet*. So generous with your cunt honey, my beautiful *numala*,” he murmured.

“I...I...” Sophie wasn’t sure what to say. She only knew she couldn’t look away from him, that his eyes were holding hers captive as surely as his thumbs were holding her pussy open, spread wide for his pleasure.

“May I taste you?” he asked, his voice deep with need. “Not just to mark you, *Talana*. I want to bring you pleasure. To taste your nectar from the source.”

Sophie felt like her heart was about to beat out of her chest. “You...you really want to?” she whispered, almost inaudibly.

“You have no idea how much I want to,” he said softly. “Let me prove to you how beautiful you are. And how delicious.” Ducking his head, he placed the tip of his tongue at the bottom of her slit. Then, his eyes never leaving hers, he flattened his tongue and lapped upward long and slow, capturing as much of her honey as he could.

Sophie’s hips bucked upward as his heated tongue finally made contact with her clit and she moaned involuntarily at the hot sight. *God, he wasn’t kidding—he really **does** like it.* She could scarcely believe it but the way Sylvan immediately went back for more let her know it was true.

She didn’t know how long it went on for but it seemed like ages and ages. Even now that he had gotten to the “main event,” Sylvan seemed content to take his time, tasting her slowly, teasing her exquisitely until the muscles of her thighs

and belly were twitching with tension and her breath was coming in short, excited pants.

“Sylvan,” she moaned at last. “Sylvan please, you...you’re making me *insane*. I don’t think I can stand much more.”

“You’ll have to.” He looked up at her, his eyes filled with need. “I still have to spread my scent inside you, at the source.”

“The...the source?”

He nodded. “I need to put my tongue inside your pussy, Sophia. Your scent is strongest there, I have to mask it with my own.”

“I...all right.” She didn’t know how much more she could bear—it seemed he’d had her teetering right on the edge for hours and she was so close...so *close*...

“It’s all right, *Talana*.” Sylvan’s voice was low and comforting. Leaning forward he placed a tender, open-mouthed kiss on her throbbing clit. “Just let me spread my scent inside you and I swear I’ll end this torture.”

Sophie moaned at the gentle touch on her sensitive button. “Please just *hurry*. I’m going crazy. I need...I need...” But she couldn’t say what she needed.

Sylvan said it for her. “You need to *come*, Sophia,” he murmured, looking her in the eyes. “And I swear I’m going give you that soon—going to make you come, hard and long. But for right now I need you to be patient.”

Before Sophie could say anything he slid both hands under her buttocks and lifted her up, like a thirsty man might lift a bowl of cool water. “Put your legs over my shoulders,” he commanded, looking up at her again. “That will help to open you up. I need to get as deep in your pussy as I can.”

Clenching her hands in the covers, Sophie did as she was told. She felt tilted at an awkward angle and yet, the expression on Sylvan’s face was almost worth it. He looked so intent, so full of desire for her...And then he pressed his mouth to her entrance and plunged his tongue deep in her pussy.

Though she’d know what he was going to do, it was still an unexpected sensation. The heat of his tongue filling her, and thrusting even deeper while his lips pressed against her clit, make her gasp and writhe under him. Her toes

curled and her hands, which had been buried in the covers, somehow crept up to his head. His spiky dark blond hair whispered against her palms. She didn't quite dare to run her fingers through it, though she needed to grab onto *something* as he continued to tonguefuck her long and deep and hard.

"It's all right." Sylvan looked up, his mouth shiny with her juices and his eyes blazing with need. "It's all right, *Talana*. Hold on to me if you need to."

"You don't mind?" Her fingers slid through the dark blond strands, as soft as silk. "Really?"

"Really." His voice was almost a growl. "I *want* you to. Want to feel your soft little hands on me while I eat your cunt."

"God!" Her fingers tightened in his hair and her back arched. "Please, Sylvan, *more...*"

"I'll give you more but I'm afraid I'll have to use my fingers."

"If...if you need to, but why?"

"You're deep." His eyes flashed with lust. "Can't reach the end of your channel with just my tongue." Keeping his eyes locked with hers, he sucked two of his fingers into his mouth, making them wet. He pressed them lightly against her entrance and then stopped. "Sophia," he asked, his voice rough. "May I have permission to enter you?"

"But...you already have," she whispered breathlessly. "I mean...with your tongue."

"It's not the same." He shook his head. "Blood Kindred ask our females permission before we enter them with fingers or cock. I would never penetrate you without your consent."

His words brought up a memory—or tried to anyway. But Sophia pushed it down. *Don't want to think about that now. Just want to let go.*

"Yes," she said softly but clearly, looking into his eyes. "Yes, Sylvan. Please... please enter me. I *want* you to."

A low groan of pure lust broke from his lips. "Gods, *Talana*, you don't know what it does to me to hear you say that."

He slipped two long, thick fingers into his mouth and sucked them. Then, his eyes never leaving hers, he slid his thick digits deep into her pussy, pressing until he found the end of her channel. Sophie moaned as he thrust into her over and over, his fingers slick with her juices. But just as she thought she was going to explode, he did something else.

Rotating his hand so it was palm up, he pulled back his fingers until they were only halfway buried inside her. Then he pressed upwards with his fingertips, making a sort of “come on” gestures.

“*Oh!*” Sophie gasped and jerked in his one-handed grasp. “Oh my God—what was *that?*”

“You like it?” He raised an eyebrow at her, smiling.

“Y-yes. It’s so...” But she didn’t know what it was—only that it felt amazing.

“The females of my kind have a special bundle of nerves here—I think your people call it a G spot?” He pressed up again, making her moan. “When stroked just the right way, I’m told the pleasure can be intense.”

“It...It’s pretty intense all right. Ah!” she gasped when he did it again...and again...and again. It was a deeper pleasure than when he’d licked her clit but somehow akin to it. Sophia felt like she was on fire from the waist down and if someone didn’t put her out soon she was going to die. “Sylvan!” she begged, tugging his hair. “Please, if you don’t let me...let me come soon...I just...I don’t know what I’m going to do.”

“I *want* you to come.” His pale blue eyes blazed like burning ice. “Want you to come all over my face, *Talana* and let me taste your juices on my tongue.”

Pressing his mouth to her pussy once more, he sucked her clit between his lips and began to flick the tiny nubbin relentlessly. At the same time he made the motion with his fingers again, deeper and harder this time.

Sophie had never felt anything like it before—the convergence of delicious sensations overwhelmed her and suddenly it was too much. Simply too, too, *too much*.

Her orgasm hit like a bolt of lightning and her back arched so violently it was all Sylvan could do to stay with her. Not that he could have gotten away at that point—she had both legs hooked over his broad shoulders and her fingers clenched tight in his hair, urging him on.

“Sylvan! Oh God, Sylvan please...*please*.” Dimly she heard herself and wondered if this could really be happening. Was that really her—timid little Sophie—sobbing his name, begging for more, writhing against him and riding his tongue shamelessly? She felt like she’d fallen into an alternate universe somehow. But it really *was* her—she was doing all those things and more, acting completely wild and uninhibited.

Sylvan, for his part, seemed as completely caught up in her orgasm as she was. With a low, hungry growl, he hooked his muscular arms around her thighs, spreading her even wider, holding her open as he lapped and sucked. He pressed his tongue deep into her pussy and teased her clit until she felt like she might die of the intense pleasure. Her heart was pounding so hard it felt like it was trying to break out of her chest and she couldn’t catch her breath. But she didn’t care—she was flying, finally breaking free and losing herself in a way she’d never dreamed was possible.

She never wanted it to end.

* * * * *

Sylvan’s cock felt like a bar of hot lead in his flight pants and his fangs ached incessantly, begging to be let out. But none of that mattered—not now. Not when she was clenching her small hands in his hair and calling his name—his *name*—as she came over and over. Goddess above but she tasted amazing—sweet and salty and utterly perfect. And the amount of cunt honey she made was so sexy. It coated his lips and mouth and entire lower jaw. His cheeks were wet with it and still he could taste fresh wetness every time he pressed his tongue deep in her overflowing well.

So deep, so hot and wet...she would be able to take me. To take all of me inside her. My cock would fit perfectly. He knew it was just a fantasy but the

image of Sophia straddling him and lowering herself onto his erect shaft wouldn't leave his mind. Beast Kindred made hormones that allowed their mates to accommodate their unusually large and thick shafts, but Blood Kindred did not. Sylvan had even heard of some Earth brides having difficulty accepting their Kindred husband's cocks deep in their pussies. But he could tell from tasting and touching her that Sophie would have no such problem. It would be a tight fit—deliciously tight—but he would be able to sink to the hilt inside her.

It's never going to happen so just forget about it. Enjoy what you have been granted for now, a reproving little voice in his head whispered. Yes, that was good advice. Especially since Sophia seemed to be winding down a little bit.

Her wild bucking and moaning had slowed and her grip in his hair had loosened a little. Sylvan flattened his tongue and lapped gently upward, testing her sensitivity. As he brushed over her clit she trembled and pulled away just a little. Obviously she'd had enough for now. But Gods, how he hated to stop. When would he ever have such an opportunity again? *Never*, whispered that same little voice. *Once you get back to the ship this will all be a distant memory, never to be repeated.*

"Sylvan," she whispered. The warmth in her tone helped him push the depressing thoughts aside and drew his eyes up to hers.

"Sophia? Are you all right?"

"Mmm, more than all right." She was smiling—a sunny expression of pure contentment he'd never seen on her face before. It turned her from beautiful to utterly radiant.

Sylvan felt his heart lurch in his chest. How could he ever give her up? And yet he would have to. Even if it wasn't for his vow, Sophia didn't want him—not really. After all, what would happen right now if he allowed his fangs to come out, as they were aching to do? *She would be frightened of me all over again and I'd lose every bit of her trust I've worked so hard to gain.* He knew it was true but he couldn't be upset with her about it. Not when she looked like such a goddess. A well *satisfied* goddess, which gave Sylvan his own warm feeling of satisfaction.

“You look happy,” he remarked, nuzzling one of her inner thighs gently with his chin.

“Do I?” She grinned. “I guess I *feel* happy. Silly, huh?”

“Not at all.” Sylvan lapped some stray honey from her other thigh with the flat of his tongue. “Your body was very hungry for pleasure. When was the last time you came?”

“Before tonight? I...I don’t know. Why would you ask me that?” Her cheeks were getting pink—a sure sign she was embarrassed.

Sylvan nuzzled her again reassuringly. “Don’t be upset—I’m not asking about your past lovers. Just when the last time you pleased yourself was.”

“That’s, uh, kind of an intimate question, don’t you think?”

“We’re in an intimate situation,” Sylvan pointed out. “I just thought if you allowed yourself a release of tension more often—”

“I don’t...don’t do that much, okay?” Her cheeks were really red now and she moved to disentangle herself from him. “I just...it’s embarrassing. And it’s usually something I’d rather not think about.”

“You should give it some thought then.” Sylvan watched regretfully as she sat up and pulled the blue uniform shirt around herself. “Don’t be mad at me, Sophia. Please.” He came to sit beside her on the bed and put an arm around her shoulders. “I wasn’t trying to offend you. I was just wondering if I would ever get to see that beautiful smile on your face again—the one you get after coming so hard and long.”

Her cheeks were still pink but she gave him a tiny ghost of a smile. “I’m not offended. Just...embarrassed.” She leaned against him, her waterfall of dark brown hair soft against his bare chest. “In case you haven’t uh, figured it out, I talk about sex even less than I have it. And that’s saying something.”

“I want to talk about everything with you,” Sylvan told her, kissing her hair. “I want to know everything there is to know. Your past, your dreams, your secrets...”

She stiffened against him. “Uh, there’s really nothing very interesting to tell. Just normal Earth girl stuff, that’s all.”

Sylvan frowned. She was hiding something—he was sure of it—something he needed to know. Because if what he suspected was true, he needed to avenge her. *She may only be under my protection for a little while but I'm going to do everything in my power to make sure she's well taken care of*, he thought grimly. *Any that have hurt her will answer to me.*

“Sophie,” he began in a coaxing tone. “Please believe me, I just want—”

A sudden low growling from outside the door cut him off. Every muscle in his body was suddenly flooded with tension and aggression as the *rage* swept over him again.

The *urlich* were back.

Chapter Fifteen

Kat crouched in the bare hallway beside the back door to Olivia and Baird's suite and waited. On one hand she didn't want to interrupt her friend's hot 'n freaky wedding night sex. On the other, she was scared to death that Lock and Deep would come after her and drag her back to their suite to have their own scary version of Kindred sex. Even now she could still feel their emotions—their need rolled inside her like waves crashing on a beach, filling her so full at times that it was hard to breathe.

Get out of my head! she sent at them fiercely, not sure if they could hear her or not. She was relieved, at least, that she couldn't hear *them*. She knew from talking to Liv that after bonding with a Kindred, a mental connection was created that allowed the Earth bride and her new husband to hear each other's thoughts without using a Think-me. *But I'm not freaking bonded to them. And I don't want to be either!* And anyway, the thoughts weren't so much the issue as the feelings. Somehow the ability to hear each other's thoughts wasn't nearly as upsetting as feeling someone else's emotions. Maybe because hearing someone else's thoughts didn't make her feel like she was going to overflow or explode at any minute.

I so don't need this right now, she thought, putting her head on her knees. *Sophie's in danger and I can't even talk to Liv because she's acting out the Kindred version of the Kama-sutra. I'm stuck on this damn ship without even a room to stay in and I've got two strangers filling my head with their feelings.*

Only they weren't strangers—not really. Even though she'd known them a relatively short period of time, Deep and Lock had kind of leap-frogged over the regular getting-to-know-you routine when they had entered her mind and seen her naughtiest fantasies.

"I don't care," she whispered sullenly. "Don't care what they saw or heard or how much they know. I've known them for less than twenty-four hours and I don't need to be stuck with their emotions in my head for the rest of my life."

Her head was still throbbing miserably and she wished longingly for some Excedrin or anything else that might stop the dull, aching pain. Did they stock such things aboard the Kindred Mother ship? They had plenty of Earth women here—surely one of the stores that catered to them would have *something* she could use. She started to get up and then remembered that most of those stores were past the unmated males' area that Deep and Lock had been so anxious for her to avoid. Would she seriously have trouble if she went there? Olivia had had some kind of similar problem during her claiming period, she recalled. Although she had been kind of vague on the details, it hadn't been good—that much Kat remembered.

They thought I would have problems because of my smell—because I smelled hot. Just thinking about it made her blush. The memory of being linked to the tall, muscular twins invaded her brain and she couldn't stop seeing the erotic images they'd passed between the three of them. That memory led to another. The burning intensity in Deep's coal black eyes when he'd asked her to stay and the vast depth of need and loneliness in Lock's warm brown eyes the last time he'd looked at her...

*Stop it! Stop it right now. You do **not** feel sorry for them and you are **never** going to see them again,* she told herself sternly. After all, who knew what they might talk her into the next time?

Kat shivered and rubbed her forehead hard with the heel of her hand. There it was again—the feeling of being horny and having a miserable, hangover-like headache at the same time. It shouldn't be possible. Then again, a lot of the things she'd done tonight shouldn't be possible. She thought of the amazing flying sensation she'd had when acting as Deep and Lock's focus. The feeling of being a swift, invisible bird able to go anywhere, do anything...it had been truly wonderful, she had to admit. It was probably the only thing she didn't regret. That and the fact that they'd been able to find Sylvan and Sophie and verify that they were alive. But for how much longer?

I hope he really is taking care of her. Oh, Sophie, be safe! Come back to us soon. Kat felt a few tears of worry and weary exhaustion slip down her cheeks.

She wasn't normally the type to bawl but to say she'd had a stressful day would be an understatement. At least she could take some comfort in the fact that Sophie had been in one piece in her vision. And Lock and Deep seemed to have every confidence that Sylvan could keep her that way. Remembering his fright-night appearance, Kat tended to agree. But she still wasn't looking forward to telling Liv that her twin sister was lost and in danger.

Wondering how she was going to break the bad news, Kat closed her eyes and leaned back against the smooth silver metal wall. God, she was tired. It really was too bad she hadn't been able to take the couch in their guest suite as Lock had urged her to do. But who knew where she might have ended up if she'd started on the couch? Even with her horrible headache the weird connection between them had been insanely intense.

And even if they did keep their hands to themselves (which she doubted, remembering Deep's hungry glare,) they *felt* too loudly to make sleep even a remote possibility. Whereas now, with a little distance between them, she was able to relax some. In fact, she was almost tired enough to drop off right where she was.

But I won't, she thought, shifting a little to try and get more comfortable against the slightly curved, cool metal wall. *Not going to do that. I need to stay awake. That way I can talk to Liv the minute she pokes her head out the door in the morning—providing she does, that is. I wonder how long the Beast Kindred can possibly keep going? And what the hell do they do about chafing? And when can I reasonably knock on the door without being afraid I'll interrupt their tantric alien nookie?*

Kat didn't have the answers to any of her questions and she didn't know what she was going to say when and if her friend ever came out of her suite. She just hoped Sophie was all right and that Lock and Deep really could pinpoint her location without any further help.

Because even for her best friends, Kat didn't think she could go through another joining with the frightening and tempting Twin Kindred again.

Chapter Sixteen

Sophie watched as Sylvan transformed again. He went from being the sweet, kind, incredibly sexy male who had pleased her thoroughly and patiently until she came harder than she ever had in her life, to a menacing killer in the blink of an eye. *Fangs out, eyes red, and he seems to get twice as big all of a sudden*, she thought uneasily. But his terrifying rage wasn't directed at her, she reminded herself. He was just protecting her from the threat outside the door.

But he marked me, she thought as the growling increased in volume. *Marked me really, **really** well. Isn't that supposed to keep them away?* She looked at Sylvan uncertainly, wishing she could ask him. But she was afraid to break his concentration and, to be honest, afraid of him *period* right now. Just because she knew his intimidating display wasn't meant for her didn't mean she wanted to risk getting too close to him at the moment.

So she waited, huddled in the middle of the bed, afraid to move—afraid to even *breathe*—until at last the growling began to die down. There was a snuffling noise outside and then some hoarse barking that sounded almost like a conversation—if the *urlich* could actually talk to each other. Suddenly, a high, wounded *yip* could be heard and then all the sounds retreated, as if whatever was making them was moving away from the cabin.

Sylvan continued to stand tense and silent for a long moment. Then, slowly, the tension left his muscles and the glare melted off his face. He turned to Sophie and took a deep breath. With a visible effort, he relaxed. Much to her relief, his fangs retracted and he seemed to shrink back down to his normal size—which was still pretty huge, but a lot less scary.

"Is...is it all right?" Sophie whispered, finally daring to speak when she saw that his pupils were no longer red.

He nodded stiffly. "It worked. The two that were here before were trying to convince their leader that they had found you. But she didn't pick up your scent, so she punished them for leading the entire pack astray."

“That must have been the hurt-sounding yelp we heard,” Sophie said. “So now what?”

Sylvan sighed wearily. “Now they’re hunting someplace else. If we’re lucky they’ll go back to the wreckage of our shuttle and start from the beginning. That will put them miles out of the way and we won’t have to worry about them for awhile.”

Sophie shivered. “I hope you’re right.”

“I do too.” He sank down on the side of the bed, his broad shoulders slumping. “At least we should have tonight to rest. And if we can make it through the night we’ll be fine—the *urlich* are creatures of darkness. Sunlight incapacitates them.”

Sylvan looked like he could use as much rest as he could get. It occurred to Sophie that he must be exhausted. He’d done an amazing job of piloting, crash landed their ship without killing them, carried her halfway down a mountain, and dealt with her emotional and sexual angst as well as gearing himself up to fight off a pack of cyborg bloodhounds, all in the space of a few hours. No wonder he looked tired!

Feeling a little braver now that he was no longer in scary-psycho mode, she crawled to where he was sitting and positioned herself behind him. “You look really tense,” she said, placing her hands tentatively on his bare shoulders. “Would, uh, would you like a massage?” She wanted to kick herself the minute the words were out. *God, that sounded so cheesy, like dialogue out of a bad porno or something.*

But Sylvan nodded gratefully. “Thank you, Sophia. If you are don’t mind I won’t refuse.”

“I’ll do my best but I’m not an expert masseuse or anything,” she told him, beginning to work on the knots in his back.

“That’s all right.” His voice was low and warm. “I just like the feel of your hands on me.”

His words sent a rush of heat through her veins and her nipples were suddenly tight under the blue shirt. "Thank you," she murmured. "I...it's nice you feel that way."

They were silent for a moment as she worked on him, trying to ease the knots of tension out of his big body. She couldn't help noticing how smooth and warm his skin was under her fingers and how good he smelled. *Even though I know all about his mating scent I still can't help being affected by it.* The sharp, spicy aroma made her want to crawl into his lap and kiss him senseless.

But I can't, she reminded herself sternly. *Even though we have a kind of...of connection, it's all just temporary. As soon as we get back to the Mother ship this will all be over.* The thought made her sad even though she knew a relationship with the big warrior would never be possible. Not with her past and his solemn vow to never take a bride. Still...

"I'm sorry if I scared you when the *urlich* came back." His deep voice broke her train of thought.

"You didn't scare me," she protested, lying only a little. "It was...I mean you looked really fierce but I knew your, uh, aggression wasn't directed at me."

"It wasn't the first time either," he said quietly. "Though I can understand how you would think it was. Especially when I started to mark you."

"Yes, well..." Sophie really didn't want to think about that. About the memories it had brought up to have such a large male start to climb on top of her and...well, she just didn't want to think about it. It was much nicer to remember the second time, the way it felt to have him licking and kissing her so gently.

"Sophia, I want to talk to you about something but I don't want you to be upset." Sylvan was speaking carefully, as though choosing his words.

Uh-oh, I'm not going to like this. He's probably going to remind me of his vow and tell me not to expect any kind of commitment once we get back to the ship. "What?" she asked as neutrally as she could.

"Earlier when we were talking you said something that made me wonder."

"Wonder? Wonder about what?"

“You said ‘don’t do it to me *again*.’” Turning his head, he gave her a look that seemed to pierce right through her. “What did you mean by that?”

“I said that?” Sophie tried to laugh even though her heart was suddenly in her throat. “I don’t remember. I was upset—who knows what I said?”

He frowned skeptically. “All right. You also talked about having a ‘phobia’—an aversion to having me...” He cleared his throat. “On top of you. Even after you knew I wasn’t trying to take you against your will.”

Sophie felt cold. “Well I mean *look* at you. I’m not exactly petite but you’re so huge and muscular. I mean, I would feel like I was...was smothering. Don’t you remember I told you I’m claustrophobic?”

Sylvan shook his head. “No, I don’t think that’s it.”

“Well then what is it? What are you trying to say?” Sophie’s heart was pounding but she tried to sound normal—a little irritated, even.

It was apparent that Sylvan wasn’t buying her act. He was silent for a long moment then he spoke in a low voice. “Who was he?”

“What was who? What are you talking about?”

“The male who hurt you. Who was he and what did he do to you? Was he this ‘Burke’ you mentioned?”

Sophie felt like someone had dumped a bucket of ice water over her head. “I... I don’t know what you’re talking about. Nobody ever hurt me. I’m fine—perfectly fine,” she protested almost frantically.

Sylvan kept looking at her in that same, patient way that made her feel like screaming. “You’re lying,” he said at last.

“What?” She pulled her hands away from his shoulders and clenched them at her sides. “How dare you say that?”

“I notice you’re not denying it.” He didn’t sound angry, just tired.

Sophie was almost shaking, she was so upset. “How can you even ask me something like that? It’s so *personal*. I mean, I hardly even *know* you.”

She wished she could call the words back as soon as they left her lips. How could she claim to hardly know him after all they'd been through together that night? But if she apologized and took back her hasty, hurtful words she might have to admit...*No, I won't. I can't.*

Sylvan was still looking at her quietly and a little sadly. Finally he sighed and nodded. "If I have offended, then I ask your forgiveness."

"It's okay," Sophie muttered, looking down at her hands. Things had been going so well. Why did he have to try and pry into her past? To dig up the old hurt she'd tried so hard to bury?

Sylvan stood up and stretched, the muscles in his broad back and arms flexing in a way that would have made her mouth water if she hadn't been so upset. "I'm going to take a quick shower now. My senses tell me the *urlich* are long gone and I want to wash the remains of the cushioning gel from our landing off."

Probably wants to wash off my scent too, and everything to do with me, Sophie thought miserably. Aloud she only said, "Okay. If you're sure it's safe, I'm going to bed."

He nodded. "I won't disturb you when I come out."

She wasn't sure how he would manage that since they would doubtless be sharing the bed but she only nodded back. As Sylvan went into the bathroom and shut the door, she climbed under the slightly musty-smelling sheets and tried to get comfortable in the strange bed.

Even though the mattress wasn't lumpy or hard, she couldn't seem to find a good position. She kept imagining Sylvan in the shower, lathering up with hot water running down his hard, naked body. If there hadn't been so much standing between them, she might even have had the nerve to go join him. Not that he would want her there now.

Not after what I said. God, why did he have to bring it up? Why couldn't he just let things be? We were doing so well and he seems like such a nice guy—when he's not going all freaky-scary, that is. Now everything is weird between

*us and it's going to stay weird because I am so **not** going there. I mean, why should I even talk about it? It was years and years ago...*

Her mind ran on in an endless loop of regret and self-recrimination until she heard the water shut off. A few minutes later Sylvan came out. Water droplets sparkled on his shoulders in the weak light of the dying fire. He was wearing his black pants and carrying his boots in one hand while toweling his hair with the other.

Sophie closed her eyes at once and pretended to be asleep. She had decided that it would be better not to talk to him for the rest of the night. Maybe when they woke up in the morning he would be ready to start fresh without any embarrassing or hurtful talk about the past.

She watched through half-slitted eyes as he walked toward the bed. Every muscle in her body tensed as she waited for him to climb in beside her. Would he get under the covers with her? Or sleep on top of them to give her more space? Did she *want* him to give her more space? Would he—

Her thoughts were cut off abruptly as he bypassed the bed and lay down on the rug in front of the fire.

*What the hell? Why did he do that? Is he **that** mad at me?*

“Sylvan?” she said before she thought about it.

“Yes?” He didn’t sound at all surprised to hear her awake and alert.

“You...I...” She wasn’t quite sure what to say. “Are you laying down there because you’re mad at me?”

“No, I’m not mad.” He sighed and shifted. She could hear the whispering sound of the rug under his large body.

“Well, then why...?”

“It’s a better position to watch the door from. And...”

“And?” she prompted.

“And if I get into bed with you, I’ll want to hold you. Touch you.” His voice was deep and soft. “But I don’t think you want to be touched right now.”

“Oh.” Sophie nibbled her lower lip and then had to muffle a squeak of pain. It made her realize Sylvan still hadn’t gotten around to healing her lip where he’d bitten her, which seemed like a lifetime ago. *And he never will now*, she realized sadly. *I’ve ruined everything...everything.*

“Goodnight,” he said softly and she heard him shift again, as if trying to get more comfortable.

“Goodnight,” she echoed. Turning on her side, she buried her face in a pillow and tried to get to sleep. But as exhausting as the night had been, she still couldn’t relax. The misunderstanding between herself and Sylvan was pressing on her like a lead weight, making any kind of rest impossible. She turned over and then flipped her pillow to the cool side, hoping it would feel better against her hot cheek. She tried counting backwards from a hundred and then from a thousand but she couldn’t concentrate, couldn’t relax and she was just getting more and more tense and restless and—

“Sophia? Are you all right?” His voice in the darkness sounded concerned. “You’re tossing and turning all over the place.”

“No, I’m *not* all right.” She sat up in bed and glared down at him. The fire had died to red coals by now and he was barely visible—a large dark shape on the floor at the foot of the bed. “It happened a long time ago,” she said, running a hand through her hair which was getting tangled from all her restless maneuvering. “And it’s not really something I like to talk about...or even think about, really.”

“No?”

“No.” She sighed again, supremely irritated. “Fine, you want me to tell you? I’ll tell you. It was at my senior prom. Or after it, anyway.”

“Prom?” he asked.

“A dance.” Sophie made a vague gesture with one hand. “A...a coming of age ritual. Everyone gets dressed up and goes to a big party and dances and drinks way too much and has fun.”

“If that’s your idea of fun,” he said neutrally.

“Well it is if you’re a senior in high school and you’re about to graduate,” Sophie told him. “Anyway, it was only a few months after...after my parents were killed.” She choked a little on the words. Even though it had been over six years since that fateful night the highway patrolman had knocked on the front door, she still missed her mom and dad fiercely.

“I’m very sorry.” Sylvan’s voice was soft with concern.

“No, it’s...that’s not the point of the story.” She took a deep breath. “What I was going to say was that Liv and I were going to stay home. I mean, who wants to go to prom after something like that? But Kat convinced us that it was a once in a lifetime deal and our parents would want us to have some fun. So we were all three going to go together—just us girls, you know?”

He made a slight noise of understanding.

“So we were going to go together—none of us had dates anyway—but then Burke Simpson asked me to go with him. He was the captain of the football team—really, really popular. Our team went to state, so he wasn’t just a big fish in a little pond—he already had a scholarship to FSU and everything. Honestly, I was really surprised that he asked me.”

“Why should that surprise you?” Sylvan sounded like he was frowning.

“*Because.* He was the big man on campus—the alpha male. And I was just this shy little nobody. I wasn’t a cheerleader or in the student council or anything like that. I thought he was probably being nice to me because of what happened to my parents.”

“Did you go with him?”

Sophie nodded and then realized he probably couldn’t see her in the dark. “Yes. Uh, he picked me up in a limo—a big long car with a driver. Then he took me out to a really nice restaurant—I remember being afraid to order anything but a salad because everything was so expensive. And besides, I was too nervous to eat around him.

“We got to the dance and everything was beautiful and romantic. The only thing was, Burke kept trying to grope me. He acted like he was playing around

but I had to kind of keep fending him off. I...I should have known better than to stay with him, but I hadn't really been out with a lot of guys so I didn't know quite how to handle him. I..." She shook her head.

"Sophia?" Sylvan sounded worried again and she realized she'd stopped talking for a long moment.

"Sorry." Taking a deep breath, she forced herself to go on. "Anyway, when the dance was winding up, Burke wanted us to get a room and stay for the night. The prom was held in this big hotel and a lot of the other seniors were staying."

"Did you stay with him?"

"I...I didn't want to." Sophie pulled her knees up to her chin. "I wanted to go home with Kat and Liv. They were going to go watch old movies and make popcorn. But Burke convinced me to walk with him up to the room. He said he just...just wanted a good night kiss. And he'd been so nice to me, paying for everything, I didn't see how I could say no to that. I mean, just one little kiss, right?"

"And was it just 'one kiss?'" Sylvan's voice was neutral.

"N-no." Sophie wrapped her arms around her knees and squeezed tight, trying to get the words out. "I mean it started that way but then he...he pushed me down on the bed. I...I asked him to stop but he wouldn't. He kept saying did I know how much the night had cost him and what kind of girl would I be if I didn't, uh, put out after all that."

"Did he take you?" Sylvan's voice was icy.

"I fought him." Her voice trembled and everything inside her felt tight as she relived that horrible night. "I kicked and screamed but it didn't...didn't do any good. He got on top of me anyway. Then he ripped my dress and tore off my panties."

She took a deep breath. God, how she hated remembering this! But as much as she wanted to push it back down, the memory had fully surfaced now—like a bloated corpse rising from a shallow grave. She couldn't do anything but go on and try to get through it.

“He was so *heavy* on top of me,” she whispered brokenly. “So *big*. I felt like I couldn’t breathe and he was prying my legs apart and it hurt when he put it in me. Hurt so *much*...” There were tears running down her cheeks now and her breath was hitching in her chest. “See? This is why I didn’t want to talk about it. I always get so stupid and *emotional*.” She was glad it was too dark for Sylvan to see her right now. She must look a mess.

“Sophia—”

“That’s why I told you to go for it when we had the choice between surrender and death in the shuttle,” she interrupted. “I...Liv had told me how they—the Scourge—dig around in your brain and show your worst memories. I didn’t want you to know about this. About what happened.”

“Sophia—” he began again.

“No, just let me finish.” If she was going to tell it, she might as well tell it all. “After...after he was done he finally rolled off me. He didn’t want to let me go at first even though...even though he was done with me. But one of his football buddies banged on the door. She shook her head. “Anyway, Burke was startled and I was able to get away. He nearly broke my wrist, though—it was black and blue for a month.”

Sylvan made a low growling sound in his throat but said nothing.

“I was afraid he would do it again so I ran...I got a taxi and went home. I knew Kat and Liv were at Kat’s house so I had the place to myself. I took the hottest shower I could stand and scrubbed and scrubbed. I just wanted him off me—out of me.”

Sophie took a shallow, shuddering breath. “Kat and Liv wanted to report the...the attack, but I was afraid to. Burke’s family was really important—his dad owns a Jaguar dealership in South Tampa and has a seat on the City Council. Liv and I only had each other after our parents died and Kat just lived with her grandma so there was no one to back us up. Besides I just...just wanted to forget it.” She sniffed. “Not like Burke would let me, though.”

“He came after you *again*?” Sylvan demanded, sounding really angry.

Sophie twisted her fingers in her lap. “In a way. He...the...the next time I saw him in school, he acted like nothing had ever happened. Like I was invisible. So I thought it was all over with. Then he cornered me in the gym behind the bleachers.” She closed her eyes briefly, remembering that horrible scene. The way Burke had crowded her up against the back supporting post of one of the bleachers, pressing himself against her, overpowering her with his big, hateful body, his breath hot on her face. She could still hear his voice in her ear...

“Listen you little bitch, you better keep your mouth shut about prom night, you hear me?”

“Leave me alone. I...I haven’t told anyone.”

“Except your sister. And that fat, nosey cunt you two are always hanging around with. What’s her name? Oh yeah, Kat.”

“Just leave me alone. Please...”

*“You don’t say a word and maybe I will. But if you start any trouble I’ll come over some night. Yeah, I know you and your sister are all alone now that poor little mommy and daddy got killed by the big bad drunk driver. You say anything—and I mean **anything**—and I’ll be coming to pay you a little visit. Only this time I’ll bring friends. You understand?”*

“I swear I won’t cause you any problems. Just let me go. Let me go!”

A little sob escaped her and her shoulders shook. God, she’d been so terrified. So sure she would wake up some night with one hand over her mouth and the other one up her nightgown. And if she had to go through that again she would die—she knew it.

“What did he do to you?” Sylvan’s voice sounded slightly strangled and she realized she’d been silent, reliving it and not saying anything.

“He threatened me, mostly.” She hugged herself tightly. “He said if I ever told anyone he and a bunch of his buddies would come to our house and...and do it again.” She shivered. “I was so scared after that. So sure he was going to come and there would be nothing I could do about it—no way to get away the next time. I...I didn’t feel better until after we graduated and he went away to college.”

“I’ll kill him.” Sylvan’s voice, cold and deadly in the darkness, snapped her back to reality. “I’ll find him and tear his heart out.”

“No, you can’t!” she protested, swiping at her eyes. “I mean, it was years and years ago. It’s over now. I just want to forget it.”

“He exploited your innocence and vulnerability—the weakness of a female alone with no male to protect her. He took you against your will and brutalized you. He deserves death.”

“I don’t need a male to protect me,” Sophie objected. “It was my own stupid fault for going to prom with him in the first place. For thinking that he would want me for anything but *that*.” She took a deep, shuttering breath. “God, why is this so hard to talk about? I mean, it’s been *years*.”

“The passage of time doesn’t always lessen pain,” he said darkly. “Sometimes it magnifies it.”

“Well, anyway...” Sophie swiped at her eyes again and tried to sound normal. “I never made *that* mistake again. In fact, I hardly ever *dated* again. It just...just seemed safer that way.”

“Does he still live in Tampa?” Sylvan asked. “This male who hurt you?”

“Yes, he works at his father’s car dealership selling—” Then she realized why he was asking. “Stop it, Sylvan—I didn’t tell you this so you could...could go after him or something. I told you because...because... Oh hell, I don’t know why I told you. But you can’t do anything about it.”

“If I was your bonded mate it would be my duty to call him out and kill him in combat. To—”

“Well you’re *not*,” she cut him off. “So promise me you won’t go after him. I just want to forget it—to try and put it behind me again.”

He took a deep breath and then let out a long, low sigh that sounded almost like a growl. “All right,” he said at last. “I swear not to kill him.”

“Thank you.” Sophie blotted her eyes on the sleeve of her shirt. God, was she *ever* going to stop crying? “I mean, I appreciate the offer but that’s...that’s really not what I need right now.”

“Forgive me.” He breathed deeply and she could almost *feel* him trying to let go of his rage and relax. “What do you need, Sophia?”

She was almost afraid to ask but... “You said earlier that you...you wanted to hold me. Do you still, uh feel that way?”

His answer was quick and certain. “Yes, of course I still want to hold you. But are you sure? I mean, in light of what you told me...”

Sophie knew what he meant. “Yeah, you’re a big guy—a lot bigger than Burke even and he was pretty huge. But I’m not afraid of you, Sylvan. At least...not when you’re not in your scary fighting mode.”

“I’m glad.” His voice came from much closer and she looked up to see him standing in the darkness beside the bed. “I never want you to fear me.”

“I couldn’t help it, earlier” she whispered. “It’s just...the way I feel when a guy gets too close too fast. The way I’ve felt ever since...ever since it happened.”

“I wish I could take away your pain.” He sat carefully on the bed, as though trying not to startle her. “I wish I could make it better in some way.”

“You can,” she surprised herself by saying. “Just...hold me. Can you do that?”

He didn’t answer with words. In a moment he was on the bed beside her, gathering her into his arms and holding her close.

Sophie pressed her head to his chest and breathed in his scent which was incredibly comforting. God, it *hurt* to talk about what had happened so long ago. To relive it. It had been so scary and it had tainted the rest of her life. Ever since Burke she’d been afraid to date—afraid to *live*. All men seemed suspect—didn’t they all have that beast inside them somewhere? Even Sylvan, as warm and sweet and comforting as he was, had an animal living under his skin, waiting to come out at any time. *Don’t think about that now. Just try to relax.* She took a deep breath. *Need to take things easy for awhile. Stop dwelling on the past and try to live in the present.*

“*Talana,*” he murmured, stroking her hair tenderly.

Enjoying his gentle caress, she nuzzled closer. “I...I’ve never told anyone besides Liv and Kat what happened that night. And I never even told *them* about how Burke threatened me afterwards—I didn’t want them to worry.”

He growled softly. “Thank you for trusting me. I will keep your confidence until the day I die.”

Again with the formal vows. But it was kind of nice, in a way.

They were quiet for a long, long time and Sophie was almost certain he’d drifted off to sleep when Sylvan spoke again.

“No wonder I frightened you. I can see now why you say you don’t want an ‘alpha male.’”

“I’m glad you understand,” Sophie said gratefully. “And I hope I didn’t uh, offend you when I told you that.”

“No.” He sighed. “It’s all right. There’s more standing in the way between us than just your aversion to large aggressive males.”

“I know.” Sophie felt unaccountably sad. How had they gotten so close so fast? And was she actually letting herself feel for the big warrior? *How stupid is that?* whispered a little voice in her head. *You know you can never have him. Even if he wanted you enough to break his vow you could never give him what he needs.* It was true but she still felt like she might cry again. And she really didn’t want to do that—she’d cried more than enough already tonight.

“It really wasn’t your fault, you know.” His voice was a quiet rumble in the dark.

“I know,” she whispered. “Well, I mean, I shouldn’t have gone with him—that was stupid. I just didn’t think he would really...try anything like that.”

“Some males have no honor.” Sylvan’s voice was fiercely protective as he stroked her hair. “I swear to you as long as you’re under my care, nothing like that will ever happen to you again.”

“Thank you.” Sophie looked up at him in the darkness. “Thank you for everything, Sylvan. For not...not making me feel stupid when I told you.”

“You’re not stupid.” He cupped her cheek, his hand warm and comforting against her skin. “Naïve, maybe. Inexperienced. But not stupid.”

“I’m not a virgin, if that’s what you’re thinking,” she said a little huffily. “Although, well, I haven’t been with anyone since...since Burke. I just...never felt like I could trust anyone enough again.”

“That’s understandable. But to me you’re perfect the way you are. Except for this.” The pad of his thumb found her hurt lip and brushed it gently.

“You can see that?”

“Kindred night vision is very sharp.”

Sophie was surprised and a little nonplussed. “All this time I was telling you, I kept thinking how glad I was that you couldn’t see me because of what a mess I am.”

“Didn’t I just tell you you’re perfect?” His voice was almost stern. “I would offer to heal your lip right now if...”

“If what?” she asked, feeling her heart begin to pound.

“You’re upset,” Sylvan said in a low voice. “I’ve reminded you of your attacker once already tonight. I don’t want to make you more upset or to take advantage of your vulnerability.”

“I told you I’m not afraid of you,” she protested. “In fact I think...I think I’d really like it if you *did* heal my lip.”

“You’re certain?” He was already cupping her cheek in one warm hand and turning her toward him.

“Yes.” Sophie tilted her mouth up to his. “Yes, please.”

His lips on hers were barely a warm whisper of breath at first. But when Sophie pressed up to him, Sylvan obliged her by taking her mouth more fully. He sucked her bottom lip gently and laved it tenderly with his tongue, then went back to kissing her more fully.

Sophie moaned softly as she felt the familiar healing tingle. God, a girl could get addicted to this really quickly. His chest was warm and hard and though the feel of his big body against hers was a little scary, he was being careful not to

overpower her. His large hand cupping her cheek was so gentle—he touched her as though she was made of fine china and might break at any moment.

She felt something hard and hot against her thigh and knew it was his shaft but she didn't even mind. It was just the way it had been after they'd taken the transport tube together—his scent was invading her senses, making her want him, making her forget to mind that they were getting too close too fast.

Slowly Sylvan's large hand slid down to cup her breast. He thumbed her nipple lightly through the silky material of the shirt, making Sophie moan hungrily into his mouth. God, his hands on her felt so good, so right...she could almost forget to be afraid. Could almost wish he would never stop. She could feel her pussy getting wet and swollen again and she couldn't forget the way he'd kissed and licked her there, the feel of his tongue and fingers deep inside her until she came so hard...

But suddenly, the healing kiss was over and Sylvan was pulling back.

"Sylvan?" she asked uncertainly.

"Forgive me." He let go of her and moved away to sit up. Leaning against the wooden headboard, he put his head in his hands.

"Forgive you for what?" Sophie moved to sit beside him. "I don't understand. What's wrong? Why...why did you stop?"

"You're healed aren't you?" His deep voice was harsh, strained. "Why should I continue?"

Sophie wrapped her arms around herself and looked away. "I don't know," she said in a small voice. "I...I guess I thought maybe you might continue because you, uh, *wanted to*."

"That's the problem." He sighed raggedly. "I *do* want to. I want...want much more than I have a right to," he finished in a low voice.

"Oh." Sophie nibbled her newly healed lip uncertainly. "I...what exactly do you, uh, want?"

"You're wet again, aren't you?" he said, not answering her question. "Hot and wet between your thighs."

“I...” Sophie squeezed her legs together. “I can’t help it. And I thought...I thought you said you *liked* that. You said I was a nu...”

“A *numala*,” he finished for her. “I *do* like it—how wet and hot you get. How your body responds when I kiss you, touch you. But it makes me want...”

“To...to make love?” Sophie could hear the quiver in her own voice but she couldn’t control it. The one time she’d had sex—before Burke had ruined everything for her—had been fumbling and uncomfortable. She’d been with a guy she’d met at summer camp, whose shaft was about the size of two of her fingers together. If he’d been any bigger Sophie was sure it would have been much worse.

As for Sylvan...well, she’d seen the size of his equipment. There was absolutely no way he would be able to fit himself inside her. And besides, if he tried he would probably want to be on top of her, biting her. As good as his mating scent smelled, she still wasn’t ready to go there.

“Not just to make love.” Sylvan’s voice cut into her worried thoughts. “I’m afraid I couldn’t stop at that. Not now.”

“What...what do you mean?” she whispered, her nerves jumping another notch.

“I’ve had your blood twice now. Three times, if you count just now when I healed your lip, though you weren’t really bleeding anymore. And I’ve tasted you.” His voice sounded deep and growly in the darkness. It gave Sophie the uncomfortable feeling of sitting beside a wild beast that had been domesticated but still wasn’t quite tame.

“What does that have to do with it?” she asked, trying to stay calm.

“It has to do with what my body wants from yours.” He sounded like he was trying to be calm and clinical about it but the growling tone was still in his voice. “Every time I taste your blood or your honey, the connection between us grows stronger. And I want to make it stronger still.”

“So when you said you don’t just want to make love...?”

“I want to bond you to me, Sophia.” He turned to face her and she was frightened to see that his eyes were glowing a pale blue in the darkness. “I want to

be buried to the hilt in your tight, wet pussy, thrusting long and hard and deep, filling you up, coming inside you over and over to make you mine.”

Her breath caught in her throat at his graphic words. “You...you do?”

“Not only that,” Sylvan said in a low voice. “I want to take your blood again and inject my essence into you while I fill you with my seed. That seals the bonding—makes it so no other male could ever take you from me.”

“You want to bite me.” Sophie felt cold and shaky at the very thought. His big male body covering her, those needle sharp fangs piercing her flesh... it was too awful. “Please, Sylvan, you...you’re scaring me. You promised you wouldn’t.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “Not unless you asked me to. And I know that will never be.” A low, frustrated sound came from him, something between a sigh and a snarl. “Don’t worry, Sophia, I am still bound by my vow. And I have no desire to take what you don’t want to give so you’re perfectly safe. It’s just...better if we keep a little distance between us. We’re getting too close to a line neither one of us wants to cross.”

“You’re right, I guess.” Sophie was glad he was enough of a gentleman to stop himself but she couldn’t help feeling sorry. “I know this will all be over when we get out of here and you won’t...won’t feel anything for me any more,” she said hesitantly. “But I want you to know something, Sylvan. I...I’ve never felt anything like what I feel when you touch me. When you, uh, marked me...” Her cheeks were getting hot and it was hard to get the words out.

Sylvan was looking at her intently, his eyes still glowing faintly. “Yes?” he murmured.

“I...I just want you to know that no man has ever...made me feel like that. That kind of...of pleasure.” Sophie looked down at her hands, unable to meet that burning blue gaze. “I’ll never forget it.”

“Sophia...” He lifted her chin and looked at her seriously. “I’ll never forget it either. The sight of you, lying open for me, the feel of your hands in my hair, the soft, helpless sounds you make when you come—the way you called my name...

Gods!” He closed his eyes briefly and made a soft growl at the back of his throat. “All those things are burned into my memory—into my heart. Forever.”

Sophie bit her lip. “That’s...that’s good to know.”

“And if we don’t stop talking about it I’m going to want to do it all over again,” he said roughly. “That and more.”

She nodded. “I know. I’m sorry.”

Sylvan rubbed the heel of his hand against his forehead as though trying to erase some inner tension. “Which is why I think it’s better if I go back to the floor now. Forgive me, but being so close to you is incredibly tempting.”

Sophie wanted to tell him she found him tempting too but she knew she’d better not. The hungry look in those glowing blue eyes told her she’d pushed things almost past the point of safety already and it was time to stop pushing *now*.

“Good night then, I guess,” she whispered, scooting away from him.

“Good night.” He got off the bed and went back to the rug in front of the fire. “Try to get some rest. We need to try and get to a populated area tomorrow if we can. I don’t know why no one has contacted us yet via Think-me—probably all still busy with the bonding party. But I’m sure by tomorrow they’ll realize we’re missing.”

Sophie almost asked where he thought the nearest town was but he had already turned over with his back to the bed. It seemed like a pretty strong hint that he just wanted to sleep, so she decided she’d probably better do the same thing.

But as she closed her eyes, his words wouldn’t leave her head. “*I want to bond you to me, Sophia...I want to take your blood again and inject my essence into you while I fill you with my seed.*”

The words formed images in her mind’s eye—images that were both disturbing... and somehow compelling. They kept her awake for a long time and then followed her down into sleep.

* * * * *

Sylvan lay on his side, his fists in knots and his jaw clenched, wanting her so badly it hurt. Everything had been all right until that last kiss when he'd felt Sophia responding to him, opening to him. Then his desire for her had gone into overdrive.

A greedy, hungry lust had exploded inside him, threatening to overcome his better judgment and turn him into a rutting beast. Leaving her on the bed by herself had been one of the hardest things he'd ever done, but somehow he'd forced himself to pull back before things went too far.

He knew what the problem was—it wasn't just that they had formed a connection through blood—although that was certainly part of it. It was the fact that he had tasted her and now his body expected him to take the next step.

In the course of the usual Kindred claiming period, a warrior had four weeks with his bride during which he was allowed to touch her in different ways. By marking her with his mouth, Sylvan had skipped the holding and bathing weeks and gone straight to the tasting period, the time when he would have been legally allowed to spread her legs and lap her sweet pussy until she came for him every night. And the next step after tasting...was bonding.

Now every instinct in his stubborn Kindred blood was screaming that she was his, that he *had* to take the final step and be certain no one else could ever take her away from him.

I can't. I took a vow and besides, she doesn't want that—doesn't want to be bonded to me. Though, to be honest, she didn't seem quite as resistant to the idea as she had been earlier.

Certainly the sex part of the bonding process seemed to scare her a little less, though he could understand why she would be frightened in the first place. That bastard who had raped her...Sylvan fought down the growl that rose in his throat. *What was his name? Oh yes, Burke. Burke Simpson.*

Sylvan closed his eyes for a moment, remembering the hurt, broken tone in her soft voice when she'd told him what had happened. She said she just wanted

to forget it but Sylvan could tell the experience had scarred her deeply. No wonder she was afraid of males, especially big, aggressive ones. No wonder she'd been so terrified of him the first time he'd tried to mark her. The uncertainty in her lovely eyes, the terror in her voice when he got too close, too quickly could be at least partly laid at her long-ago attacker's feet.

Just remembering made Sylvan long to hold her again, to comfort and protect her. But he couldn't trust himself to be that near her—not at the moment. Instead he fantasized about vengeance.

Sophia seemed to think that the assault had happened too long ago for anything to be done about it—as if there was a statute of limitations for such reprehensible actions.

Sylvan disagreed.

He didn't care that the attack and threats had taken place long before he met Sophia, didn't care that she hadn't even seen the male who attacked her in years. He only knew he had to avenge her pain—to repay the bastard who had hurt her. And he fully intended to do that, even if he *had* promised not to kill him.

But I'll make him wish he was dead. That much I can do.

The pitch of his anger grew until he was almost trembling with fury. *Stop it. This isn't right—isn't like me .What's wrong with me anyway?* He took a deep breath and then another, trying to calm down. *You have a shadow on your heart...a pain that taints your very existence,* whispered a voice in his head. *It will draw the darkness to you...* Sylvan pushed it away. He couldn't blame his past for the way he was feeling now. But why was he reacting this way? He'd always been cold, emotionless, *logical*. Now he was behaving like a beast in rut, eager to demolish anyone who even looked at his beloved the wrong way.

Beloved...Talana... He shouldn't have started calling her that in the first place. The endearment was reserved for a Blood Kindred's bonded mate, not a female he was destined never to have. Even if Sophia could get over her fear enough to let him make love to her, he knew she would never agree to the final

step—that of having his fangs buried in her neck at the moment of orgasm. And without bleeding her, he could never bond her.

You could never bond her anyway. Stop wishing for what can never be. Once you get back to the ship and she's no longer in danger you'll forget these overpowering emotions, lose this insatiable hunger. You'll be yourself again.

But would he really? Deep in his heart, a seed of doubt had been planted. He burned for Sophia—craved her in a way he had never known was possible. Could such a fire really be smothered so easily? But if not, why would the Mother of Life allow such a desire to grow in his heart in the first place?

Then again, he had desired a female before, had been certain she was supposed to be his, and *that* relationship had never come to fruition. Feenah's betrayal was the secret pain the priestess in the sacred grove had spoken of—the anguish he carried with him always. She had wounded him deeply—too deeply to ever recover, or so he'd believed.

I never felt this for Feenah, though. Never felt like I might die if I couldn't have her, that I would kill to protect her. What's wrong with me?

He didn't know. He only hoped that once they were back aboard the Mother ship he could find some cure for his madness. Some cure that didn't involve the impossible—claiming Sophia as his bride.

Chapter Seventeen

“The *urlich* have lost the scent.” Xairn stood before his father’s throne, waiting for the AllFather’s rage. He disliked being the bearer of bad news but he wasn’t willing to delegate the task to another. Not when he knew what the consequences would be. Besides, he had a punishment coming—might as well get it over with. In his experience, the longer his father waited to dole out his brand of sadistic discipline, the worse the torture was in the end.

But the AllFather surprised him. “I know.” Those glowing red eyes blinked once, calmly, in a way that made Xairn decidedly nervous.

“I...I thought you’d be displeased. The energy net is damaged beyond repair. So if we don’t take her on the planet’s surface with the transfer beam...”

“We’ll take her.” There was a certainty in the AllFather’s voice that tightened Xairn’s stomach. “And when we do, ssshe will pay for the fine chase ssshe’s led usss on.”

“But how—?”

“The male with her isss masking her ssscent with hisss own. He’sss claimed her, the fool—or wantsss to, anyway. But he hasss doubtsss. As well he ssshould.”

Xairn didn’t ask how his father knew such things. The AllFather’s mind was like a dark magnet, drawn to the pain of others and drawing anything or anyone with darkness in them to him. When he focused his vast and malevolent mental powers on any one individual or creature, it wasn’t long before he knew their innermost heart and darkest secrets. All he needed was a window of opportunity. The smallest blight of anger or sorrow, the tiniest shadow on a person’s heart provided a crack he could slip through to sense their conflicting emotions.

“What are we to do?” he asked, perplexed. “Surely you can’t keep up the thought block around the planet forever? Soon they’ll have contact with the Mother ship again and when the other Kindred learn of their distress, a shuttle will be sent for them at once.”

“True.” The red eyes blinked again. “I can only keep the block in place a few more hoursss at most. Sssoon the girl will be sssafe aboard their Mother ship—beyond our reach.”

Xairn frowned. “Have you given up on her then? Is she not the one the prophesy spoke of?”

“I believe that ssshe iss.”

“But then—”

“If we try to take her now, even if the *urlich* could find her ssscent, the male with her would ruin our plansss. He iss too aggressive now that his rage has risen—even for a pack of our best to take down. Besidesss...” The AllFather shook his head, his shadowy robes billowing with the gesture. “I have changed my mind. I don’t want to take her jussst yet.”

“But once she’s safe aboard their Mother ship—”

“Ssshe will not remain there. The Kindred High Council will not allow it. They will sssend her away.”

“To a place not as heavily guarded because they’re not under siege.” Xairn began to see his father’s plan. “But if they fold space, how will we follow? They’ll sense us—even our unseen fighters aren’t completely undetectable.”

“Then let them sssee usss. We will be hiding in plain sssight.”

Xairn shook his head. “What do you mean?”

“Never mind. I have made arrangementssss for all contingenciesss—that iss all you need to know.”

“I still don’t understand why we don’t try to take them now,” Xairn argued. “I can have the *urlich* focus on his scent instead—it must be the one that confused them in the beginning when two of the pack were certain they had her. The lead bitch has a marker in her tooth. One bite and—”

The AllFather shook his head. “Leave them. I want the girl to bond herself to the warrior who guardsss her—or at least givesss him her fragile human heart—before she is taken. That way her pain will be much greater when ssshe is ripped from him. And my pleasure in taking her will be multiplied a hundred fold.”

The greedy anticipation in those glowing red eyes was obvious. Xairn kept his face carefully blank. Though the AllFather preferred to feed on the psychic pain of his victims, he was not above devouring physical and sexual pain as well. He, like all Scourge, was a natural sadist—it was in his very DNA to cause harm, to demand submission.

Xairn had never taken a female against her will, though he knew he had those tendencies locked within himself—a brutal legacy from his father. But he had seen too many of the AllFather’s victims, broken and empty, to wish to perpetrate such an act. He had no desires of the carnal nature and only prayed that nothing ever awakened his own dark appetites. That no female ever excited him to such acts of perversity and lust. *It would be kinder if the girl was taken sooner, before she forms a bond*, he thought. Kinder, yes—but against his father’s wishes.

“We will wait for the girl,” the AllFather intoned, breaking his train of thought.

“Then I will remove the *urlich*. Their pods should still be functional. If they are not, I can use the transfer beam.”

“No. Let them ssstay until the girl goesss. They must familiarize themselves with the warrior’s ssscent as well—I want it burned into their brainsss. We may have need of them later.”

“Very well. I will wait.”

“Yesss, we will wait. But not all pleassss must be delayed. Come forward, my ssson. I believe you were expecting a punishment?”

His heart sank but Xairn squared his shoulders and lifted his chin. “I was.”

The AllFather clicked his tongue against his teeth. “Alwaysss so brave to begin with. Let us sssee how long it takesss to break you. Come.”

Nothing to do but bear it. Try to get through it. It was a familiar litany, one that had been with him from his bitter, barren childhood.

Xairn knelt before the metal throne, trying to shield his mind. There was only one thing he cared about, one thing that kept him from despair and madness in his hellish existence aboard the Fathership. It was a small spark of warmth,

barely enough to heat the cold corridors of his heart, yet he was desperate to keep it from the AllFather's greedy, seeking grasp. So far he had managed to keep his secret, but how long could he continue? Each time the AllFather probed him, he got closer to that small, hidden corner Xairn fought so desperately to protect. How long until it was uncovered, the contents rifled and destroyed?

"Now then..." The AllFather positioned himself, his scabrous fingertips pressing lightly against Xairn's skull. His touch was corpse-cold and wholly repulsive. No wonder the Earth girls he'd tried to mate with had gone mad long before he killed them. The touch of his father's hands made even Xairn shiver and he had been enduring it since birth.

The worst thing was, the AllFather had no need of physical contact in order to scan his subjects—he only touched Xairn because he knew it made the whole experience even worse and harder to bear. *Someday I'll touch **him** in a way he finds hard to bear*—Xairn cut off that line of thought abruptly. It would never do to let his father hear him think such treasonous things even though the AllFather surely knew Xairn hated him. Knew and didn't give a damn.

The feeling of icy fingers rifling through his memories was both familiar and repugnant. As usual the AllFather lingered over past pains and sorrows, polishing them lovingly until they gleamed like precious jewels with edges sharp enough to draw blood.

Being torn from my nurse and told I would never see her again. She was kind to me—the only one who ever was. A Kindred bride the AllFather captured. Yet when I was old enough to be on my own he took her from me and drove her mad. Seeing her later locked in a cage like an animal, her eyes unseeing even when I called her name over and over, begging her to look at me...

Living like a beast beneath the metal throne—given only scraps to eat for days at a time, no safe place to call my own. Kicked with hard boots, stepped on and trampled if I got in the way, spat on, beaten. I learned the true meaning of hatred then and have known it ever since...

The pet lizard I found on the home world when we visited—it was black with purple edged scales. I never had a pet before and father let me keep it for

weeks, lavishing it with affection before he crushed it beneath his boot while I wept and begged him not to. The sound of his laughter as he watched my tears and feasted on my pain...

The excruciating flow of memories went on and on, each one blindingly intense and horribly real—almost as though it had just happened. The AllFather liked to keep the pain he inflicted sharp and intact, to allow instant access to the mental suffering he fed from so greedily. Xairn often thought that his father had conceived him not because he wanted an heir, but because he wanted a constant source of nourishment—a deep well of agony that would never run dry.

He tried to endure, but in the end Xairn lost his composure. It was the question of his true mother that broke him—as it almost always did. “*Who was ssshe?*” whispered the AllFather in his mind. “*And what did I do to her when I was done using her body, done ravaging her mind? Ssshe loved you, you know—cared for you as only a mother can care for her child. Ssshe wept and raved when I took you from her. Begged to be allowed to hold you just once more...*”

The mental image of a woman with tears in her eyes—eyes unlike the glowing red on black of Xairn and his father—filled his mind. Though her skin had been the pale, pearly gray of all Scourge, his mother’s eyes had been green—a deep, beautiful green. In his vision they swam with tears as she begged to be allowed to keep her child—to keep Xairn...

It wasn’t until there were tears in Xairn’s own eyes that the AllFather finally stopped and withdrew his icy presence from Xairn’s mind.

“*Ssstill weak. You always break for that vision.*” The AllFather’s voice was contemptuous.

“What did you do to her? Does she still live?” Xairn had never dared to ask the question before, but this time it seemed drawn from his lips.

The red eyes buried far back in the shadowy cloak glared. “That I ssshall leave to your vivid imagination. Now go.” The AllFather waved one skeletal hand dismissively. “I am sssated for now.”

“Yes, Father.” Xairn nodded stoically and rose to stand tall and proud before his father’s throne. The emotional pain he felt must not be echoed by physical weakness. And despite the torture he had managed to keep his secret. The hidden part of his heart was still just that—hidden. *A victory*, he thought ruefully, blinking tears from his eyes. *A small one but I can call it my own.*

Turning, he walked down the long, broad steps that led to the metal throne and made his way from the AllFather’s presence with what dignity he could. Gods above, how he hated the soulless bastard and longed for his death!

He knew it was a foolish wish. His father spoke of Xairn succeeding him but he didn’t believe it would ever really happen. The AllFather would be there forever—the malignant dark sun he was doomed to orbit for his entire existence.

For how could one who was not truly alive, die?

But I will see to the girl, he thought grimly. *He has no right to inflict such agony again. After all the many he captured and tortured, looking for just the right DNA sequence to fulfill the prophesy. She shall be taken before she is bonded to the warrior—*
that much I can do.

Whether he wished to defy his father out of spite or mercy for the suffering of a fellow being, he did not know. He only knew he was tired of folding beneath the AllFather’s will. Tired enough to defy the ageless, living corpse who sat upon the metal throne and fed greedily on the pain of others.

Even though it might cost him his life.

Chapter Eighteen

Liv was sore. *Deliciously* sore. She was tender in places she hadn't even known existed and sensitive all over, as though her entire body had become one big erogenous zone. God, who knew that Baird had a kinky side? Her new husband had been an *animal* the night before—in a good way, of course.

She looked at him fondly. Baird was breathing deeply, his big body completely relaxed on the other side of their large bed. It was no wonder he was worn out after everything he'd put them both through the night before!

Liv had to admit, the whole “you’ve been a bad girl and now you have to be punished” scenario had never done much for her in the past. The one time her old fiancé, Mitch, had tried it she'd burst out laughing, which completely ruined the mood. Poor Mitch, he just hadn't had the physical presence or the emotional intensity to pull off anything even remotely resembling domination play.

But Baird...he had it. *God*, did he have it. Liv shivered as she remembered the hot, dangerous gleam in his golden eyes. The hungry, possessive way he'd taken her. Just thinking about it made her feel weak in the knees. She'd heard all the old jokes about how sex got boring and stale after marriage but somehow she didn't think that was going to be a problem. Not as long as Baird kept surprising her with his kinky side. *Yum*.

Leaning over, she gave him a quick kiss on his rough cheek. Kindred didn't seem to get as hairy as human men—thank God, since Liv had seen some guys at the beach who looked like walking fur coats—*ugh*. But the big warriors *did* still need to shave their faces occasionally. Not that they used a razor to do it—they had a domesticated animal that actually nibbled their beards away in a matter of seconds. It looked a little too much like the face-hugger from the *Alien* movies for Liv's taste, but it never seemed to hurt Baird and he claimed it was completely painless. She hadn't quite gotten up the nerve to use it on her legs yet but maybe someday in the near future...

Her stomach growled, reminding her that she'd barely eaten anything the day before. And who knew how many calories she'd burned during their marathon sex session? What she needed was a big, splurgy breakfast—the kind she and Sophie and Kat used to make every Saturday morning. Liv smiled. *Think I'll surprise Baird with some blueberry pancakes.* It had taken her awhile to learn how to make them on the wave—the Kindred version of a stove—without burning them to a crisp, but Liv thought she had the hang of it now.

Careful not to wake Baird, she slid out of bed and put on a red silk robe which was all that was left of a really nice lingerie set she'd gotten at her wedding shower. Sadly, Baird had ripped the matching red lace teddy right off her, ruining it completely—although Liv had to admit she hadn't minded a bit at the time.

Walking a little gingerly, she made her way to the back door of the suite. Before she started the pancakes, she wanted to make sure the morning *klava* had been delivered. It was a Kindred drink that tasted, to Liv anyway, like spicy herbal tea with a hint of lavender thrown in. It was immensely popular, so much so that the Kindred had built a special greenhouse aboard their ship to grow the flowers it was made from. Every morning the new buds were picked and simmered to perfection and the resulting brew was delivered door to door to those that signed up to receive it.

But though it tasted like herbal tea, Liv had learned to take the Kindred breakfast drink in small quantities. In caffeine content it was more like the concentrated Cuban coffee served in Tampa where she'd grown up than the Sleepy Time she and Sophie liked to sip before bed. Drinking more than a very small amount of *klava* left her wired the entire day.

Pressing the door switch, she leaned out to look for the steaming metal cylinder of *klava*. She saw it at once, but there was something else against outside the suite that caught her eye—or rather *someone*.

Kat was slumped against the wall, still wearing the dress she'd worn to the wedding. The silky, sapphire blue material was creased and rumpled and a lot worse for the wear.

Liv couldn't help noticing that Kat was looking a lot worse for the wear herself. Her cheek was pressed against the curving silver wall and her long auburn hair was in tangles around her shoulders. Her delicate features were pinched, even in sleep, as though she was having a bad or disturbing dream.

"Kat?" Liv stared at her in concern. What was her friend still doing here? Why wasn't she back on Earth where she belonged?

"Liv?" Kat's eyes fluttered open and she blinked uncertainly. "Oh thank God! Are you *finally* finished with your tantric alien sex?"

"Uh, for now." Liv bent to pick up the cylinder of *klava* and then offered her friend a hand up. "Come on, come inside. Why didn't you knock earlier?"

"They told me I couldn't. They said a Beast Kindred can't be interrupted under any circumstances when he's doing the bonding nasty with his bride." Kat took her hand.

"Who in the world is *they*?" Liv asked, giving her a pull.

Kat winced as she got to her feet. "Deep and Lock—Baird and Sylvan's step brothers. Er—second brothers, I mean."

Liv remembered seeing the way the Twin Kindred had been eyeing her friend at the wedding and smiled. "Uh-huh. And what *exactly* were you doing discussing bonding sex with those two?"

"*They* were the ones talking to *me* about it, and you can wipe that smirk off your face right now," Kat snapped in a very un-Kat like display of temper.

"*Sorry.*" Liv ushered her into the food prep area and sat the steaming metal cylinder of *klava* on the counter. "Didn't mean to make you angry."

"No, I'm the one who's sorry." Kat made a face and rubbed her forehead. "It's just this damn headache I have—it won't go away. And those two *feel* so loudly I can hardly hear myself think."

"They *what*? Kat, what are you talking about?" Liv was beginning to be really worried about her. "Come on, hon, I think you'd better sit down."

“No,” Kat gripped her hand, a troubled look on her face. “You’re the one who should sit down, Liv. I’m so sorry. I keep babbling on because I don’t know how to say what I need to say.”

A cold finger of fear traced its way down Liv’s spine. “What do you need to say?”

“Okay, now first let me tell you that they’re all right—at least they were the last time I saw them,” Kat said rapidly. “But Sophie and Sylvan’s shuttle crashed and they’re lost somewhere in the Blue Ridge Mountains.”

“*What?*” It felt like a shriek leaving her throat but what came out was more like a strangled whisper.

“You heard me,” Kat said grimly. “They’re lost. But they’re not hurt and they have each other. And the last I saw, Sylvan was doing his damndest to protect Sophie.”

“The last you *saw*? How did you see them? Did you contact Sophie by Think-me?”

Kat frowned. “You know I’m not allowed to use one of those. My mind isn’t linked to a Kindred’s.” She made a face. “Well, not in the *traditional* way, anyway. I mean, not...look, never mind how I did it. The point is I was able to see them even though we couldn’t communicate.”

“You...you said he was trying to protect her. Protect her from what?” Liv whispered through numb lips.

Kat looked unhappy. “I don’t know exactly. But whatever it was, Lock and Deep seemed to think that Sylvan could handle it. And the way he looked...” She shivered. “Believe me, anything with half a brain would have left him the hell alone. His eyes were red and his fangs were out—”

“The *rage* was on him, then.”

They both turned to see Baird standing in the doorway with a frown on his face. He was wearing the smiley face boxers Liv had bought him as a joke, but somehow even the sight of her gigantic husband in bright yellow silk smilies didn’t lighten her mood.

“Baird,” she said. “Sophie and Sylvan are—”

“I know. I heard.” Baird looked at Kat. “Did Deep or Lock try to bespeak Sylvan?”

Kat nodded. “Of course. That was the first thing they tried. But the Scourge —”

“Have put up some kind of a mental block around Earth.”

This voice came from a different doorway—the one leading to the back entrance. Liv turned her head to see two large males crowded together, one with black hair and black eyes and the other with dark blond hair and brown eyes.

“Forgive the intrusion,” Lock said courteously, making an abbreviated bow. “The door was open and we heard voices so we assumed it was safe to come in.”

“Is that right?” Kat’s grip suddenly tightened on Liv’s hand until she yelped in pain.

“Ow, Kat! What the—?”

“You shouldn’t be here.” Kat was glaring at Baird’s second brothers like she wanted to burn a hole right through them with her eyes.

“We have as much right to be here as you.” Deep growled, his black eyes flashing as he glared back at Kat.

Liv looked between them uncertainly. *Boy, if looks could kill...* What in the world had happened between the three of them to cause this level of hostility? The entire food prep area was suddenly charged with tension, as though someone had set a bomb that was timed to blow at any minute.

“Sylvan is our second brother,” Deep continued. “We have as much interest in his safety as you do in Sophia’s.”

“Not enough to let me talk to Liv last night instead of waiting all this time,” Kat shot back. She looked at Liv. “I wanted to tell you earlier but Lock and Deep said I shouldn’t interrupt you.”

“Yes, you should have!” Liv sank down on the round bench that circled the table in the dining nook. “You absolutely should have, Kat—I don’t care how awkward it would have been.”

“Olivia is right,” Baird rumbled. “Though believe me, it would have been plenty damn awkward,” he added, looking uncomfortable. Remembering the kinky exploits of the night before, Liv felt herself blush in agreement.

“We *would* have if we thought Sylvan couldn’t protect her,” Lock said with dignity. “But from what Kat and Deep and I saw—”

“How *exactly* did you see them?” Baird growled, frowning.

It was Lock’s turn to look uncomfortable. “We, er, used Kat as a focus to find Sophia and Sylvan. But only because you weren’t available yourself, Brother.”

“They used you as a *what*?” Liv looked at her friend in concern. Kat was still glaring at the twins and her fair cheeks were stained a deep, rosy red. “Kat,” she murmured, what exactly did you get up to last night?”

“Not as much as *you* did, I’m sure.” Kat spoke to Liv while keeping her eyes trained on Deep and Lock. “But a hell of a lot more than I planned on, I can tell you that.”

Liv turned on Deep and Lock. “You bastards—what did you do to my friend?”

“Only what was necessary to find your sister,” Deep shot back.

“Using an unmated female as your focus?” Baird shook his head. “I don’t know much about the way seeking/finding works, but I thought it was forbidden to use an unshielded mind in such a way.”

“It was her choice.” Deep scowled.

“And it’s not forbidden—just not exactly *encouraged*,” Lock added. “The lady Kat *did* offer herself. We tried to warn her that the experience might be somewhat...intimate.”

“*Somewhat intimate*?” Kat demanded. “It was a hell of a lot more than ‘somewhat intimate.’ Compared to being mentally groped by the two of you, a trip to the gynecologist is like a handshake.”

“You volunteered for it,” Deep exploded. “We *tried* to warn you.”

“Well you *didn’t* warn me about the fact that this...this *link* between us doesn’t seem to be fading.” Kat sounded both scared and furious. “Or that I’d

have your damn emotions running around inside me for who knows how long. *Or* that I'd have a splitting headache I can't get rid of."

Baird crossed his arms over his bare chest and narrowed his eyes at the two Twin Kindred. "You put me in an awkward position, brothers. It is my duty to protect the females under my care. As my bride's friend, Kat falls squarely into that category."

"Kat should be *ours* to protect," Deep snarled, taking a step forward. "Lock and I have shared a joining with her and you already have a bride."

Baird took a step forward too, glowering. "If I'm hearing correctly, she wants nothing more to do with you. And it seems you took unfair advantage of her last night."

The tension in the room was suddenly so thick it was stifling. Liv could almost smell the testosterone filling the air, a thick, hot odor like the musk of male animals in rut. She opened her mouth to say something but Kat beat her to it.

"Wait a minute, wait a minute." She held out her hands, stepping between Baird and Deep, who was being held back by Lock. "Look, I'm not happy about what happened last night—not happy *at all*." She glared at Deep. "I *will* admit, though, that it was necessary up to a point. We *had* to make sure Sophie and Sylvan were all right. And that's what we need to concentrate on now—finding them and bringing them home."

"The lady Kat is correct," Lock said earnestly. "After she found them, Deep and I were able to pinpoint their exact location."

"Give me the coordinates," Baird said at once. "I'll go get them right now."

"The structure they're in is in a heavily wooded area," Deep growled. "You couldn't wedge a shuttle in there if you tried."

"However, there is a clearing about half a mile away by a small human shop. You could land there," Lock offered. "Only..."

"Only what?" Liv demanded impatiently.

“Well...” Lock looked uncomfortable. “Perhaps you should try bespeaking them again first. And not just...walk in on them.”

“When we last saw Sylvan he was deep in *rage*,” Deep added, as though that explained anything.

“He really was?” Baird frowned. “I thought he might be from Kat’s description but I didn’t know he cared for Sophia that way.”

“Apparently he does,” Deep said dryly. “Which is why you should call first.”

“How can we call them? I thought you said there was a mental block,” Liv said.

“There is,” Lock said. “But the last time I tried Sylvan on the Think-me, it felt weaker. As if I could *almost* get through. Maybe if someone with a stronger connection—”

Liv was already up. “Bebo,” she called. “Bebo, quick, fetch the Think-me.”

“Wait.” Baird put a hand on her arm just as the little *zichther*, which looked remarkably like a blue teddy bear, came waddling into the room with a thin wire circlet clutched in its jaws.

“Wait? Why should we wait?” Liv was already reaching for the Think-me but Baird got it first.

“Think what Lock is trying to tell us, Olivia,” he said softly. “Sylvan was deep in *rage*. That’s a state Kindred males don’t go into unless their bride is threatened. I had a helluva time not being blinded by it myself when I went to the Scourge’s Fathership to get you. If the AllFather had refused my offer of *krik-ka-re*, I probably would have lost it and ripped the whole damn place apart.”

“I still don’t understand.” Liv shook her head. “Sophie and Sylvan aren’t together but he still went into this...this *rage* state? What does that even mean?”

“It *means* that Sylvan probably demolished the threat—whatever it was—and he’s bonding Sophia to him this very minute,” Deep drawled. “And it’s not wise to interrupt bonding sex between a Blood-Kindred and his chosen mate—not even telepathically. Although it’s a hell of a lot better to bespeak them than to just barge in.”

“Are you *crazy*?” Kat glared at them. “You never said anything like that to me. Sophie doesn’t even *like* Sylvan.”

“Sometimes *liking* doesn’t have anything to do with it.” Deep gave her a half-lidded look so hot Liv was surprised it didn’t burn her friend’s silky blue dress right off her lush, voluptuous body. “Sometimes the desire between a Kindred and his bride is so intense that it can’t be denied—by either party.”

“Deep is right,” Baird said thoughtfully. “Sometimes the blood knows what the mind does not wish to see.” He sounded like he was quoting some kind of a proverb.

Liv thought of the hungry way Sylvan had kissed her twin during the Luck Kiss and how nervous Sophie had seemed afterwards. Could they possibly... *No. No way. It’s just not possible.* “I’m not listening to any more of this.” She held out her hand, frowning up at Baird. “Give it to me.”

“*Lilenta*,” he murmured. “How would you have felt if someone had interrupted *us* the first time?”

“I would have been madder than hell,” Liv said calmly. “But I’m telling you, Baird, *nothing* is going on. Think-me’s only work when you’re calling from the Mother ship and Sophie left her cell phone at home, so neither one of them has any way to communicate. They’re probably down there, twiddling their thumbs right now, waiting for us to make contact. That’s *if* they’re okay. Please...” Her throat got tight but she forced the words out. “I *have* to know they’re all right.”

Baird looked troubled but he handed her the thin silver wire at once. “Very well. But I’m certain they’re well, *Lilenta*. Sylvan and I have a very deep bond. I would know if he was wounded or had gone to be with the Mother.”

“You *think* that,” Liv said, settling the Think-me so that the cool silver wire pressed against her temples. “I was really close to my parents, too. I would have sworn that I would just *know* somehow if anything happened to them. But when we got that knock on the door I had no idea. I...” She shook her head, unable to finish.

“Liv...” Kat squeezed her arm comfortingly. She had been the first to rush over to the house on that terrible day, so Liv knew her friend understood exactly how horrible the memory still was. And how fearful Liv was of losing someone else she loved suddenly.

“It’s okay.” She shook her head. “Let me...just let me concentrate.” Closing her eyes she thought hard, pushing her mental voice out into space. “*Sophie... Sophie, can you hear me?*” But there was nothing—nothing except the strange sensation of her words flying out into space...and then bouncing back. Almost as though they were being repelled by some outside force. Liv opened her eyes.

“Anything?” Kat looked at her hopefully.

Liv shook her head. “Nothing. Just this weird...barrier somewhere out there. It’s like trying to shout through a rubber wall or something. I know that doesn’t make sense...”

“It makes perfect sense,” Lock said firmly. “That is exactly what Deep and I encountered when we tried to make contact with Sylvan. But the first few times we tried the wall was more solid—like rock.”

“That’s why we think it’s getting weaker,” Deep added. “Whatever or whoever is generating it—probably the Scourge—can’t keep it up forever.”

“If we can’t *bespeak* them then we have to go to them,” Liv said. “*Now*, Baird! And don’t start that crap again about Sophie and Sylvan being together. I know Sophie and Sylvan is *not* her type.”

“It might not be so easy,” Lock said. “Since last we talked to lady Kat, the High Council has put a moratorium on travel between the Mother ship and the planet—at least until they ascertain that the threat is gone.”

“Threat, what threat? I thought they crashed,” Liv protested.

“We think they may have been forced down,” Deep said. “The Council has decided to fly some patrols in the space between Earth and the ship. So far they haven’t found anything but just to be sure...”

“It should only be another few hours,” Lock said, obviously intending to be comforting.

“A few *hours*?” Liv kept her voice low and controlled with an effort. “In a few hours it might be too late! I thought you said they were in *danger*.”

“That was hours ago,” Deep said. “And if Baird says they’re still alive—well...” He shrugged, his broad shoulders rolling nonchalantly under his dark green shirt.

“How would Baird know?” Kat demanded. “I mean, no offense,” she said, turning to him. “But Liv is right. You can’t just *know* that the people you love are okay.”

“Actually, I can,” he said mildly. “Sylvan and I share a blood connection. We’re only half brothers, so we can’t hear each other’s thoughts without a Think-me, or feel each other’s emotions like Deep and Lock here.” He nodded at his second-brothers. “But I *do* know that if Sylvan was wounded or dying, I would feel it here.” He thumped his chest with one large fist. “The same way I felt our father’s passing.”

“So...” Liv looked up at him. “You’re not just *saying* that to make me feel better? You’d really know if something was wrong?”

“With Sylvan, yes.” He nodded firmly. “And *Lilenta*, if he cared enough about Sophia to go into *rage* for her, then he would have died killing whatever was threatening her before he allowed her to come to harm. Actually, he would have died defending her even if he didn’t care—I charged him with her safety, remember? If Sylvan is alive and well, I would stake my honor as a warrior that your sister is as well.”

Liv looked at him for a long moment and Baird met her eyes with his own golden gaze. After a long moment she felt the knot that had formed in the pit of her stomach loosen just a little. “Oh Baird, are you really sure?”

“As sure as I can be.” He drew her to him and held her tight, tucking her head under his chin. His arms around her shoulders felt like warm, flexible steel and Liv let herself melt against him, drawing comfort from his big, solid form.

Breathing in his spicy, comforting scent, she tried not to cry. “I hope you’re right. I really do.”

“So do I, *Lilenta*,” he rumbled. “So do I.”

Chapter Nineteen

It was still dark when Sophie opened her eyes, with just a hint of gray dawn peeping in the cabin's smallish windows. She woke with the strange feeling that someone she loved wanted to talk to her very, very badly and was upset because they couldn't reach her. It made her feel unsettled and anxious, like dropping a call in the middle of an important conversation. *Only what were we talking about? What was she saying?* But that didn't make any sense. She hadn't been talking to anyone—had she?

Sophie rubbed her eyes and stretched. *What a weird dream. And where am I?* As though her brain had been waiting for that question, the events of the night before came rushing back to her. *The crash...all the misunderstandings with Sylvan...the urlch...the way he marked me...* This last memory woke her completely and she sat up, shivering in the cool early morning air.

Is he still asleep? Sophie looked down past the foot of the bed. Sure enough, Sylvan was curled on his side, on the rug in front of the ashes of last night's fire. Even in sleep his strong features looked troubled, as though he was wrestling with a problem that had no solution. Sophie felt a stab of pity. *Poor guy!* She wished she could lean down and stroke the worry lines off his high forehead, but that might wake him up. And after last night, he definitely needed all the sleep he could get.

I wonder if he's dreaming of me, she thought, tracing the lines of his big body with her eyes. *Dreaming of what happened between us. Or of what he said he **wanted** to happen.* That thought sent a different kind of shiver down her spine which had nothing to do with the chilly air.

She still didn't want him on top of her and biting her the way he'd described. But the memory of his mouth on her pussy, the long, slow, loving way he had tasted her, and the hunger in his voice when he talked about what he wanted to do to her was still fresh in her mind. Though she'd been avoiding alpha males for

years now, she was beginning to think she understood what other women saw in them. If they were anything like Sylvan, that was.

Well, Liv is perfectly happy with Baird, she reminded herself. And he's about as alpha as they come. Then again, he didn't insist on biting Olivia every time they had sex. Sophie sighed. It really *was* too bad about the whole biting thing. She thought that with time and a *lot* of patience, she might overcome her fear of sex—though she was *never* going to want a big, male body on top of her while it happened. And she might even get used to Sylvan's protective mode, as scary as it was. But the idea of being stabbed in the throat with what amounted to four huge needles every time her lover was feeling amorous...*Huh-uh, no way.* Just the thought made her vaguely ill.

And why are you even thinking about this, anyway? As soon as you get back to the Mother ship it's all going to be over. So there's no use getting attached in any way.

Sophie shivered again and wrapped her arms around herself. *So cold. What I need is a nice, hot shower.* But would that wash Sylvan's scent off? She bit her lip and looked longingly toward the closed bathroom door. She never felt quite right in the morning without a shower—even if she'd taken one the night before. Even more than her first cup of coffee, it woke her up and got her going.

A weak ray of sunshine slipped over the tree tops and through the window above the bed. It played over the worn patchwork comforter, catching Sophie's eye. Funny how she hadn't noticed the comforter much the night before—maybe because it had been so dim with only the small fire to illuminate the cabin. Looking at the bed covering now, she could see that someone had put a lot of time and effort into it. In the pale sunlight the faded red and blue patches were—*wait a minute. Sunlight!* Sylvan's voice from the night before echoed in her head. “...*the urlich are creatures of darkness. Sunlight incapacitates them.*”

So we should be fine today, Sophie thought with relief. *And I can have my shower after all.*

Feeling much better, she slipped quietly out of bed and tiptoed across the floor to the bathroom. Her hurt ankle twinged a little but at least it didn't feel like

someone was stabbing her with knives anymore. In fact, with the exception of being ravenously hungry, Sophie thought she felt remarkably well considering the harrowing events of the night before.

How much of that had to do with a good night's sleep...and how much of it had to do with Sylvan? Sophie didn't know and she wasn't about to wake him up and ask him. Sneaking into the bathroom she closed the door as noiselessly as possible.

The hot water felt wonderful sluicing down her back and shoulders—it woke her up and made her tingle all over. In fact, as she soaped herself, she felt especially *tingly* between her legs. Her thoughts turned again to the way Sylvan had spread her open, to the slow, patient way he'd explored her with his tongue. She had to admit, it had been the most erotic experience of her entire life. The pleasure of his touch had almost made up for all the fear and uncertainty she'd gone through.

Sylvan had seemed to really enjoy it too. At least from the way he talked about how good she tasted and smelled and how much he wanted her. Being desired so badly wasn't something Sophie had experienced much in the past. Sure, the first guy she'd ever had sex with had told her he wanted her, but he was fumbling to get under her Camp Wakikee t-shirt at the time for a quick grope before lights out.

This was totally different. The way Sylvan looked at her, the hungry growl in his voice when he talked about what he wanted to do to her...it made her feel like a goddess. And no one had ever made her feel that way before.

Almost of its own volition, Sophie's hand found its way between her thighs. She'd told Sylvan that she usually didn't do this—didn't touch herself—which was true. But it was also true that she didn't usually have such vivid fantasy material. *Only it wasn't a fantasy. He really did that. Really spread me open and tasted me until I came so hard...*

It wasn't long before she was coming again. Sliding her fingers along the side of her clit, she moaned his name softly as the hot water rushed over her naked body. "Sylvan...oh God, Sylvan..."

* * * * *

Sylvan was having the most incredibly erotic dream. Sophia was naked in the shower and warm, soapy water was dripping from her tight pink nipples. God, he loved her ripe breasts, the curve of her hips, the round fullness of her ass. Just the sight of her had him hard and aching in an instant and his fangs wanted to come out too. Sylvan held them in grimly until she stopped washing herself and started... *Gods, is she really doing what I think she's doing?*

Sure enough. As if the sight of her gorgeous bare body wasn't enough, Sophia's slim hand slid down the rounded curve of her abdomen and settled between her thighs. A long, slow sigh fell out of her as she parted her pussy lips and began to stroke her clit with one finger.

Sylvan could barely hold back a growl. He had the sudden urge to drop to his knees right there and let the water run over both of them while he lapped her cunt. He wanted to press her back against the wall of the tiny shower stall and lick her from top to bottom, to press his tongue deep inside her honey well and taste her juices until she came for him again and again. And then he would stand behind her and part her legs to fit his cock inside her.

Sylvan could almost see it in his mind's eye...Sophia's slender form bent over with her legs spread for him. She would be bracing herself against the tiled wall, trembling slightly. But he would take things slowly...so slowly. He could almost feel the wet heat of her pussy against the head of his cock as he rubbed it against her, making her hot, making her ready...His shaft would be coated in her honey and she would feel so tight and silky and perfect around him as he pressed up into her, filling her inch by inch.

She would be moaning his name as he took her, making those soft, helpless little sounds she made when she was hot and in need as he pressed up and up, searching for the end of her channel with the head of his cock. Sylvan would reach around in front of her and cup her breasts, tugging lightly at her nipples to heighten her pleasure and then he would let his hand slide down to slip between her thighs and stroke her soft, wet pussy just like she was stroking herself now.

He would fuck her slowly, sweetly, whispering in her ear how good she felt around him, how much he loved her, how he never wanted to let her go. And then, when her pleasure built until she couldn't stand it anymore and he felt her coming around him, he would do it. He would blood her.

Piercing the tender skin of her throat with his fangs, he would fill her bloodstream with his essence as he filled her pussy with his cum, while she moaned and cried and gave herself to him completely and without reservation. And in doing so, he would make her his. His *forever*.

Sylvan could almost hear her calling his name as it happened.

"Sylvan...oh God, Sylvan..."

His eyes flew open. *That's no dream. She's really calling me! What's wrong?* Jumping up he rushed to the bathroom and threw open the door. The small room was so filled with steam he couldn't see a thing.

"Sophia? Are you all right?" Without waiting for a reply he plunged into the steam filled room, heading for the shower. One yank and the door to the small stall was hanging off its hinges, revealing a very wet, naked, and surprised Sophia.

"What...what are you doing here?" She tried unsuccessfully to cover her breasts and sex with her small hands.

"What am I doing here? You called for me." Sylvan frowned. "You sounded... upset."

"You *heard* that?" Her eyes were wide with disbelief. "Over the water and everything?"

He spread his hands. "I'm here, aren't I? Are you all right?" He tried to keep his gaze impersonal as he scanned her for possible injuries but it simply wasn't possible. Though he had spread her open and tasted her pussy the night before, he had never seen her completely naked except in his dreams. Her high full breasts and shapely hips, bare and slick with water, were almost too much for him. He wanted to climb in the shower with her, just as he had in his dream.

Wanted to touch her and taste her everywhere and make her come over and over, her pussy honey flowing freely until he could smell her sweet, secret scent...

Her scent! *Gods*, Sylvan realized with a jolt, *I can smell her scent again!* It filled the small bathroom as completely as the cloud of steam, bathing him in its delicious fragrance, making his mouth water...and no doubt seeping out of every crack in the cabin on the warm air escaping from the bathroom. Calling the *urlich* to them.

"Sylvan," she said, breaking into his grim thoughts. "Please, as you can see I'm fine. So if you could just shut the door and let me finish—"

"No." Reaching into the shower he turned off the water and took her by the arm. "Get out and dry off. *Now*."

"What? Why?" She looked at him, her eyes suddenly wide. "What are you going to do to me?"

I have no idea. What could he do to repair the damage? They didn't have time

for a long, leisurely marking again, even if he thought he could resist going further than she wanted to go. And besides, as he'd told her earlier, the scent glands around his mouth weren't nearly as strong as those around his groin. But there was no way he could mark her *that* way. Not without bringing back the memory of her attack.

"I don't know," he said shortly.

"Sylvan, please..." Her face was suddenly filled with fear. "You...you're scaring me," she whispered.

"I'm sorry." He felt his heart twist. "That's the last thing I want, truly, Sophia. But your scent is everywhere in here and it's being carried outside by the warm, moist air."

She turned suddenly pale and grabbed for a towel. "I...I'm sorry. I didn't mean to wash your scent off me but I thought it would be okay because you said the *urlich* were incapacitated by sunlight."

“*Bright, direct* sunlight,” he said, pulling her out of the bathroom. “I know you probably didn’t notice last night but this cabin is completely surrounded by dense vegetation. We may have to go miles to reach open ground. Not that that’s an issue right now—there’s no way we can leave here with your scent so strong in the air. And if the *urlich* catch it...” He shook his head.

“I...I don’t know what to say.” Sophia was knotting the too-short towel around her chest as she spoke. “I’m sorry I misunderstood you but I thought it would be safe to take a shower. I...I guess I should have asked first but you looked so tired, I wanted to let you sleep.”

Sylvan sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “You taking a shower isn’t the problem. That would wash off some of my scent but not completely eradicate it.”

“Well then I don’t understand how—”

“It could only be caused by you coming,” Sylvan said, more roughly than he’d intended. “An orgasm floods your body with hormones causing it to put out pheromones. Not to mention the fact that your pussy gets wet, washing away any scent but your own. And you know how wet you get...*numala*.”

Sophia lifted her chin, embarrassment and anger warring in her gaze. “You never told me that. Never told me I couldn’t...couldn’t...*You know*.”

Sylvan blew out a breath. “I was trying to last night when I asked how often you touched yourself. You acted like you never did. If you’d been a little more forthright I could have warned you not to.”

“I can’t believe this.” She crossed her arms over her breasts, glaring at him. “How was I *supposed* to answer? I mean that’s *private*.”

“Well, it’s about to be very *public* once the wind carries your scent back to the *urlich*.” Sylvan could hear the snarl in his voice but he couldn’t quite help it. Her delicious scent was affecting him too—calling to him as surely as it would the *urlich* that would come running to it. And he couldn’t get the image of her wet and naked out of his mind! It was enough to drive a male *crazy*.

I’m not acting like myself. Need to calm down, take control... But this time he couldn’t. Turning abruptly, he stalked away from Sophia, trying to put some

distance between them. He took a deep calming breath...and felt her small hand on his bare shoulder.

“Sylvan?” When he turned to look at her, all the defiance in her face had melted away, leaving only fear and regret. “Sylvan, I really am so sorry,” she said softly. “I never imagined I would put us in danger again just by, uh, indulging in a fantasy.”

“It’s not your fault,” he said hoarsely, trying to keep his eyes on her face. “I should have told you instead of—what’s that human expression? Beating up the bush?”

She smiled. “It’s beating *around* the bush. But, Sylvan...” She let her hand slide down his arm and he swore he could feel the soft touch on his cock. “Can’t we...can’t we just solve this the way we did last night? I mean couldn’t you just, uh, mark me again?” Her cheeks were pink and her voice was breathy as she asked the question. For a moment her scent got even stronger.

She wants it. Wants me to taste her, to bury my face between her thighs and lick her pussy until she comes and comes... Sylvan wanted it as well. Too damn much. So much he felt like he was going to explode. “I—” he started to say.

“Oh!” Sophia jumped back from him, a hand to her mouth. “Your fangs...”

“I’m sorry, Sophia. I can’t always hold them back—even for you.” Sylvan tested the point of one jagged, double fang with his tongue, drawing blood. The sharp pain was nothing to the ache in his cock...in his entire body. Gods, he wanted her so damned *badly*. “I can’t mark you with my mouth this time,” he told her. “I want you too much and I’m right on the edge.”

“You...you think you’d cut me by accident?” She gestured timidly at his fangs.

“No, I know I wouldn’t do that. I could go down on you for hours, even with my fangs fully extended, and not leave a scratch on you. ” He gave her a level look. “But I don’t know if I could stop myself from biting you when I felt you coming.”

“Oh,” she whispered again, her eyes wide. “You...you don’t?”

“It’s the way of the Blood Kindred. To inject our essence at the moment our female reaches her peak. An instinct so ancient it’s nearly impossible to overcome. I was able to repress it last night, before I tasted you for the first time. Now...” Sylvan shook his head. “The flavor of your honey, the taste of your hot, wet pussy under my tongue...you lit a fire in me, *Talana*. And nothing but sinking my cock and fangs to the hilt in your sweet, soft body will put it out.”

Sophia was backing away from him now. “You wouldn’t,” she said in a shaking voice. “You promised...”

“A promise I have every intention of keeping,” Sylvan said roughly. “Don’t worry, you have nothing to fear from me. But I can’t mark you again—not with my mouth.”

She went pale and sat down on the bed. “But Sylvan I don’t...don’t think I can handle the other way either. Not...especially not when you’re like...like this. So close to the edge, like you said. Your eyes...your fangs... I’m sorry but you scare the hell out of me right now.”

Sylvan ran a hand over his face, as though he could change what she saw there by touch. The *rage* was on him again but it wasn’t just because he might have to fight the *urlich*. It was a claiming, possessive *blood rage*. An extremity of emotion brought on by his intense longing for her.

His blood was boiling in his veins and a red veil had drifted over his vision. The urge to make her his *permanently*, to mark her and bond her until he never had to worry about losing her was so strong he had to turn away again. “I’m sorry, Sophia,” he growled, hating the animalistic tone of his voice and not being able to change it. “I don’t know what to do, how else to mark you. And I don’t want you to fear me. Although maybe...maybe you should.”

There was a long silence and he half-thought she must have retreated back into the bathroom. It wouldn’t have surprised him at all. In fact, it would have been a very sensible move. But then she tapped him on the shoulder again.

“No,” she said, when he turned slowly around. “I...I refuse to be frightened of you. I *know* you won’t hurt me, Sylvan. Because that’s not the kind of man—of male— you are. I know I can trust you.”

“But I can’t trust *myself*.” He risked taking her small, soft hands in his. “Please, *Talana*, I’m touched by your faith in me but tasting you...it flipped some kind of switch inside me. Caused a fundamental change. I can’t mark you the way I did last night and you don’t want me to mark you the traditional way. So we’re out of options—there’s nothing else I can do but wait for the *urlich* and try to fight them off.”

“No, that’s not true.” Sophie’s face was still pale but her chin was raised and she had that glint in her eyes—that look of determination she got when she was about to do something that frightened her. “You...you just need to rub against me to mark me, right?” she asked, gesturing to the clear outline of his cock in his black flight pants. Gods, he was so hard even the soft fabric that restrained him hurt!

Sylvan nodded. “There’s a little more to it than that but yes, that’s the essence of it.”

“Well...” Sophie bit her lip. “Why does it have to be *you* rubbing against *me*? Why can’t it be the other way around?”

He frowned. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying why do *you* have to be the one on top? What if you lay on the bed and I got...got on top of you?” Her cheeks were crimson with embarrassment but she was clearly determined to get the words out. “I could press myself against you. Against your, uh, scent glands. Couldn’t we...wouldn’t it work that way?”

Sylvan closed his eyes for a moment as a vivid mental image filled his mind. Sophia on top of him, naked and rubbing her hot, wet pussy over his aching cock. He nearly groaned. Gods, could he stand it? Could he possibly just lie there and let her touch him so intimately without wanting to flip her over and penetrate her hard and deep, filling her with his shaft and fangs and claiming her completely?

“I don’t know, Sophia,” he said, opening his eyes to look at her. “Don’t know if I could let you do that and not...respond.” He had a sudden idea. “But maybe if you used my belt.”

“What?” She took a step back. “Look, Sylvan, I’m not *that* kinky. I don’t care what you want to do to me, I’m not going to beat you with your own belt for it.”

“No.” He shook his head. “I mean if you tied me up—fastened my wrists to the headboard.”

She looked at the black leather belt he wore around his waist and then at the wooden headboard. “Are you sure?”

Sylvan took a deep breath. It was going to be pure torture—feeling her against him without being able to enter her. But there was nothing else they could do. He nodded. “Do it. And quickly—we don’t have much time.”

* * * * *

*I cannot **believe** I’m doing this.* Sophie checked the fit of the black leather belt around his wrists for the third time, making sure it was securely fastened around the center strut of the wooden headboard. If anyone would have asked her she would have sworn without a doubt that there wasn’t a single kinky bone in her body. And now she was trying a guy down so she could rub against him naked without him biting her. It was crazy and a little bit frightening but Sophie knew she would be lying if she didn’t admit she found it a little bit exciting too. And it was certainly less scary than the idea of having Sylvan’s big body on top of hers, making her feel helpless and smothered.

Less scary but a hell of a lot more embarrassing. She resolutely didn’t look below his waist. He’d undressed before lying on the bed so she could bind him, and the few glimpses she’d gotten of his big cock made her blush. He was already hard for her—that much she could tell. And his massive size hadn’t been a figment of her overheated imagination the night before either. His shaft really did match the rest of his large, muscular body. *Huge.*

She finished checking the belt for the last time and then sat back, acknowledging that it was time to get on with things. Sylvan was looking up at

her with a waiting expression on his face and every muscle in his big body was tense, as though he was ready to pounce.

She wished he didn't look quite so frightening. The pupils of his eyes were blood red and his fangs were still fully extended. It made her feel like she was about to perform a perverted sex act with some kind of animal or demon—something that would certainly bite if it got loose.

Don't think of him like that, she told herself sternly. *Remember how he was last night when he cried for you, when he tasted you.* That Sylvan, the sweet, kind, sensitive male...he was the one she wished for. But she had an idea that for the time being, at least, he was gone and wasn't coming back.

"Sophia." His deep voice was a low, lustful growl. "It's time."

She bit her lip. "I know. It's just... you're a big guy," she said, trying to keep the quiver out of her voice. "I mean, *really* big. Aren't you strong enough to break either the belt or the bed or both?"

Sylvan shrugged. "Of course. The belt is more of a reminder than anything else. Being held down makes me stop and think before I act. Before I... do something I might regret," he finished in a low tone.

Sophie tried not to shiver. "All right, then. And I guess we want you to be able to get out if the uh, *urlich* come, don't we?"

"If I hear them I'll shred the belt and snap this strut like a twig." His biceps flexed, giving truth to his words. "But the sooner we get you marked, the less likely that is to be necessary."

"Yes, I know..." Biting her lip again, Sophia scooted a little closer until she was kneeling right beside him on the bed. "I guess I just...don't know quite how to start."

"Start by straddling me," he directed in that deep, growling voice. "Come on, Sophia—I won't bite," he added more softly. "You tied me down so I couldn't, remember?"

She realized that despite his own inner tension, he was trying to make a joke, to make this a little easier for her. "All right," she said, trying to smile. "I'll do it."

She was still just wearing the pink towel knotted above her breasts and nothing else, so she maneuvered carefully, trying not to flash him. Finally she had herself settled with her knees planted on either side of his hips and there she stopped...unable to go any further.

“Sophia...” Sylvan’s voice was strained, as though he was trying to be patient and finding it awfully damned hard. “This isn’t going to work unless we have direct contact—a lot of it. You’ll have to lower yourself down onto me.”

Sophie cleared her throat. “But I don’t...don’t have to put you, you know, *inside* me, do I? I mean aside from the fact that I’m not using any kind of protection I just don’t think you’d, uh, fit.”

His eyes blazed. “As to that, you couldn’t conceive unless we were bonded. So it’s perfectly safe for you to have my seed inside you. But to answer your question, no, you don’t have to put my shaft into your pussy. It should be enough for you to rub against me—as long as you’re thorough.”

“The way you were last night,” she said, and blushed again.

“Yes.” He caught her gaze with his and held it. “The way I was last night when I spread you open and tasted you. Come down, *Talana*.” His voice was low and commanding, impossible to disobey. “Come down and let me feel that sweet, hot pussy against my cock. But first let me see how wet you are.”

“I...I...” Sophie tugged at the hem of the towel, feeling both embarrassed and excited. “You want me to...to show you?”

Slowly, he nodded. “Yes, show me. I want to see how wet you’re getting, my *numala*. Do you want to feel me against you as much as I want to feel your soft pussy against my shaft?”

“I...I don’t know.” Sophie looked down uncertainly. She still held the bottom edge of the towel in her fingers. Slowly, trying not to think about it, she pulled it aside, putting herself on display for him.

Sylvan watched as the towel parted and then let out a low groan. “Look how wet you are already, Sophia. Your thighs are already coated with your pussy honey.”

“I can’t help it,” she whispered, feeling a wave of shame.

“Don’t want you to help it.” His voice was hoarse with desire. “Come down, I want to feel all that sweet wetness against me. Against my cock.”

Feeling both awkward and incredibly turned on, Sophia lowered herself until the lips of her pussy were just brushing the straining shaft of his cock. Leaning forward, she braced herself on his rock hard abdomen and began a slow, up and down sliding motion.

Sylvan growled with approval. “Very good, *Talana*, but you’re not going far enough. You need to come all the way down. I need the maximum possible contact with you.”

“You...you mean...?” Sophie looked at him.

He nodded. “I mean you need to spread yourself open around me. Let my cock part your pussy lips and really press against you. Pretend...” He cleared his throat. “Pretend you’re trying to make yourself come.”

“But what if...what if I *do* come? Won’t that make my scent even stronger?” she protested.

“Not as long as you’re rubbing against me while you do,” he assured her. “My mating scent will mask your sweet fragrance, make it into something completely different. Now come on, Sophia. Open for me and come down.”

There was nothing else she could do. Reaching between her legs, Sophia parted herself for him, opening her pussy which was embarrassingly slick, and lowered herself completely onto the straining shaft of his cock.

They both groaned at the intimate contact. She could feel him rubbing against the entire length of her pussy now, pressing directly against her clit which was already swollen and oversensitive from her earlier orgasm in the shower. The sensation was so intense that Sophie had to just sit there for a moment, her legs trembling with tension, before she could go on.

She still held the towel to one side and she stared, mesmerized, at the erotic sight between her legs. She could see herself pressing against him, spread out around him, with just the broad head of his cock thrusting out between them,

pressed against his hard belly. It seemed almost to throb with need and for a brief instant, Sophie allowed herself to imagine what it would feel like to reach down and fit it against her entrance, to feel him pressing not against her but *into* her, filling her completely with the long, hard shaft she could feel between her pussy lips. Would it really be so bad, so frightening? Maybe not if she could be in charge the way she was now...

Sylvan broke her train of thought by shifting under her. He thrust up with his hips so that the hard ridge of his cock rubbed against her. Sophie gasped and threw back her head as a bolt of pleasure shot through her. "Oh!" she moaned. "Oh, Sylvan..."

The use of his name seemed to do something to the big warrior. He thrust up again and then again. "That's right, *Talana*," he growled as he moved against her. "Rub yourself against me. Ride my cock."

There was nothing else Sophie could do. She tried to hang on to him, bracing herself against his tense abdomen, but soon she found it was better and easier if she leaned back instead. Placing her hands on his muscular thighs, she arched her back and opened herself in a way she never would have believed was possible, as Sylvan moved against her again and again.

Sophie heard herself moaning his name as he pressed against her clit, sliding and grinding against her in a way that sent electric bolts of pleasure through her entire body. The rhythmic motions dislodged her towel and before she could grab it, the damp piece of terrycloth slithered away, falling off her body and over the side of the bed.

"Oh God!" Sophie froze, suddenly incredibly aware of her own nakedness. She couldn't remember ever being in such a compromising position and while she didn't hate her body, she didn't exactly love it either. Not enough to show it off so blatantly, anyway. But when she started to dismount and reach for the towel, a low sound from Sylvan stopped her.

"No. Please." His eyes—thin rings of ice blue surrounding crimson pupils—were locked on her naked body and there was a look of pure hunger on his face. "Please," he said again, looking up to meet her gaze. "Once we reach the ship I'll

never get to see you or touch you again. Please, *Talana*, let me drink in your beauty. Let me look at you.”

The way he was looking at her made her blush all over but at the same time, she suddenly felt incredibly desirable and powerful. Here she was, straddling a massive warrior, strong enough to break the bed in half or kill her with his bare hands. Yet with all his power, he was helpless before her...under her. And the way he was looking at her made her feel like the most beautiful woman in the whole world. *To him, I am*, she realized as she watched him look at her. *He doesn't want anyone else. Just me.*

Years of shyness and body sensitivity suddenly seemed to fall away from her. Suddenly Sophie felt completely and utterly gorgeous. A goddess. Though she would never in a million years have thought herself capable of such blatant sexuality, she gave him what he wanted.

She stopped trying to cover herself, stopped trying to hide her body. Instead she thrust out her breasts proudly and spread her legs, letting him see her completely in all her naked glory. And instead of waiting for Sylvan to thrust against her again, she began to move against him.

“Gods,” he whispered hoarsely as she braced herself on his thighs and pressed forward in a long, slow slide. “You’re so beautiful, Sophia. So beautiful when you open yourself for me, when you rub your hot little pussy against my cock.”

“You like it?” Sophia heard herself asking. “Like how it feels when I press against you like this?” *God, what's wrong with me? I'm talking like a porn star!* But she couldn't seem to stop. “I like it too,” she told him when he muttered a hoarse assent. “I...I like the way you feel against me. Even though I still don't think you could, uh, you know, fit inside me.”

“You would open to receive me,” Sylvan assured her as he watched, apparently mesmerized by the sight of her hot, open sex gliding against his cock. “You would be wet enough to take me all the way inside. And I would fill you slowly, I swear, *Talana*. I would make sure you had pleasure and no pain.”

Sophie wasn't at all sure that would be possible. To her way of thinking it didn't matter how wet she got, he was just too damn huge. *Well, thank goodness I don't have to worry about that now. It's enough just to rub against him, I guess. But for how long?*

She wanted to ask but she was halfway afraid he would tell her it was all right to stop. And she really didn't want to. Her nipples were hard and her muscles were tight with pleasurable tension. In the pit of her belly she felt like someone was winding a wire tighter and tighter. A wire that might snap any moment. All she needed to make that happen was to rub against him just a little bit more, just a little bit harder...

Sylvan must have sensed how close to the edge she was. Ever since her towel had fallen off he'd been holding himself perfectly still and letting her work herself against him. Now he joined her rhythm, pressing up when she pressed down, increasing the delicious friction between them until it was ten times, a hundred times, a thousand times more intense.

"Ah!" Sophie gasped as she felt the wire in her belly wind tighter and tighter. "God, Sylvan...so close...I'm so close..."

"Come, then." His voice was a low growl of desire and every muscle in his big body was bunched with tension as he thrust up against her. "Let me feel you coming against me, Sophia. Let me watch the look on your face when you come on my cock."

His hot words and the way he was looking at her were too much. With a ragged gasp, Sophie felt the tension reach its breaking point inside her—finally, the wire snapped. Crying his name, she pressed down against him *hard*, letting herself go completely.

The orgasm seemed to shake her to her very foundation. She felt like she was trembling all over, as though she'd been hit with some kind of sexual earthquake. *Oh God, so good...so **good**.*

The entire time she came, Sylvan watched her with that hungry look in his eyes. It was as though he was trying to soak up the experience, to record it in his

brain and save it for later, so that he would always remember her just as she was at that moment.

“Beautiful,” he murmured hoarsely when the waves of pleasure finally receded, leaving her feeling limp and sated. “Gods you’re so incredibly beautiful when you come, *Talana*.”

“What...what does that mean?” Sophia asked softly, still trying to catch her breath. “I know you started to tell me the other night but I think I fell asleep before you could finish. What is ‘*talana*?’”

Sylvan looked away, the lust on his strong features abruptly replaced by sadness. “It’s just an endearment. Like ‘sweetheart,’ I suppose. Or I think I have heard some human males calling their females ‘baby.’ Although why human women want to be compared to an infant I don’t understand.”

“Oh.” Sophie had an idea he wasn’t telling her the whole truth but now didn’t seem to be the time to ask for a more detailed explanation. Besides, now that her passion had passed, she was beginning to feel embarrassed again. And very, *very* exposed.

But there was still the little matter of Sylvan’s satisfaction. Though she had come, he had not. He was still hard and throbbing under her and it didn’t seem right or...*polite* somehow to leave him in such a state when she had gotten such an Earth shattering orgasm out of the marking. Before she could say anything, however, Sylvan was already tugging at the black leather belt that bound his wrists.

“You’ve been marked well enough now. It’s time we stopped.”

“But...but...” Sophia frowned. “You didn’t, uh, you know...”

“I don’t need to,” he said shortly. “I don’t have to come in order to successfully mark you. Having you against me is enough.”

“But it doesn’t seem fair,” Sophie said stubbornly. She could feel her cheeks getting hot again but she was determined not to leave him hanging as she had the night before. “I mean, you, uh, you’ve given me pleasure twice but you got nothing for yourself.”

His eyes blazed and he looked at her intently. "Do you truly care about my satisfaction?"

"Of course I do," Sophie protested. "I mean, I know I didn't, uh, do anything about it last night and I feel really bad about that. So, I mean, is there...is there anything you want me to do to, uh, help you along? Maybe I could...could touch you...?" She was already reaching between them to grasp his thick shaft but Sylvan shook his head.

"No, not that way. As much as I would love to feel your soft little hand wrapped around my cock, there is something I want more."

"What?" Sophie whispered, her mouth suddenly dry. "I, uh, have to warn you though that I have even less experience giving oral sex than I do receiving it. I'll try, though."

Sylvan smiled. "I don't want you to take me in your mouth. Just the opposite, in fact."

"You want to...want to...taste me again?" she asked hesitantly.

Sylvan nodded. "More than anything."

"I don't know," she said, eyeing his fully extended fangs. "I, uh, thought you said you couldn't help biting me if you did that."

"Only if you come while I'm tasting you. And since you just finished a moment ago that should be no problem."

"Oh...Okay." Sophie nodded but made no move to go to the head of the bed. Somehow she just couldn't stop looking at his double set of razor sharp fangs. Could she ask him to pull them in again? To retract them or whatever it was he did to make them go away? But he'd said earlier that he couldn't always do that, not even for her. Did she dare let him get so close to her, to such a tender, intimate area, with them out?

"Please, Sophia," he said in a low voice, breaking into her train of thought. "I swear not to hurt you. I just want to taste you once more before..."

"Before we get back to the ship and all this is over," she finished for him. "I understand."

“Just let me clean the honey off your thighs,” he murmured. “You don’t have to let me put my tongue inside you if you’re afraid.”

Sophie lifted her chin. “I’m not afraid of you, Sylvan. And...I trust you, really I do. I just...don’t quite know how to...how to get into the right position.”

“Straddle my face.” His eyes were half-lidded and his voice was deep with need. “Put your knees on either side of my head and lower yourself down. Just like you did to press yourself against my shaft.”

“You’re sure this is what you want?” Sophie couldn’t help feeling self-conscious as she moved to get into the position he’d described.

“Gods, yes.” The eagerness in his face couldn’t be faked. “To taste your sweet juices again. To give you pleasure and feel you quiver against me...it’s all I want. All I could ever want.”

Sophie felt something in her heart clench at his words. What would it be like to have him in her life on more than a temporary basis? To know that she was loved so much, cared for so deeply? She knew it would all be over the minute they reached the Mother ship but she couldn’t say no to his request—or to the longing and heat in his eyes.

Slowly, hesitantly, she positioned her knees on either side of his head and lowered herself down. Despite her words and his promises, she’d been halfway expecting to feel the sharp prick of his fangs in her inner thigh the moment they made contact. But all she could feel was the velvety-hot caress of his tongue against her flesh. Just as he had promised, Sylvan was cleaning her juices away from her thighs, using long, slow strokes that made her tingle and set a fire between her legs.

All too soon her thighs were clean and she heard him call her name. She sat back a little so that she could look down at him and saw the longing in his eyes again. “Sophia,” he murmured. “Will you trust me to taste you? To spread your pussy with my tongue and taste your honey from the source one last time?”

“Oh Sylvan...” His fangs were still out and his eyes were still red but somehow she didn’t fear him anymore. It might have been the fact that he was still bound

to the headboard, so she still felt in control of the situation. Or it might have been the melting honesty in his burning eyes. But for whatever reason, she wanted to give him what he needed. Wanted to give him *herself* any way she could.

“Please,” he murmured and Sophie could deny him no longer.

“Yes,” she whispered. Gripping the top of the headboard tightly, she lowered herself again until she was pressing against his mouth.

And then she felt his tongue.

He parted her pussy lips with a long, slow, sensuous lick that started at her entrance and traveled all the way up to her clit. Sophie was still sensitive from her recent orgasm but Sylvan seemed to know that. He didn’t poke or prod her with the tip of his tongue or try to suck the small swollen bud into his mouth. Instead he flattened his tongue and pressed it against her, giving Sophie the option of how much she wanted to move—if she wanted to move at all.

To Sophie’s delight, it felt incredibly good. His warm, wet tongue seemed to be pressing against her everywhere at once and she couldn’t feel the sharp points of his fangs at all. All she felt, in fact, was pleasure and his hot breath against her open pussy.

Hesitantly, still not sure if she ought to be doing this, Sophie began to move. It was a small motion at first, just a slight thrust of her pelvis. But the velvet friction of his tongue against her naked, sensitive pussy made her do it again... and then again and again.

Before she knew it she was actively riding him, rubbing against his tongue the way she’d rubbed against his cock earlier. Giving him what he’d begged for so sweetly as her pleasure built again.

Her eager submission to his request seemed to be too much for Sylvan. For a long moment he held perfectly still, seemingly content to let her press against him and take her pleasure. Then Sophie heard a low ripping noise. *What the...?* Her eyes had been closed tight in concentration. Now she opened them just in time to see the thick black belt shredding away from his wrists. He tore through

the tough leather as easily as Sophia would have shredded tissue paper. The moment he was free he gripped her hips and pulled her even closer.

Sophia gasped in a mixture of pleasure and panic. God, he was so strong! And now he was free of the restraints, doing exactly what he'd said he shouldn't be allowed to do. Tasting her, marking her with his mouth. Though she'd never been multiorgasmic before, she could already feel her pleasure building again. What was she going to do if he made her come?

For that was obviously his intent. From his slow, sensual beginning, Sylvan had progressed to a fierce sexual assault on the tender area between her thighs. It was as though he knew she was warmed up and ready for him. Ready to feel his tongue lashing her clit and pressing deep inside her pussy as he thrust it relentlessly into her over and over again.

"Sylvan!" she gasped as he tonguefucked her. "Sylvan, please! You're going to make me...you're pushing me too far. I can't...I won't be able to hold back."

His only response was to grip her hips even harder as he lapped her. God the things he was doing to her felt *incredible*. Sophie knew she would have lost it already if she wasn't so afraid of the consequences. Because now she could feel his fangs. They didn't hurt her or pierce her flesh but they were definitely there—four sharp points bracketing her tender pussy, reminding her of what Sylvan ached to do to her the moment she came. Which was going to be any minute if he kept this up...

Clutching desperately at the headboard, she tried to hold the orgasm back. She couldn't understand what was wrong with her. She'd never been able to come easily—not even when she touched herself, which wasn't all that often. But ever since she'd been with Sylvan, her body seemed to be in overdrive. Was it a response to his mating scent? Or was he just that good at going down?

Whatever the reason, she felt the pleasure peaking inside her again. She couldn't stop it—another orgasm rolled over her, drenching her in intense, almost overwhelming sensation and making her tremble helplessly against his mouth. Oh God, what was Sylvan going to do to her now?

* * * * *

The urge to bite, to mark, to inject his essence and claim her for his own was almost insurmountable. Sylvan struggled with himself, willing the cool, logical side of his personality to take over and take control of the situation. But though it had ruled him his entire life, that side was weak now. In its place was a ravenous beast, a hungry warrior that wanted nothing more than to blood and claim his bride.

The feeling of her trembling against him as she came, as well as the sweet gush of honey from her pussy, lit a fire inside him. He felt his cock swell and his fangs get even longer with the need to release, to fill her with his cum and essence at the same time.

Mine, she's mine, the beast inside him raged. *Have to have her. Have to make her mine **now**!*

Gripping her hips, he pulled her legs even further apart, baring her tender inner thighs for his hungry fangs. He could feel them throbbing as they filled with the pale blue liquid that was unique to his kind. The essence that could heal almost any illness with a single bite—and bind the female of his choice to him. Sylvan opened his mouth to bite...

And heard her soft voice begging him not to.

"Please, don't bite me, Sylvan." Her tone was filled with fear and agitation. "*Please.*"

The fear and pleading in her voice cut through the blood lust that had fallen over him like a smothering curtain. Though his need to bite her remained just as strong, his reason returned and enabled him to hold back...at least for the moment.

Sylvan paused.

*Have to stop. Have to let her go **now***, he told himself firmly. But the voice of reason was weak, ineffectual. In contrast the roar of the beast within was almost deafening. *Need her. Want her. Have to mark her—make her mine! Now!*

He couldn't help himself anymore. The need to have her, to bind her to him was simply too great. The bonding wouldn't be complete because his cock wasn't buried to the hilt inside her pussy. But filling her with his essence would still mark her as his and keep other males away from her. And he *had* to have her. *Oh Goddess, Mother of All Life, forgive me...*

His fangs throbbed and stung with a pleasurable kind of pain. The ache of fullness which could only be relieved by biting and releasing their load of essence into tender, female flesh. Sylvan stretched his jaws wide—

"Sylvan? Sylvan can you hear me?" The familiar mind voice invaded his head, cutting through the claiming lust and the urge to blood his bride like a knife.

"Baird?" he sent back, hardly able to believe it. *"Is that you?"*

"It's me, Brother. I hope I'm not interrupting anything but you're in danger."

Sylvan looked at Sophia. He saw the fear in her eyes, felt the way she was trembling as she waited for him to bite. He was in danger in more ways than his brother knew. In danger of harming the female he would rather die than hurt. In danger of breaking his vow, both to Sophia and to the Mother of Life.

"Oh yes, you're interrupting," he sent grimly. *"But don't worry about it."* He had never been more glad to be interrupted in his life.

* * * * *

Sophie was beyond relieved when he stopped in mid-chomp. She could see his fangs pressing against her vulnerable inner thigh, could feel their razor sharp tips digging into her tender flesh. But he hadn't broken the skin...yet.

The sight and feel of him about to bite her had her nearly hyperventilating. The pleasure of the intense orgasm he'd given her was rapidly draining away to be replaced by an all consuming fear as panic raced through her. It brought her past back in a sickening rush—reminded her too much of what she'd gone through when she was still a little girl.

The shots...the transfusions...needles everywhere... She could almost *smell* the rubbing alcohol—that harsh, stinging gonna-get-a-shot odor that made her stomach churn with dread. All she could think of was how much it was going to hurt—that sharp, hard stick of a needle sinking into flesh—multiplied by the four jagged points in his mouth.

“Please,” she breathed again, afraid to move, afraid to do anything but beg. “Please, Sylvan, *don’t*.”

With a low, frustrated growl, he pulled back. But the need in his eyes still burned just as brightly, his lust for her white-hot and unquenchable. “Need to mark you. Need to make you mine.” His voice was the growl of a beast denied its prey. “But I won’t. Not now.”

“Sylvan...”

“Get up.” He was already urging her off the bed and reaching for his clothes. “Baird called me from the Mother ship. He’s coming for us but he says the *urlich* aren’t far from the cabin. We’re going to have to make a run for it.”

“What? Did he bespeak you? How does he know?”

“Yes, he bespoke me. And Deep and Lock told him—they’re finder/seekers.” He was pulling on his black flight pants and tall black boots as he spoke. “Here.” He threw her the blue uniform shirt which had been lying at the end of the bed.

“Finder whats?” She was pulling on the shirt as she spoke, infected by his sense of urgency.

“Never mind. Let’s just hope you’re marked well enough that my scent throws them off.”

“Am I? I mean, can’t you tell?”

Grabbing her arm he pulled her close. Leaning over her, he inhaled deeply, his eyes closed for a moment as if in deep concentration. When he opened them, there was a troubled look on his face. “*I think* you are but it’s hard for me to tell. I’m so sensitive to your scent now I smell it even when I shouldn’t be able to.”

“What? What does that mean?” She looked at him worriedly.

“It means your scent is imprinted on my brain—like everything else about you.” He cupped her cheek and stared down into her face. “The color of your eyes, the exact tone of your voice when you’re nervous, or frightened, or in need. The shade of pink your cheeks turn when you’re embarrassed. I’m full of you, Sophia. Full to overflowing...but it does me no good.”

“I...” She wanted to look away from the frightening intensity of his gaze but somehow she couldn’t. “I don’t know what that means,” she whispered at last.

“It means I’m damned.” His tone was desolate. “Completely and utterly damned.” Abruptly he let her go. “Baird says there’s a clearing a half a mile North of here. If we can get there, out into the open sunlight, we’ll be safe. And the sooner we go the better.”

Sophia took a deep breath, trying to push down the fear and panic that wanted to rise and overwhelm her. “All right, I’m as ready as I’m going to be. Let’s go.”

He frowned at her. “How’s your ankle? Can you run on it or do I need to carry you?”

“There’s no way you can carry me half a mile up the mountain at a dead run,” she objected.

Sylvan looked at her sternly. “I can if I have to. So tell me now and don’t lie to me or yourself—can you run on that ankle or not?”

Sophie bounced up and down a few times experimentally. There was a slight twinge but nothing she couldn’t deal with. “I’ll be fine,” she said, hoping it was true. “Honestly, Sylvan, I will. Now let’s go.”

He gave her another long look and then nodded, as though deciding to take her word for it. Taking her hand he led her to the door. “Quietly,” he murmured, putting his ear to the splintered wood. “Let me listen.”

Sophie held her breath and tried to be as quiet as a mouse, praying he wouldn’t hear a thing. When he pulled away from the door his face was a little more hopeful.

"I hear them but they're still far away. If we hurry we can make it up to where Baird is going to land before they get to us."

"Let's go then," Sophie urged. "Hurry up!"

Sylvan moved the chair that had been blocking the door. "When I open the door we need to run as fast as we can," he told her. "And whatever you do, whatever you hear, *don't* look behind you. The *urlich* take direct eye contact as a challenge—looking at them will only speed them on. Got it?"

"Yes," Sophie whispered through numb lips. Now that they were actually about to step out of the safety of the cabin, the panic she'd been trying to hold back was eating her alive.

"Good." Sylvan nodded at her and gripped her hand tighter. Yanking the door open he pulled her out of the cabin and away from the last vestige of safety. "Now, run!"

Sophie ran.

It was uphill going, but thankfully not as steep as she'd feared and Sophie risked a quick glance at their surroundings. The trees around the cabin were big and old, casting their shadows over the thickly wooded area as far as the eye could see. It wasn't quite leaf season yet, but some of the leaves had started to turn from green to brilliant yellow and vermillion. It would have been a beautiful scene if Sophie hadn't been frightened out of her mind and running blind. Luckily, Sylvan seemed to know exactly where he was going and he pulled her after him ruthlessly, his grip on her hand unbreakable.

How far have we gone? How long does it take to run a half mile anyway? She knew how long it would take her at the gym setting an easy jogging pace on the treadmill but that was a far cry from running for her life. Now she wished she'd visited the gym much more regularly. But it was too late for that—all she could do now was pray she was able to keep going and get out of the forest alive.

Sophie's bare feet flew over the last year's fallen leaves and sharp, stabbing twigs as she struggled to keep up. She was going to be in some serious pain after

this run was over—her hurt ankle was already throbbing—but none of that mattered at the moment.

Because now she could hear the *urlich* coming up behind them.

At first it was just a scuffling sound, like many paws rushing through the undergrowth, and a few short, inquisitive barks. Then there was a loud, long, baying—the call of a wolf or a wild dog when it finds the scent of prey. The blood chilling howl was answered by many more voices taking up the call, until she felt like a fox or a rabbit with a pack of hounds after her.

Sophie had been falling behind but the frightening cries gave her a second wind. Gasping for air, her breath tearing in her throat, she gripped Sylvan's hand tighter and put on a new burst of speed.

"There—ahead." He didn't sound a bit out of breath and it occurred to Sophie that he would have been able to go much faster without her. She looked where he was pointing and saw a brilliant spot of sunlight in a clearing up ahead. It was nothing more than a dusty, unpaved parking lot in the back of a ramshackle building, but to her it looked like an oasis in the desert.

Safe, we'll be safe there! she thought deliriously. *If we can only get to it...* There was still a long way to go under the cover of the trees before they reached the sunlit refuge. But at least they could see it, could see they were headed in the right direction.

The *urlich* behind them seemed to see the clearing too because there was a chorus of angry growling and barking behind them. *Oh my God, they're gaining!* Sophie started to turn her head to see how close the animals were and then remembered what Sylvan had said. Resolutely, she kept her face forward and kept running, trying to ignore the fear that rushed through her like fire.

She'd never liked big dogs—especially fierce ones. Growing up, their next door neighbors had raised Dobermans and one of them had gotten out into the neighborhood once while she and Liv were riding their bikes. It had chased them eight blocks and Sophie had pedaled until she thought her heart would burst, sure it was going to catch them and kill them both.

But the Doberman that got loose wasn't genetically and mechanically modified, whispered a little voice in her head. The urlich are. And if they catch you they won't just bite. They're looking for you for a reason. Because the Scourge want you...

Okay, none of this was what she needed to be thinking about right now. At the moment what she needed was to concentrate on was—

A fresh round of baying and snarling cut her thoughts off as cleanly as a sharp knife.

Because these sounds were coming from in front of them.

They were surrounded.

Chapter Twenty

“I’ve got the clearing in my sights.” Baird spoke into the com-link he wore clipped to his ear as he piloted the medium sized shuttle he’d gotten to replace the one Sylvan had crashed. The Master of Ships hadn’t been too happy about that—the tech that went into even the smallest and simplest Kindred craft was considerable and expensive. But Baird was a war hero with friends on the High Council—which was the only reason he was being allowed to fly down to Earth now when the whole planet was on lock down. The Council still weren’t sure exactly what was going on with the Scourge, but it seemed certain they’d developed some troubling new forms of technology which needed to be identified and either duplicated or destroyed.

“Hurry,” Deep’s voice said in his ear. “There’s a pack of *urlich* closing in on them right now.”

“I’ll come out swinging,” Baird promised. “I’ve got my blazer and I brought Sylvan’s too. I’m sure he’ll be glad to get it.”

Be careful! The new voice came not from the com-link but from inside his head. It was Olivia and she sounded worried.

I will be, Baird promised her. *I’ll bring them both back safely. I promise, Lilenta.*

Love you... The voice faded to a whisper in his mind as he got out of range. Even the mind-link forged when a Kindred bonded to his bride had some limits. Baird would have felt lonely without her soft voice but he didn’t have time. Sophia and Sylvan were in trouble. He just hoped he was in time to save them and keep his promise to his bride.

* * * * *

“Up the tree. Now!” Sylvan was already giving her a boost as he spoke.

Sophie gripped the rough bark tightly and scrambled with her bare feet against the side of the trunk. She winced as her hurt ankle chose that exact

moment to twist the wrong way again, leaving it practically useless. *Damn it—not now! Not when I have to climb!* She did her best to get higher but the next available branch was far above her head and well out of reach. She tried to jump for it, landed wrong on the hurt ankle again and gasped in pain. In response, the slender branch supporting her weight shivered and gave an ominous creaking sound. It was then that she realized she was still alone in the tree.

“Sylvan?” she said anxiously, looking down at him. He was standing braced beneath the tree, half crouched with his arms spread, obviously ready for combat. Sophie was aghast. “Sylvan, what are you doing?” she demanded. “They’re coming—get up here!”

“That branch won’t hold my weight.” He didn’t look up as he spoke, still scanning for the impending threat.

“Then find another tree,” Sophie urged him. “Quick, while there’s still time.”

“No. I won’t leave you.”

“Sylvan, don’t be s—”

The words died in her mouth as the first of the *urlich* came into sight.

Sophie didn’t know what she’d been expecting—robot dogs with metal teeth maybe or something that was half alive and half machine—like that old movie, *The Terminator*. Instead she saw animals that were, well, just animals. In fact, they looked an awful lot like the Doberman which had chased her and Liv all those years ago. *Except that they’re freaking huge!*

They were as big as small horses and their cruel, pointed snouts were filled with razor sharp teeth, every one as long as Sylvan’s fangs. Aside from their size the only other unusual thing about them was their eyes.

They’re red, Sophie thought with a spasm of fear. *Glowing red like coals.*

“Get higher in the tree if you can,” Sylvan told her grimly, keeping his eyes glued to the largest *urlich* which seemed to be the leader. “They can’t climb but they can reach a good distance when they stand on their back paws.”

Sophie could see he was right. Standing on their hind paws, any one of the modified dogs would be well able to pluck her right out of the tree she was

currently hiding in. *And that's exactly what's going to happen. Because I can't reach the next branch. And how the hell does Sylvan expect to fight them with no weapons?*

Her answer came in the form of a low growl down at the base of the tree. As she had in the cabin, Sophia realized that the sound was coming from Sylvan, not the dogs. He was still crouched in a fighting stance and his fangs looked longer and sharper than she'd ever seen them. Just because he didn't have a weapon in his hands didn't mean he was unarmed. She had never seen him look more fierce, more threatening. *But there are so many of them. And just one of him!* A spasm of fear shot through her and then one of the animals leaped right at him.

Sophie bit her lip as Sylvan ran to meet the attack. She was certain the huge animal would rip out his throat and she wanted in the worst way to look away but she was mesmerized, her eyes glued to the action.

Sure enough the pointed snout full of teeth aimed right for the big warrior's neck but at the last minute, Sylvan put his hands up. Not to protect his throat, though. Sophie watched in horror as he actually stuck both hands in the animal's mouth. *Oh my God, he's going to lose all his fingers!*

But before the *urlich* could clamp down, Sylvan had hold of its jaws and was prying them apart. Sophie could only imagine the sheer strength it took to hold such a huge, ferocious animal's mouth open. *But why is he doing it? What's the point?* True, it kept the *urlich* from biting but it seemed like there should be a better way to do that. What did Sylvan hope to accomplish?

A low whine was coming from the animal's throat as Sylvan stretched its jaws wider and wider. And then he wrenched the entire head to one side and Sophie had the answer to her question. With a sharp cracking sound, the animal's neck snapped and it fell in a limp heap at Sylvan's feet.

Ugh! She flinched at the grizzly sound but there wasn't time to freak out. Another *urlich* had launched itself at Sylvan. This one managed to avoid his hands and plow into him with enough force to take them both to the ground.

Sophie bit back a scream as she watched them roll over and over on the ground, the lethal jaws snapping inches from Sylvan's face. The look on his chiseled features was grim and unyielding as he held the *urlich* off.

How can he fight up close like that? How long can he possibly hold it off? Suddenly the *urlich* went for Sylvan's throat. But instead of his neck, the wickedly curving teeth found his bare shoulder. The beast ripped into him but Sylvan hardly seemed to notice. He shifted his grip and, in a gruesome example of role reversal, *his* fangs found the *urlich's* throat instead. Then, with a quick, vicious jerking motion, he ripped it out.

Sophie's breath caught in her throat as a spray of blackish-red blood fountained up from the dying *urlich*. A few droplets splattered her bare feet, hot and thick and slimy. And then Sylvan was up again and ready to face the next attacker.

She stared at him in awe. His jaw and chest were smeared with the *urlich's* slick, black blood and he was bleeding heavily from the wound on his shoulder. But his face showed no signs of pain—only a fierce, animalistic determination to kill all the attackers or die trying.

It's because he's defending me, Sophie realized as she watched the four remaining *urlich*, including the large one that appeared to be the leader, circle her tree where Sylvan was still standing guard. *He's willing to die for me—to die protecting me, just like he said. What's so special about me? What did I do to inspire such loyalty? Such...love? And will all that emotion really just disappear when we get back to the ship? If we get back to the ship?* She didn't have long to wonder because suddenly everything happened at once.

Up until now the *urlich* had been coming one by one as though trying to test Sylvan's strength. Now the lead *urlich* barked out several sharp, short commands and the four remaining animals launched themselves at the base of the tree at once.

Sophie gasped as their heavy bodies hit the trunk, shaking the entire tree and nearly dislodging her completely. Only by wrapping her arms around the tree and holding on desperately was she able to keep her place. She couldn't see what was

happening to Sylvan—he seemed to be buried under a mound of snarling, snapping bodies. In the mean time, the *urlich* leader was up on her hind paws, snapping at Sophie's unprotected ankles.

This is it, she thought desperately as she tried to avoid those razor sharp jaws. In a minute this thing is going to grab me by the leg and drag me out of the tree. I don't know why the Scourge want me but it looks like they don't care if I get to their ship in one piece or not. They'll take me away and I'll never get to see anyone I love again. Liv or Kat or Sylvan...

She didn't have time to wonder why she'd added the big warrior's name to her list of loved ones. It didn't matter anyhow. He was probably dead—as dead as she herself was going to be once the Scourge were through with her.

Hot, fetid breath bathed her bare legs and she tried to dance away again, out of the reach of the snapping jaws. Her bad ankle gave a warning twinge and Sophie gasped in pain. Hanging on to the rough bark of the tree, she tried to kick out at her attacker, to fend it off, but the movement caused another excruciating bolt in her twisted ankle. Before she could try again, teeth as sharp as razors were closing around her leg. Sophie felt an agonizing pain as they bit and pierced deep, gripping the meat of her knee and lower leg. The large female *urlich* growled low in her throat and began to pull, trying to dislodge her prey from the tree.

Me, I'm the prey, Sophie thought. Oh my God, no...no! Slowly but surely her fingers were being pried from their grip on the rough bark. Hot rivulets of blood were pouring down her leg. The pain was incredible, enormous as the giant, sharp teeth dug deeper into her tender flesh. GodohGod...hurts! Hurts so much!

Then suddenly there was a sizzling sound and some of the pressure eased. The pain was still terrible but at least she was no longer being pulled out of the tree. Sophie opened her eyes which had been clenched shut and couldn't hold back a scream. The lead *urlich's* teeth were still buried in her leg, its long, ugly head attached to her, but the rest of its body was gone—sheared clean away as though cut off by a knife or a sword. *Or a blow torch, she thought wildly. My God, look at it—it's smoking!*

It was true—the stump of the animal’s neck was steaming as though it had just been cauterized by the world’s biggest surgical instrument. The sickening stench of burned hair and cooked flesh coming from it made her want to gag but she had no time to be sick. With trembling fingers she reached out and pried at the razor sharp teeth. She was afraid that the jaws, clenched tight in death, would never let go. But at last she managed to lever them open and the smoking head dropped away, leaving nothing but gaping puncture wounds to remind her of its owner.

She heard another sizzling sound and then another. Looking at the ground below her, she saw that the two *urlich* on top of Sylvan had been reduced to a pile of smoking chunks. She had no idea what was happening until she saw Baird charge in with a gun-like weapon in his fist. Sophie had never been so glad to see her new brother-in-law in her life.

“Baird?” she gasped and he nodded at her briefly.

“Where’s Sylvan? Did he get out or is he still under these two?” He nodded at the mess under her tree.

“I didn’t see if he got out or not. Oh God, Baird. I don’t know if he’s...still alive.” She choked on the last words, feeling sick and faint. *Sylvan*, she thought, as fear took her by the throat. *Oh Sylvan, please don’t be dead. Please, please don’t. Even if this is the end for us and you won’t care any more once we’re back at the ship, please don’t be gone for good.*

She was about to dissolve into tears when the gruesome pile of *urlich* parts shivered and heaved. Sylvan sat up, pushing them out of the way. He looked like a survivor from a zombie movie, more dead than alive, but he was still moving and that was enough for Sophie.

He’s all right. Oh, thank God, he’s all right. Suddenly she was literally faint with relief. Or maybe it was blood loss. The deep wounds in her calf were pumping out streams of crimson which was trickling down her bare leg to patter on the ground below. Just watching it was making her feel...so...dizzy.

She tried to hold on to the tree but the world was spinning in a giddy arc, threatening to throw her down at any minute. “Sylvan,” she muttered, not even sure if she was talking aloud or if the words were all in her head. “Sylvan, I—”

Then she felt herself falling. *Gonna hurt when I land. The ground is so hard...* But someone caught her before she reached it. Strong arms held her tight and someone whispered in her ear, “Safe now. You’re safe, *Talana*.”

Sophie opened her mouth to answer but nothing came out. Blackness ate the world and she remembered no more.

Chapter Twenty-one

“You’re a mess.” Baird looked over his half brother critically. Sylvan was in bad shape with wounds all over the place. Yet he refused to give up his precious burden—Sophia, still cradled in his arms. He’d insisted on tending her wounds immediately, even though there was still an *urlich* running around loose somewhere.

Baird waited patiently, keeping guard beside the pile of steaming corpses while Sylvan worked. Luckily, the Scourge bred animal was nowhere in sight. *Good, let it go back to its master. Tell that bastard the AllFather, Kindred warriors aren’t that easy to kill.*

Still, he wished Sylvan would agree to take Sophia back to the shuttle for first aid instead of performing it right here in the forest. It made a hell of a lot more tactical sense to get out into the sunlight and away from danger. But there was no arguing with his brother. Sylvan was intent on cleaning and sealing her wounds at once, which he did with long, careful strokes of his tongue.

At last he appeared satisfied. Looking up from Sophia, who was still unconscious, he nodded at Baird. “Let’s go.”

“Can you manage? Do you need me to get your med kit for you? I brought it with me just in case.”

“I’m fine.” Sylvan struggled to his feet, holding Sophia against his chest. He staggered for a moment before regaining his footing.

“Sylvan, Gods!” Baird put out a hand. “At least let me carry her. It’s still a long way to the ship.”

Sylvan, who had never even raised his voice to Baird before, pulled back his lips in a savage snarl. “Get back. She’s *mine*.”

Surprise and dismay made Baird take a step back. He stared at his brother. Sylvan’s pupils were a bloody crimson and his fangs were long and sharp—as lethal as daggers. The look on his face was pure threat—all emotion and no reason whatsoever.

“All right, fine.” Baird held out his hands, palms up in a gesture of peace. “Carry her yourself. But don’t blame me if you fall out from exhaustion or blood loss on the way. She wasn’t the only one who was wounded, Sylvan.”

“She’s the only one who matters.” Sylvan’s voice was guttural and deep—almost bestial.

Baird shook his head. His half brother had been gone for less than twenty-four Earth hours but in that short amount of time he appeared to have changed into a completely different person. What had happened to the slightly distant, coolly logical male Baird had always known? And who was this haggard, emotionally-ravaged creature with the wild, hungry look in his burning eyes? Even the *rage* couldn’t explain such changes. “Look,” he told Sylvan. “I understand, you just bonded her and you’re probably still feeling a little—”

“She’s not bonded to me.”

“What?” Baird frowned. “But I can smell your scent all over her.”

“Doesn’t matter. She’s not my bride.” Sylvan looked up, his eyes blazing. “Did you really think I would break my vow so easily?”

“Of course not. I know your word is good,” Baird said fiercely. “But even the Mother of All Life must understand when a male’s true bride comes into his life. After all, it’s she who puts a warrior and his mate together so—”

“It was the Mother of All Life who gave me these feelings for Sophia.” The harsh, growling voice became as soft as a caress when he spoke her name. “But only so I could protect her. I had to mask her scent with my own—there was no other way with the *urlich* tracking us. Once we get back to the Mother ship, though, everything will go back to normal. *I’ll* go back to normal.”

They were making their way toward the ship as they spoke, moving slowly, at Sylvan’s wounded pace. At his brother’s words, Baird actually stopped and turned to look the other warrior full in the face.

“You really believe that? You think your feelings for her—the need to claim her and bond her to you—will just disappear the minute we hit the ship?”

“They have to.” There was something like desperation in Sylvan’s eyes now. “Because I can’t have her. Can’t claim her, no matter how much I want to.”

Baird frowned. “Stop this foolishness, Sylvan. Go to the priestess in the sacred grove. Ask to be released of your vow.”

Sylvan shook his head. “I can’t.”

“You must!” Baird stabbed a finger at him. “Don’t let pride break you. There is no shame in bowing to your body’s demands—just look at you, you’re so deep in need for her you’re not even the same person. You look like hell, Brother. You can’t go on like this.”

“I have to.” Slowly, Sylvan began to march forward again. Baird could see his arms trembling with fatigue but he moved with a single-minded determination, a stubbornness that trumped his wounds and weariness. “I have to,” he said again. “Have to go on, no matter what. Go on without her.”

“Why?” Baird demanded. “You’ve found the woman you love—now claim her before the need inside you eats you alive.”

Sylvan looked at him and there was such a depth of pain in his eyes that Baird ached to see it. “I can’t claim her because she doesn’t want me. She’s rejected my bite over and over again.”

“Gods.” Baird didn’t know what to say. *The hope, the need, the desire...and then the rejection. The pain worse than death. It’s Feenah all over again.* But Sylvan had never been like this the one time he’d tried and failed to call a bride before. He’d never looked this bad, this ragged. It was clear the need to claim Sophia was riding him like a cruel master, spurring him to take her, to bond her. And it was just as clear that Sylvan was determined to fight it. Baird knew his brother—a more honorable male did not exist. So it was no wonder Sylvan refused to bond her against her will.

Baird looked at the other male with fresh compassion. How well he remembered the pain he’d felt when Olivia had refused to let him mark her and bond her! *Her* objection had been in leaving everyone she loved back on Earth. Sophia could have no such reason since her beloved twin sister was already on

the Kindred ship. Yet it was clear that she had rejected Sylvan in no uncertain terms. Why? He wanted to ask more, to try to get to the root of the problem, but it was clear Sylvan was in no mood to discuss his pain. The fact that he had revealed it at all instead of keeping it hidden—which was his usual way—said a great deal about how much he was hurting.

“So you see,” Sylvan continued, breaking his train of thought. “I *have* to believe things will go back to normal once we reach the ship. It’s either that...or madness.” He gave Baird a hollow-eyed glance that said he wasn’t far from that eventuality. Indeed, he looked like a male standing right on the edge and looking down into the abyss.

“Then I pray you’re right, Brother,” Baird said softly. He dared to reach out and squeeze the other male’s uninjured shoulder, trying to convey his sympathy in the simple touch.

Sylvan nodded, a determined look on his face. “When we reach the ship this will all be over. Until then Sophia is still mine to protect and cherish.”

“I understand,” Baird said, nodding. “Don’t worry, we’ll be home soon and your burden will be lifted.” *I hope.*

Sylvan shook his head. “I don’t want to go straight back to the ship. There’s something I have to do—an errand I have to run—in Sophia’s home town. Can we stop by Tampa before we go back?”

“Well, I *am* here on a special dispensation from the High Council,” Baird said. “They didn’t order me to come right back and I know there are a few things Olivia would like to have from her old home. So I don’t see why not.”

“Good.” Sylvan nodded with a finality that was somehow troubling. “And don’t worry, I won’t take long.”

“You’d better not,” Baird said, trying to joke. “Or Olivia will skin us both alive. She said she wants us home in time for late-day meal or we’ll get nothing but *Grieza* worms for a month.”

Sylvan nodded but didn't smile. Clearly he was deep in thought. Was he contemplating his errand, whatever it was? Or wondering why the woman he wanted so desperately didn't want him?

Baird felt a shiver of unease pass over him but there was nothing more he could do or say. Sylvan was past any help but that of the Mother of All Life...or Sophia. The human female he carried so tenderly in his arms held the key to healing his heart...or destroying it forever. Baird only hoped she would be gentle.

* * * * *

Sophia was having the oddest dream.

It was about Sylvan. But not the cool, logical Sylvan she'd known before their stay together at the cabin. No, this Sylvan was different—as different as the blazing desert sun is from an icy glacier. He no longer looked cool and collected. In fact, he looked terrible—weary and wounded and his eyes were wild. But there seemed to be something he had to do and he was determined to do it.

Sophie watched as he took a quick shower in her town house (What was he doing there?) and dried himself with her favorite sunflower beach towel. His strong body was covered with cruel markings—wounds from the fight with the *urlich*, she was sure. They appeared to be healing already but there were going to be scars—a *lot* of them.

Watching the big warrior, the weary way he moved and the terrible wounds that he'd gotten for her sake, Sophia ached for him. His pain was almost palpable, even in her dream. She wished she could give him a massage, ease some of the tension that was knotted in those broad shoulders. Then she would have him lie down on the couch (if he would fit) and make him chicken noodle soup and let him watch bad daytime TV until he couldn't take any more. That was the way her mom had always treated any sickness from the common cold to affairs of the heart and it was what Sophie wanted to do for Sylvan now.

Wish I could take care of you, she thought longingly. Wipe that grim look off your face and see you flash that little one-sided smile of yours. Maybe even hear

you laugh. Had she ever heard him laugh? Sophie didn't think so. *I bet with that deep baritone voice of his it sounds great. Wish I could hear it, just once.*

Unable to help herself, she reached out to him...and realized afresh that she was locked in a dream—there was nothing she could do but watch.

Sylvan finished drying himself and then he put back on his black pants and boots. He slipped on a red shirt he must have borrowed from Baird—it was the color of the Beast Kindred, not the pale blue of the Tranq Kindred—and went out.

She watched, a silent, invisible passenger, as he took the small silver car she knew must be a transformed Kindred shuttle, down to South Tampa. This was the end of town where the very rich lived. Old money had built a row of fabulous mansions on Bayshore Boulevard—the long, palm tree lined road that stretched for miles along Tampa Bay.

Sylvan obviously wasn't looking for a walk on the beach and he showed no interest in the affluence around him. He kept his eyes straight ahead and took several turns until he pulled into a pristine lot filled with new cars.

Sophie didn't know a whole lot about motor vehicles—to her it was enough if a car got from A to B and had good cold AC—a must in the hot and humid Tampa summers. But even to her untrained eyes, the cars on this lot looked high end. Not to mention very, *very* expensive.

Sylvan unfolded himself from the silver car—the Kindred shuttles really got small and unobtrusive in their Earth-bound state—and walked straight up to the glass and metal dealership that dominated the lot.

The girl at the front desk, who had been playing in a bored sort of way with her cell phone, perked up immediately at the sight of Sylvan. She jumped up and ran around to talk to him, batting her eyelashes at him and jutting her hip to one side as though trying to show off how tight her short black skirt was. She was thin—a lot thinner than Sophie—and had lush blonde hair that was done in a fashionable retro-wave. Sophie felt a flash of jealousy zip through her like lightning as the girl stroked Sylvan's arm flirtatiously.

But why should I be jealous? He's not really mine, after all. And even if he was, for a short time in the cabin, he won't be as soon as we get back to the ship. Still, she couldn't help wanting to slap the blonde girl who was fawning so disgustingly over the big warrior.

Sylvan, however, seemed to notice the flirty receptionist about as much as a tiger on the prowl notices a fly. He was scanning the expansive showroom floor, obviously looking for something...*Or someone.* Sophie had an uneasy feeling but she tried to push it away. Maybe he'd decided to stay on Earth for awhile and he wanted a new car? But that didn't make any sense. The Kindred were all stationed aboard the Mother ship with no exceptions. They only came down to the planet's surface to claim their brides. So why was he here?

Suddenly she had a moment of panic. Could it be that Sylvan had found his true bride? Was it some girl working here at this swanky car dealership? Was he going to claim her and take her back to the ship?

It's probably some girl who isn't afraid of him—who isn't afraid to let him bite her, whispered a spiteful little voice in Sophie's brain. *You can bet your boots that blondie there at reception would open a vein in ten seconds flat if he gave her so much as the time of day. Any girl would—just **look** at him.*

She watched with new eyes as Sylvan continued his search. No doubt about it—he was leading man material all the way. Despite the tired lines around his pale blue eyes, his features were handsome and strong. Straight nose, square jaw, cheekbones like granite. Not to mention the way he literally overshadowed every other man in the room with his large, muscular frame—even the tall, dark haired salesman who was coming over to shake his hand.

Sophie frowned. There was something about that salesman. He looked familiar. For a human man he was pretty tall—six foot three or four at least—and he had broad shoulders. Despite his size, though, or maybe because of it, he was running to fat. The beginning of a very impressive beer belly was stretching the fabric of his Egyptian linen shirt and his dark curly hair was thinning on top. In another five years he'd probably be completely bald but his hair looked like it

used to be really thick. Like something a girl would dream of running her hands through while he kissed her.

I used to daydream like that, whispered a voice in her head—the voice of memory. *Used to sit in homeroom right behind him and imagine what it would be like to reach out and touch those dark curls just once. And then on that night, that awful night, I had both hands buried in them. But I was yanking and pulling, begging him to get off me, to leave me alone...Oh God!*

The salesman was Burke Simpson. He *had* to be. Despite the beer gut and thinning hair, Sophie realized she would know him anywhere. Because he was the man she wanted to avoid most in the entire world.

And now she was seeing him again. Seeing him up close and in person—or so it seemed in her dream—and she couldn't get away from his hateful grin or those smirking, muddy brown eyes. Eyes she remembered staring down into hers while he ripped her dress and told her to "Just lay still, baby, and it'll all be over in a minute."

Sophie recoiled in horror, feeling like she was reliving the traumatic night all over again. She didn't want to be this close to Burke Simpson—never wanted to be anywhere remotely near him again.

Have to get away! The part of her that recognized she was dreaming fought to wake up—to escape from her attacker. But she couldn't go—she was a captive audience and it seemed that the strange scene playing out before her wasn't done yet.

Sylvan took Burke's hand and nodded politely as the other man spoke. Suddenly it was as though someone had turned up the volume and Sophie could hear everything he was saying.

"...just got these new models in last week," he said, nodding at a sleek red sports car with a shiny silver jaguar hood ornament. "Now don't let this sexy little number fool you—I can see what a big guy you are but she's got a lotta leg room. Not to mention a trunk you could hide a body in."

“I see.” Sylvan’s deep voice was neutral but the pupils of his eyes had begun to go red—as red as the gleaming car Burke was trying to sell him. “I don’t mean to interrupt,” he said before Burke could go further into his pitch. “But can we go someplace private?”

“Oh, so you want to make a deal?” Burke grinned eagerly.

“Something like that.” Sylvan’s voice was quiet and cool but there was a dangerous glint in those red eyes. A look that made Sophie’s stomach knot with anxiety. Oh God, she *really* didn’t want to be seeing this.

Burke led Sylvan to the back of the large showroom and into a small private room with a large glass window that faced the showroom. There was a nice wooden desk with several cushy chairs on either side of it. Clearly this was where he took clients to close negotiations.

“All right now.” He closed the door and turned to Sylvan, rubbing his hands together. “Let’s talk. Depending on your credit history I think I can get you—”

“Weren’t you the captain of the Hillsborough High Mustangs?” Sylvan asked, raising an eyebrow.

How does he know that? Sophie wondered, feeling ill. *I never told him our school mascot. Oh my God, make it stop. Please just make it stop and let me wake up.*

But it didn’t stop and she still couldn’t shake the dream.

Burke puffed his chest out with pride. “Well, yeah, I was. I don’t remember you, though—did you play for another school? Lemme guess—offensive tackle, right? Man, you’ve sure got the size for it.”

“Actually, I’m not human.” Sylvan bared his teeth in a ferocious smile and Sophie could see that his fangs were fully extended. Long and sharp and deadly, they proved his point more eloquently than any words could have.

For the first time Burke really seemed to see him. And what he saw obviously made him uneasy. “Oh, uh—a Kindred, right? I guess that would explain your eyes and those...” He gestured vaguely at Sylvan’s fangs. “Well that’s cool, man.

We're all really grateful to you guys. I mean, you saved our asses, right?" He tried to laugh but the sound died in his throat as Sylvan continued to stare at him.

"Do you know a girl named Sophia Waterhouse?" he asked.

Burke appeared to be pretending to think. "Uh...Waterhouse?" He shook his head. "Nope. No, sorry—doesn't ring a bell."

"That's strange." Sylvan frowned. "I was under the impression that you were in the same class together."

"Uh, well, I mean, HH is a big school." Burke was sweating freely now, the crisp collar of his linen shirt turning limp despite the excellent air conditioning. "I can't remember everybody in my home room class—let alone my graduating class. You know?"

"Think hard," Sylvan said. "She's about this tall..." He held out a hand about the level of his chest. "She has long dark brown hair that has red highlights in the sunlight and large dark green eyes. She is surpassingly lovely."

"Well, when you describe her like that..." Burke frowned. "Shy little thing? Has a twin sister that's kind of mouthy and they hung around with a chunky chick with red hair?"

Sylvan smiled grimly. "Yes, that's her."

Burke grinned back. "Wait a minute, I get it! You're thinking about calling her up in the draft as your, uh, bride, right? And you want to dig up a little dirt on her first—find out what she's like before you take the plunge. Well, lemme tell you, she's a lot wilder in the sack than she looks." He winked at Sylvan and elbowed him, grinning. "Know what I mean?"

"No." Sylvan's voice was dangerously soft. "Why don't you tell me?"

Sophie, still watching the scene from the unbreakable prison of her dream, winced. Burke was either too stupid or too conceited to see the danger he was in.

"Well, she acts like she's scared of her own shadow, ya know? But pay her a little attention and watch out! She's a hell cat. I mean, I took her to prom and she left some marks on me after the dance—hell, I've still got the scars to prove it." He laughed and pounded Sylvan on the back. "Night to remember, right?"

“From what I was told, the only marks she left on you were defensive wounds. When she fought to get you off her.”

“Well, I mean, you know...” Burke shrugged, beginning to look uncomfortable again. “Lots of girls like to put up a fight, right? Just makes it that much more exciting.”

Sylvan raised an eyebrow at him. “Are you saying you’ve done this more than once? You make a habit of luring innocent, unprotected females out with you for the sole purpose of raping them?”

“Whoa—hey. Hey now, man...” Burke held up his hands and glanced through the window at the showroom where the customers and other salespeople were wandering around. “That’s a pretty ugly word to be throwing around.”

“It’s a very ugly act.” Sylvan’s voice had deepened to a growl. “Do you deny that you did it to Sophia?”

“It was nothing like that,” Burke protested. “I mean, just a little slap and tickle, right? And she loved every minute of it.” He tried to laugh but the sound died in his throat as Sylvan continued to stare at him.

“You raped and brutalized the woman I love.” Sylvan’s hands curled into fists. “Then you threatened to come to her house and do it again if she dared to report your actions.” He took a step closer to Burke who had begun to sidle away.

“I didn’t mean any of it.” Burke’s voice had gone high and thin. “I mean, I had a scholarship all lined up that I had to protect. I couldn’t let some mousy little bitch ruin my entire future—she wasn’t even that good a fuck, you know?”

“No, I *don’t* know,” Sylvan said, his voice low and threatening. “Because unlike you, I am not a rapist—I don’t take women against their will. And from now on, you won’t either.”

He pulled something out of the pocket of his black flight pants—a strange looking metal device that fit neatly into the palm of his large hand.

“What the fuck is that?” Burke looked at the small device uneasily. “Some kind of gun or bomb or something?”

“No,” Sylvan said simply. He bent his attention to the device which he appeared to be calibrating in some way.

“Okay, I get what you’re doing here—you want to warn me off your girl. No problem, man.” Burke held up his hands again and began to back away. “Listen, I haven’t even seen her since high school. In fact, I haven’t even *thought* of her in years.”

“She has thought often of you, though,” Sylvan said quietly. “Often enough to keep her from having another relationship since the night you raped her. Often enough to keep her from trusting another male—even one who would rather die than hurt her.”

“What do you want me to do, offer to pay for her therapy?” Burke demanded. “Look, let’s just let bygones be bygones. Just put that...” He gestured at the device. “Whatever it is away and we’ll forget all about it. To show you my heart’s in the right place, I’ll give you a really sweet deal on that little beauty.” He nodded through the window at the red sports car.

“I’m not interested in your shiny little toys.” Sylvan took another step forward until he was looming over Burke and the other man had to look up to see him. “I’m interested in vengeance.”

“In *what*?” Burke clearly couldn’t believe the situation he was in. “Man, you’re crazy. All that crap with Sophie was *years* ago!”

“And you’ll have years to think about the consequences of your actions. The rest of your life in fact.” Sylvan held out his hand, pointing the silver device at Burke’s crotch. There was a low humming sound and a beam of brilliant light shot out and burned a hole in the expensive dress slacks, right between Burke’s legs.

“Holy shit!” Burke looked down at the smoking hole. His genitals were clearly visible, dangling like defenseless hairy fruit outside his ruined pants. The sight made Sophie feel like she was going to throw up. “You son of a bitch!” He looked up at Sylvan angrily while trying to cover himself with one hand. “You know how much these pants cost me? That’s not funny.”

“It’s not meant to be,” Sylvan told him. “You asked me if this device was a bomb or a gun—it’s neither. It’s medical equipment. We use it for burning off unwanted growths.”

“Unwanted growths?” Burke looked at him with wide eyes. “What are you talking about?”

“I think you know.” Though his eyes were glowing red, Sylvan’s voice was distant...detached. “You’d better move your hand if you want to keep it,” he advised.

“What?” Burke frowned, obviously still not getting it.

“All right, I’ll move it for you.” Reaching out, Sylvan took him by the wrist almost gently. But it was clear when Burke tried to pull away that his grip was like iron.

“Hey!” Burke tried again to yank his hand away unsuccessfully. “I—”

Before he could say anything else, another short brilliant burst of light came from the device in Sylvan’s hand. There was a puff of black smoke from Burke’s crotch and when it cleared there was...

Nothing. Oh my God, it’s gone. It’s all gone. Sophie couldn’t believe her eyes. Burke’s penis and testicles, which had been dangling outside his scorched slacks, were missing. Between his legs there was nothing but a shiny reddish scar, like a burn, long healed.

Burke groped with his free hand between his legs, as though he couldn’t believe his eyes. “Where is it? Goddamnit—what did you do to my dick? What did you do to *me*?”

“Made certain you’ll never be able to hurt another female again,” Sylvan said grimly. He was still holding Burke’s arm tightly in one hand and he pocketed the small silver device with the other. “A painless procedure, unfortunately, but necessary.”

“What?” Burke looked at him, his eyes huge with fear and disbelief. “What did you say?”

Sylvan ignored the questions. “Now, Sophia tells me you marked her when she was struggling to get away from you.” He pushed up the cuff of Burke’s white linen shirt, revealing a tan wrist covered in black, wiry hair. “Just about *here*.”

Oh God. Sophie wished she could close her eyes. Inside her the fear she’d felt that night—the desperation to get away before he could do it again—was welling up all over again. “*Let me go,*” she heard herself pleading. “*Please, Burke, just let me go now.*”

“Marked her? What are you talking about?” Burke’s voice jerked her back to the present. He still looked shaky with shock. “Is this some kind of sick joke? You didn’t really, uh, burn off my dick, did you? I mean I didn’t feel a thing but where the hell is it?”

“Gone,” Sylvan told him. “Permanently. You didn’t feel anything because it is, as I said, a painless procedure. But I think we can fix that—you deserve some pain for what you did to Sophia.”

Burke looked at him with wild eyes. “What the fuck are you talking about? You’re kidding, right? This is just some kind of prank.”

“No joke,” Sylvan assured him. “Don’t worry.” He was still holding Burke by the wrist and he squeezed it, his large knuckles turning white with pressure. “I’m not going to kill you. I swore not to.”

“Then let me go, man!” Burke spat. “I have to go in the bathroom. Have to figure out what the hell you did to me. God, nobody told me you Kindred were such freaks!”

“We’re simply very protective of our females. And we never, *never* take what isn’t offered freely. No matter how desperately we may want to,” Sylvan told him, squeezing harder.

Burke glared at the big warrior. “Look man, you better let me go or you’re going to be sorry.”

Sylvan shook his head and didn’t loosen his grip a bit. “I don’t think so. As I was saying, you bruised her—sprained her wrist when you raped her.” Despite his fearsome appearance, Sylvan’s voice was curiously gentle. “Isn’t that true?”

“I don’t know.” Burke was still looking down at the scar where his genitals had been. Clearly the fact that he had just been permanently neutered still hadn’t sunk in. “I guess so, maybe.”

“Then consider this retribution.”

Sophie knew what was coming next and she wanted to look away in the worst way. But in the timeless way of dreams, her eyes were glued to the action and she found she couldn’t move. *Please, God, I don’t want to see! Don’t want to know. Don’t want to remember...*

But she *did* see as Sylvan gripped the other man’s beefy forearm and snapped it like a twig.

She heard it too. There was a muffled *crack*, followed by a sickening, meaty tearing sound. With a spray of blood, two sharp red points came bursting through the black wiry hair and tan skin of Burke’s arm. Sharp red points with bleeding, jagged ends.

Bones, Sophie thought, feeling like she was going to be sick. *Oh my God, those are his **bones**...*

Burke howled like a wounded animal, his dick, or lack thereof, forgotten for the moment. The people milling around in the showroom looked up uncertainly, clearly not understanding what was happening in the small private consulting room.

“My arm! Oh my fucking God, you broke my *arm*,” Burke babbled.

“*Hold still you little bitch*,” Sophie heard him say inside her head. “*Hold still if you don’t want me to break your fucking arm.*”

“*No, Burke, please let me go! Please don’t!*”

She felt like her head was going to explode. The past and the present were merging, blending in a giddy, nauseating whirl of images and emotions that made her feel like she was going crazy. *No*, she thought. *No, no, no, no, no...* And then she was watching the scene at the car dealership again.

Sylvan dropped the limply dangling hand and took the other man by the chin. He stared into Burke’s eyes, wide with pain and fear. “Think about this the next

time you're tempted to hurt a female. *Any* female," he growled. "And I don't care how many years ago your encounter with Sophia was—if you ever come near her again, I'll kill you. *Slowly*."

Then he turned and walked casually away, leaving the dealership as quietly as he'd entered it.

Chapter Twenty-two

As the silver and glass door closed behind Sylvan, Sophie finally shook free of the dream. Bolting upright, she nearly fell out of her bed and stumbled into the adjoining bathroom.

She barely got the toilet seat up in time before she started retching. Nothing came up—she hadn't had anything since the mint tea Sylvan had given her the night before. But still she couldn't stop gagging.

God it was too much—*too much*. Seeing the face of her attacker after all these years brought back the attack itself—ripped open the old wound and made her pain fresh and new. She heard Sylvan's deep voice in her head. "*Raped...raped and brutalized.*"

I don't want to think about it! I just want to forget, she thought frantically but she couldn't stop. Couldn't stop reliving that horrible night. Couldn't stop seeing what Sylvan had done to avenge her.

Over and over she saw the slick, red scar where Burke's shaft had been. Over and over she heard the sickening snap and saw the bloody, jagged bones tear through his skin.

"No...no! Stop it. Make it *stop*," she moaned, pressing her hands over her ears. No matter what she did, Burke's screams still echoed in her mind, mixing with her own muffled cries the night of the rape.

"Hold still, you little bitch. You know you want it. You know you love it."

Sophie balled her hands into fists and pressed them against her eyes, trying to push away the memories. Her mind felt brittle—like it might snap at any minute. Snap the way Burke's bones had snapped...

"Sophia? Are you all right?"

She looked up to see a huge dark figure looming over her.

"No!" She scrambled to get away. "No, please—leave me alone!"

"It's all right." The man reached for her and she shrank from his touch. "All right," he repeated. "You just had a bad dream."

A dream. Just a dream. Her fragile mind latched on to the idea like a drowning man grasping a life preserver. *That's right, it was just a dream. Sylvan didn't really go down there and do all that. And everything that happened with Burke is all in the past. I should let it go—bury it again.*

But it was still so sharp...so fresh. After years of pushing it down and trying to forget it, the night of her attack was once more vivid in her mind's eye. Sophie didn't know why her bad dream had brought it back in such detail. Seeing Burke's face again must have triggered it. Whatever had caused it, she just wanted it to stop. Wanted to not think about it ever again...

"Baird? Sophia? What's going on?"

Sylvan's deep voice echoed in the small tiled bathroom and Sophie looked up hopefully. *Sylvan's here. He'll make everything all right.*

"Are you all right?" Sylvan shouldered Baird aside and knelt beside Sophie. "Why are you crouched on the floor like that?"

"I heard her crying and moaning," Baird said. "I came in here to find out what was wrong but she didn't seem to recognize me."

"Sophia?" Sylvan reached for her, his blue eyes concerned. "Come here."

Sophie wanted to go to him. More than anything else she wanted the feeling of those strong arms wrapped around her and the warm press of his body against hers.

But as she reached for him she saw it...three crimson spots like freckles across one of his high cheekbones. Only they weren't freckles. They were...

"Blood!" She pushed away from him abruptly. "It wasn't a dream. You really did it! You *really* broke his arm."

Sylvan frowned. "I had to—he hurt you. But how did you know?"

"Dream sharing," Baird said from behind them. "Sophia was sleeping when you left to do your 'errand.' She must have seen the whole thing." His voice dropped. "Brother, what did you do?"

"Only what any male would do for the woman he loves," Sylvan protested. He reached for Sophie again. "Please, Sophia..."

“No.” She shrank away from him. “Please, just...just don’t touch me.” She wrapped her arms around herself and shook her head. “I want to see Liv and Kat. Can’t we go now?”

“We can leave as soon as you’re ready,” Baird said soothingly. He put a hand on Sylvan’s shoulder. “Come, Brother. Let’s give Sophia a little space.”

“But...” There was anguish in Sylvan’s eyes. A yearning so deep it would have filled Sophie with pity if she’d been able to see it. But at the moment she was blind to anything but the past.

I just want to go home, she thought as hot tears filled her eyes. Just want to go back to the time before any of this ever happened. Before Burke hurt me. Back to when Mom and Dad were still alive and Liv and Kat and I were still in school. Back when everything felt safe.

Curling into a ball, she pressed her cheek to the cold tile floor and wept.

* * * * *

Sylvan felt like his heart was being torn to shreds by an animal with very sharp teeth. The look on Sophia’s face when she’d seen the blood on his cheek, the fear in her eyes when he reached for her...

“It’s worse,” he said aloud, rubbing a hand over his face. “Worse than it was before. I tried to avenge her and instead I traumatized her.”

“Sylvan...” Baird put a hand on his shoulder but Sylvan shrugged it off angrily and began to pace. There wasn’t much room for it in the small hallway that led from the bathroom to the bedrooms but he did his best.

“I wanted to kill him for what he did to her. But I didn’t, Baird—I didn’t. That has to count for something.”

“Of course it does,” Baird said soothingly. “Sophia’s just upset right now. Seeing what you did must have brought back her past. I, ah...” He cleared his throat. “Assume she was attacked in some way?”

“Yes,” Sylvan said briefly, still pacing. “Gods, I should have left him alone. But I couldn’t...I *couldn’t*. Not after what he did to her.” He looked up at his brother. “Can you understand that?”

“I would feel the same way if Olivia was attacked,” Baird said quietly. “I would seek out her attacker and make him pay. Any warrior would.”

“I didn’t know she was watching. Didn’t know it would affect her this way.” Sylvan ran both hands through his hair. “And now I’ve ruined everything. *Everything*. Sophia will hate me forever.”

“Let me show you something.” Baird caught him by the arm and stopped his frantic pacing.

“What?” Reluctantly, Sylvan allowed himself to be dragged down the hallway to the far bedroom. “What is it?”

“This.” Baird threw open the door to the room and pulled Sylvan in.

“What?” Sylvan asked again.

“Look,” Baird said quietly. “Just look.”

Taking a deep breath, Sylvan forced himself to do as his half brother asked. The room had one long window with no shades on it. Sunshine poured through it in a brilliant flood. There was no furniture anywhere—just an artist’s easel in the center of the room. Finished and half-finished canvases were stacked against the walls.

“Paintings,” Sylvan said, frowning. “Yes, Sophia’s an artist. She told me so.”

“Look,” Baird said again. “All these paintings are of *you*, Brother.”

Sylvan looked around in wonder. It was true—from every painting and canvas, he saw a piece of himself. Ice blue eyes, blond hair, stern mouth...*Does she really see me this way?* “She told me she had painted me,” he said aloud, still looking. “And I saw it in a dream, too. I just didn’t know she’d done so many.”

“There’s enough to fill a museum in here.” Baird sounded amused. “The Sylvan Vii museum of fine art. We could sell tickets.”

“Very funny,” Sylvan said sourly. “I don’t see your point.”

“The point is that the female who painted these pictures, cares for you,” Baird said earnestly. “Cares very much, I believe. And I can see you care for her as well. Just give her time to collect herself and tell her so, Sylvan. Apologize for frightening her and declare your love. Then when you get back to the ship, go to the sacred grove and ask to be released of your vow.”

“I’m going to the sacred grove, all right,” Sylvan said grimly. “But it won’t be to renounce my vow.” He took a deep breath. “I’m going to ask for a cleansing.”

Baird uttered a surprised curse. “A cleansing? You’ll willingly let a priestess dig around inside your skull just to be rid of some unwanted emotions? You know how much that’s going to hurt?”

“I know how painful it is,” Sylvan said stoically. “I had it done once before after we left Tranq Prime, remember? But I can’t help it, Baird. These feelings I have for Sophia—I can’t have them anymore. They’re eating me alive.”

“Well, at least you admit you have a problem,” Baird said. “But I would urge you to reconsider, Brother. A cleansing is so—”

“Excuse me.” Sophia’s soft voice cut him off and both brothers turned to face her.

“Sophia?” Sylvan asked tentatively. She was standing in the doorway looking fragile and pale. Clearly she’d washed her face but her eyes were still red...still haunted. Gods, how he wished he could wipe that look of sorrow and pain from her lovely face. But he didn’t even dare to go to her.

“I’m ready,” Sophia said quietly, looking at him. “Ready to fly back to the Mother ship. Please, can we get going?”

“Of course.” Baird nodded. “We’ll go at once.”

“Thank you. I’ll wait in the living room.”

Sylvan opened his mouth to speak her name again but she was already gone, slipping out the door as silently as a wraith.

Chapter Twenty-three

Sophie was miserable on the ride back to the Kindred Mother ship. *A cleansing—he's going to have some kind of emotional cleansing and all because of me. Because he doesn't want to feel for me anymore.*

After she'd finally managed to break the grip of the dream and calm down a little, she'd decided she wanted to talk to Sylvan. To apologize for freaking out and explain why she'd gotten so upset. *"I never let myself really remember it. Never let myself face what he did to me that night,"* she'd imagined herself saying. *"I know you were just trying to do what you thought was right. It just brought everything back so strongly..."* Of course Sylvan would understand. He would hold her, tell her everything would be all right. And maybe they could find a way...a way to be together after all.

But after she heard Baird and Sylvan talking, that dream had been shattered. *A cleansing,* she thought again and wrapped her arms around herself with a shiver. She'd never *really* believed that there could be anything lasting between herself and the big warrior. Not with her traumatic past and his vow in the way. But she'd never dreamed he would go so far as to purge her from his system completely the minute they got back to the Mother ship.

He hates me now. She watched the viewscreen, seeing the distant stars rush past as the vast, sleek form of the Mother ship grew closer. *He'd rather endure horrible pain than feel anything at all for me.*

But who could blame him? After all, it wasn't as though she was some kind of prize. *Emotionally damaged, that's what I am. What happened with Burke, what he did to me, ruined everything. Everything.*

She wished she could talk to Sylvan, to try and explain. But he was staring woodenly ahead, barely speaking even when Baird asked him a question or made a remark. His eyes were still red and his fangs were still elongated but he wasn't displaying the ferocious aggression he had earlier at all. The very fact that he was so withdrawn worried Sophie. But what could she do about it? Nothing but hope that getting back to the ship would make him feel better.

If he can just forget me, loose his feelings for me like he said he would... But it was hard to think that, so hard. Even though she knew it would be for the best if Sylvan could rid himself of his need for her, the idea of him moving on with his life and never thinking of her again was almost unbearable. But what else could she hope for?

*It's for the best, she tried to tell herself. Even if I didn't have the past haunting me, I'm still afraid of his fangs. I could never give him what he wants...what he needs. He **should** try to forget me.*

"Sylvan," she began as the shuttle began its descent. But either he didn't hear her or didn't want to hear her. The moment the shuttle landed in the docking bay, he was up and out like a shot.

"Well, here we ar—" Baird started to say but Sylvan was gone before he could finish. Baird frowned. "Guess he's in a hurry."

"I guess so." Sophie looked down at her hands, not wanting to meet her brother-in-law's golden eyes. She was afraid of what she would find there.

"Are you all right?" Baird's voice was gentle.

Sophie looked up in surprise. "I think so. I'm just sorry I upset Sylvan so much."

"He'll come around," Baird said confidently. "He just needs a little time. I think you both do."

"Maybe." Sophie didn't want to tell him what a hopeless case it was. "I hope so," she added listlessly.

"Sophie? Sophie!" Her sister's voice made her look up with a start. She was overwhelmingly glad to see Liv and Kat standing there in the large docking bay. They were flanked by Baird and Sylvan's second brothers, Lock and Deep.

"Oh!" she gasped, practically throwing herself out of the shuttle and into her sister and friend's arms. "Thank God you're here!"

"We could say the same thing about you." Liv pulled back from her tight embrace to examine her with a critical nurse's eye. "You look terrible. Multiple

contusions and puncture wounds. Not to mention your ankle—what in the world did you do to it?”

“Twisted it trying to get away from mutant cyborg bloodhounds,” Sophie said, half laughing, half crying. “What else?”

“Judging from the look on Sylvan’s face, I’d say there’s a whole hell of a lot of ‘what else,’” Deep rumbled.

“Which is none of your goddamn business,” Kat snapped, glaring at the big Twin Kindred. “So why don’t you get lost and leave her alone?”

“Leave *her* alone, or leave *you* alone, little Kat?” Deep gave her a mocking smile.

“You’re impossible!” Kat put a hand to her head. “And stop *feeling* at me like that. I don’t want to know how horny you are every minute of the day.”

Sophie looked at her friend in surprise. It wasn’t like Kat to get so ruffled. And what in the world was she talking about when she said Deep was ‘feeling’ at her?” She looked at Olivia for an explanation but her twin just shrugged. Apparently events had been almost as strange aboard the Mother ship as they had been for herself and Sylvan back on Earth.

“Forgive him, my lady Kat.” The blond haired twin, Lock, swept Kat a courtly bow. “As you know, Deep tends to speak without thinking.”

Sophie looked at Olivia again and mouthed, “*My lady?*” but again Liv just shrugged. It was clear she was as much in the dark as Sophie.

“Come on.” Kat took them both by the arm and turned away. “We’re going.”

Olivia looked over her shoulder. “Sorry, hon—looks like you might have to do supper without me.”

“That’s okay.” Baird nodded and gave her a lascivious smile. “We’ll make up for it later.”

Olivia blushed and shook a finger at him. “You—” But by then Kat had dragged them almost out of earshot and into the long metal corridor which served as the back entrance to many of the Kindred suites.

“Ouch, not so fast,” Sophie complained as her hurt ankle twinged. “Walking wounded here, Kat. Be careful.”

“Sorry.” Kat threw a glance over her shoulder, apparently checking to be sure they weren’t being followed. When she saw nothing, she slacked her rapid pace a bit. “I’ve just had it up to my eyeballs with those guys. Them and their stupid feelings.”

“What in the world are you talking about?” Sophie demanded. “How can you possibly feel their feelings?”

“My question exactly,” Olivia chimed in. “And now that Sophie is home safe you have no more excuses, Kat. I know you did *something* with those two but I want the dirty details. Spill.”

“Okay.” Kat sighed and ran a hand through her rather messy auburn hair. That in and of itself was completely unlike her—she was always meticulous about her personal grooming, Sophie thought uneasily. “But let’s get inside and get settled first. I need some of that *klava* tea to calm my nerves.”

“What?” Olivia looked at her in real alarm. “You’ve been drinking *klava* to *calm down*?”

Kat frowned. “Why not? It tastes exactly like Sleepy Time tea.”

Olivia frowned. “Well it’s *not*. In fact, it has more caffeine than Cuban coffee. And I don’t mean *café con leche*. I’m talking about those little espresso shots they serve in the teeny, tiny cups. The kind that’s so bitter you can barely stand to drink it.”

“Really?” Kat raised her eyebrows. They were standing in front of one of the ubiquitous silver doors now and she stroked the door switch and waited for it to open. “I was given a guest suite since I seem to be stuck here—at least until the Earth is no longer under lock down,” she explained when Sophie looked at her in surprise. “Now come on, let’s go in and I’ll get you a drink and explain.”

“Not *klava*,” Olivia said sternly.

Kat sighed. “No, not *klava*. Damn, and here I was thinking I’d found the perfect energy boost with no side effects. Not that I need side effects with all the crap going on inside my head lately.”

“Which you’re going to tell us about *right now*,” Olivia instructed firmly, bustling around the food prep area and locating cups. “Unless Sophie wants to go first?” She looked at Sophie with a raised eyebrow.

“Who me?” Sophie felt like her stomach had just dropped down around her ankles. “Uh, there’s really nothing to tell,” she said weakly, but the other two weren’t buying it.

“Sophie,” Liv said kindly. “You’re my sister and my best friend but there is no denying you are a *terrible* liar.”

“Liv’s right. You can’t lie for shit,” Kat said candidly.

“So we’ll give you until Kat spills the beans about tall, dark, and scary and tall, light, and polite to get your act together,” Liv said. “And then it’s show time whether you want to talk or not. Got it?”

Sophie nodded miserably. “Okay.” It wasn’t so much that she minded talking, telling them what had happened between herself and Sylvan—although some of the details were super embarrassing. No, what bothered her was wondering what they would say in return. Would they think she was a coward for freaking out after dream sharing with Sylvan? For not trying harder to explain how she felt? But would good would that do? He didn’t *want* to have feelings for her. In fact, he had probably gone straight to the sacred grove in the center of the ship to have the cleansing done.

She only hoped that for his sake it worked, even though the very thought of it made her feel sad and depressed. *But I want him to be well again. Not to hurt inside. I want that more than I don’t want to hurt myself.*

“You can start with the whole ‘my lady’ thing,” Liv said, breaking her train of thought. “What’s the deal with that?”

Kat’s face got almost as red as her hair. “It’s what they call plus-sized girls, all right? They, uh, have a thing for them. For us, I guess.”

“Holy crap—Lock and Deep are curvy connoisseurs?” Liv raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“*Seriously*,” Kat said gloomily. “As in, they’d rather peruse the Lane Bryant catalogue than the *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit issue.”

“But that’s great!” Sophie exclaimed, forgetting her own problems for a moment. “You’re always saying that guys in Tampa don’t appreciate curves.”

“Yeah, well, neither do they want to get inside your head and never ever leave,” Kat snapped. “Talk about the first date from hell that won’t end.”

“Okay, all right.” Olivia made a cutting motion with one hand. “Start from the beginning and tell us everything.”

“All right.” Kat sighed. “But I warn you, it’s going to sound pretty strange.”

Not as strange as what I have to tell, I bet, Sophie thought but didn’t say. “Just talk,” she urged aloud. “And don’t leave anything out.”

“Well first of all,” Kat said turning to her. “It’s all your fault. If you and Sylvan hadn’t gone missing...

“...and now I can’t stop feeling their emotions,” she ended, about an hour later. “I mean, they’ve dimmed a little, but I still have this headache I just can’t get rid of. It’s not as bad as it was at first but it’s still *there*, you know? I know I’ve been snappish and out of sorts but this really has me running scared. I mean, what if it *never* stops?”

“You should see Sylvan,” Sophie heard herself saying at the same time Liv said,

“Sylvan’s the one you need to talk to.”

Kat looked at them in surprise. “He’s that good?”

“I’ve been working in the med lab awhile now and I believe he’s the best doctor, er, medic on this ship,” Liv said firmly. “If anyone can help you, he can.”

“And he, uh, healed me. Several times,” Sophie added, though remembering how he’d done it made her cheeks get hot—a fact which was not missed by Kat and Olivia.

“Uh-huh.” Kat nodded. “Well, if things don’t go back to normal or they get worse, I’ll take your advice. In the mean time, I want to hear more about how he *healed* you.”

“Yeah, would this be *sexual healing* by any chance?” Liv grinned at her and Sophie felt her cheeks get even hotter.

“Stop it, you guys. It wasn’t like that,” she protested, scratching her right knee. There was a little bump there, just beside the kneecap which seemed to be some kind of permanent scar. Other than that, no one would ever have known she’d been attacked so viciously by the *urlich*. Sylvan must have done a very thorough job while she was unconscious. All her wounds looked like they were days old.

“Okay, so what was it like?” Kat said. “Come on, Sophie—I spilled my guts. Now it’s your turn. Tell us every little detail and don’t leave anything out.”

Sophie took a deep breath. “Well the first thing you need to know is that the Scourge are hunting me. I don’t know why but they really want me badly—enough that Sylvan had to crash our shuttle into a mountain to get away from them.”

The mood was immediately serious. Sophie didn’t know if she was glad about that or not but she did her best to tell them everything that had happened—well, almost everything. She didn’t say exactly *how* Sylvan had marked her—only that he had, twice. She could tell by the looks they exchanged that Liv and Kat knew there was more to the story but she refused to embarrass herself any further.

She told them about the way she and Sylvan had talked, too. And that she’d told him about the attack on prom night—something she hadn’t discussed with anyone else besides the two of them.

Kat’s eyes went wide when she heard. “Seriously? You *told* him that?”

Sophie bit her lip. “He sort of...pried it out of me. And then he wanted to go after Burke. I made him promise to stay away—well, not to kill him, but Sylvan went after him anyway.”

“Really?” Olivia stared at her. “You mean he tracked down Burke after all these years and beat him up? That doesn’t sound like Sylvan to me.”

“It’s *not* like him. At least, not as far as I can tell.” Sophie sighed unhappily. “I saw everything he did—he didn’t just beat Burke up—he broke his arm. A *bad* break. I could see the...the bones coming out of his skin all jagged and bloody...” The memory made her sick to her stomach and she shook her head, unable to continue.

“A compound fracture, huh?” Olivia nodded thoughtfully. “That *is* bad.”

“But that’s not all,” Sophie went on. “He also, uh, castrated him.”

“He *what*?” Liv and Kat said together.

“He *did*.” Sophie nodded. “With this little silver thingy. It was really small—it fit in the palm of his hand. But it burned Burke’s, uh, equipment right off. There was nothing left but a...but a scar.” She swallowed hard, willing her stomach to be steady. Considering the fact that she hadn’t eaten in well over twenty-four hours, she felt remarkably un-hungry.

“I think I know what you’re talking about,” Liv said. “It’s mostly used for dermatological cases—when somebody needs a wart burned off or something. I never thought of burning off anything, uh, bigger.”

“Well I guess Burke’s out of business.” There was no mistaking the satisfaction in Kat’s tone. “Permanently from the sound of it.”

Liv laughed. “Good for Sylvan! I wish I could have seen it.”

“I wish I *hadn’t*,” Sophie said in a low voice.

Liv and Kat both leaned toward her, concern on their faces. “Sophie, are you all right?” Liv asked. “Did seeing it upset you?”

“I would think you’d be glad,” Kat said. “After what Burke did—”

“But that’s the thing,” Sophie interrupted. “When I saw him again, it all came rushing back. That whole awful night. It was even worse than when I told Sylvan about it. I almost...almost felt like I was reliving it.”

“Oh, honey, no.” Liv put a comforting arm around her shoulders. “I’m so sorry.”

“So am I.” Sophie sniffed, trying to keep back tears. “But I freaked completely out. I fell out of bed and barely made it to the bathroom and started puking and crying and—”

“Wait a minute” Kat frowned. “You were in bed? Where did all this happen?”

“Sylvan went to Burke’s work—you know at the car dealership in South Tampa?” Sophie said. “I was watching in a dream. When I woke up—that’s when I freaked out.”

“You were dream sharing with him?” Liv’s eyes went wide. “Sophie, that’s big. That’s *huge*.”

“Yeah, you should have told us that first,” Kat pointed out.

Sophie put a hand over her eyes. “Don’t you see? It doesn’t matter—none of it matters. Because Sylvan doesn’t *want* to have feelings for me. He told me that once he got back on the Mother ship they would all fade away. And just to be sure they do, I heard him tell Baird he was going to have some kind of ceremony done—a cleansing is what he called it. To get rid of unwanted feelings.” She looked up at the other two girls. “Feelings for *me*.”

“He’s probably just upset,” Liv said. “Although God knows, I wouldn’t have thought *anything* could upset Sylvan. He’s pretty controlled.”

“He wasn’t with me,” Sophie said softly. “You should have seen the way he got when he fought off the *urlich*—the cyborg dogs the Scourge had tracking us,” she explained, seeing their looks of confusion. “His eyes got red and his fangs...” She broke off, shivering.

“It’s called *rage*,” Liv said.

“He was enraged all right, especially when the *urlich* were after us,” Sophie said. “But when he broke Burke’s arm he seemed so casual—so cold blooded.”

“But he was probably still in *rage*,” Kat said. “It’s a state Kindred warriors go into when their female is threatened. Baird explained it to us.”

Sophie listened, wide-eyed, while the other two told her what they’d heard.

“So you see,” Olivia finished, “Sylvan *does* care about you. He was displaying perfectly normal behavior when he did all those things. I bet if you just talked to him—”

“What could I say?” Sophie objected. “Even if he hadn’t taken a vow to never call a bride, and even if I didn’t have my stupid past dragging me down, I’m still afraid of his fangs. It wouldn’t be fair to ask him to care for me when I can’t give him what he wants. What he *needs*.”

“Oh right, the biting.” Kat snapped her fingers. “Well of *course* that’s a problem—for you especially. You’ve hated being stuck with anything sharp since you were a kid—and for good reason.” She turned to Liv. “Hey, remember that time in college when Sophie’s biology professor was offering extra credit to anyone who donated blood? And she was so afraid the class was going to pull down her GPA she actually went and tried to do it?”

Olivia smiled. “The next thing I know my cell is ringing and they’re asking if I can come get my sister who’s fainted dead away.”

“It took both of us to drag her out of the bloodmobile, remember?” Kat smiled at Sophie fondly. “The rest of the people waiting to donate were scared silly. And the tech told us he’d barely stuck the needle in before your eyes rolled up and you went down like a sack of potatoes.”

“I *tried* though,” Sophie said defensively. “And you have to admit it’s better to faint when you’re trying to give blood than when you’re in the middle of...well, you know.”

Olivia laughed. “Yes, it would kind of put a damper on your sex life if you passed out in the middle of your big O because your hubby tapped a vein.”

“That would suck—literally and figuratively.” Kat grinned.

“So...you don’t think I’m a coward for not wanting to...you know, be claimed by Sylvan?” Sophie asked in a small voice.

“Honey, we would never call you that,” Kat said. She and Liv both reached for Sophie’s hands and squeezed.

“You have to do what feels right for you,” her sister said firmly. “And remember, I was pretty scared of Baird’s, uh, equipment at first, too. I had to get to the place inside myself where I was more scared of losing him than I was scared of letting him bond me to him.”

“I guess that makes sense.” Sophie felt like crying for some reason but she tried to blink back the tears. “But what if...what if I never get there? Not that it matters. I mean, he’s doing that cleansing thing to get rid of his feelings for me. Soon he won’t care anymore. Oh *God*...”

Olivia pulled her in for a hug and Kat patted her back. Sophie couldn’t help it, she started to cry. “It’s okay,” her sister whispered. “I know it hurts and it’s scary. But things are going to get better Sophie, I’m sure they will.”

“Absolutely,” Kat affirmed. “And if he wants to get rid of his feelings for you, then you just return the favor.”

“That’s just the thing.” Sophie pulled back from their comforting embrace, sniffing. “I...I don’t know if I can. Every time I close my eyes I see him. I mean, he’s even been popping up in all my art lately. I didn’t want to tell you guys because I thought you’d think I was crazy but I seriously can’t paint anything but Sylvan lately.”

“Wow.” Kat shook her head. “Sounds like you’ve been hit hard.”

“I have,” Sophie admitted. “I really have. And I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Don’t do anything for right now,” Olivia said practically. “Let’s just enjoy all being together again. It seems like ages since we could get together and just pour our hearts out like this.”

“It *has* been a long time. And I’ve really missed it,” Kat admitted. “Who else could I tell about having other people’s feelings in my head? Who else wouldn’t just think I was crazy?”

“Oh, we *know* you’re crazy. We’ve known that for *ages*.” Sophie grinned at her friend through her tears.

“You!” Kat lunged at her playfully and she leaned away, laughing.

“Okay you guys, break it up.” But Liv was grinning too. “Come on, it’s getting late and I have to get home to Baird at *some* point.”

“Not before we get the really juicy details, though,” Kat objected. “You know—the ones you skipped over before?” she asked, eyeing Sophie.

“But—” Sophie objected.

“No buts,” they said together. “Spill!”

Sophie looked at them hopelessly. “You know I hate it when you two gang up on me.”

“Yes, we’re horrible,” Kat said remorselessly. “Now tell me more about this marking thing. Liv obviously knows all the details but I’m a little lost...”

* * * * *

“Please, I beg you, help me.” The plea was wrenched from him as he knelt before the statue of the Mother, his hands uplifted in supplication. It was the same place he had been in when he first made his vow to never call a bride. Back then he had been proud and strong, head held high as he dedicated his chastity to the Mother’s service. Now he was a broken male, the need inside him raging like a fire out of control, his blood all but boiling in his veins.

And being back aboard the ship hadn’t made it one bit better.

Baird was right, I can’t just turn it off like a switch. Can’t be rid of my feelings for Sophia so easily. But if the Mother didn’t give me a need for her in order to protect her while the urlich were stalking her, then why did she do it? Why must I endure this agony with no end in sight?

“Yes, Warrior. You seek counsel?”

Sylvan groaned inwardly when he saw who it was that spoke. The same priestess who had performed Baird and Olivia’s joining ceremony. *And she also happens to be the same one I ‘rescued’ Sophia from.* Still, there was nothing to do but humble himself before her and pray she would have mercy on him.

“Yes,” he said, looking down at the green and purple grass. “I seek counsel of the Mother of Life, she who protects and nurtures us all.”

“It is good you have come, for I can tell you are much troubled. Tell me your pain.”

“Though I took a vow before the Mother to never call a bride, my blood burns within me for one I can never have,” Sylvan admitted, filled with shame.

“Why may you not have her?” the priestess asked. “Does she belong to another?”

“No.” Sylvan shook his head. “But...she does not want me. She is afraid of me and I fear I have done little to allay her distress and much to make it grow.”

“Then your agony is your own fault,” the priestess said sternly. Then her voice became slightly less chilly. “But come, let me see what I can do to lessen it.”

“I would ask...ask for a cleansing,” Sylvan said hoarsely, forcing the words out. He had undergone such a ceremony once, when he had been mad with grief over losing Feenah. It had been the most painful experience of his life and he had vowed to never undergo another one. Yet here he was, asking for it...asking for the equivalent of psychic surgery without anesthesia. But what other option did he have?

“I will look into you first,” the priestess said, stepping forward to look into his eyes. “To see if such a thing is necessary or even possible.”

“I—” Sylvan began but she was already in his mind, rifling casually through the contents of the past twenty-four Earth hours without so much as a by-your – leave.

Sylvan gritted his teeth and forced himself to relive it with her. The Luck Kiss, the crash in the mountains, the grueling march to the cabin and all that had transpired between himself and Sophia there. Then the fight with the *urlich* and the way he had punished her attacker which had caused Sophia so much pain and terror.

“I see,” the priestess said at last, releasing Sylvan to his great relief. “I see your agony but it was of your own doing, Warrior. All of your own doing.”

“I—” Sylvan began but she shushed him with a wave of her hand.

“You made your vow to never take a bride, not out of genuine desire to serve the Goddess, but out of pride,” the priestess said. “And out of pride you chose not to see the warning signs that you were being drawn to this girl—this Sophia. And when you *did* choose to acknowledge them, you blamed them on the Mother of All Life, saying that she had only given you these feelings in order that you might protect the Earth girl.”

“But I thought she *had*,” Sylvan protested. “Why else would she have me break my vow?”

“A vow made in pride and fear—yes, *fear*. For fear is the loathsome sister of pride, who stands just inside the door to your soul, whispering foul untruths. Telling you that if you never give your heart again then it can never again be broken.” She frowned at Sylvan. “This was the shadow I saw on your heart, the fear and pride which taints your entire existence.”

“It was terrible when I was rejected the first time,” Sylvan admitted brokenly. “So terrible I never wanted to go through it again. But this...this is a thousand times worse.”

“Because you have found your one true mate—your bride.” The priestess shook her head. “And yet you let her slip through your fingers—telling her that your need for her will be gone as soon as you reached the ship. Letting her believe you can live without her when you know you cannot.”

“A fact which I now acknowledge freely,” he said. “But please, your holiness, she does not want me.”

“She does not *know* she wants you because you haven’t given her a reason to know it,” the priestess said sternly. “You allowed your need to overcome you, the protective *rage* to rule your actions instead of common sense. In so doing, you have frightened her away.”

“Permanently, I fear,” Sylvan said harshly. “In light of my loss, will you not now perform a cleansing?”

“I will not. For I think that you may yet regain your bride’s trust and bond her to you.”

“How?” Sylvan couldn’t help feeling exasperated. “She fears me. And as long as my blood burns with need for her, I can do nothing but make her fear me more.”

“I will do this much at least, then. Come, I will cool your blood.” The priestess beckoned him again and Sylvan bowed his head to receive her.

This time the feeling was a soothing one. A sensation of fresh, cool water being poured over the fevered fissures of his brain. The need which had come to the forefront of his mind, usurping his regular personality with its terrible imperatives, didn’t exactly vanish, but Sylvan found he was able to pack it away. To fold it like an unused garment and stow it in a chest in the corner of his mind. He still wanted Sophia, still needed and loved her, but he was able to pull his fangs in and the red veil which had fallen over his gaze so many hours ago was finally lifted, allowing him to see the world through fresh, rational eyes.

“Thank you,” he murmured with true gratitude when the priestess at last withdrew her hands. “I cannot tell you how much better that is.”

“It will not last forever.” She eyed him sternly. “It is but a respite. You must tell this Earth female how you feel for her. Let her know how much you care and that you can love her without hurting her. For I perceive that she had been hurt before—that was the shadow I saw around *her* heart.”

Sylvan nodded. “She has.” He frowned at the priestess. “And my vow?”

“Was never a true vow in the first place. But I release you of it now. Go and seek your bride.”

“I thank you, your holiness,” Sylvan said, rising to his feet. “But I fear you are sending me on a hopeless mission.”

“While both of you still breathe, there is hope. When one is dead, the other may die also,” the priestess said. She gave him an abbreviated bow. “Now I must go refresh myself. Your load of sorrow and need are a heavy burden indeed.”

“Forgive me” Sylvan said but she was already gone, her bare feet whispering over the green and purple grass of the sacred grove.

Chapter Twenty-four

“Sylvan, can I talk to you? Alone?”

He looked up and for a moment Liv thought she saw a brief flash of hope in his ice blue eyes. But when he saw it was only her and not Sophia, he simply nodded and stepped away from the chart he was coding at the med station.

“I am at your service, mate-of-my-kin,” he said gravely. “What can I do for you?”

Liv studied him for a moment, taking him in. According to Sophie he’d become a whole different person during the time they’d spent together on Earth. A very *frightening* person, apparently. But there were no signs of that now. His fangs were as short as his other teeth and his eyes were their normal icy blue. There was a sadness in them, though, that Liv had never seen before. A kind of calm despair that made her sorry for him.

Well, he made his choice, she reminded herself. Both Baird and Sophie had told her that Sylvan had chosen to do a cleansing ceremony to rid himself of his unwanted feelings for Sophie. It was probably just as well—Liv couldn’t imagine a more mismatched pair. But ever since they’d come back from their short stay on Earth, almost a week ago, both of them seemed quiet and sad. Liv wished she knew what to do to cheer them up but there didn’t seem to be any way. And since they were avoiding each other like the plague, there was nothing they could do to help each other, either.

“I need to know something,” she said to Sylvan in a low voice as he came around the station he’d been working at to stand by her. “Do you have a pregnancy test I can use? I’ve searched in every shop selling Earth products on the ship and I can’t find a single one.”

Sylvan frowned. “That’s because an Earth standard test wouldn’t show if you were pregnant by a Kindred warrior.”

“Shhh!” Liv looked around the busy med station. “Can we go some place private to talk about this?”

“Of course.” He led the way into a back room where medical supplies were stocked. As Liv closed the door behind them he began rummaging through the cabinets. “I think I have the necessary equipment...here,” he said, turning around at last. “I’m afraid I’ll have to draw some blood, though—quite a lot of it, in fact.”

“That’s fine,” Liv said though she couldn’t help recoiling a little at the large gauge needle he was pointing at her. “Geeze, you guys really need to get some smaller needles up here if you’re going to treat the Earth brides as well as your own warriors,” she complained as he swabbed her arm with antiseptic. “We don’t all have veins the size of fire hoses, you know.”

“I’ll order some at once if you can recommend a good supplier,” he said. “A little pinch here, I’m afraid.”

Liv winced as he slid the needle in. To his credit he did it quickly and smoothly so that even though the large needle stung, it didn’t hurt as much as it could have. “A *little* pinch, huh?” she said dryly. “You’re a good stick, though. I’ll give you that.”

“Thank you. I’m a natural with sharp objects.” He gave her one of his rare grins, showing his double set of fangs which were small and innocuous looking at the moment.

“Ha-ha.” Liv grinned back at him, glad to see a small vestige of humor returning. “You know,” she remarked as he drew vial after vial of blood. “It’s a good thing I’m the one you’re sticking and not—”

“Not who?” He looked at her sharply.

“Uh...” Liv frowned, God, she’d really put her foot in it now. “Not Sophie,” she answered reluctantly. “She, uh, has a phobia of needles. Ever since she was a kid.”

“Does she?” Sylvan was trying to appear unconcerned as he finished the draw but she could tell that he was dying to hear the details.

“Yes, really. She had ITP when she was little—only about five or six.”

“ITP?” he asked, sealing the small needle wound with some flesh glue and placing the freshly drawn vials in a coffee mug-sized silver machine. He tapped in a sequence on its tiny keyboard and then said, “What’s that?”

“It’s a blood clotting disease. Your spleen attacks your platelets and starts chewing them up. And of course without platelets, your blood can’t clot. Theoretically, in an extreme case, you could skin your knee and bleed to death.”

“Fascinating.” Sylvan crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her, giving her his whole attention. “Go on.”

“Well now they have a cure for it. But back when she was first diagnosed the only thing you could do was blood transfusions or a splenectomy. Of course my parents didn’t want Sophie to go through such a risky surgery so they opted for the blood transfusions. And you know what a big needle you have to use for those.”

“Of course.” Sylvan frowned and rubbed his jaw. “So she had to endure these transfusions...?”

“It was a weekly thing and she absolutely *hated* it.” Liv shook her head. “Sometimes my mom would let me come with her to hold her hand. That was when I decided I wanted to be a nurse—I wanted to help heal sick people, people like Sophie.” She sighed. “Poor Sophie—it was terribly traumatic for her. She used to beg my mom not to make her go and they would both wind up crying and crying. It was awful.”

“She, ah, told me she didn’t like sharp objects like...like my fangs.” Sylvan looked down at his boots. “But she never told me why.”

“Honestly, I don’t think she lets herself think about it much,” Liv said candidly. “See, one thing about Sophie is that she’s really good at burying bad memories.”

“So I noticed,” he said dryly. “I had to almost pry the story of her attack on your, ah, prom night from her.”

“She told me what you did to Burke Simpson,” Liv said softly. “And I want to thank you for it—that’s exactly what I would have liked to do to him. Only I would have broken both his legs and his jaw too.”

He sighed unhappily. “Unfortunately Sophia didn’t see it that way. I think seeing him again and watching what I did to him traumatized her.” He shook his head. “I can’t forgive myself for that.”

“You didn’t know, Sylvan. You were just doing what you thought was right,” Liv protested. “And, like I said, Sophie doesn’t like to dwell on the past. I’m still not sure if she’s processed all her grief from our parents’ death—it’s like she’s afraid to let herself feel because it might hurt too much.”

Sylvan laughed brokenly and shook his head. “Gods, to hear you say that...”

“What?” Liv frowned.

“It’s just...ironic. I was told by a priestess in the sacred grove recently that I had the exact same problem.”

Liv shook her head. “You two are a pair, all right.”

“No, we’re not.” Sylvan was suddenly serious. “And I’m afraid we never will be. How can we be? Aside from her past trauma, Sophia fears needles. And I have what amounts to four, incredibly sharp needles in my mouth that I long to pierce her with.”

Liv frowned. “Do you really have to do the biting thing? I know Sophie likes you—likes you a lot. But after what she went through with the ITP, the biting is sort of a deal breaker for her.”

Sylvan ran a hand through his spiky blond hair. For a moment he looked more miserable than Liv could ever remember seeing him, then his features smoothed out and he shook his head. “I’m afraid the ‘biting thing’ as you put it, is part of bonding sex for a Blood Kindred. In fact, it’s part of *any* kind of sex with us.”

Liv shook her head. “That’s really too bad, Sylvan. In that case, I don’t know what to tell you. But...does it really matter to you? Baird told me you vowed never to take a bride. And anyway, I thought you did a cleansing ceremony to get rid of your feelings for Sophie.”

He looked down. "The priestess released me of my vow and refused to perform the cleansing. She says Sophie doesn't care for me because I haven't given her a reason to care. But I don't know how to do that."

"Back off a little to start with," Liv suggested. "I mean, you're giving her space right now and that's good but when you *do* get together again, don't go all he-man protective on her. Sophie's not big into alpha males."

"Yes, she told me as much. She, ah, said I wasn't her 'type,'" Sylvan admitted.

"Honestly, you're not," Liv said candidly. "But then, I don't really know what *is* Sophie's type. She hasn't dated anyone seriously in so long it's hard to say. Just...be gentle with her Sylvan. She's been hurt before, as you know. And trust is a big issue with her. If you lose her trust, you're going to have a very hard time rebuilding it."

He sighed. "Thank you for the advice, mate-of-my-kin. Tell me, does she still have this ITP disease you spoke of? She didn't seem to have any problems clotting when we were on Earth together. I know—I healed her several times."

"Yes, she, uh, told me." Liv cleared her throat. "No, they developed a cure for it a few years after she was diagnosed—Sophie was one of the first ones treated with it, in fact. My parents always kept her very sheltered, though—it's one reason she became such a great artist. She wasn't allowed to run and play outside with the rest of us. She had to stay inside with her paints and crayons."

"I have seen several of her paintings—both in real life and in my dreams," Sylvan said softly. "She is very talented, though perhaps too generous to her subjects."

"She paints things as she sees them. Her art is the one place where she's truly honest with herself, I think," Liv said. "If she painted you as strong and handsome and brave then that's really how she sees you."

"Or *saw* me, anyway," he murmured, looking down.

"I think she still sees you that way," Liv said thoughtfully. "But...I think she's afraid. Both of what you want to do to her and what you represent. You're a whole lot of male, Sylvan—any Kindred warrior is. I think Sophie has to realize she can

handle someone like you and well, she's just not there yet. Just give her a little time, okay?"

He nodded. "All right."

"And speaking of time, when will I get the results?" She nodded at the small silver machine he'd placed the vials of blood in.

Sylvan turned and studied it. The configuration of lights on the outside seemed to be slightly different but there was no other discernable change that Liv could see. "Right about...now," he said, pressing a final button on the keyboard. The machine emitted a small beeping noise and from out of the slot where he'd put in the vials, a small blue flower appeared.

"What's that?" Liv asked as he gave her the flower. She couldn't tell if it was real or not but it had silky, periwinkle blue petals and a mild, sweet fragrance that reminded her of baby lotion.

"Your answer," Sylvan said. "If the results were negative, you would have received a white flower. If you were carrying a female baby, the flower would have been pink—that's a very rare result indeed."

"But blue means..." Liv looked up at him, her heart pounding. "A little boy? I'm carrying a boy?"

"You are," Sylvan said gravely. "May I be the first to congratulate you, mate-of-my-kin, and wish you a safe and healthy pregnancy and delivery."

"Oh my God!" Liv was so excited she couldn't speak. Instead she rushed forward and pulled him down into a hug. Sylvan was stiff at first, clearly surprised by her exuberance. But then he loosened up a little and hugged her back carefully. "Wait 'til I tell Baird," she exclaimed. "He's going to be so surprised!"

"He'll be extremely pleased and so proud there'll be no living with him." Sylvan smiled when she finally let him go. "Are you going to tell him at once?"

"Yes, him first and then the girls. Oh, Sophie's going to be so excited to be an aunt!"

"I'm excited to be a...what is your term for it?"

“An uncle. You’ll be the baby’s uncle.” Liv grinned at him. “Oh, I have so much to do! And no time to do it.”

“You have plenty of time,” Sylvan assured her. “According to the results and the size of the flower you received, you’re still in your first quadmester.”

“My first *what*?” Liv frowned. “You mean *trimester*, right?”

“No.” He shook his head. “Carrying a Kindred baby to term takes twelve of your Earth months, not just nine. So you see, Olivia, you have plenty of time to get everything done.”

“Wow.” Liv was a little nonplussed. “Uh...a whole year, huh? You guys should really put that in the brochure.”

“We don’t hide anything,” Sylvan protested. “You just have to ask about some things if you want to know.”

Liv laughed. “All right—I’m so excited right now I don’t even care. Although by my eleventh or twelfth month I may want to shoot myself. Or Baird, for that matter.”

Sylvan gave her one of his rare, one-sided smiles. “Go tell him now before you start wanting to shoot.”

“I will.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “*And* I’ll tell the other girls what they can expect if they end up getting claimed. You know, we used to joke about having sixteen pound alien babies but none of us thought it would take a whole year to have one.”

He looked suddenly sad again. “Tell Sophia she doesn’t have to worry. I would never claim her unless I knew she wanted me to. So she doesn’t have to fear carrying my son.”

“Oh Sylvan...” The sorrow in his eyes made Liv forget her own joy for a moment. *Sophie was wrong*, she thought. *He cares, he really does. And he loves her so much it hurts him. Just like Baird loved me before I finally let him in.* Impulsively, she stepped forward and gave him another hug. “Don’t give up,” she whispered in his ear. “I know things seem hopeless but they did for Baird and me too, remember? And we came out all right in the end.”

Sylvan smiled at her. “More than all right. Forget about my worries, Olivia—go tell my brother that he’s soon to be a father.”

“All right.” She patted his arm. “But just know that I’m rooting for you.”

“Thank you.” He nodded. “Go—and don’t say a word. Just hand Baird the flower. He’ll know what it means.”

Still feeling troubled for him, Liv left the med station. She couldn’t wait to tell Baird they were going to be starting a family but as happy as she was, she wished her sister could have the same joy. If only she and Sylvan could find a way around their differences...but Liv couldn’t imagine how they could. Sylvan’s need to bite every time they had sex was a serious issue for the needle-phobic Sophie. Although if Liv could get used to Baird’s mating fist, it seemed like her twin could find a way to cope with being a pin cushion. Couldn’t she?

For Sophie and Sylvan’s mutual happiness, Liv hoped she could.

* * * * *

“A year? Really? A whole *year*?” Kat’s eyes were as wide as saucers. “That is seriously messed up, Liv.” She scooted forward on the couch to pour herself another tiny cup of *klava*. Olivia had mysteriously told them she had some very important news and suggested a breakfast get together at her suite. Baird had been called away early to some sort of conference so they had the place to themselves. But so far they were doing a lot more talking than eating.

“I don’t think it’s so bad.” Sophie hugged her again—it seemed she hadn’t been able to stop ever since her sister had told them the news. “It gives you more time to get everything ready. The nursery and baby-proofing the suite...”

“It’s easy for *you* to say it’s not so bad. What if *you* were the one that was going to be preggers for a solid year?” Kat objected.

“I hear it’s longer if you’re mated to Twin Kindred.” Olivia nudged her playfully. “Takes more time for the babies to develop because you always have twins.”

“Ugh, don’t even joke about that!” Kat glared at her. “You *know* it’s not funny.”

“Deep and Lock might think so,” Sophie said with a little smile.

“Speaking of which, are you still reading Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum’s feelings loud and clear?” Olivia asked.

“No, thank God.” Kat put a hand to her head and sighed in relief. “It *finally* stopped. I know this sounds strange but I never thought I’d be so glad to be alone in my own head.”

“Honey, *nothing* sounds strange when you’re mated to a Kindred,” Olivia said, sweeping a strand of blonde hair behind one ear. “But what about the headache?”

Kat frowned. “Still just the tiniest bit—like a dull throbbing at the back of my head. But it’s not nearly as bad as it was.”

“That worries me.” Sophie frowned at her. “Couldn’t that be the sign of something bad?” She looked at her twin for confirmation. “Like a subdural hematoma or something?”

Olivia smiled. “Subdural hematoma, you mean? Not to worry, Sophie, that’s an injury you usually get from bumping your head really hard—not from having a kinky alien ménage with hot Kindred twins.”

Kat crossed her arms over her chest. “Again, *not funny*. As if I would ever go there—they’d freaking split me in two.”

“Sorry, couldn’t resist,” Liv looked like she was trying not to smile again. “You know, Jillian never has any complaints about *her* Twin Kindred hubbies. Practically all she can talk about is how wonderful three-way sex is.”

“Yeah, but let’s be honest—Jillian isn’t the brightest crayon in the box,” Kat said. “I mean, there’s a reason she was captain of the cheer squad instead of captain of the chess team, you know?”

Sophie tried not to laugh. “Kat, you’re so bad.”

“All right, that *was* kind of bitchy of me,” Kat admitted, one corner of her mouth twitching. “It’s just that this whole thing has me so freaked out. I mean—”

“Lilenta?”

They all looked up to see Baird standing in the doorway to the food prep area. Right behind him was Sylvan, who Sophie tried unsuccessfully not to look at. He was looking especially handsome in his pale blue uniform shirt, but he and Baird both had grave looks on their faces.

“Baird, there you are.” Olivia jumped up from the circular bench and ran to give him a kiss. Then she drew back and looked at him worriedly. “Is everything all right?”

Baird sighed heavily and ran a hand through his thick black hair. “You’re probably not going to think so. The High Council has finished their analysis of what happened when Sylvan and Sophie crashed and what it means in terms of security.”

“We’ve just come from giving testimony,” Sylvan said. “I’m afraid they weren’t pleased when I told them all the details of what happened.”

“What does that mean for us?” Olivia asked anxiously.

Baird put an arm around her shoulders and drew her close. “It means they want to send Sophia away.”

“What?” all three girls exclaimed at once.

“Send her *where* exactly?” Kat demanded.

“Someplace the Scourge can’t find her,” Baird said.

“Someplace safe,” Sylvan added.

“I’m sorry kin-of-my-mate,” Baird said, turning to Sophie who was sitting there numbly at the table, trying to process the information being thrown at her. “The Council has determined that as long as you’re here in Earth orbit, the security of the entire Mother ship is compromised. They don’t know why the Scourge are after you but until they do, they want you someplace else.”

“Where?” Sophie asked, trying to keep her voice even. “I mean, I guess I can go back to Earth. If there’s a place the *urlich* can’t reach me...”

“They don’t want you on Earth either,” Baird said. “You’re to go to Tranq Prime. Don’t worry—it’s only about fifty light years away.”

“*Only* fifty light years?” Olivia struggled to get out of Baird’s hug in order to glare up at him. “Are you seriously telling me the Kindred High Council has decided that we’re in so much danger Sophie has to be sent to a galaxy far, far away?”

“It’s okay, Liv.” Sophie held up a hand before her twin could really get going. “Look, I don’t mind—really I don’t.” In fact she was scared to death but she kept her chin up and tried to hide it.

“Well *I* do,” Olivia protested. “This is ridiculous!”

“Liv...” Sophie went to put an arm around her sister. “I don’t want to stay and put you and the baby in danger. If they think I should go, I...I’ll go.” She looked at Baird. “Do they speak English there the way you guys all do?”

“No. But we’ll give you a universal translator implant before you go,” he assured her. “And besides, you won’t be going alone. Tranq Prime is Sylvan’s home world—he’ll be taking you.” He nodded at Sylvan who nodded back gravely.

“I hope you don’t mind, Sophia,” he said, addressing her for the first time. “I made it very clear to the Council that you were in no way bound to me, but they still thought it was best because I had been your protector before.”

“Oh.” Sophie was flooded with a mixture of relief and dismay. *Not going alone!* sang a little voice in her head. On the other hand, now she had to deal with being in close proximity to Sylvan again. And last time that had ended badly—very badly.

“Sylvan has been charged with Sophia’s safety,” Baird said to Olivia. “He has accepted the charge and sworn to do everything in his power to protect her.”

“Well, as long as Sylvan’s going to be with her...” Olivia sounded slightly mollified.

“I will shield her with my life,” Sylvan promised seriously.

Olivia smiled at him. “I know you will. I just...don’t like the idea of my womb-mate being so far away.” She hugged Sophie, who hugged her back tightly. Kat joined in the hug as well and for a moment Sophie felt completely surrounded by their love and support.

Taking a deep breath, she looked up and met Sylvan's eyes. "All right. When are we leaving?"

"Immediately. The space-folder is already primed and ready and I have your translator implant here." To Sophie's horror, he held up a large hypodermic needle. "I'm sorry," he said. "Olivia told me how you feel about shots, but it's the only way. The implant is actually a strain of bacteria that colonizes the language centers of your brain and enables you to understand new languages extremely quickly."

"God." Just looking at the needle made Sophie's flesh crawl.

"Wait." Olivia held up a hand. "You know I trust you Sylvan but are there any counter-indications with this stuff? Has it been tested on humans before?"

"The only side effect is a slightly improved short term memory and yes, many of the Kindred brides have already taken the implant injection. We don't give it to pregnant females, however," Sylvan added. "Just as a precaution."

Liv looked at her. "Sorry, Sophie. It looks like you take the shot or you won't be able to communicate."

Sophie tried to laugh. "Yeah, well, how much do you really need to know what other people are saying?"

"Trust me," Sylvan said darkly. "On Tranq Prime, you need to know."

"Sylvan's right," Baird said, chiming in unexpectedly. "It's not exactly the most straight-forward place in the world. You really have to stay on your toes there."

Sophie took another deep breath and blew it out, trying to steady her nerves. Then she looked up at Sylvan. "Okay, you can stick me, but don't be surprised if I puke or faint or both."

"Come sit down," Liv said practically. "Kat and I will hold your hands and support you."

"I'm sorry," Sophie apologized as they settled on the circular bench, one on either side of her. "I hate being such a baby."

"You're fine," Sylvan assured her. "And I promise to be as quick as I can."

“I have really bad veins,” Sophie warned him faintly. “They’re tiny and they roll.”

“He’s a really good stick,” Olivia assured her. “He stuck me for the pregnancy test and I barely felt a thing.”

“Yeah but you’re not a wuss like me.” Sophie extended her arm, feeling like a sacrificial lamb. Sylvan swabbed the inner bend of her elbow and the sharp, astringent smell of antiseptic assaulted her nostrils, making her feel sick. *The gonna-get-a-shot smell*, She thought faintly. It made her heart race and her breathing shallow. “God,” she whispered, squeezing Liv’s hand tight. “I don’t know...don’t know if I can do this.”

“You can do it,” her sister murmured, squeezing her shoulder. “Hang in there, Sophie, you’re going to be all right.”

“I’m sorry,” Sylvan murmured, kneeling in front of her. And then she felt the needle slide home and liquid fire was traveling up her arm.

Sophie gasped as tears sprang to her eyes. “It burns! Is it supposed to burn like that?”

“Only for a moment,” Sylvan assured her. His voice sounded strange and Sophie looked up at him. What she saw took her mind off the burning in her vein.

Unshed tears glimmered in his ice blue eyes and the pain on his face was unmistakable.

“Sylvan?” she whispered. Freeing her hand from Kat’s supportive grip, she reached out to touch his cheek.

“I’m sorry. I hate being the cause of your pain.” His deep voice was rough with emotion and he looked away, blinking rapidly.

“It’s all right,” she said softly as he withdrew the needle and sealed her wound with flesh glue. “You couldn’t help it.”

“But I didn’t want to hurt you,” he said fiercely and looked at her again. “I *never* want to do that, Sophia.”

“I know,” she whispered.

For a long moment they just looked into each other's eyes and then Kat cleared her throat. "Um, I can tell you two are having a private moment but do you mind telling me what in the world you just said?"

"Huh?" Sophie turned to look at her friend.

"Kat's right." Olivia looked puzzled. "For a minute there you were both talking a whole different language. Actually, it sounded a little like French."

Sylvan looked embarrassed. "I must have slipped into my native tongue. And Sophia answered me the same way."

"Wow." Sophie was amazed. "It works that fast?"

He nodded. "You only need to hear a few words of any given language and the translation bacteria do the rest. So." He stood and cleared his throat. "Are you ready to go?"

"I guess I don't have a choice." Sophie stood too, still feeling a little wobbly. "Can I have a few minutes to pack?"

Baird looked at his chronometer. "Ten minutes and not much more. The Council may be slow to make a decision but once they make one, they want it acted on quickly."

"That's not nearly enough time," Sophie protested. "My stuff's spread all over Kat's suite." She had elected to stay with her friend rather than her sister, to avoid the embarrassment of hearing Liv and Baird having "sexy-time fun" as Kat jokingly put it.

"Just pack your personal items—toiletries and underclothes—things like that," Sylvan directed. "Don't worry about clothing."

"Don't worry about clothing? You expect me to walk around in my bra and underwear all day?" she demanded without thinking. "Uh, I mean..." She could feel her face getting hot.

"I know what you mean." Sylvan's voice was deceptively soft and she suddenly *knew* he was remembering how she looked naked. "But no, I don't expect that at all. None of your clothing is suited to the climate on Tranq Prime. We'll have to get you new clothes when we get there."

“Hear that? The first thing you get to do is go *shopping*.” Kat grabbed her arm. “Sounds like fun! Come on, let’s go pack up your shampoo and other stuff quick.” She and Liv hustled Sophie away to throw her things together.

Almost before she could blink, Sophie was in Kat’s suite stuffing bras, panties, nightclothes and hair care products into a bag as fast as Liv and Kat could hand them to her.

“Sophie,” Olivia said as they worked. “There’s something I meant to tell you this morning except I got sidetracked with my little guy here.” She rubbed her still-flat belly protectively.

“What is it? Is it bad news?” Sophie asked, alarmed.

“Well, it depends on how you take it,” Liv said carefully. “Uh...how do I put this?”

“You’ve only got two minutes,” Kat informed her, stuffing another handful of underwear into the travel bag. “So however you put it, talk quick.”

Olivia frowned. “Fine. Sylvan didn’t have that cleansing ceremony you thought he had. So he still has feelings for you, Sophie.”

Kat rolled her eyes. “Like anyone with half a brain couldn’t tell that just by watching him. He’s so head over heels for her it’s a wonder he’s not flat on his back.”

“You guys!” Sophie could feel herself blushing again. “Come on.”

“Sorry, but I *had* to tell you.” Liv pressed her hairbrush and some hair bands into Sophie’s hands. “I promised I’d put in a good word for you. He really loves you, you know?”

“He does?” Sophie felt elated for a moment, then her heart sank. “But what about his vow to never take a bride?”

Her sister shrugged. “He said the priestess released him from it.”

“Oh.” Sophie bit her lip. “That’s nice about the cleansing and the vow and everything but it’s still not the main point. I mean what about...”

“I know, the biting,” Liv said.

“It’s not just that he wants to bite me,” she objected. “He wants to *inject* me with his *essence*.”

“His what?” Kat and Liv frowned as Sophie explained rapidly.

“...and I just can’t imagine feeling what I just felt in my arm times four every time we have sex,” she finished.

“Can’t say that I blame you.” Kat shook her head. “Damn, why can’t anything ever be normal with these crazy Kindred? They all want to inject you or invade you or—”

“Or *love* you,” Olivia finished firmly. “Maybe it’s not that bad, Sophie.”

“Yeah, but the only way to find out is to try it,” Kat objected. “And since it’s part of their bonding sex, she couldn’t exactly back out if it turns out to be as painful as hell. The Kindred don’t do divorce, remember?”

“She doesn’t have to try it—she could *ask*,” Olivia pointed out. “She’s going to a whole planet full of women who are mated to Blood Kindred males.” She looked at Sophie. “Find one you can trust and *talk* to her.”

“I’ll try,” Sophie said doubtfully. “But honestly, you two are the only ones I’ve ever talked to much about, well, you know.”

“Not to mention that if it’s the norm there, they might have a skewed viewpoint,” Kat said. “I mean, if the women there all get bitten every time they get busy they might think it’s normal to feel pain while your having sex. Like a S&M kind of thing. And Sophie’s not exactly the kinky type.”

“Hardly.” Sophie shivered and looked down into the bulging travel bag. “Is that everything? I hope so because I don’t think anything else is going to fit.”

“That’s it, I think.” Olivia frowned. “Oh God, Sophie, I really wish you didn’t have to go. Promise to call me as soon as you get there.”

“From fifty light years away? I’ll try but I don’t know if we’ll still be in Think-me range,” Sophie said doubtfully.

“We won’t be but you can communicate using the ship’s viewscreen.”

“Oh!” Sophie looked up to see Sylvan standing in the doorway. “Oh, uh, thanks,” she said weakly. *My God, how long has he been standing there? How*

much did he hear? She couldn't tell from the stoic look on his face and she didn't dare to ask.

"We have to go now." Sylvan took the bag from her hands and zipped it up quickly and efficiently despite the way the contents were bulging out the top. "Come, the space-folder takes vast amounts of energy and it's already been running for a long time."

"All right. I'm ready." Sophie turned to give Kat and Liv one last hug. "I'll let you know when I get there safely," she said bravely. "Love you."

And then Sylvan was leading her out of the suite and down the long metal corridor at a brisk pace with Kat and Olivia calling 'I love yous' from the doorway of Kat's suite.

Sophie risked one last glance behind her and blew them a kiss, wondering when she would ever see them again.

Chapter Twenty-five

“It iss time. They are preparing to fold ssspace.”

“I know. Our instruments detected the spike in their energy output as soon as it happened.” Xairn nodded, his eyes never leaving the hooded figure on the metal throne. Behind the AllFather stood his new personal guard. Four vat-grown warriors, each eight feet tall and incredibly muscular, they formed a silent wall at the Allfather’s back.

“Meet Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta.” The AllFather nodded at the wall of muscle at his back. “I thought it prudent to expand my protection. I had them grown and trained to my personal specificationsss.”

And I had nothing to do with them. Didn’t even have knowledge of them until just now. Xairn frowned. It was a bad sign. “They look very...competent,” he said aloud.

“More than competent—*deadly*.” The red eyes flashed. “But I did not sssummon you here sssimply to admire my new guardsss.”

“I know,” Xairn said quietly.

He had been expecting this summons for days—ever since the *urlichs*’ attempt to take the Earth girl had failed. They had been acting on Xairn’s orders—orders he had given against the AllFather’s will. And yet, though the details of the failed attack were well known to his father, this was the first time Xairn had been summoned to the throne room since it had happened. He was almost tempted to hope his father had forgiven or forgotten his small rebellion. Almost. But he knew the AllFather too well for that. Most likely he was simply waiting, letting the dread of another punishment build to make the harvesting of Xairn’s pain all the sweeter.

“I have not forgotten that you defied me in the matter of the girl’sss capture.” The low hiss made him think that the AllFather must have been reading his thoughts and Xairn looked up quickly. “Sssome good did come of it, however,” the hissing voice continued. “The marker the lead bitch placed when it bit her

may prove to be most useful—especially now that I have lost my lock on the warrior’s mind.”

Xairn was surprised though he tried not to show it. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d received any kind of praise from his father. “His mind eludes you now?” he asked carefully.

The AllFather made a noise of disgust. “He must have visited one of their accursed priestesssss. Hisss hate and rage have been repressed, making him difficult to read.”

“Well, at least with the marker in place we can track the girl anywhere—as long as we’re in the correct proximity. Of course, if they go too many light years away...”

“They could go a thousssand light yearsss from the Fathership and I would ssstill have them right in the palm of my hand.” The AllFather’s boney, scabrous fingers clenched suddenly, like a trap snapping shut. “Do you not wish to know how?”

“I am certain you will tell me when you are ready.”

“I am ready. And you will sssee. But first, I think we have time for a quick punishment.”

“What?” Xairn took a step backwards, thrown off his guard. “But, Father, I thought you said the marker was useful. You said—”

“I ss said it was useful, yesss. But placing the marker was not your only objective when you inssstructed the *urlich* to attack, wasss it?” Glowing red eyes regarded Xairn steadily from the confines of his hood. “You intended to defy me. And useful or not, I will not let ss such defiance go unpunished. Come. Kneel.”

“I...do not wish to.” The words seemed pulled from his throat but Xairn couldn’t help himself—he had lived a lifetime under his father’s sadistic tyranny and he was tired of always bending beneath the lash of the AllFather’s cruel will.

“*Come. Kneel.*” This time the words had power he had not felt before though he had seen it at work in others. Xairn felt as though iron cables had suddenly

been fastened around his arms and legs—cables that worked his limbs as though he was a life-sized marionette.

“I...do...not...wish...to,” he grated out again. Yet despite his words, he felt his limbs moving against his will. *But I haven’t had time to prepare, to shield my mind. What if he finds out—* He cut off that line of thought abruptly. Nothing, he must think of nothing if he wished to keep his secret.

“A ssshort punishment,” the AllFather murmured as Xairn was forced to kneel before him. “But no lesss painful for all that...”

Hating his father almost more than he could endure, Xairn looked up to take the pain that was his birthright.

There was nothing else he could do.

* * * * *

Afterwards he felt drained. The AllFather’s directions had been specific. “Go to the docking bay and tell the Master of Ships that I wish the new ship readied. You ssshall pilot it yourself. You and none other. And at the proper time—the time that *I* sssay, you will collect the girl and bring her to me.”

“Yes, Father,” he had murmured through numb lips. His hatred was just as strong but his spirit was weak. So weak that he had to risk disobeying his father once again though he knew it might draw a further punishment.

The corridor that led to his private apartments seemed longer than it ever had. The AllFather never came down to this end of the ship, preferring to spend most of his time in the throne room. The metal throne etched with glowing green runes was the seat of his power and, in part, the source of the dread he exuded the way any other male would exude a bodily scent.

His father’s absence from this part of the ship—where most of the flesh vats and the *urlich* kennels were located—was Xairn’s main objective in claiming the prized space for his own. It had not been easy, though. He had killed three of his father’s most trusted advisors and the general of the Scourge army in order to gain the rooms he now occupied. Xairn did not regret their deaths. It was only by

violence and bloodshed that he had earned his way out of the throne room and into a space of his own.

A space where he could keep his secret.

Upon reaching the triple-thick plasti-steel plate that served as his door, Xairn keyed in a sequence that only he knew. It was a combination of runes, glyphs, numbers and letters that changed daily and he trusted it to no one other than himself. After letting himself in, he closed the door and locked it securely. Only then did he breathe a sigh of relief.

“Sanja? Here, girl,” he called softly. Though the walls of his lair were sound-proofed, he was still careful. One could never be too careful on the Fathership.

A soft, uncertain whining could be heard coming from the inner chamber where he slept. Xairn could hear the question in it and he approved. He had taught her to trust no one—not even him—without the code words.

“Green eyes,” he murmured and a short, joyful bark answered him right before Sanja came rushing around the corner and barreled into him.

“Easy girl. Easy!” Xairn felt his face break into a smile—such an unfamiliar expression and yet one that seemed natural whenever his pet was with him.

Sanja panted happily and her stump of a tail wagged frantically in greeting. Xairn regretted that—all *urlich* pups were born with soft, floppy ears and long, bushy tails and Sanja’s had been beautiful. He had not been able to save her before the medical mutilation that turned her lovely ears into sharp, menacing points and truncated her tail. But at least he had rescued her ahead of the chip implantation which enhanced the sense of smell and aggression in an adult *urlich* and turned their eyes the same evil, glowing red as his own and the AllFather’s.

He had been forced to kill the Master of the Kennels in order to get her away without a trace but that was another death he did not regret. Anything was worth keeping his secret—*anything*.

Sanja jumped up, putting her paws on his shoulders and licked his face. When she tasted the salt left by his tears she whined softly, her big brown eyes filled with concern. Xairn knew that she understood he had recently been in

distress and was worried about him—even an unmodified *urlich* had the intelligence and sensibilities of a bright, ten year old child.

“It’s okay, girl. I’m all right.” He rubbed her behind the ears and she panted happily again, reassured that her master was well.

“I have to go away for awhile,” Xairn told her regretfully. “I don’t know for how long, but the automatic feeder will take care of you. I’ll miss you, though—you know I will.”

Sanja whined uneasily, distressed as always to hear that he would be leaving her. Xairn hated to upset her but she needed to know of his impending absence. He couldn’t tell how long he would be gone or when he might see her again and he didn’t want her to worry. As she surely would, if he simply failed to show up in his quarters at night. With a sigh, he buried his face in her soft ruff and breathed in the warm, living scent of her.

His pet was the only spark of warmth in his entire cold existence. Before he had rescued her, he had felt himself going slowly mad from the intolerable cruelty that surrounded him—becoming more and more like the AllFather. But now, as long as he had her to come back to, even his father’s worst punishments were bearable. Sanja kept him sane and in return, he kept her safe. *And she will remain safe*, he vowed to himself.

As long as the AllFather never found out about her.

He can’t. He’ll never pry it out of me, Xairn told himself fiercely. He had taken every measure possible to protect his precious Sanja from his father. Even one that he prayed he never had to use. But he would use it if he had to—if there was no other way to keep her from the boney clutches of the AllFather.

Because, as Xairn knew all too well, there was no fate worse than that.

Chapter Twenty-six

“So, I’m not a science geek or anything but I’m pretty sure we shouldn’t be able to go fifty light years away without it having some kind of effect on us or the people we left behind. I mean, won’t everyone age while we’re gone?”

Sophie watched nervously as the small, specially modified ship Sylvan was piloting approached the reddish cloud that had gathered a small distance from the Kindred Mother ship. It was the fold in space, generated by the special machine the Kindred had developed to help in their quest to find viable genetic trades. But to her it just looked like a big wound had opened in the blackness between the stars.

“If we were traveling at a normal rate of speed that would be true.” Sylvan sounded completely unconcerned, which made her feel a *little* better. “But we’re not. In fact, we’re only moving a few hundred yards in actual space.” His deep voice took on a scholarly tone. “Imagine space as a piece of paper and our ship is an ant that has to crawl across it. If it crawls across the entire length of the paper, it takes a great deal of time. But if someone folds the paper, the ant can get from one end of the paper to the other almost instantly. Does that make sense?” He turned to look at her and Sophie smiled.

“Yes, perfect sense. You’d make a good teacher, you know? I mean, if you weren’t already a doctor...er, medic.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” He returned her smile with one of his own—the one-sided smile she’d learned to love even though it appeared so rarely.

“I love your smile,” she said impulsively. “I mean, I hardly ever get to see it but it lights up your whole face.”

“Thank you.” His voice was soft and deep and his eyes caught hers. In the lights from the instrument panel they appeared to be glowing a soft, pale blue which Sophie rather liked. It was so much less menacing than the blood red that took over his pupils when he went into the *rage* state. He had appeared to be kind of stuck in that state down on Earth but now that she thought of it, ever

since they'd gotten back to the ship, she hadn't seen him that way. Not that she'd seen much of him but still...

"You seem...calmer lately," she ventured, hoping he wouldn't be offended. "I mean, since we came back to the Mother ship. On Earth you were, well..."

"I was out of control," he admitted candidly. "My blood was burning and I had no way to quench the flames."

"Oh." Sophie looked down at her hands. "That was my fault, I guess."

"Of course not." He sounded almost fierce and she looked up again, wide-eyed. "Don't ever take the blame for any of my actions on yourself," he said sternly.

"But I thought you were...that because I wouldn't let you...you know..."

"You weren't ready." Sylvan looked back at the controls. The red wound in space was growing closer. "You may never be, I see that now."

"I...I don't understand," Sophie faltered.

He glanced at her again. "I saw the look on your face after I came back from dealing with your attacker."

"About that," Sophie began haltingly. "I'm really sorry I freaked out on you. Seeing him again just...brought everything back."

"I thought it was probably something like that," Sylvan said grimly. "I'm sorry I was the cause of your fear and pain."

"No, really. I—"

"But that isn't the only reason I spoke as I did. When I had to inject you with the translation bacteria, your fear and dread were almost overwhelming." He shook his head. "Do you think I want to see those emotions in your eyes when I take you? When I make love to you, Sophia?"

"I...no," she whispered, twisting her fingers together nervously. "No, I guess not."

“I told you I didn’t want to cause you pain.” Sylvan looked back at the fold in space which was almost upon them now. “And I meant it. I’ll leave you alone from now on—I swear it.”

Oh no—another unbreakable oath! Sophie knew he didn’t break his word. *Please don’t say that!* The words hovered on the tip of her tongue but a single thought kept her from saying them. If she asked him not to leave her alone, not to vow to keep his distance, it was the same as encouraging him, giving him hope. And wasn’t it wrong to do that when she was still afraid to let him bite her?

If only he didn’t have to bite! she thought miserably. *Why couldn’t he be any other kind of Kindred? I don’t know what Kat’s complaining about. Even having Twins to deal with wouldn’t be as scary.*

“I’m sorry,” she said aloud, feeling horrible. “Really so sorry, Sylvan.”

“Let’s not speak about it,” he said shortly. “We’re about to enter the fold. It’s best to clear your mind and try to relax.”

“Will going through the fold change us in any way?” Sophie asked anxiously.

“It shouldn’t. But it’s better to remain calm—we will be passing through other dimensions, you know.”

Actually, she hadn’t known. But before she could ask any other questions, the little ship slipped into the red gash in space and everything she had ever known in her whole life disappeared.

* * * * *

Sylvan watched her from the corner of his eye as the dimensional slip took them and they crossed the fold. It didn’t hurt to go through folded space but it was an odd sensation, one he’d only experienced a few times before himself. Though the actual slip only took moments, time seemed to stretch out indefinitely, giving a person a chance to contemplate their entire life and which way it was headed.

Last time he’d crossed the fold, he had been leaving Tranq Prime and Feenah had been on his mind. A lost love. A hopeless desire destined never to come to

fruition. And now, ironically, he was crossing the other way, going back to his native world, and he found himself in the exact same situation—only worse.

I never loved her as I love Sophia, he thought, watching her pale and lovely face as she stared out the viewscreen in awe. *What I felt for Feenah was a pale shadow of the emotion that threatens to overwhelm me now*. But he wasn't going to let it. Wasn't going to fall into that trap again. He had to keep the *rage* in check—keep the need under control so it didn't get the best of him again. And as long as Sophia was in no physical danger, he was fairly certain he could manage that. *I won't scare her again*, he told himself sternly. *I won't be the cause of her fear or her pain. I will protect her and love her—even if I have to do so from afar. Even if I am destined never to have her*.

Oh, Talana...

At last the slip was over and they were on the other side of the fold. The ship flew out of the red gash in space and into the familiar territory of his own solar system. Sylvan watched as the craggy white peaks and snow-covered tundras of Tranq Prime grew larger in the viewscreen. It had been years since he had been home and he felt a strange tugging on his heart at the sight. If only his mother was still alive everything would be—

Sylvan frowned.

"Is everything all right?" Sophie asked from beside him. "Why are you frowning?"

"It's nothing. Just..." He checked the instrument panel. "Something came through the fold with us."

"It did? What is it?" She shifted anxiously in her seat, looking worried.

Sylvan didn't blame her a bit. After all, look at what had happened to them the last time they'd taken what they thought would be a quick and easy trip from the Mother ship. Still...he frowned at the readout he was getting from the off-ship scanner. Then he relaxed.

"No, it's nothing. Just a small asteroid."

"So that's okay?" She still looked worried.

“It’s fine,” Sylvan assured her. “It happens sometimes. When you fold space it creates a kind of vacuum—not as strong as a black hole but strong enough to suck other, smaller objects in along with our ship.”

“Good.” Sophie relaxed and scratched her knee. “Ow. Itchy,” she muttered to herself.

“Problem?” Sylvan couldn’t help looking at her bare legs. She was wearing a light blue dress which was wholly inappropriate for Tranq Prime and the knee she was scratching was the one he’d healed with his tongue after the *urlich* attack. How well he remembered the taste of her blood, the warmth of her skin...the memory made his fangs ache but he held them back sternly.

“No, nothing. Just an itchy knee.” She smiled up at him brightly. “So...can we call everyone back home—er—at the Mother ship and tell them we made it through okay?”

“Certainly.” Sylvan activated the com on the viewscreen and got Baird in a matter of moments.

“All well, brother?” Baird growled and Sylvan nodded.

“We’re through with no problems. We brought a small asteroid with us but nothing else of consequence.”

“That’s good.” Baird nodded. “I’ll tell Olivia.” He looked at Sophie. “She sends her love and Kat does too. She wanted to stay up and speak to you but I convinced her she needed her rest.” He touched the pale blue flower which he was wearing in the buttonhole of his front pocket. “Carrying a son can be very tiring for a female, even in the first quadmester.”

Sophia looked surprised. “Stay up and speak to me? But it’s only a little past noon.”

Sylvan shook his head. “It’s more like midnight at the Mother ship. We lost a few hours in the fold.”

“Oh, well...” Sophia appeared disappointed not to see her sister but she shrugged. “Well, Liv never was much of a night owl. Tell her I love her. And Kat too.”

“I will.” Baird nodded again. “And now we should go. Transmitting across this many light years takes enormous energy.”

“Goodbye then. We’ll speak to you again if we have anything new to tell you,” Sylvan said. “And please contact us if anything changes.”

“Will do. Goodbye, Brother.” Baird winked out and the viewscreen showed the growing grayish-white curve of Tranq Prime again.

Sophia cleared her throat and looked at him. “So we’ll be landing soon. Tell me what to expect. Where are we staying?”

“With my kin.” Sylvan hoped they wouldn’t mind—he hadn’t had much time to give them warning he was coming. “The mother of my sister,” he clarified for Sophia’s benefit. “She and her mate and their daughter live in *Lanash*, the main grotto on Tranq Prime.”

“Uh, grotto?” She frowned. “You live in a cave?”

“We dwell underground on Tranq Prime—the weather conditions are much too harsh to live on the surface,” Sylvan explained. “In fact, I never saw the sun above until I was nine and my father took me on a hunting trip.”

“Really? What did you hunt?”

“A *vranna*.”

“A what? Sorry, I thought I knew your language now.”

“You know the grammar and syntax and the basic sentence structure but there will still be a few words that are unfamiliar to you,” Sylvan told her. “A *vranna* is...” He tried to think how to explain. “Imagine something that’s a little like one of your grizzly bears but as tall as a giraffe covered in green-blue fur. They’re quite fierce.”

“I bet.” Her lovely green eyes were wide. “Did you kill it?”

Sylvan shrugged. “It was my manhood hunt so I was allowed the first thrust. With my *shale*—it’s like a long spear, twice the height of the male who carries it. And a blade on the end as long as my arm.”

“So in order to become a man you had to kill an abominable snowman?”

“A what?”

“Never mind.” She shook her head. “It’s just...that’s amazing.”

“It’s the way of my people. We can be very direct in some ways. And not so direct in others,” he finished, frowning.

“Are you trying to tell me to watch my back?” she asked frowning. “I mean, even Baird seemed to think you really need to keep your eyes and ears open down there.” She nodded at the frozen white globe which was growing larger in the viewscreen. “Do I have to worry about being eaten by one of those abominable *vranna* things?”

Sylvan frowned. “You have nothing to fear as long as I am with you. And we won’t be on the surface anyway so you would never be in danger from any of the larger predators.”

Her eyes widened. “Are there worse things than giraffe-sized grizzly bears wandering around?”

“Certainly. And since it’s spring time now, a lot of them will be coming out of hibernation. A very *long* hibernation, since winters on Tranq Prime can last for dozens of your Earth years.”

“Spring time, huh?” She sounded doubtful. “I know what that means to me—flowers blooming, birds singing...”

“We have those things.” Sylvan nodded. “Maybe not in the way you think of them but we have them. Remind me to take you to see the snowdrop trees in bloom. They only blossom for a short time in spring. In fact, we may be just in time for the Snowdrop Festival. There’s a feast and a dance—it’s quite a big deal.”

“A festival? That sounds like fun.” She smiled. “You know, I was kind of apprehensive at first but now I really want to see your home planet.”

“Really? Are you interested in other cultures?”

“Just yours, mainly,” she said and then blushed.

Sylvan wished she didn’t look so bewitchingly pretty when her cheeks turned that soft shade of pink. It made him want to drag her into his lap and kiss her

until she couldn't breathe. Until she bared her neck for him and begged for his bite... *Never going to happen*, he told himself roughly. *Get over it. Move on.*

"Well, you're not ready to see my planet yet," he said, more abruptly than he'd intended.

"I'm not?"

"No. If you set foot on the surface in what you're wearing you'll freeze to death in moments. Go to the back of the shuttle and look in the upright locker."

Sophia did as he asked and came back wearing an oversized green-blue fur that dragged the ground. "I'm swimming in this thing." She motioned at herself, the furry arm of the coat flopping.

"Yes, I'm sorry. It's actually mine," Sylvan apologized. "I had no time to get any in your size on such short notice. But I'm certain my mother's sister can find you something once we get below the surface."

"But what about you?" she objected. "You've only got your blue uniform shirt. I don't want to take your coat—you'll freeze."

"Not nearly as quickly as you will." Sylvan set the shuttle's landing sequence on autopilot and turned back to her. "Blood Kindred have twice the number of red blood cells that humans do. They carry more oxygen and keep us warmer. Besides, we only have a few hundred yards to go from the landing area to the grotto entrance."

"Uh...what about shoes?" She looked down at her woefully inadequate footwear. Two little straps went between her first and second toes and attached to a flat pad at the bottom, leaving her entire delicate foot exposed. Sylvan thought they were called "flop-flips" or something equally ridiculous. He couldn't help noticing, though, that her toenails were painted an innocent shell-pink which was somehow devastatingly feminine.

"Those won't do at all," he told her sternly. "And I don't have any boots that will fit you. I'll just have to carry you."

"Oh no, I don't want you to have to do that. If it's just a few yards like you said, I'm sure I can manage."

Sylvan felt his heart knot like a fist. “A few *hundred* yards,” he corrected her gruffly. “Is there some reason you don’t want me to carry you? Remember I swore to leave you alone so you don’t have to worry that—”

“No, no!” she said hastily, cutting him off. “No, I just didn’t want to...to burden you.”

“You could never be a burden to me, *Talana*.” The endearment slipped from him before he could help it. Clearing his throat, he tried to cover his mistake. “Besides, if you don’t want to lose your pretty toes to frostbite, you’ll have to be carried whether you like it or not.”

Sophia went pale. “It’s that cold?”

He nodded. “It’s that cold.”

She bit her lush lower lip, another gesture that made him want her so much he ached. “Then I would like it very much if you would carry me, Sylvan,” she said in a low voice. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Truth be told, despite the biting cold he knew they would encounter, he was looking forward to the short trip between the landing area and the grotto.

It would probably be the last chance he ever got to hold her in his arms.

Chapter Twenty-seven

Sophie didn't know what to expect. She felt more than a little nervous about meeting Sylvan's family. With all the talk of stabbing wild animals with spears and living underground in caves, she wondered if they might not be a primitive people. Of course, they had space flight and Sylvan didn't strike her as a *Clan of the Cave Bear* kind of guy—the exact opposite, in fact. But maybe they had gotten all their technology in their trade with the Kindred.

Whatever she faced underground in the “grotto” however, she had to deal with getting there first. After they landed, Sylvan wrapped the long bluish-green fur around her tightly, making sure her hands and feet were well covered. Then he lifted her gently and nudged the door release with his elbow.

“Get ready,” he murmured in her ear. Slowly the shuttle opened to reveal a flat, frozen plain that appeared to be covered in short grayish-blue vegetation.

Sophie opened her mouth to reply—and nearly choked as a rush of freezing cold air gusted down her throat. “God!” She gasped and tried to draw another breath, only to feel like someone was stabbing her lungs with knives.

“Take short, shallow breaths,” Sylvan advised in a low voice. He had kicked the shuttle door shut behind him and was already striding over the frozen ground with swift, economical movements.

There was no wind at all but even the brush of the air against her face as he carried her hurt. It was a stinging, freezing cold that Sophie had never experienced before and she wasn't equipped to deal with it. Despite being well wrapped up, her hands and feet were already numb and her eyes stung and watered. The tip of her nose felt like it might break off and every breath she took was like a spike in her lungs. She began to feel dizzy and the gray-blue plain wavered in her vision.

“Sophia? Are you all right?” Sylvan sounded concerned.

“Hurts,” she whispered. “Hurts to...to breathe.”

“Press your face to my neck,” he ordered. “Draw warmth from me.”

“But—”

“Do it!” It was a command, not a request.

Miserably, Sophie did as he said. She was certain her nose would feel like ice against his skin but she pressed her face against the side of his neck anyway. To her surprise, he was warm. Not just a little warmer than her but positively toasty. And he didn’t flinch when he felt her chilly touch.

Feeling a little less panicky, Sophie snuggled closer, nuzzling against his throat and breathing in his scent. It was sharp and spicy and utterly masculine—his mating scent again, she realized. Had he started exuding it because she was close to him or just because he felt protective of her? Either way, it smelled delicious and she breathed it in happily, glad to be able to draw a breath without the stabbing pain.

Sylvan went on tirelessly, though she couldn’t see how he could function in the extreme cold, let alone move well enough to carry her. She wondered drowsily how long it would be until they got underground—had they been walking for long? It seemed like an eternity, though it must feel even longer for Sylvan who was carrying her so patiently. Her hands and feet still felt numb but it didn’t seem to matter anymore. Nothing mattered because she felt so tired...so incredibly sleepy...

“Sophia? Sophia, wake up!” Sylvan’s voice was sharp in her ear and she stirred sluggishly.

“Huh?” She lifted her head and then winced as the cold air clawed at her like a wild animal. Quickly she pressed her face into his neck again. “Leave me alone.”

“I can’t. You *must not* go to sleep out here. You might not wake up.”

“Wha...what are you talking about?” She peered groggily up at him with one eye, trying to keep the rest of her face close to his neck. He was still striding along but he was looking down at her and his pale blue eyes were worried.

“The cold’s affecting you more than I thought it would.” He frowned. “Just stay awake—we’re almost there.”

“Almost where?” Were they going somewhere? When she pushed herself to remember it seemed like they were, but she didn’t know where or why. Why

bother to go anywhere when she could stay close to Sylvan, breathing in his delicious mating scent? At first she'd been horribly cold but now everything was perfectly, beautifully warm...

"Almost to the grotto entrance." Sylvan's voice seemed to come from far away this time. "Stay awake, Sophia—please!" There was desperation in his voice and he was almost running now, jogging over the frozen ground with her in his arms, as though he was trying to win some kind of race.

"Slow down," Sophie protested peevishly. His faster pace was joggling her uncomfortably, making it almost impossible to sleep the way she so desperately wanted to. "Can't...get any rest...this...way."

"You don't need to rest. You need to wake up. Here." He sounded relieved. "Here we are at last."

He ducked his head and then they were passing into some kind of entrance. Sophie caught a vague glimpse of a stone archway and then a door slammed shut behind them and they were headed downward into warmth and darkness...

She must have gone to sleep after all because when she woke up she was lying on a hard surface (*some kind of bench?*) and someone was rubbing her hands and feet frantically.

Her eyes fluttered open and she lifted her head, which felt like it weighed about a thousand pounds. Looking down she could see Sylvan kneeling beside her. He was rubbing one of her hands which felt strangely numb. As her vision cleared, Sophie saw with horror that the hand he was working on was no longer tan—in fact, it was almost blue. Looking farther, she saw that her other hand and her feet were the same alarming color.

"Sylvan?" She couldn't keep the fear out of her voice. "Sylvan, am I...will I be okay?"

His face was drawn and pale with concern as he continued to rub her hands and feet. "You would be if I could bite you—but I know you don't want that," he added before she could open her mouth to protest. "Even essence might not do

the trick, though. What you need is more red blood cells circulating through your system.”

Sophie felt her breath catch in her throat as a memory came rushing over her.

“You need more blood, honey—better blood.” The tall, blonde nurse leaned over her with the hateful needle in one hand, sharp and silver and bright. “That’s all we want to do, just give you better blood. It’s just a little pinch and it’ll be over in a minute...”

But that was what they always said. And it was never just one little pinch. Her veins were tiny and hard to find. Sometimes she was stuck six or seven times before they could get one big enough for the transfusion. The needles left huge black and purple bruises on her pale arms and they hurt so much...

“No,” she blurted. “No, Sylvan, I don’t want a transfusion. I can’t—”

“I’m not talking about a transfusion. There’s no time for that, anyway.”

Sophie saw a flash of fang as he bit sharply into the blue bracelet of veins that ran along the underside of his inner wrist.

“What...why did you do that?” she barely had time to ask before he was holding his bleeding wrist to her mouth.

“Drink.”

“Drink your *blood*?” She wanted to recoil but she was too weak.

Sylvan cursed softly. “This isn’t the right way to do this but it can’t be helped. I offer you the gift of my blood freely, Sophia. You *must* drink.”

“But why? How will it help?”

“I’ve had your blood several times. That means my body is attuned to yours which causes it to produce chemicals tailored to heal and stimulate you.”

Sophie looked at him, wide-eyed. “So...you’re like my own personal pharmacy? Is that normal?”

He looked pained. “It would be if we were bonded. What matters now is that the taste of my blood should stimulate your body to start producing more red cells very quickly. And it will also warm you up rapidly.” He pressed his wrist to

her lips and looked at her sternly. “You have frostbite in all your extremities. Drink now if you don’t want to lose your hands and feet.”

“Oh my G—” she started to say. But as soon as she opened her mouth, it was full of his blood.

Sophie wanted to gag but she forced herself not to. *Have to do this. Have to. Have to*, she chanted to herself and actually, after a moment she found that it wasn’t so bad. She’d been expecting the salty, coppery, slightly nauseating taste she got when she accidentally bit her tongue or cheek, but Sylvan’s blood was different.

It’s not bad, she realized with surprise. *Not bad at all. I mean I wouldn’t pour it over ice cream like Hershey’s syrup but it doesn’t taste like blood—human blood, anyway. It’s kind of sweet and creamy and strong...* To be honest, it tasted like something that might get her drunk if she drank too much of it. But Sylvan didn’t seem to be concerned about that. He watched her anxiously as she sucked at his wrist, as though trying to gauge her reaction to his blood.

Sophie wasn’t sure what was supposed to happen but suddenly she felt an intense warmth and tingling in her hands and feet. When she glanced down, she saw that her skin had returned to its normal color and she was able to move her fingers and toes. She pulled back from his wrist. “I think it’s working. Look!” She wiggled her fingers for him and smiled.

“Take a little more,” Sylvan urged. “To make sure.”

Sophie looked at his wrist which was already healing. “Are you sure? I mean, I don’t want to make you weak.”

“Sharing the gift of blood with you can do nothing but strengthen me.” His voice was deep and soft and the way he was looking at her...

He’s so intense, Sophie couldn’t help thinking. *As though we were doing something somehow forbidden. Forbidden but deeply desirable...*

“Take from me, *Talana*.” Sylvan stroked her cheek, holding her gaze with his own. “I want you to.”

Sophie lapped at his wrist again, taking more of his sweet, strong blood in her mouth, and felt another warm tingle race through her. The heat was spreading up her arms and legs into her core and it seemed to be pooling between her legs, somehow. Her pussy suddenly felt swollen and sensitive, just as it had when he marked her, tasted her...

"It's good," she whispered, taking another small lick. "I didn't think it would be but...I like it. Is that strange?"

"It's because you are as attuned to me as I am to you," he murmured. "Tell me, does it give you pleasure to drink of me?"

"Drink of me...I like that." Sophie took another lingering lick, feeling the rush of tingling warmth that flowed directly to the tender spot between her thighs. "Yes," she admitted softly. "It does give me pleasure. It's almost like I can feel it—the effects of your blood, I mean—uh, everywhere." A wave of embarrassment washed over her and she wondered if he knew what was really happening to her every time she took another taste.

From the way Sylvan's eyes were half-lidded with lust, he knew *exactly* how his blood was affecting her. "Are you wet, my *numala*?" he murmured, catching her gaze and holding it with his own. "Do you feel the pleasure of my blood between your thighs?"

Biting her lip, Sophie nodded. "Yes," she whispered. "I...I do. Do..." She cleared her throat. "Do you feel the same way when you taste my blood?"

He nodded. "Your blood, your honey...as I said, my body is attuned to yours now." His voice was a soft growl. "Everything about you makes me want you. Even the way you take my blood."

Sophia's eyes flickered down to the thick outline of his cock, pressing against the fabric of his black flight pants. "I...I'm sorry," she whispered, feeling flustered. "I didn't mean to—"

"I know you didn't." He shook his head. "The fault is mine."

"Sylvan..."

“It’s all right,” he assured her. “Just drink of me one more time to be certain you’re well and we’ll say no more about it.”

“Are you sure you want me to?”

“When will I ever get the chance to give you the gift of blood again? To feel your soft lips pressed to my flesh as you take what only I can give you?” His voice was hoarse with need and longing. “Yes, Sophia, I’m sure. Drink of me. Drink and be healed. Drink and be pleased.”

His soft words seemed to do something inside her, to touch and caress her exactly where the tingling warmth of his blood had already started a fire. Feeling like she was drowning in lust, Sophie met his eyes and flattened her tongue against his wrist to take another long, slow, lick of his blood...

“I see you’ve arrived in one piece, son of my sister,” said a high, feminine voice behind her. “It’s so good to see you again after all these...oh dear!”

Sophie was so startled she jerked away. At the same time, Sylvan pulled his wrist back and turned to look at whoever was speaking.

“Mother’s sister,” he said steadily to the tall, thin woman with pale blonde hair and light blue eyes, who was standing there in the stone hallway behind them. “I am pleased you came to meet us.”

“We wouldn’t have come if we knew you’d be doing...*this*. Really, Sylvan, it’s hardly appropriate—especially in a public place like the access tunnel!” She had her arms crossed over her narrow bosom and her thin lips were drawn in a tight line of disapproval. Behind her was a man who was almost as tall as Sylvan but of a much thinner and slighter build. His dishwater blond hair was thinning, showing a pinkish scalp and he had a long, boney face that was also drawn in deep lines of condemnation. To Sophie he looked like a large, hairless cat.

“I am sorry, Mother’s sister,” Sylvan said, nodding his head. “It was regrettably necessary. Sophia had frostbite in all her extremities and I had to, uh, stimulate her system.”

At the word “stimulate” their faces grew red. They were both dressed, Sophie saw, in thin pastel furs that seemed to be cut into clothes. The woman’s pale pink

fur was made up into a long, sleek dress that fell elegantly from her neck to her ankles but the man's pale green fur was tied at the side into a kind of loincloth that barely reached the middle of his thighs. His narrow, scrawny chest and long, skinny white legs were bare and he was wearing a pair of huge furry purple boots that made Sophie want to laugh. But she held back the giggle that rose in her throat—clearly these were Sylvan's aunt and uncle and just as clearly they weren't happy.

Sylvan's uncle cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Sharing the gift of blood is a private, *Kindred* matter, best kept behind closed doors," he said, addressing Sylvan. "While you stay with us, you and your bride will please remember that."

"She's not my bride."

"What?" If Sylvan's aunt's eyebrows got any higher they were going to disappear into her hairline. "She's not even bonded to you and you were giving her the gift of blood? Have you no *shame*?"

Sylvan sighed and stood up to face them. "As I said, it was necessary."

"Well it had better *not* be necessary again," blustered his uncle. "After all, we have an impressionable young daughter to consider. Nadiah doesn't need to see such things."

Sylvan nodded. "I understand. It won't happen again."

"Well good." He nodded curtly. "Since we understand each other, your mother's sister and I offer you and your, er, female friend, the hospitality of our home."

"Thank you. Sophia and I accept." Sylvan looked down at her. "We should go. Can you walk?"

"I...I think so." She was still sitting on the hard, stone bench. When she tried to stand, her legs folded under her. Had exposure to the extreme cold made her weak or was it some side effect of taking his blood? "I'm sorry," she said as Sylvan swung her up into his arms again.

"Don't worry. I don't mind carrying you." He smiled.

“Thank you.” Sophie smiled back gratefully...until she saw the disapproving way his aunt and uncle were looking at her. “Uh, unless it’s against some kind of law or custom,” she added hastily. “I don’t want to offend anyone.”

“It’s not a problem,” Sylvan assured her and looked at his aunt for confirmation. “Is it, mother’s sister?”

She shook her head curtly, though she still looked to Sophie like she’d been sucking an unripe persimmon. “No. Not as long as that’s *all* you do.”

“You have my word that no more intimacies will be performed in public or in private,” Sylvan said, looking her in the eye. “I have foresworn myself of Sophia for reasons I choose not to discuss.”

“Well then, that’s a different matter.” His uncle gave Sophia a tight smile which wasn’t much better than his disapproving frown. “I’ll let that be known at the feast when we introduce you and your guest.”

“Very well.” Sylvan looked almost as unhappy as Sophie felt. It was a shame that he had to tell everyone they weren’t together in such a public way. She had been feeling so close to him after he saved her yet again. The taste of his blood lingered on her tongue and the tingling feeling between her thighs hadn’t quite dissipated either. And he smelled so *good*...

Stop it, she told herself sternly. *It’s better not to wish for things you can’t have. Because you can’t just have one part of him.* It was true but it still made her frustrated and sad. Sighing deeply, she laid her head on his broad shoulder and watched as his aunt and uncle preceded them down the long, stone corridor that seemed to go on forever.

* * * * *

Sylvan was filled irritation as he followed his kin down the access tunnel that led to the main grotto. His mother’s sister Zeelah and her mate Grennly were still as prudish as ever. Maybe even more so than last time he’d seen them. He wondered if they were out and out Purists yet or if they were still teetering on the edge of that controversy. It was one he would rather not get into himself, if he

could help it. He was Kindred, born and bred and he couldn't help it if his mother's people disapproved of that.

"Sylvan?" Sophia's voice was so low in his ear than Sylvan almost didn't hear her.

"Yes?" He glanced down to see Sophia looking up at him with an uncertain look on her face.

"Don't take this the wrong way," she whispered. "But, uh, your aunt and uncle seem really...upset. Maybe we shouldn't stay with them."

Sylvan frowned. "There is no place else for us to stay unless you wish to sleep in the public reflection area."

"The what?"

"It's an open area in the middle of the grotto, something like what your people call a park. But it's strictly for meditation and other serious pursuits. I don't think my people would like us sleeping there but if you dislike my kin so much—"

"It's not that I dislike them," she protested. "I just don't want to impose. Couldn't we stay at a motel or something?"

"You mean a temporary lodging for guests who need a place to sleep? The kind you have on Earth?"

She nodded. "Yeah, one of those. It doesn't have to be the Hilton or anything. We could even stay at the Tranq Prime Motel Six—I don't care."

"We have no such lodgings," Sylvan told her. "Tranq Prime is a closed world. Unless you have kin here to stay with, you don't stay."

"Oh." Her face fell. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize."

"Everything will be all right," Sylvan assured her, hoping it was true. "You'll have a room of your own for some privacy and you'll like my mother's sister's daughter, Nadiah. She's very...outspoken. Or she was the last time I saw her."

"So we won't be staying together?" She looked a little frightened.

“We’re not bonded,” Sylvan pointed out. “My mother’s sister would never let us share a room—it wouldn’t be proper. But don’t worry,” he added, trying to dispel the worried look in her lovely green eyes. “I’ll always be nearby. I won’t let anything happen to you, Sophia.”

“I know.” She gave him a little smile that seemed to tug at his heart. “I’m sorry, Sylvan. I don’t mean to be a baby. It’s just that I’ve never been away from Earth before and you’re the only person I know on this entire planet. In this entire *solar system*, for that matter.”

And that’s the way I want to keep it. Want to take you away with me and keep you safe and protected somewhere private where it’s just the two of us. He knew it was a dream that could never come true but he couldn’t help himself. Giving her the gift of blood had stirred him almost unbearably. The feel of her soft lips and warm tongue against his skin, the look in her eyes and the way her scent had changed, letting him know that she was getting wet, getting ready...

“Oh *my!*” Sophie’s awed exclamation drew him out of his reverie and he realized that they had passed through the access tunnel and were entering the main grotto.

“Do you like it?” he asked as she looked around the huge underground space that encompassed the grotto.

* * * * *

“Do I *like* it?” Sophie breathed. “It...it’s beautiful. I can’t stop looking at it.”

When Sylvan had spoken of his people living underground, she had immediately thought of a vacation her family had once taken to some natural caverns in the mountains of Tennessee. The caves had been dark and spooky with cool, damp, stagnant air that smelled strangely of nothing. Everything she touched had left a smear of reddish clay on her fingers and the gritty crunch of pebbles under her feet had echoed eerily in the wide, empty spaces that had never seen light.

The whole experience had been horribly claustrophobic because she kept thinking of all the tons and tons of rock above her head and how there was only

one way out of the cave. To make things worse, the guide went on and on about people who had started exploring and then couldn't find their way out again. Sophie couldn't help thinking about what an awful way it would be to die—alone in the dark after your candle or flashlight had gone out, knowing that no one could hear your echoing screams...

So that—or something like it—was what she'd been expecting when they entered the grotto. What she saw couldn't have been more different.

The space was vast, for one thing—at least as big as two football fields put together. And it was open and airy, so that she could only dimly see the natural rock ceiling glinting far above. The plain brown walls of the tunnel had given way to vast sheets of pinkish rock that were streaked with what must be mineral deposits in every imaginable color. A purplish-blue vegetation that reminded Sophie of moss covered the floor which sloped down to a center area where a grove of pale trees with silvery leaves grew around a still blue lake.

Thick pillars of deep, maroon stone stood here and there, stretching up to the ceiling like giant petrified redwoods. They had been carved with golden letters in some language Sophie didn't know...or did she? As she stared, they began to make sense. *Must be the translation bacteria at work*, she thought, delighted to suddenly be able to read a whole other language without effort. Too bad she hadn't had something like this back when she took high school Spanish!

"Peace," she read aloud softly. "Prosperity. And—"

"Purity," Sylvan finished for her in a low voice.

"Purity?" Sophie frowned. "Is, uh, everyone here super religious or something?"

"No, they aren't speaking of sexual or spiritual purity—the runes refer to purity of the blood. As I said, Tranq Prime is a closed world. They don't interbreed with off-worlders and they're very proud of their untainted bloodlines."

"They don't? But what about the trade they made with you guys? With the Kindred?"

“Done strictly out of necessity because of the epidemic of Blood Fever. The native Primes had to trade with the Kindred or die out as a race. Now that a vaccine has been developed and the disease has been all but eradicated, there are many who say the trade should end and the Kindred shouldn’t be allowed to call brides from Tranq Prime any longer. Kindred warriors used to be considered very desirable mates...but no longer. ”

There was a deep bitterness in his tone that Sophie had never heard before. It made her wonder if he had somehow been personally affected by the elitist attitude of the natives. But how could that be? He had vowed never to call a bride, hadn’t he?

“That’s awful,” she exclaimed, a little louder than she’d meant to. Sylvan’s aunt looked back and Sophie nodded and smiled until she turned around again. “I mean, you saved them, didn’t you?” she went on in a lower voice. “And how long have the Kindred been here?”

“Thousands of years.” He shrugged. “But the Primes are a stubborn people with a long memory. The Kindred have never really been welcome—they’ve only tolerated us because they needed us. Now they don’t anymore.”

“Of all the rude, ungrateful—” Sophie stopped abruptly when Sylvan’s aunt turned to look at her again.

“Do you find our grotto to your liking, Sophia?” She pronounced Sophie’s name with a lilting accent that made it sound exotic.

“It’s beautiful,” Sophie said truthfully. “But where do you live?” She supposed that the open area in the center with the lake and silver trees must be the public reflection area that Sylvan had spoken of, but she had yet to see any kind of houses or shops or other signs of life other than the few tall, blond people walking purposefully through the grotto.

“Our dwelling is an offshoot of the *central* corridor.” Sylvan’s aunt sounded proud, as though this information was important. “Come, we’ll be there soon and you can refresh yourself and put on some decent clothing.” The *vranna* fur had

fallen open and she eyed the sundress Sophie had on under it with apparent disapproval.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Sophie hastily snatched the robe closed, although to be honest, she was beginning to feel overheated and stuffy in it. How in the world did they keep it so warm down here when it was so incredibly cold on the surface? Looking at the reflection area again she noticed steam rising from the lake. Could that be the answer?

Before she could ask, they were turning down a wide stone tunnel made of the same pinkish-rainbow streaked rock as the grotto. Along the tall, curving walls there were evenly spaced doors that seemed to be made of the same deep maroon stone as the pillars that supported the roof of the main grotto. After walking about halfway down the wide stone hallway, Sylvan’s uncle and aunt stopped in front of a door with raised golden designs on it.

Sylvan’s uncle produced an elaborate gold metal hook as long as his hand and began to fit it into the depression in the center of the doorway. But before he could finish, the door swung open revealing a tall, slender girl with bright blue eyes. Her hair was the same pale blonde that Sophie had seen on almost everyone else, but it was frosted with blue and purple tips. It was cut pixie short except for one long braid running from the very center of her scalp which had been dyed a glossy black. She was wearing a thin fur dress similar to Sylvan’s aunt’s, but hers was a vivid purple.

“Omigoddess! Sylvan!” the girl squealed when she saw him standing behind his aunt and uncle. Rushing past them she reached up to plant an enthusiastic kiss on his cheek. Then she looked at Sophie who was still cradled in his arms. “And you must be the off-worlder he brought with him. Your hair is just *gorgeous!* So exotic! I wish I could go all the way dark but Mamam won’t let me.”

“Because a true daughter of Tranq Prime has hair and skin the color of star moss,” Sylvan’s aunt said reprovingly. “It’s bad enough what you’ve done with your hair already, Nadiyah.”

“Oh Mamam, you’re so old fashioned!” Nadiah put a hand on her hip and sighed loudly. Then she turned to Sylvan and Sophie again. “Come on, I’ll show you to your room.”

“There’s been a change of plans, Nadiah.” Sylvan’s uncle frowned. “Sylvan and his guest will be in separate rooms. “Sylvan may have the guest room in the far East corner of the domicile and Sophia may have the room right beside yours. They’re...ahem...not bonded.” He turned bright red at the announcement and so did Nadiah but with excitement, not embarrassment.

“Omigoddess, Sylvan, you brought a female you’re not even bonded with to stay in our domicile? I can’t believe Mamam and Patro allowed it!”

“Never mind,” Sylvan’s aunt said firmly when he opened his mouth to answer. “Sylvan needed a place to stay and no matter what his other connections, we *are* his family.” She looked at Sophie. “Can you walk now, my dear?”

“I think so.” Sophie looked up at Sylvan. “You can put me down now. I think I’m okay.”

“All right.” But he held her a moment longer, as though he was reluctant to let her go. Then with a sigh, he placed her carefully on her feet.

Sophie tottered for a moment and then regained her balance. The dizziness she’d felt earlier seemed to have passed completely and she felt completely herself again. Better than herself, in fact—she felt reinvigorated. *Must be Sylvan’s blood*. She opened her mouth to ask about it...and shut it again when she remembered how his aunt and uncle had disapproved of his “gift of blood.”

Nadiah had been watching her as she stood and now she touched Sophie’s arm. “You’re all right then? I thought maybe Sylvan had to carry you because your off-worlder legs didn’t work right.”

Sophie was surprised into laughing. “No, I was just dizzy. I had a bad reaction to the cold on the, uh, surface.”

The bright blue eyes widened. “You *did*? But it’s spring time—it’s barely cold at all any more.”

“Well, it felt incredibly cold to me,” Sophie told her.

“Sophia comes from a place which is so hot you can go down and bathe in the sea any time of year,” Sylvan explained. “And they have vents in their domiciles that blow chilly air to keep them cool day and night.”

“You blow *cold* air into your dwelling?” Nadiah didn’t look like she believed it.

Sophie nodded. “It gets so hot in summer you can’t live without the AC—uh, air conditioner.”

“Which is why they wear lighter clothing than we’re used to.” Sylvan gave his aunt a meaningful look. “Out of necessity.”

“Well what’s necessary here is to be decent. Especially if you’re going to accompany us to the Snowdrop Festival tonight,” his aunt said briskly. She nodded at her daughter. “Nadiah, take Sophia to her room. See that she’s matched with the right *tharp* and do *something* with her hair. We only have a few hours to prepare.”

Nadiah clapped her hands. “Oh goody—a *zan-daro*! My favorite!”

Sophie looked at Sylvan for help. “*Zan-daro*?”

He frowned. “I’m trying to think how to translate but I don’t know the words in your language. It means a complete redo of your personal style.”

“Oh, a *make-over*.” Sophie smiled—it seemed that teenaged girls weren’t that different wherever you went. “Of course,” she told Nadiah. “That sounds like fun.”

“Great! Come on!” Grabbing her by the hand, Nadiah pulled her into the domicile. Sophie barely had a chance to throw a quick backward glance at Sylvan, who was watching them with a bemused look on his face, before she was dragged around a corner and into the alien house.

Chapter Twenty-eight

“Watch out for the heat-stream,” Nadiah instructed, nodding at a narrow channel of steaming, pale purple water that flowed down the length of the room. It was only about six inches across but Sophie could see how getting her foot stuck in it might result in another twisted ankle. She was careful to keep to one side of it as Nadiah pulled her through the living area of the house and down a long stone hallway. *Kind of romantic—like living in a castle*, she thought as their footsteps echoed behind them.

“This is your room.” Nadiah threw open a door carelessly—or as carelessly as she could, considering it appeared to be made of solid stone. But as heavy as it was, she didn’t appear to have any problem moving it. Either the Primes were incredibly strong or she was really into fitness. Given the fact that they all seemed to be taller and built on a larger scale than humans, maybe the door just didn’t seem that heavy to her.

Sophie started to go into the room but Nadiah pulled her further down the hall. “This is my room,” she said as they came to another stone door. “Luckily it’s on the other end of the domicile from Mamam’s. Still, it’s better to be safe,” she added, nodding at a flat metal plate attached to the door. Pressing her palm to it for a moment, she muttered something too low for Sophie to make out. When she took her hand away it briefly glowed bright pink and then the door swung silently open.

“Wow, that’s some combination lock you have there,” Sophie murmured.

Nadiah grinned. “Sorry about the security. But Mamam would have a fit if she saw half the things I have in here.” She looked at Sophie anxiously. “I can trust you not to tell, can’t I? I mean, you’re with Sylvan so you must not be a Purist.”

“A what?”

“Someone who’s against the trade. You know—with the Kindred?”

“My sister was just called as a Kindred bride,” Sophie assured her. “So I have no problem with it.”

Nadiah looked relieved. “Oh *good*. Well come in then, and we’ll get you ready for the feast.”

Sophie came into the somewhat cluttered room and looked around with interest. In the middle was a low, perfectly square sleeping platform that had long round pillows on all sides. It was strewn with furs of all different colors. More fur clothing and various trinkets that looked like they might be jewelry were spilling out of drawers built into the rock walls and there was a full length 3-D viewer in one corner with a blinking red time display at the top. Most interesting, to Sophie anyway, were the holographic posters taped to the walls. They were of various large, muscular men, all stripped to the waist and smiling seductively. When she moved a certain way, some of them seemed to wink.

“Kindred posters,” she said in surprise. “Twin Kindred...Beast Kindred...and you have three Blood Kindred.”

Nadiah blushed. “Well you can’t blame me for having a preference! Besides, the Blood Kindred are *so* sexy.” Before Sophie could answer she moved a pile of clothes off the bed and motioned for her to sit down. “Make yourself comfortable.”

“Uh...do you mind if I take off my coat?” Sophie asked hesitantly. She didn’t want to corrupt an innocent young mind—although she was beginning to wonder how innocent Nadiah was—but she was getting really overheated and was slightly desperate to get rid of the heavy *vranna* skin coat.

“Go ahead and take it off—we’re all girls here.” Nadiah smiled warmly.

“Thanks.” Sophie slipped off the thick fur with a sigh of relief, revealing the thin sundress she’d put on what seemed like a million years ago.

Nadiah was instantly interested by the thin cotton material. “Ooo, what kind of *tharp* is that? Does it keep you cool instead of warm?”

Sophie had no idea what a *tharp* was but she tried to answer anyway. “It’s called a sundress and yes, I guess you could say it keeps you cool. It’s better than wearing something hot and heavy, anyway. Not that I don’t like Sylvan’s coat but —”

“Oh, is that Sylvan’s?” Nadiah’s eyes sparkled. “Is it from the *vranna* he killed for his manhood hunt?”

“Uh, as a matter of fact, it is.”

“And he let you wear it.” Nadiah stroked the thick, green-blue fur softly. “His manhood cloak. That’s so romantic.”

“It was the only thing he had,” Sophie said, thinking that her new young friend was getting the wrong idea. “I mean, I would have frozen to death otherwise. In fact, I almost did, even *with* the coat on. Sylvan had to warm me up with his—uh, he had to warm me up,” she ended lamely.

“He *did*? How?” Nadiah sat down beside her, blue eyes wide.

“Oh, uh, he...he rubbed my hands and feet.” Sophie hoped she wasn’t saying anything that might give Nadiah the wrong idea—or the right idea for that matter, since Sylvan’s uncle and aunt seemed to be so scandalized by the fact that he’d given her some of his blood.

“Oh.” Nadiah looked disappointed. “Well, that’s nice. Look, we’d better get you ready! The feast is in just a couple of hours and you have to look perfect.”

“Well, I don’t know if we’re going to achieve *perfect*,” Sophie said carefully, eyeing the blue and purple frosted hair of her make-over artist. “I think we should shoot for *presentable*.”

“Uh-uh.” Nadiah shook her head firmly. “Presentable isn’t nearly good enough. Not if you want to outshine Feenah.”

“Who?” Sophie frowned.

Nadiah frowned back. “You mean Sylvan didn’t tell you? Feenah’s his ex.”

“His *what*?” Sophie couldn’t keep the shock out of her voice. “But I thought he took a vow to never call a bride!”

“He *did*. And Feenah’s the reason why.” Nadiah glanced up at the time display on her 3-D viewer and shook her head. “Hey, we *really* have to get you ready. We’ve only got a little while before the feast and you haven’t even chosen a *tharp* yet.”

Sophia made an impatient gesture. “You choose one for me. I want to hear about what happened.”

But Nadiah was not to be deterred from her make-over, even by juicy gossip. “I’ll tell you in a minute but right now we need to get going.” She bounced up off the bed. “You’re in luck. I just bought some new *tharps* the other day and I haven’t imprinted all of them yet. Let me go grab them from Mamam’s room.” She slipped out her door and was gone for what seemed like forever.

Sophie felt like she was going to die of impatience and curiosity. Finally Nadiah came back carrying a stack of what looked like folded fur blankets in all different colors.

“What do you think?” Nadiah sat them down beside her and made a sweeping gesture.

“There’re all really pretty. But look, about Feenah...” Sophie swallowed. “Were she and Sylvan actually, uh, married? I mean, bonded?”

Nadiah frowned. “Of *course* not. Feenah was just his intended.”

“Oh.” Sophie felt a rush of relief. But really, what had she expected? The Kindred didn’t do divorce, she remembered. So of course he couldn’t have been married to the girl. To this...Feenah. But when Nadiah had said she was his *ex*...

“They were betrothed in childhood,” Nadiah went on, breaking her train of thought. “It’s not done much now—not with the Kindred anyway—but it was pretty popular up until a few years ago. Before the vaccine was invented.”

“Oh?” Sophie didn’t know what else to say. Not only was Feenah—whoever she was—Sylvan’s *ex*, she was also his childhood sweetheart! How could she compete with that? *You’re not supposed to be competing*, she reminded herself sternly. *He’s foresworn himself of you, remember?* But the thought didn’t make her feel one bit better. In fact, she felt worse.

“Uh-huh.” Nadiah nodded absently. She was going through the pile of fur blankets and holding each one up under Sophie’s chin as though trying to decide which color worked the best. “They were dream sharing and everything—at least I

think they were. He'd been gone off planet for years but once you have a connection to a Kindred, you never really lose it."

Sophie frowned. "Where did he go?"

"His mother—my Mamam's sister—died when he was nine. So his father took him to Rageron and married again and had Baird. And after *she* died, the three of them—Sylvan, Baird, and their father—moved to Twin Moons. And I think that was where he was living when he and Feenah started dream sharing."

"Oh." Sophie was mildly surprised. She had known that Baird and Sylvan were brothers but she hadn't known that Sylvan was the older brother. "They—Baird and Sylvan I mean—look about the same age to me," she said.

"Well technically they almost are. Males from Rageron reach maturity really fast—something to do with their biology." Nadiah shrugged. "Anyway, the point is, Sylvan and Feenah were intended for each other but when he came to claim her, she wouldn't go with him for the claiming period."

"She wouldn't?" Sophie thought of the way Liv had been literally dragged from their townhouse the day Baird had claimed her. "How did she get away with that?"

Nadiah shrugged. "Her parents are Purists—the leaders of the faction, actually. They backed up her decision. Of course, Sylvan never really pressed the issue." She sighed. "He got really quiet after that—sad, you know? Not that he was ever very talkative, but he kind of shut up completely. Then he and Baird decided to go all the way to Earth—which I guess is where you're from—right?"

"Uh, yup. Earth. That's me," Sophie said distractedly. "Uh, do you know *why* Feenah refused to be claimed?"

"I have *no* idea. I mean, how could she resist him, right?" Nadiah's eyes went wide again. "I mean, he's my cousin and everything but I'll be the first to admit he's seriously hot."

"He's very handsome," Sophie agreed with a smile. "Which makes me wonder why she rejected him."

“Oh, you know...” Nadiah shrugged. “It’s that whole Purist thing—they think Kindred males are beasts because of their fangs and how they insist on biting.”

Sophie felt a surge of shame. *The same reason I rejected him! Poor Sylvan!* “So...the other males on your planet *don’t* have fangs?” she asked.

“Oh no.” Nadiah shook her head, her long black braid flying. “The Kindred sort of evolved them as a means of curing Blood Fever. The fangs are the fastest way to inject the antidote their bodies create into a girl suffering from Blood Fever. Well, other than *you know*.”

Sophie didn’t know. “No, what?”

“Sex. Doing the deed. Riding the *vranna*.” Nadiah nudged her with one boney elbow. “That’s why having sex with a Kindred is referred to as ‘getting the love injection.’ You know?”

“No, I didn’t know that,” Sophie said blankly. She remembered Olivia saying that she was going to a planet filled with women mated to Blood Kindred and that she should find one and talk to her. But apparently that was wrong—mating with a Kindred was out of favor here on Tranq Prime. *Well, at least I found a source of information*, she thought looking at Nadiah. But how reliable was her source?

Nadiah shrugged. “Anyway, it was Feenah’s loss. The Prime male her parents wanted her to bond with ran off with some girl from another grotto. And she’s so beautiful and perfect you’d think she could have her pick of everyone else, but no one is all that eager to bond with an oath-breaker, you know? Besides...” She leaned closer to Sophie conspiratorially. “Everybody thinks she’s still got a thing for Sylvan. Like maybe she’s sorry she let her parents stop her from being claimed?”

“Really?” Sophie was caught off guard by the stab of jealousy that pierced her heart. “Do you think Sylvan might, uh, feel the same way about her?”

Nadiah shrugged again. “Who knows? He brought *you* here, didn’t he? Then again, he *did* forswear himself of you, so it’s not like you’re really together.”

Sophie frowned. “How did you know that?”

“I heard Mamam and Patro talking about it when I went to get the *tharps*.” Nadiah grinned at her. “So is it true that they caught you and Sylvan sharing the gift of blood?”

Sophie felt her cheeks get hot. “Well...” She shifted uncomfortably. “He...he had to. I was dying of cold and it was the only way Sylvan could warm me up in time to save me.”

“Oh my goddess, that is just *so romantic*.” Nadiah flung herself back on the bed, swooning dramatically. “It’s exactly like the holo-novels—you know, the ones you’re forbidden to read but everybody passes around school anyway? Where the heroine’s family disapproves but she gets Blood Fever and she can’t help herself, she *has* to let the Kindred warrior take her.” She sat up and sighed. “I wish *I* could get Blood Fever. Unfortunately I got the vaccine ages ago.”

“I didn’t have Blood Fever—just frostbite,” Sophie said, frowning. “And I don’t see what the big deal is anyway. He only bit his wrist and let me drink some of the blood.”

“What’s the big *deal*? It’s *only* part of the Blood Kindred mating ritual.” Nadiah gestured wildly. “*That’s* the big deal.”

“Oh?” Sophie said doubtfully.

“Yes. It’s the first part of bonding sex. Only usually it’s the female who offers the gift of blood. She says, ‘I offer myself to you freely, warrior, blood, body, and soul.’ Then he bites her and then they, you know.” Nadiah grinned. “Of course, you can mix it up some if you want to get kinky.” She shook her head. “I never would have thought Sylvan was like that though—he seems like such a straight forward guy. I guess people can surprise you.”

Sophie thought of their time in the cabin. How Sylvan had tasted her, how he’d had her bind him to the bed so that he could mark her the second time. *That* had been pretty kinky...

“Hey, you’re blushing!” Nadiah elbowed her again. “What are you thinking of? Some other naughty things you and Sylvan did?”

“No, of course not,” Sophie lied quickly. Her cheeks felt like they were on fire. “I just...I’m embarrassed because now I realize that we broke one of your customs. A very *important* one.” She sighed. “No wonder your Mom and Dad...er, Mamma and Patro don’t like me. What an *awful* first impression.”

“Don’t worry.” Nadiah gave her arm a reassuring squeeze. “They wouldn’t have liked you no matter what their first impression of you was.”

“What?” Sophie frowned. “Why not?”

“Because *you’re* an off-worlder and *they’re* Purists,” Nadiah said as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Of *course* they’re not going to like you. But Sylvan’s kin, so they have to let him stay. And they have to let you stay too since you’ve drunk of the cup of hospitality.” Her eyes suddenly widened. “Omigoddess—the cup! I forgot to give you a drink from the cup!”

“The what?” Sophie asked, but she was talking to an empty room. Nadiah had run out again.

Sighing, Sophie looked down at the folded fur blankets scattered on the bed. How in the world was she supposed to wear one of them to the feast? Well, maybe she could knot it over one shoulder like a toga—as long as it didn’t show too much skin that way. She didn’t want to shock her hosts any more than she already had. No wonder Sylvan’s aunt and uncle had been so upset—basically it was as if they’d walked in on her and Sylvan making love. Sophie blushed miserably at the thought. *Well I’ll just have to make a better second impression, that’s all. Maybe I can do really well at the feast tonight. If I just—*

“Here you go.” Nadiah was back again, this time holding an elaborately carved stone cup. It was shaped like a trophy cup—at least to Sophie’s eyes—with high set, wide handles on both sides. The stone it was made of was smooth and black, like marble with flecks of gold and silver running through it. It was filled to the brim with pale purple liquid.

“What is it?” she asked, taking the cup from Nadiah and nearly dropping it. “Wow—this must weigh ten pounds.”

Nadiah frowned. “I don’t understand that unit of measurement. This is our family’s hospitality cup and it’s filled with the traditional drink.”

“Which is?” Sophie wasn’t about to drink until she found out what was in the cup.

Nadiah shrugged. “Just water—meltwater from the first snow of the winter. Drink it and you can’t be kicked out—no matter *what* Mamam and Patro catch you and Sylvan doing.” She grinned.

“Just water, huh?” Sophie sniffed it uncertainly and then took a small sip. It tasted plain enough but the water fizzed in her mouth and tickled her nose like champagne bubbles.” “Goodness!” She swallowed with difficulty and handed the cup back. “Okay, there, I did it.”

“Good.” Nadiah nodded in apparent satisfaction. “Now you can’t be thrown out of the domicile for any infraction or transgression—no matter how big or small. Sophia, let me be the first to welcome you to my family’s dwelling.”

“Uh, thank you.” Sophie nodded. It seemed kind of strange but she supposed that the whole “you can’t be thrown out for any reason” clause was a big deal in a community with no hotels or motels. If your family kicked you out, where else could you go? Especially since the surface of the planet was a frozen wasteland.

“All right—and now we *have* to find you the right *tharp*. We barely have time to get one imprinted on you as it is.” Nadiah set the heavy stone cup on the floor with a *thump*. “Do you see any you like?”

“Uh...that one.” Sophie pointed to the moss green fur blanket that was farthest from her. “I like that one.”

Nadiah frowned and picked up the blanket. She held it up under Sophie’s chin and then shook her head. “Nope, I’m afraid not.”

“What? Why not?” Sophie asked. “You asked which one I liked—well, I like this one.”

“Yes, but it doesn’t like *you*,” Nadiah said earnestly. “Believe me, Sophia—it’s not the right one for you at *all*.”

Sophie looked at the rest of the fur blankets and frowned. They were all different shades from brilliant scarlet to deep purple to bright blue, but none of them would look as good with her eyes and complexion as the moss green. And suddenly she *did* want to look perfect for the feast—especially if *Feenah* was going to be there. “I like this one,” she said gently but firmly, taking the moss green *tharp* from Nadiah’s hands. “And I’m sure it *does* like me—green has always been my color. Because of my eyes, you know.”

“You *do* have gorgeous eyes.” Nadiah sighed. “So exotic... All right, maybe you can make it work after all. But don’t blame me if it causes mischief. A mismatched *tharp* can be your worst nightmare.”

Sophie didn’t know why she was so worried. Holding the moss green fur up to herself in the viewer, she could see that it was the perfect shade for her.

She was going to be beautiful at the feast tonight. Beautiful and poised and elegant. She was going to make a wonderful impression on everyone there—even Sylvan’s aunt and uncle, and she was going to do her best to outshine Feenah. *Why should you care about looking better than her? It’s not like you’re in some kind of competition for Sylvan.*

Except it felt like she was. And try as she might, Sophie couldn’t ignore the stab of jealousy she felt when she imagined Sylvan’s ex meeting up with him again after all these years.

Chapter Twenty-nine

It had been a long time since Sylvan had worn a *tharp* and the traditional dress of his home planet felt strange to him. To be honest, he would have preferred to remain in his Kindred uniform. But he knew that would stir up trouble with the Purists and he didn't want to deal with controversy at the moment. So he reluctantly decided to dress in the traditional manner—at least for the feast.

He had been a little worried about breaking in a new *tharp* on such short notice, but luckily his mother's sister had some that were new and not yet imprinted. He had chosen a shaggy brown one that looked mature for its age and let it know that he would tolerate no nonsense. The *tharp* had acquiesced to his will at once and draped obediently and securely around his waist as he directed.

Sylvan only hoped that Sophia, who had been shut up in Nadiah's room for well over an hour now, was having similar luck. It would have been better if he'd had time to explain to her about the Tranq Prime clothing and customs, but he was sure Nadiah was covering all that as she dressed Sophia for the feast.

"Well," he said aloud, looking at his new *tharp* in the viewer. "This one appears to be well behaved."

His mother's sister's mate, Grennly, nodded in approval. "A good choice. As I recall, you always were good at subduing *tharps* to your will. Too bad you don't have as much luck with females, eh?" He laughed and slapped Sylvan on his bare back.

"Yes, it's a pity," Sylvan said politely. *And as I recall, you always were an idiot.* But he didn't say it aloud—one could not say such things to kin, no matter how true they were.

"So why did you *really* forswear yourself of the exotic little Earthling?" Grennly wanted to know. He had been taking sips from a small stone flask ever since he'd managed to slip away from his mate, and his proper Purist attitude seemed to be melting away along with his sobriety. "I mean, she's not a Prime

female but she's pretty enough in an off-worlder kind of way. A bit short for my tastes but that dark hair is *very* fetching. I would've thought you'd snatch her up."

Sylvan gritted his teeth and fought the irritation that rose inside him at the male's ignorant words. "Sophia is a good deal more than *fetching*. And I am here to protect her—nothing more. She is being hunted by the Scourge."

"Is that right?" Grennly took another swig from his flask. "Feenah will be at the feast tonight, you know," he said, changing the subject with his usual lack of tact.

"I expected as much," Sylvan said evenly. "She and Tyber will be sitting at the founding families table, no doubt."

"You don't know?" Grennly raised his thin blond eyebrows in surprise.

"Know what?"

"Why that Feenah is still unmated! She and Tyber went their separate ways barely a cycle after you left Tranq Prime for good." He snorted. "Or rather, *Tyber* went his own way. He ran off with a female from the Twii grotto right before he and Feenah were to be mated."

Sylvan frowned. "Such faithlessness in a male is shameful."

Grennly looked surprised. "I would have thought you'd be glad to hear that Feenah got a taste of her own medicine."

"I cared for her at one time—cared deeply," Sylvan said. "How could I be happy about anything that hurt her?"

"Well..." Grennly shrugged his narrow shoulders and settled on the sleeping platform. "Just thought you might like to know. And she's still unmated. Might be she'll be more amenable to your, ah, attentions now than she was last time you were here."

Sylvan adjusted his *tharp* and frowned. "I thought you and Zeelah were Purists now. Why would you encourage me to pursue a pure-blooded Prime female—especially one who has already rejected me once before?"

Grennly cleared his throat. “Well, all that Purist sentiment is mainly for Zeelah’s benefit. I mean, don’t get me wrong—I wouldn’t want Nadiah bonding with a Kindred.” He took another drink. “No offence.”

“None taken,” Sylvan said dryly, reaching for the pair of extra-large brown fur boots that his mother’s sister had somehow managed to procure for him.

“Good.” Grennly nodded. “As to why I would encourage the match, well, Feenah’s people have always been a *little* too proud of their blood lines.”

Sylvan raised an eyebrow at the other male. “So you want me to bond with Feenah in order to ‘pollute’ their blood with my inferior Kindred stock and put them in their place?”

“*Exactly.*” Grennly was either completely immune to sarcasm or not sober enough to notice Sylvan’s tone. “They think they’re so important because their domicile is closer to the main grotto than ours.”

“They *are* dreadfully self-important.” Zeelah’s strident voice preceded her as she entered the guest room they had given Sylvan.

Grennly, who had been lounging on the sleeping platform, quickly hid the stone flask under a pillow and sat up straight. “Just so, my dear. Just so.”

“Sylvan, my dear, just *look* at you.” Zeelah came forward, smiling. “So handsome! A bit brawny for my taste, perhaps but you can’t help that—it’s the Kindred blood in you.”

Sylvan looked at her. “I’m proud to be what I am—a Kindred warrior.”

“Of course. Of course.” Zeelah made a gesture with one hand, as though shooing his words—and his less than pure blood lines—away. “But you’re first and foremost a male of Tranq Prime and tonight we’re going to remind everyone of that.”

Sylvan raised an eyebrow at her. “And just how do you intend to do that?”

“Not to worry—I have everything in hand.” Zeelah gave him a reassuring smile that he didn’t trust a bit, but before he could say anything Nadiah stuck her head in the doorway.

“What’s everybody doing in here? We’re going to be late for the feast!”

“Coming my dear.” Zeelah smiled at her daughter. “Is Sophia all ready for her first Snowdrop Festival?”

“As ready as I could make her.” Nadiah sounded a little doubtful. “We had some trouble with her *tharp* but it’s behaving itself now—I *think*.”

“Nadiah Vil-delano Quui—that was *all* you had to do, just find her a suitable *tharp*,” Zeelah scolded. “Couldn’t you even manage that?”

“I *did* manage it,” said Nadiah defensively. “She looks fine and we’re ready to go. But we can’t leave until the males do—unless you want to break with tradition and all go together. My friend Lenrah’s family are all going together at the same time. She told me so.”

Zeelah sniffed. “Really, Nadiah, where do you find these *friends*? Is their domicile even anywhere near the main corridor?”

Nadiah bristled. “Lenrah’s people are perfectly nice and respectable, Mamam. And who *cares* where their domicile is located?”

“You had better care, young lady, if you want to make a good bonding match,” Zeelah said tartly. “You’re judged by the company you keep, you know. And furthermore—”

“Sylvan and I are ready.” Grennly got to his feet looking surprisingly steady for a male who’d been drinking as much as he had. “We’ll go on ahead, shall we?”

“Yes, yes, go.” Zeelah made a shooining gesture. “But don’t be seated until I get there. You won’t have to wait long—we’ll be right behind you.”

“All right then. Come on, Sylvan.” Grennly nodded for him to follow but Sylvan stayed where he was.

“I would prefer to escort Sophia to the feast myself.”

“What?” Zeelah fluttered around him in agitation. “But you can’t do that, Sylvan! The males in the family must always arrive first and you’re not even a bonded pair—think what people will *say*.”

“I don’t care what they say, Sophia is uncomfortable enough as it is and I am the only person she knows on Tranq Prime. I won’t abandon her just to please convention.”

“But Sylvan—”

“It’s all right.” Sophia appeared in the doorway, smiling hesitantly. She looked lovely in a moss green *tharp* that draped beautifully over her curves and brought out her eyes. “Excuse me, I don’t know if I’m supposed to be in here but I heard voices so...”

“Of course it’s okay.” Nadiah smiled at her. “What happened to you, anyway? I thought you were just going to relieve yourself. What took so long?”

“Oh, I...” Sophia’s cheeks went nearly scarlet. “I had a little difficulty. I mean, your, ah, facilities are different from what I’m used to. And then I got lost. Your, uh, domicile is very beautiful and very *large*,” she said, turning to Zeelah.

“Well, of course.” Zeelah puffed up with pride. “The Quiis are one of the first families. We couldn’t possibly live in a smaller or less prominent dwelling.”

Nadiah rolled her eyes. “Of *course* not. Because everyone knows your worth as a person is determined by your blood lines and social rank.”

Zeelah turned on her daughter. “That’s enough out of you, young lady. You may turn up your nose at our social standing now but when it comes time for you to choose a mate I’m sure you’ll think differently.”

“Now, now.” Grennly stepped between his mate and daughter. “Let’s not argue on a festival day. Sylvan and I need to get going or we’ll all be late.”

Sylvan crossed his arms over his chest. “You can go ahead. I’ll be escorting Sophia.”

“Oh, you don’t have to do that,” Sophia said quickly, before his mother’s sister could protest. “I’ll be fine going with the girls.”

“Are you certain?” Sylvan walked over and took her by the shoulders. Looking down into her eyes he murmured, “I don’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“I’m fine, really.” She smiled up at him. “Nadiah and I are already friends and besides, I don’t want to make things hard on you in your own hometown. Er... home planet.”

Sylvan scanned her face, wanting to be certain she was really all right. “If you’re truly certain...”

“Positive,” she assured him brightly.

“And your *tharp* is well suited to you?”

She looked down at herself. “It’s, uh, fine. Nadiah had a hard time getting it fastened at first but now it fits like a glove.”

“So I see.” He couldn’t help noticing that the *tharp* in question was clinging to her in a way that was almost indecent. From what Nadiah had said, it had been troublesome to begin with. *Well, it appears to like her well enough now*, he thought, eying the way it was draped lovingly over her full breasts and hips. “Just keep it in its place,” he told Sophia.

“Of course I’ll keep it in place.” She frowned. “I mean, it’s not like I would take it off in the middle of the feast.”

“That’s not exactly what I meant—” Sylvan started to say, but then Grennly was taking him by the arm. “Your lovely young lady is fine, Sylvan and we really need to go.”

“Go on, you two.” Zeelah shooed them out the doorway. “We females will do a last bit of freshening up and we’ll meet you at the feasting grotto.”

Frowning, Sylvan cast a last look over his shoulder at Sophia. But she was arm-in-arm with Nadiah and the two females were already talking about something else. He told himself he was being overprotective. After all, it wasn’t like the Scourge could reach down and pluck her away from him here under the surface of Tranq Prime. She was as safe as she could possibly be—she didn’t need him keeping her caged in every minute, especially when it seemed that she and Nadiah were already fast friends.

Still, it was with a certain amount of reluctance that he allowed Grennly to lead him out of the domicile and toward the feasting grotto. Sophia was so beautiful in the clinging, moss green *tharp* and if another male looked at her or wanted to talk to her, he would have to sit by and watch it happen. Because despite what his heart told him, he technically had no claim on her.

No claim at all.

* * * * *

Sophie watched Sylvan walk away and tried to subdue the small spark of panic that tried to set fire to her nerves. *I'll be fine*, she told herself nervously as Nadiah squeezed her arm. *Just fine. And I'm sure we'll sit together at the feast so it's no big deal that we aren't walking there together now.*

She wished she'd had five minutes alone with him before he left, though. She wanted to talk to him—really *talk*, not just mouth pleasantries, which was all she felt able to do in front of his relatives. And she wouldn't have minded a little time to admire him, either. Though the Tranq Prime style of dress looked absolutely ridiculous on his uncle, Sylvan pulled it off with style and class.

With his bare chest, the brown *tharp* draped around his waist like a furry kilt and the brown fur boots to match, he had the whole barbarian vibe going on in a very hot way. He looked like a primitive warrior ready to go into battle and Sophie couldn't help thinking that no woman in her right mind could resist him. Especially not an ex-girlfriend that still had the hots for him.

Sophie only hoped she looked as good in her own *tharp*. It really was an amazing piece of clothing. The way it draped around her and joined at just the right places—it was almost as though it had a mind of its own. But of course that was ridiculous. She was just glad that Nadiah had finally gotten it fastened after working with it for almost half an hour. It had taken her much less time to put Sophie's hair up into an elaborate loopy up-do, held in place with thin combs made out of some kind of translucent, glittery mineral.

When Sophie had looked in the viewer she'd had to admit the effect was very nice. The moss green *tharp* draped across her breasts like a strapless gown, leaving her shoulders bare. But it also managed to form long, flowing sleeves that covered her arms from the elbows down and made her feel like a princess. The bodice—if you could call it that—was a little tight and clingy, but it fell gracefully to her feet, which were covered in furry white dress boots that Nadiah had loaned her. She had found Sophie's flip-flops fascinating and also a little naughty—

apparently females on Tranq Prime didn't show their feet to anyone but their mates.

The only thing Sophie *didn't* like about her new outfit was the fact that she'd had to take off her bra and underwear to put it on. She'd begged to be allowed to keep her panties on at least but Nadiah had vetoed the idea firmly. Apparently wearing any other clothing besides footwear was some kind of insult to the *tharp*. Sophie supposed it was like trying to modify a gown made by an important designer back on Earth. Maybe Nadiah was afraid that they would meet the person who had made her particular *tharp* and he or she would be upset.

She had never been a slave to fashion before but in the end, she reluctantly agreed to leave off her underwear in deference to the Tranq Prime customs. It made her wish for her simple cotton sundress, though. Despite the fact that it was completely sleeveless and much shorter than the *tharp*, she had felt a lot less naked and vulnerable wearing it.

"So tell me what really happened in the necessary room," Nadiah said in a low voice as they walked slowly down the long stone corridor behind her mother. "Was there some kind of problem?"

"A little," Sophie confessed, feeling her cheeks get hot. "There was some kind of, uh, animal in there—I guess it must be your family's pet? Anyway, when I finished, uh, relieving myself it suddenly got very, er, very *friendly*."

She shivered just remembering it...

The facilities were strange—the toilet was on a stone pedestal and she had to climb a set of elaborately carved steps to reach it. It made her hope she didn't have to go in the middle of the night—she could just imagine falling off because she was half asleep. When she was finished, Sophie looked for the tissue but she didn't see it anywhere. *Great*, she thought to herself. *So what am I supposed to do now—drip dry?*

It was then that the thing she'd assumed was a furry purple bath mat at the base of the pedestal, climbed up and insinuated itself onto her lap.

Sophie was frightened at first and almost screamed. But then she remembered Liv's story about Baird's blue teddy bear, Bebo. The first time she saw him, Liv had been sure the little animal was some kind of predator intent on eating her up, when in fact he was just a harmless pet. Sophie was determined not to repeat her sister's mistake. *I'm not going to get all freaked out when it's obviously just some kind of pet*, she told herself firmly. *I can handle this—it's no big deal.*

The mat was a little creepy but she liked animals—especially little furry ones—and it sort of reminded her of long-haired purple cat. A very *flat* cat, to be sure, but it made a soft humming sound that was sort of like purring when she stroked it and seemed loveable on the whole.

“Good girl...or boy,” Sophie murmured, petting its flat, furry back. “Aren't you a good little...whatever you are? Good—”

And that was when the mat started trying to work its way between her legs. “Hey!” she yelped. “Bad mat...cat...thing. Whatever you are. Stop it—no!” She pushed it firmly away but it was very insistent. Now it reminded her of one of those dogs that wasn't happy unless it had its snout buried firmly in someone's crotch. Only most people didn't usually leave their overly-friendly dogs in the bathroom to ambush unsuspecting guests at such a vulnerable moment.

As she fought with the alien animal, her *tharp* somehow got twisted around her legs and Sophie nearly fell right off the elaborate pedestal where the toilet was perched. She pushed the purple mat away long enough to hop awkwardly down and ran out of the bathroom—or necessary room as Nadiah called it—barely getting the door shut in time.

“Oh my God,” she muttered, breathless from her narrow escape. She leaned against the door, her heart beating crazily as she tried to rearrange her *tharp*. But she could still hear it—the purple mat thing was scratching frantically on the other side of the door, trying to get to her...

“Oh, you mean the cleaner?” Nadiah said, breaking into her too-vivid recollection of the bathroom break from hell.

Sophie frowned. “The what? Is that what you call that little purple mat thing?”

Nadiah nodded matter-of-factly. “Yes, that’s it. What was the problem?”

Sophie could feel her cheeks getting even hotter. “Well it came up and wanted to sit on my lap. It scared me at first but then I realized it must be a family pet so I petted it some but then it...” She dropped her voice, not wanting Sylvan’s aunt to hear. “It tried to get between my legs.”

“Uh-huh. That’s what they do—cleaners, I mean.” Nadiah didn’t sound surprised at all. “They *clean*.”

“They do?” Sophie demanded. “And you don’t try to *stop* them?”

Nadiah shrugged. “Why would you? Besides, how else would you get clean if you don’t let the cleaner take care of you?”

“With...with something that’s not *alive*, that’s how,” Sophie sputtered. “You mean you just let it...let it get between your legs and...and...”

“And clean you.” Nadiah nodded. “Sure. Why—how do you manage on your planet?”

“Well on my part of Earth we use tissue.” When Nadiah frowned, Sophie tried to think of a way to explain. “Thin sheets of disposable material.”

“Like fur?”

“No. It’s actually made from wood pulp—from trees,” Sophie said.

Nadiah frowned. “You mean on Earth you clean your bottom with *trees*? Doesn’t that hurt?”

“It’s not like that,” Sophie assured her. “It’s—”

“I mean, if your trees are like ours—don’t you ever get splinters?” Nadiah interrupted. “Or do Earth people have really tough skin down there?”

“No, of course not. You don’t understand—”

“Well girls, here we are.” Zeelah turned to face them and Sophie realized that they had passed through the main grotto and were standing in front of a narrow opening in the pink rock wall. There was a muted glow coming from within that

made Sophie think of candle-light and for the first time she wondered how the vast underground caverns were illuminated. Were the rock walls themselves photo-luminescent? Or was there some kind of plant or animal that gave off light way up on the ceiling, out of sight? She opened her mouth to ask but before she could, Sylvan's aunt had her by the arm and was leading her into the narrow stone archway.

"Come my dear, we need to get you seated."

"Oh, uh, okay. Thanks," Sophie said uncertainly.

"See you later," Nadiah chirped, letting go of her other arm. "We can talk after the feast."

"Oh." Sophie felt suddenly bereft. She'd assumed that Nadiah would be staying with her through the entire feast. "Uh, all right," she said, trying to sound unconcerned. Of course Nadiah had friends of her own she wanted to sit with and besides, Sophie told herself, she would still be with Sylvan—right?

But when they entered the smaller grotto Zeelah steered her purposefully to a large oval table with only one free seat.

"Wait," Sophie objected, looking around the cavern for Sylvan. There were many, many high, oval tables scattered around and most of them were already filled with people but she didn't see him anywhere.

"What's the matter, my dear?" Zeelah's voice was kind but the grip she had on Sophie's arm felt like a pair of iron pincers.

"I just thought I'd be sitting with Sylvan. Oh look—there he is!" He was standing against the wall talking to his uncle and few other males. Sophie tried to go to him but there was no escaping Zeelah.

"Oh, you *can't* sit with Sylvan, my dear," she purred sweetly in Sophie's ear. "Considering your rank and status that would *never* do."

"What rank?" Sophie asked, frowning. "Honestly, I'm not an important person where I come from. I just teach elementary art."

“Of *course* you’re important,” Zeelah said firmly. “Why, you’re a visitor from another planet! An emissary from Earth. I’m going to place you between Lady Whitethorn and Magistrate Licklow.”

“I’m sorry? Magistrate *who*?” Sophie was sure she must have misunderstood the last name Zeelah had mentioned—were her translation bacteria acting up?

“Lady Whitethorn and Magistrate *Licklow*. He’s only the most important male in the grotto.” Zeelah lowered her voice. “Now remember, as our guest you’re representing our family so I expect you to make a good impression, my dear.”

“But I don’t know your customs,” Sophie said desperately. “What if I make a mistake? Please, I *really* think I’d be better off with Sylvan.”

“Nonsense.” By this time Zeelah had dragged her all the way to the table and was motioning to a high, padded chair which reminded Sophie of a bar stool. “Now climb up like a good girl and do your best,” she hissed under her breath.

Sophie opened her mouth to protest one more time but the look on Sylvan’s aunt’s face was so scary that she closed it abruptly. Zeelah was smiling but her eyes were hard and there were two little white dents on either side of her aristocratic nose. Clearly she was as sweet as could be—as long as she got her way. But if you crossed her... *I better not cross her*, Sophie thought. Reluctantly she mounted the chair and settled herself on its bright yellow cushion. As she did Zeelah introduced her.

“Lady Whitethorn, Magistrate Licklow, I’d like to present our guest Sophia,” she said importantly.

“Uh, how do you do?” Sophie said weakly, greeting the man and woman on either side of her. Lady Whitethorn was a stick-thin older woman with a regal bearing and hair as white as the *tharp* she was wearing. Her eyes were a very pale shade of crystal blue that almost looked clear.

Magistrate Licklow was her exact opposite. Though most of the people Sophie had seen on Tranq Prime were tall and thin, he was extremely corpulent with a round belly and red cheeks that made her think of Santa Claus. All he needed was

a long white beard and a red suit. *Not that I'd want to sit on his lap and tell him what I want for Christmas*, Sophie thought. *Not with a name like "Licklow."* She stifled a nervous giggle and then realized that Sylvan's aunt was still talking.

"Sophia is an ambassador from Earth, fifty light years away," she was saying. "She's a leading artist on her world and she's here on a mission of peace and goodwill to our planet. I hope you'll enjoy her company."

Sophie opened her mouth to protest—Zeelah had made her sound about a thousand times more important than she was—but the look on the other woman's face was more than enough to shut her up.

"Have fun my dear," she murmured, patting Sophie on the arm and then she left.

"Well, well, it's been a long time since we've had such an important visitor." Magistrate Licklow beamed at her, looking positively jolly. "And you've come such a long way too."

"Anyone can come vast distances if they fold space," Lady Whitethorn sniffed, clearly unimpressed. "Tell me, my dear, isn't that a *Kindred* technology?"

"Yes it is." Sophie shifted in her seat uncomfortably. While she had been up and walking around the *tharp* she was wearing had felt fine. But now that she was sitting it was itching in the most distracting way. "Uh, I'm here with Sylvan," she said, looking around for him and trying not to fidget.

"Sylvan Vii?" Lady Whitethorn raised an eyebrow at her inquiringly.

To her mortification, Sophie realized she didn't know Sylvan's last name. In fact, she hadn't even known that he *had* a last name—it seemed that all the Kindred she knew just went by their first names. "Uh, I suppose so," she said uncertainly. "He's related to, uh, Lady Zeelah who introduced us?"

"Oh, I know him well enough." Lady Whitethorn sniffed again. "He was once betrothed to my daughter. Of course her father and I put a stop to *that* nonsense."

"He was?" Sophie looked at her uncertainly. "So your daughter must be Feenah then."

“She is indeed. She was supposed to be sitting beside me but now I see her over there for some reason.” Lady Whitethorn sounded most displeased.

Sophie followed her gaze and couldn’t help feeling upset as well. Sitting at a table diagonally across from them was the most beautiful girl she’d ever seen. She was tall and slender with hair such a pale blond it was almost white. Her eyes, when she looked up, were the same crystal blue as her mother’s and she was wearing a lovely indigo *tharp* that set them off perfectly. Worst of all, she was sitting right beside Sylvan.

“Well if I’m in your daughter’s seat, maybe I should just trade places with her,” Sophie said, having a sudden inspiration.

“What?” Magistrate Licklow sounded shocked. “Get up and leave for another table once you’ve been seated? *Impossible.*”

“And very insulting as well.” Lady Whitethorn gave her a stern look. “Although I’m sure an important *ambassador* like yourself must have much better things to do than share a meal with Magistrate Licklow and myself.”

“No, no! Of course not.” Sophie was horrified. She’d been seated less than five minutes and already she’d made a horrible social blunder. “I would never think anything like that,” she protested. “Please forgive me—I didn’t know it was rude to change seats at a feast here on Tranq Prime. It’s perfectly fine on my planet so I didn’t think anything of it.”

“Indeed.” Lady Whitethorn looked down her thin, boney nose. “So on Earth it’s considered normal to go hopping from seat to seat completely disregarding your dinner companions’ finer feelings? It sounds like a rather *primitive* world, I’m afraid.”

“No it’s not,” Sophie protested. “We’re really quite civilized.”

“I’m sure you are,” Magistrate Licklow said heartily. “Why, I’m certain your grottos on Earth are almost as lovely as our own here on Tranq Prime.”

“Well, no,” Sophie admitted, thinking again of her family vacation to the natural caverns. “Most of our, uh, grottos are dark and dirty. But that’s only because nobody lives there,” she added hastily.

“Oh?” Magistrate Licklow raised his bushy eyebrows. “Then where do you live?”

“On the surface of our world.”

Lady Whitethorn looked aghast. “Crawling on the surface like bugs! How awful!”

“No it’s not—honestly.” Sophie was miserably aware that she was giving her dining companions a very dismal view of Earth but she couldn’t seem to help it—everything she said just came out wrong somehow.

“But how do you keep warm?” Magistrate Licklow wanted to know. “You must cultivate some very heavy *tharps* indeed.”

“We don’t need them,” Sophie said. “Earth isn’t nearly as cold as Tranq Prime. Well, parts of it are, but most of it isn’t. And some parts are so hot you could practically go naked. Not that you would,” she added quickly but the damage was already done.

“So you wander around on top of your world, half naked, with no proper *tharps* to wear and no grottoes to live in.” Lady Whitethorn shook her head. “Dear me, I don’t believe I will be visiting any time soon.”

“Come now, Lady Whitethorn, we must forgive the lovely Sophia a few oddities—she is, after all, an alien.” The Magistrate smiled at Sophie and raised a glass of clear blue liquid. “Although it’s easy to forget. You speak our language so well we could almost believe you’re one of us.”

“Thank you.” Sophie smiled at him gratefully and took a sip from her own glass. The blue liquid burned a trail down her throat and exploded in her stomach, making her eyes water. She set it down hastily and tried not to cough. “But I really know hardly anything about your customs,” she admitted. “I’m only fluent in your language because I was given an injection of translation bacteria.”

“Yet *another* Kindred invention, no doubt,” Lady Whitethorn said witheringly.

Sophie began to get irritated. “And what’s wrong with that? What’s wrong with the Kindred?”

“Nothing at all...provided you don’t mind your family tree bearing some rather *odd* fruit.” Lady Whitethorn tittered unkindly.

Sophie’s *tharp* was itching her abominably and the discomfort made her irritable. Or else maybe the pale blue drink had gone to her head—either way she couldn’t just sit there without saying something.

“My sister is mated to a Kindred warrior,” she said, lifting her chin “She just found out she’s pregnant and we couldn’t be happier. In fact—” But just at that moment the long, trailing sleeve of her *tharp* seemed to jerk on its own and somehow snagged Lady Whitethorn’s glass. Before Sophia could stop it, it dumped the pale blue liquid directly into the older woman’s lap.

“Oh!” Lady Whitethorn jumped off her chair with surprising agility. “My favorite *tharp*! You’ve drenched it in *woo*! Oh my poor darling.” She caressed the *tharp* tenderly. “I’ve had it since it was a neophyte.”

Sophie’s anger evaporated immediately to be replaced by mortification. “I’m so sorry!” she exclaimed, looking around for a napkin. “I didn’t mean to spill, uh, *woo* all over your dress...er *tharp*.”

Lady Whitethorn narrowed her eyes. “That’s quite all right, my dear. Of course one can’t expect good table manners from someone of your underprivileged background. Especially since you came here with a *Kindred*.”

“That *Kindred* saved my life,” Sophie said, her voice trembling. “His name is Sylvan and he’s brave and kind and considerate and—”

“I’m sure all that is perfectly true, dear.” Lady Whitethorn finished blotting at her *tharp*, which now had a light blue stain, and reseated herself in her tall chair. “So it’s a great pity that he’s foresworn himself of you, isn’t it?”

Sophie didn’t know what to say. Hot words came to her lips and she swallowed them down with difficulty. After all, Lady Whitethorn had her there—Sylvan *had* foresworn himself when it came to her—a fact that was making her more and more unhappy every time she thought of it. Even worse, when she looked up she saw that he and Feenah were talking. In fact, he appeared to be laughing heartily at something the lovely blonde girl had just said.

Just my luck, Sophie thought glumly. *His ex is the Tranq Prime version of a supermodel **and** she's apparently got a sense of humor too.* Of course she also had a barracuda for a mother. Sophie was sure that one conversation with Lady Whitethorn would be enough to drive *anyone* away, no matter how beautiful and perfect Feenah was. She hoped so, anyway.

"Now, now," Magistrate Licklow ventured, breaking into Sophie's dismal thoughts. "I'm sure there's no need for such distress over a simple accident. Let us move on with the feast—surely the *fleeta* pudding will be here soon." As he spoke, a server appeared behind them and began placing thin stone plates filled with brownish-red mush in front of each guest.

Sophie looked down at the steaming pile on her plate with a sinking heart. Back on Earth one of her neighbors had a Great Dane and wasn't very good about cleaning up the little "presents" it left behind. The food in front of her bore an uncanny resemblance to what she saw on the sidewalk every morning when she went out of her townhouse to jog.

"Mmm, *delicious*." Magistrate Licklow had picked up a long, thin utensil shaped rather like a chopstick with a tiny spoon on the end and was digging into his own pile enthusiastically. "Try it, my dear," he said, nodding at Sophie. "It's a delicacy here on Tranq Prime—you might even call it our national dish."

"Really?" Sophie picked up her own chopstick-spoon and began poking carefully at the steaming brownish mass. "Uh what did you call it? Some kind of pudding?"

"It's *fleeta* pudding." Lady Whitethorn took a dainty bite. Now that she'd had the last word, she appeared to be willing to speak to Sophie again. "Eat some," she added. "Unless, of course, your *civilized* palate is too refined to appreciate such local fare."

"I never said that," Sophie said defensively. "In fact..." She swallowed hard. "It, uh... it looks like something I've seen very often on my own home planet."

"Oh, you have a delicacy similar to ours?" Magistrate Licklow smiled. "See Lady Whitethorn? Earth must not be such a savage place after all." He smiled at

Sophie. “Go on, my dear. Have some and let us know how it compares to your own local dish.”

Both of her dining companions were watching her closely and Sophie felt trapped. *Oh my God, I’m actually going to have to eat some!* Taking a tiny spoonful, she brought it to her lips. She had been hoping it would smell better than it looked but unfortunately, it really didn’t. A thick, rotten aroma rose up to greet her, making her feel like she was going to gag.

“Go on,” the Magistrate urged again.

Just get it over with! Taking a deep breath (which she immediately regretted) Sophie popped the spoonful of *fleeta* pudding in her mouth and swallowed as fast as she could.

“Well?” Lady Whitethorn arched an eyebrow at her imperiously.

“D-delicious,” Sophie managed to say. Reaching for her glass, she took a huge gulp of the burning blue *woo* and prayed not to puke. Fire erupted in her stomach and her eyes watered so much she could hardly see, but at least the nauseating pudding stayed down.

“And was it very like what you have on your own home planet?” Magistrate Licklow asked, smiling.

“*Exactly* like it,” Sophie assured him, wiping her eyes. Then, remembering the protein paste Sylvan had offered her back at the cabin she asked, “Uh, it’s not made of ground up bug larva, is it?”

“Most certainly *not*.” Lady Whitethorn took another dainty bite and a sip from her glass, which the server had refilled.

“Oh good.” Sophie felt relieved. She was sure that if she knew what she’d eaten was bug larva she would have been sick all over the table.

“*Fleeta* pudding is made from the mature insects themselves,” Magistrate Licklow added helpfully. “See? If you look closely you can see some of the legs—they add texture.” He poked at his own pudding, exposing a long, hairy chitinous leg. Plucking it out of the brown mass, he popped it into his mouth and crunched it up with obvious enjoyment. “Wonderful!”

Sophie's stomach did a slow forward roll. *Bugs. I just ate a spoonful of bug guts and there are **legs** in there too.* The horrible, hairy many-jointed leg reminded her of the insects that lived in her native Tampa. Everyone called them palmetto bugs, but really they were just huge roaches that could fly. No matter how clean the house was, they still got in—especially during the rainy season. It was always horrifying to open a closet or push back the shower curtain and suddenly be confronted by one. *But what kind of sick person would try making a pudding out of them? Oh my God, I'm going to puke. I can't help it...*

The only thing that saved her was her *tharp*. Ever since she had been seated at the table it had been making her itch. While she had tasted the bug pudding it had stopped for some reason. But now it started again, so fiercely that it actually took her mind off her stomach.

Sophie shifted in her chair. *What is **wrong** with this thing?* The worst part was that the itching was centered in some very private and delicate places. Ignorant of the Tranq Prime culture as she was, she was fairly sure it would be rude to scratch those areas in public. Putting her hands in her lap, she balled them into fists. Her *tharp* sleeves jerked and twitched as she clenched her teeth and told herself, *I must not scratch. I must not puke. I must not—*

"Well, well, my dear, I'm sure I find your, ah, offer most tempting. I mean, you're quite a lovely female for an alien but I *am* a mated male," said a low voice in her ear.

Sophie's eyes flew open and she saw that Magistrate Licklow was frowning at her.

"I'm sorry, *what?*" She looked at him uncertainly as she felt the sleeves of her *tharp* twitch again.

"I'm just saying that while I appreciate your offer of, ah, intimate relations, I must politely decline." He cleared his throat. "So please stop touching me."

"But I'm not!" Sophie was appalled. "What would make you think I was doing...doing something like that?"

“Because you *are*.” He was beginning to look red in the face—clearly *something* was happening beneath the table but Sophie had no idea what. Her hands were still fisted in her lap with the long sleeves of her *tharp* hanging down almost to the ground. They still seemed to be twitching a little but it was hard to tell when she was itching so abominably. Her knees were together and her feet were up on the bottom rung of her chair, so it wasn’t like she was playing footsie with the Magistrate. What was he talking about?

“I’m not,” she said earnestly. “I promise you. I would never—”

“Oh, shocking!” Unfortunately Lady Whitethorn had picked up on what was going on—or what the Magistrate *thought* was going on, anyway—and she was glaring at Sophie.

“No, really,” Sophie protested. “I don’t know *what’s* happening but I promise I have nothing to do with it. I’m not touching anybody, see?” She held her hands up high as proof...and the top of her *tharp* fell down to her naval exposing her bare breasts to the entire table.

There was a collective gasp and the other people seated at the table—none of which she’d been introduced to—apparently couldn’t decide if they ought to stare or look away. All eyes were fixed on her and for one awful moment Sophie was frozen to the spot.

Then her paralysis broke and she snatched hastily for the moss green *tharp*. “Oh my God, I’m so *sorry!*” she gasped.

Both Lady Whitethorn and the Magistrate Licklow were still glaring at her. “I suppose it’s a quaint Earth custom to show your dining companions your *endowments*,” Lady Whitethorn remarked acidly.

“No, honestly it’s not.” Sophie was still having trouble getting the *tharp* to stay in place. It kept wanting to slip down and expose her again. “That *wasn’t* on purpose.” But her words fell on deaf ears.

“Young lady, it may be considered proper to expose yourself and make sexual advances on your dinner companions on *your* planet but here on Tranq Prime, it

is *not*.” Still giving her a dirty look, the Magistrate moved his chair very pointedly to the right, putting some space between them.

“But—” Sophie began helplessly.

“What’s going on? Is there a problem?” Zeelah suddenly appeared with a worried look on her face.

“No problem at all, Zeelah,” Lady Whitethorn said coldly. “Your *important* guest has just been entertaining us by fondling a public official and exposing herself to the entire dinner table. And that was *after* she doused my favorite *tharp* in *woo*.”

“No I didn’t,” Sophie exclaimed. “I mean, my *tharp* fell down and I did spill *woo* on Lady Whitethorn but I didn’t fondle *anyone*.”

“You most certainly did!” Magistrate Licklow frowned. “It was terrible, Zeelah—she wouldn’t leave me alone even after I told her I was mated.”

“Really,” Lady Whitethorn sniffed. “I can’t believe you brought this *person* here to insult us like this. It’s inexcusable.”

“I’m sure Sophia didn’t intend to insult anyone.” Zeelah looked at Sophie warningly. “Did you, my dear?”

Up until now, Sophie’s *tharp* had been itching so badly she thought she was going to scream if it didn’t stop. But now, suddenly, it began to tickle her instead and Sophie was *very* ticklish.

“I...I...” It felt like a thousand tiny fingers were poking her in the ribs in just the right way. A snort of laughter escaped her and then another.

Lady Whitethorn gave her an incredulous look. “Are you actually *laughing*? You find this situation *amusing*?”

“N-no, no of course n-not. I...I...” But Sophie couldn’t go on. She dissolved into helpless giggles as the tickling became even stronger.

Zeelah took her by the arm and pulled her off the high chair. “My goddess, what is *wrong* with you? Are you drunk? How much *woo* did you have?”

“I...I only had half...half a glass of...of *woo*,” Sophie gasped through her giggles. It felt like the tiny little fingers were squeezing her just above her knees—

another terribly ticklish spot. "Please...can't...can't..." But she was doubled over laughing and couldn't go on. It was dreadful, like some kind of nightmare, but she couldn't stop, even though she knew she was adding insult to injury and offending her dinner companions and Sylvan's aunt even more than she already had.

"Sophia? Are you all right?" The deep familiar voice in her ear made her look up.

Still laughing, she shook her head. "Sylvan...help..."

"I will if I can." He sounded bewildered. "What happened to her?" he asked his aunt.

A barrage of answers greeted his question and Sophie got to hear all over again how she had groped Magistrate Licklow and flashed the entire table. She wanted to protest that none of it was her fault but she couldn't stop laughing. By now her stomach hurt and her eyes were streaming but still the tickling went on. What was causing it? Was it a reaction to the steaming dog poop-looking food or the pale blue *woo*? Or was she just going crazy?

"All right, all right, thank you, everyone," she heard Sylvan saying. "I'll take care of Sophia and you can all go back to the feast."

Sophie looked up to thank him, if she could stop laughing long enough, that was...and the tickling stopped abruptly. "Oh, thank God..." She sagged in relief and Sylvan caught her gently.

"Are you all right?" he asked again, looking at her anxiously.

"I am now." Her words fell in complete silence and she realized that every eye in the entire grotto was trained on them. *Oh my God*, she thought dismally. She had caused such a scene that every single person at the feast had stopped to watch.

"Is your little friend quite all right, Sylvan?" It was Feenah, looking even more lovely close up. Standing, she was almost as tall as Sylvan. Her figure was so slender and perfect Sophie could almost *feel* her own hips growing wider by comparison.

“I *think* so.” Sylvan was still looking at Sophie with a perplexed expression on his face. “She seems to be now, anyway.”

“Is it normal for people from her planet to have fits?” Feenah asked in a soft, musical voice. “Or is it just her own little peculiarity?”

Sophie straightened up and glared at her. “I do not have *fits*.”

“Oh dear!” Feenah opened her crystal blue eyes wide in apparent concern. “Now I’ve upset her. Oh, the poor little thing!”

“Listen,” Sophie began, looking up at her. “Just because I’m not a freaking Amazon is no reason—”

“Stay away from her, my dear,” Lady Whitethorn was fluttering around her daughter anxiously. “I know she seems perfectly harmless, but I do believe she’s *insane*. She poured *woo* all over my lovely *tharp* and molested poor Magistrate Licklow.”

“For the last time,” Sophie said through gritted teeth. “I did not grope, fondle or molest *anyone*!”

The conversation around them, which had gradually begun to pick up, died abruptly again. Again Sophie felt like she was caught in the middle of a nightmare—the kind where you’re naked in front of everyone and can’t get away.

“Please,” she begged, looking up at Sylvan. “Please, can’t we just go? I have to get *out* of here.”

“Of course.” He swung her up into his arms, but before he could go anywhere, his aunt was at his elbow.

“You can’t take her back to our domicile,” she hissed. “I won’t have her in my home—not after this...this *outburst*. I won’t have it. She’s not welcome!”

“Oh yes she is!” Nadiah shouldered her way through the small crowd that had gathered between the tables. “She drank from the cup of hospitality, Mamam. You *can’t* kick her out.”

“What?” Zeelah rounded on her daughter in furry. “You let her drink from the cup?”

Nadiah raised her chin. “I did. And if you try to get rid of her now I’ll tell everyone how you’re an oathbreaker.”

“Why you...”

“Now, now my dear.” Grennly was suddenly there too, taking his wife by the arm. “I’m sure everything will be fine,” he said loudly. Then he murmured, “You’re only making things worse. Let Sylvan get rid of the blasted female and let’s go back to the feast.”

Zeelah looked like she’d been sucking a lemon but she finally nodded. “Of course.” Then she turned to Sylvan. “Take her back but keep her out of my sight. I’ll never live down this day. *Never*.” Grabbing Nadiah by the arm, she marched her away. As they left, Sophie heard her saying, “As for *you*, young lady, all your privileges are revoked for the foreseeable future.”

“Mamam!” Nadiah protested as they moved through the maze of tables.

“Well I suppose you’d better see your little friend home,” Feenah smiled winsomely up at Sylvan. Thankfully, her mother, Lady Whitethorn, had seated herself again and was talking in hushed whispers to Magistrate Licklow. “But I hope you’ll come back for the dance. It’s been so long since I’ve seen you and I was so hoping to be able to catch up a little more.”

Sylvan frowned. “I must see to Sophia first. She may be unwell.”

Feenah made a sympathetic face. “I’m sure the poor little darling just needs to rest. Didn’t you say she almost expired coming from your ship to the grotto?”

Sophie felt like she was going to explode with irritation. “My planet doesn’t get as cold as yours,” she told Feenah, pointedly.

“It’s true,” Sylvan said. “Sophie is not used to such extreme temperatures.”

“Of course she’s not—she’s so delicate.” Feenah made a kissy face at her that made Sophie’s hand itch to slap her perfect cheek. “And *adorable* too.” She looked up at Sylvan. “Why don’t you get your little pet bedded down for the night and come back for some fun?”

Sophie was fuming now. “I’m not a *pet*. I—” Just then the itching started again and she stiffened in Sylvan’s arms. “Sylvan, get me out of here *now*.”

Sylvan looked concerned. “I’m sorry, Feenah but I must go.”

“All right, but come back as soon as you can.” Feenah gave him a seductive smile. “I promise I’ll save a dance for you...*Tanar*.”

Sophie wanted to say something—what the hell did *Tanar* mean anyway—but the itching had turned to tickling again and she was trying not to laugh. *Oh God, please—is this **ever** going to be over?* Grimly she held in her giggles until Sylvan had carried her out of the grotto. Then, only a few feet away from the lighted archway she lost it completely.

* * * * *

“Sophia? Sophia, are you all right?” Sylvan was at a complete loss as to what to do. Sophia appeared to be having some kind of hysterics and in all his medical training, he’d never heard of a disease that manifested with uncontrolled laughter. Was it some kind of Earth pathology? “Sophia, please!” He shook her slightly and she writhed in his grasp.

“Put...down,” she gasped between gales of hysterical laughter. “Put me...d-down.”

“No.” Sylvan held her firmly. “I won’t let you go until I know what’s wrong.” Luckily the feasting grotto wasn’t far from his mother’s sister’s domicile. He was at least able to carry Sophia into the main corridor before she started writhing so wildly he couldn’t keep hold of her anymore. There, despite everything he could do, she shimmied out of his arms. Sylvan was forced to go to his knees to keep from dropping her. Then, to his dismay, she started ripping at her *tharp*.

“Sophia, stop! We’re still in public,” he protested. “At least wait until we get inside the domicile.”

“Can’t wait. Have to...have to get it off!”

She seemed so upset that Sylvan actually helped her, tugging at the moss green *tharp*, until it parted of its own accord and released her.

The minute Sophie got free of it she stopped laughing and sank to her knees, breathing hard. “Oh my God...wait a minute. Just wait a minute,” she gasped when Sylvan started toward her. “Just let me...catch my breath.”

She was distractingly naked but he was too worried about her to become aroused. At least the hysterics seemed to have stopped—but for how long? “Sophia?” he asked tentatively.

She looked up. “Okay. I can go inside now.” She struggled to get to her feet but Sylvan was already there, scooping her up again. Sophie laid her head on his chest like a tired child, still breathing hard.

Sylvan felt his heart squeeze in his chest. Gods, but she was so beautiful, so fragile! What if there was something seriously wrong? Thankful that Grennly had given him a key, he pulled it out and opened the door while holding her mostly one-handed. Then, still cradling her to his chest, he took her back to her room.

“Sundress.” Sophie lifted her head and looked around. “I want my sundress.”

Sylvan found the discarded garment and helped her put it on. Once she was covered and sitting up on the sleeping platform she seemed to feel better.

“Thanks,” she murmured. “And I’m sorry about all...that. Everything that happened.”

“What *did* happen?” Sylvan asked, sitting beside her. “Are you feeling all right now?”

“Much better.” She took a deep breath. “I think it was the dress. The *tharp*, I mean. But how can that be?”

Sylvan frowned. “What was it doing?”

“Tickling me. Making me itch *unbearably*. And the sleeves kept twitching too.” She shivered. “Do you think I’m allergic to the fabric, or fur it’s made of?”

“It’s not *made* of anything,” Sylvan said. “It’s a sentient being—well, semi-sentient, anyway. But I’ve never heard of anyone being allergic to one before.”

“What?” She looked shocked. “You mean I’ve been wearing something that’s *alive* all this time? Like...like some kind of *animal*?”

“Of course. An animal with somewhat limited intelligence, but very useful nonetheless.” He looked at the moss green *tharp* which still dangled limply from his hand. “This one seems brighter than most but still—”

“You let me wear an animal? A live animal and you didn’t tell me?”

“I don’t understand why you’re upset.” Sylvan shook his head. “Don’t your people wear furs too? I know they do—I’ve seen females wearing fur coats and the like.”

“But they’re *dead*.”

“So you’d rather wear a dead animal than a live one?” Sylvan was still trying to understand.

“A dead animal can’t hurt you or tickle you until you laugh uncontrollably like a maniac.” Sophie crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him, her eyes blazing. “Or spill a glass of...of *woo* on the person beside you. Or *fondle* the other person beside you. Or decide to come down in the middle of a very public function and flash your ta-tas to everybody in the entire room!”

Sylvan frowned grimly. “I wondered what in the world Lady Whitethorn and Magistrate Licklow were talking about. I knew you wouldn’t...” He cleared his throat. “Make advances to someone who didn’t care to receive them.”

“Of *course* I wouldn’t!” Sophie exclaimed, her cheeks turning bright red. “I don’t understand, Sylvan—why didn’t you tell me about the *tharp*? That was *awful*.” Her voice broke on the last word.

Sylvan felt terrible. “I’m so sorry, Sophia,” he said. “I thought Nadiah would explain to you while she was getting you dressed. She was supposed to be certain that you were matched to a *tharp* that was compatible to you.” He held up the *tharp* and frowned at it. “Which this one clearly is *not*.”

Sophie sniffed. “She *did* say something about it not being the right one for me but I thought she didn’t like the color. I had no idea it would do such appalling things.”

“A mischievous *tharp* can be a lot of trouble but I’ve never heard of one behaving as badly as this one.” Sylvan frowned at the now quiescent animal again. “It must really dislike you.”

“Well the feeling is mutual, I assure you! Get rid of it!” Sophie drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. “I just can’t believe this. I’ve never been so embarrassed in all my *life*.”

Sylvan sighed. “I’ll dispose of it immediately. Do you want me to kill it?”

Sophie bit her lip. “I...I don’t know. No, just...get rid of it.”

“Very well.” He nodded and turned to go. “It will die anyway once it’s away from you.”

“What? Hey, come back.”

Sylvan turned back to her. “Yes?”

“Why? Why will it die?”

“Even though you two are a bad match, it’s imprinted on you,” Sylvan explained. “*Tharps* live by choosing a single host and drawing warmth from their skin. In conditions of extreme cold they multiply it and give it back, keeping their host warm—it’s the reason we cultivate them here on Tranq Prime. This one...” He shook the moss green *tharp*. “Won’t be able to take warmth and nourishment from anyone else.”

Her eyes widened. “So you’re saying that without me that...that *thing* will slowly starve to death?”

Sylvan nodded. “Yes.”

“Oh my *God*.” She put her head in her hands. “This is just too much—*too much*.”

“I’m sorry,” he said softly. “I didn’t mean for you to feel overwhelmed.”

She looked up, her eyes blazing. “Well then you should have *told* me about the *tharp* instead of assuming that someone else would. You should have told me I was picking out a lifetime companion and not just a dress to wear to a fancy banquet. Now I feel like somebody who picked a puppy up at the pound and decided to return it because it chewed up all my furniture and peed on my leg.”

Sylvan frowned. "What?"

"Just give it back. Give it here." She gestured at the *tharp*.

"But I thought you hated it?"

"I *do*." Sophia's eyes filled with tears. "I hate this whole damn place. I hate the fact that you have live toilet paper and that you eat dog crap and bug guts for dinner and drink *woo* that looks like blue Kool-aid and tastes like somebody lit a blowtorch in your mouth. I hate the fact that it's so damned cold outside I can't get away. So I'm trapped here with your aunt and uncle, who can't stand me, because the live clothing they gave me to wear made a fool of me in front of their entire community. And now I'm stuck with a pet I don't want for...how long do they live?"

Sylvan cleared his throat. "The average *tharp* can live as long as its owner."

"For life." Sophia threw up her hands. "I'm stuck with a horrible, badly behaved pet I don't want for the rest of my life! I hate it, Sylvan. I hate it, I hate it, I *hate* it. And I just...just want to go home." The last word ended on a sob and she buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking with the force of her tears.

"*Talana*..." Sylvan put a hand on her shoulder but she shrugged it off.

"Just go away and leave me alone," she whispered brokenly. "Go back to Feenah—that's where you want to be."

"That isn't true," Sylvan said in a low voice.

"Of course it is." She looked up, her eyes red from crying. "I saw the way you two were looking at each other. Not that I can say anything, I know. But still...still..."

"Still what?" Sylvan's heart gave a strange little thump. Could it be that she was jealous? That she cared for him after all? Enough that he didn't want him to see Feenah?

But Sophia only shook her head. "Never mind. Just...go. Leave the *tharp* and go."

Sylvan wanted badly to stay and comfort her. To cuddle her in his arms and whisper that everything would be all right. But from the look on her tearstained

face his comfort wasn't wanted right now. In fact, he was fairly sure that Sophia wouldn't want anything to do with him or any of the rest of Tranq Prime for some time to come.

“Very well, *Talana*. Maybe we can speak later.” Sighing, he dropped the *tharp* at the foot of her sleeping platform and left the room.

What else could he do?

Chapter Thirty

Sophie didn't know how long she cried but finally her sobs tapered off to sniffles, and she lay quietly on the bed on her side. She was so worn out and emotionally exhausted that she didn't even scream when the moss green *tharp* began moving toward her. *It's probably coming to suffocate me*, she thought dully as she watched it inch across the sleeping platform. *Not that I care at the moment. At least then I'd be off this horrible planet.*

But the *tharp* didn't try to wind itself around her neck or cover her face. Instead it slowly draped itself around her shoulders like a shawl. It wasn't until she began to feel warm that Sophie realized she'd been shivering.

"All right," she said aloud, stroking an edge of the furry creature. "I know you're just being nice because I'm your only source of food but okay, you can stay."

The *tharp* seemed to snuggle closer in response to her words and Sophie found that she was actually comforted. Now that she thought about it, having a living blanket that could cuddle with you and keep you warm, even in the coldest weather, was kind of nice. She just wished she'd known about it before she'd agreed to wear it as clothing.

"Why didn't anyone tell me about you?" she said as the *tharp* nuzzled her cheek. "If I had known what to expect I wouldn't have been so freaked out." She vaguely remembered Liv complaining about a live blanket that Baird had gotten from somewhere, but she had never made the connection between that and the *tharps* of Tranq Prime. Now, of course, she realized the live blanket and the *tharp* must be one and the same.

"You were very naughty tonight," she told the *tharp* sternly. "You caused me a lot of trouble. I'll keep you around but I'm never wearing you again—I just want to make that clear."

The *tharp* nuzzled her again and Sophie could've sworn that she heard a very faint sound that was somewhere between a hum and a rustle. It reminded her of

the rusty sounding purr her cat, Miss Meow used to make when someone stroked her. “Maybe I should name you,” she said, stroking it again. “You remind me of my old cat, Miss Meow. How about if I call you Miss Meow Two? I know it’s not very original but you could go by MM2 for short. That sounds kind of science fiction-y and God knows that’s what everybody on Earth is going to think you are—if I ever get back there, I mean.” She sighed.

“Hey, who are you talking to?”

Sophie looked up to see Nadiah standing in the doorway. “Oh, hi.”

“I hope you don’t mind.” Nadiah bit her lip and shifted from foot to foot uncertainly. “I’ll go if you want me to. I wouldn’t blame you if you were really mad at me but Sylvan asked me to check on you.”

“Really?” Sophie sat up and swiped under her eyes. “Uh, where is he?”

“Back at the feast. Well, it’s almost over now. Pretty soon everyone will be going to the Snowdrop Dance.”

Sophie groaned and put a hand over her eyes. “Great. Just great. And I’m sure he’ll dance the night away with his ex—who probably *won’t* be his ex by the time the dance is over.”

Nadiah shrugged and came to sit on the sleeping platform beside her. “Well, it is kind of obvious that Feenah has decided she wants him back. I even heard her call him *Tanar* before I left.”

Sophie frowned. “I heard her call him that too. What does that mean? Is it just an endearment like ‘honey’ or ‘darling?’”

Nadiah snorted. “Hardly. It means ‘heart’s desire’. It’s what you call your male when you’re either mated or about to be mated.”

Sophie groaned again. “Ugh! She was being so superior and treating me like I was his *pet* or something! And then to call him *that* right in front of me...” She shook her head and then had another thought. “Nadiah, what does *Talana* mean?”

Nadiah’s eyes went wide. “Goddess, you heard him calling her *that*?”

“No. That’s what he calls *me*. He told me it was just a nickname like ‘baby’ or ‘sweetheart.’ Is it?”

Nadiah gave a long, low whistle. “No, not at all. Tell me, how many times has he called you that?”

“A lot,” Sophie admitted. “He started before we ever came here. Why, what does it mean?”

“Blood of my blood. It’s what Blood Kindred call their bonded brides. If he’s calling you that, Sophia, I don’t think you have to worry about Feenah.”

“Yes, I do,” Sophie protested. “Because she’s determined to have him back. And he’s foresworn himself of me. And...and...it’s all my fault.” She felt tears in her eyes again and blinked them away. “God, I feel so stupid. Even if he still wanted me I couldn’t have him.”

“Why not?” Nadiah stroked the moss green *tharp* absently, like one might stroke a cat.

Sophie sighed. “A lot of reasons. All of them seemed valid and important to begin with but now...now I’m beginning to wonder.”

“What reasons?” Nadiah asked.

Sophie sighed. “Well, at first I was afraid because I didn’t really know him and he’s such a big guy, uh, male. I...I was attacked by someone almost his size a long time ago and it never really left me.”

“Oh no.” Nadiah put a hand on her shoulder. “That’s terrible.”

“It was.” Sophie nodded. “I had a really hard time with it. But then I got to know Sylvan and I realized that he would never do that, never hurt me the way that other guy did.”

“Of course not!” Nadiah declared. “Sylvan is an honorable male. He would never attack a helpless female.”

“I know,” Sophie said. “And then he went after the guy who attacked me.”

“Well of *course* he did.” Nadiah put a hand on her hip. “That’s what Kindred *do*. They avenge any wrongs visited upon their females. Let me tell you, if any male around here had attacked a female or even spoken harshly to her and then

she got bonded to a Kindred..." She shook her head. "He'd better move to a new grotto quick. Preferably one on the other side of the planet. Or he's *vranna* meat—know what I mean?"

Sophie nodded. "I understand that now. But seeing the guy that attacked me brought everything back. It forced me to face what had happened in a way I never had before. And that made me upset—*really* upset. Because I didn't want to face it. I just wanted to bury my head in the sand and forget it."

"Are you still upset about it?" Nadiah asked quietly.

Sophie shook her head. "No. I realize now I should have dealt with it when it happened. Instead I tried not to think about it—it hurt less that way."

"So if you're not afraid of him and you're not upset with him, then why aren't you *with* him?" Nadiah asked. "Why aren't you out dancing with Sylvan right now and showing Feenah that he's taken?"

Sophie bit her lip. "Because I *am* still afraid of him. Well, part of him."

Nadiah leaned forward and lowered her voice. "Is it his shaft? Is that what you're afraid of? I mean, I've heard that the Kindred are really well endowed, so I can understand you being scared."

Sophie felt her cheeks getting hot. "No, it's not that. Although it is, uh, pretty impressive. It's his fangs."

"His *fangs*?" Nadiah sat back frowning. "Why are you scared of those?"

"Because he wants to bite me, of course. And I have a phobia of anything sharp that goes into a vein." Sophie thought of her childhood blood transfusions and shivered. "I just...just don't think I could let him. That horrible piercing pain..."

"But it doesn't hurt!" Nadiah grabbed her hands. "It doesn't, *honestly*—or only for a minute anyway and then it's pure pleasure."

Sophie frowned. "How would you know? Have *you* been bitten by a Blood Kindred?" She was pretty sure Zeelah would *not* approve of that.

"I *wish*." Nadiah rolled her eyes. "But no, of *course* not. I know because it's in all the novels. The heroine offers the hero—the Blood Kindred I mean—the gift of

her blood. She bares her neck to him and he bites her. She feels just the *tiniest* little pinch of pain but then he immediately begins to inject her with his essence. After that it's all pleasure."

Sophie shook her head. "That *sounds* really nice but you can't believe everything you read in books. Especially when it comes to, uh, sex."

"In this case you can. I *know* someone who's been bitten," Nadiah said triumphantly. "Or I know her sister, anyway. And *she* said that her sister said the minute you feel the essence it's absolutely incredible. In fact..." She dropped her voice and leaned in again. "She said the Blood Kindred's essence is like an orgasm in liquid form. It's *that good*."

"Really?" Sophie didn't know what to believe. It *would* be nice if she could count on the bite hurting only for an instant before turning into pure pleasure. But could she trust a second hand account from a teenaged girl, who had obviously read one too many romance novels?

"Really," Nadiah said firmly. "So were there any other reasons you thought you couldn't be with Sylvan?"

Sophie shook her head. "No, that was it. But look, Nadiah, even if Sylvan still wanted me and didn't care about Feenah, I don't think he'd be willing to...to bond me to him. He doesn't want to hurt me or cause me fear or pain and he thinks biting me would cause me both."

"And would they?"

"I...I'm not sure anymore," Sophie admitted. "But I just got finished telling him I hated him for not telling me about the *tharp*. And I pretty much told him I hated his entire planet too. Sorry..." She gave Nadiah a sidelong glance. "I didn't mean it. I was just overwhelmed."

"Don't worry about it," Nadiah said cheerfully. "I hate it here too. In fact, the minute I'm of age, I'm leaving. I'm going to get called by a Kindred warrior and fold space out of here so fast my parents won't know what hit them."

“You shouldn’t get married, er, bonded, just to get away,” Sophie said. “Can’t you, I don’t know...go away to college or something? Like a school that’s far from your home town...er, grotto?”

“Maybe.” Nadiah didn’t look too concerned. “Anyway, back to your problem. You think Sylvan wouldn’t bite you even if you asked him to?”

“I’m pretty sure he wouldn’t,” Sophie admitted. “He swore an oath to leave me alone.”

Nadiah made a shooining gesture. “Oh, all that foreswearing stuff is so stupid. He only said that because he thinks it will cause you pain. If you can convince him you’re not afraid of a little pain and you *want* him to bite you—”

“I do want him to,” Sophie said, lifting her chin. “I don’t care about the pain any more—I *want* him.”

“Well you’d better let him know in a hurry if you don’t want him biting Feenah instead.” Nadiah made a face. “Ugh, I can’t *stand* her. I’ll just *die* if I have to have her as a relative.”

Sophie smiled. “We can’t have that. Tell me how to make him bite me and help me get dressed for the dance. But I want to wear something that’s *not* alive this time. Okay?”

Nadiah clapped her hands. “Oh good! So you’re going after him?”

Sophie nodded. “If he still wants me after all the awful things I said to him.”

“If he’s calling you *Talana* then he still wants you.” Nadiah was already playing with her hair, trying new styles in the 3-D viewer. “Trust me on that, Sophia.”

Sophie hoped that she was right. Talking about Sylvan and her problems with him had made things clear in a way they hadn’t been before. And what was clearer than anything else, was that she wanted him—really *wanted* him—fangs and all. *I’m not going to hand him to Feenah on a silver platter just because I’m afraid of a few little bites*, she told herself firmly. *I just hope it’s not too late...*

The dance was being held in the main grotto down among the silvery-white trees Sophie had seen the first time she'd passed through it. She wondered if they were the Snowdrop trees Sylvan had talked about and decided they must be. Their leaves were thin and spidery and delicate—almost like palm sized snowflakes—on the ends of the pale, glimmering branches. The snowflake leaves were pure white with just a tracery of pale blue along their edges, making them look ethereal and lovely and setting the scene for a magical dance.

But the scenery wasn't on Sophie's mind as she stepped under the farthest tree and studied the dancers. She scanned the crowd of couples dancing and winced when she saw Magistrate Licklow dancing with a tall, thin woman who was probably his wife. She wished desperately that she hadn't made a fool of herself quite so recently in front of all these people. *But that's in the past now*, she told herself, lifting her chin. *And anyway, once we leave here I'll never have to see them again. So who cares what they think?*

Still, she had always been shy and it took an enormous effort not to just turn tail and run away before everyone at the dance noticed the “crazy” off-worlder and started talking. She might have lost her nerve completely if it hadn't been for Nadiah standing behind her.

“Go on,” she hissed, poking Sophie in the back. “You look *fabulous*. Get out there.”

Sophie hoped she was right. She was wearing one of Nadiah's few non-living outfits and it was a little too tight for her taste. Still, she had to admit that it looked nice and draped well. It was a long red leather dress which came down to her ankles. Nadiah had told her was made from tanned, dyed *vranna* hide. The dress had a deep V neck which was trimmed in short, black fur and high, off the shoulder sleeves. A deep split up one thigh was also trimmed in fur and showed a lot of leg—or would have if she hadn't been wearing a pair of high black boots with a wedge-type heel.

The leather dress and boots made Sophie feel like she was dressed for a Wild West fashion show, but at least she didn't have to worry about her outfit tickling or itching her...or deserting her at an inopportune moment. So it was with a fair

amount of confidence that she stepped out from under her tree and walked toward Sylvan.

He was dancing with Feenah but it was impossible to tell if he was happy about it or not. His face was completely impassive as he performed the elaborate steps to the slow, steady beat of the stately music. It was kind of like a waltz with a very slow techno beat in the background—bizarre but somehow catchy.

*What if he wants **her** now instead of me? What if he hates me for saying all those awful things about his planet?* Sophie squeezed her hands into fists nervously. She could feel her heart beating in every part of her body at once and, even more strangely, it felt as though the blood in her veins was running hot. Which was completely ridiculous, of course—her blood was the same temperature as the rest of her body. What she was feeling was no doubt a bad case of the nerves and that was all. But it was never going to get better if she didn't do something about it.

Sophie took a deep breath. *Here goes.*

Walking up to Feenah—who had eyes only for Sylvan—she reached up and tapped the taller woman on the shoulder.

“What?” Feenah looked around in obvious irritation and her eyes widened when they finally settled on Sophie. “Oh look, Sylvan, your little pet is here.”

“Sophia?” They stopped dancing and Sylvan gave her a worried look.

“Hi.” Sophie smiled at him. “I’m, uh, feeling better.”

He smiled back. “I’m glad to hear it.”

Feenah’s eyes flashed but her voice was as sweet as ever. “Whatever can the poor little thing want? I thought you’d put her to bed for the night?”

Sophie raised an eyebrow. “What I *want* is for you to stop talking about me like I’m some lower life form. I’m not Sylvan’s pet, I’m...well, anyway, I care for him. Deeply.”

“How sweet. Of *course* you do.” Feenah gave her a patronizing smile. “And you can tell him all about it once the dance is over. But right now we’re a little

busy, so if you'd excuse us—" She put her hands on Sylvan's shoulders again but Sophie was determined—she wasn't about to be pushed aside.

"I don't think so." She stepped closer so that she was almost between Feenah and Sylvan. "I'm cutting in."

Feenah gave her a look of wide-eyed surprise. "You can't mean you want to *dance* with my Sylvan? I'm afraid you'll embarrass yourself, sweetie—and haven't you had enough of that already tonight?" She gave Sophie a sweetly sympathetic look that was obviously fake.

"He is not *your* Sylvan," Sophie said with as much dignity as she could muster. "And yes, I want to dance with him."

Feenah clearly wasn't going anywhere. "Why don't you watch and see what you can learn for the next dance? After all, you don't even know the steps."

"Then I'll teach her." Stepping away from Feenah's grip on his shoulders, Sylvan offered Sophie his hand. "Would you care to dance?"

"Yes." She smiled at him gratefully. "Yes, I really would."

Feenah's smile was slipping but she still tried to keep her voice light. "It's all well and good for you to want to teach her about our customs, Sylvan, but you know it's against tradition to change partners in the middle of a dance."

Sylvan shrugged. "I guess I'll be breaking tradition then." He nodded at Feenah. "It's been nice seeing you again after all this time, Feenah but I have to see to Sophia. She is my first and most important priority."

"Is that so?" Feenah's smile was entirely gone now, replaced by a spiteful look that reminded Sophie very much of Lady Whitethorn, her mother. "Well then, I hope you enjoy your dance," she said, glaring at Sophie but speaking to Sylvan. "That is, unless your little *pet* has another fit and starts going crazy again."

Sylvan frowned at her, his ice blue eyes narrowing. "Be careful of what you say, Feenah. Sophia is the female I love. If you were a male I would have to challenge you for talking about her in that manner."

Sophie's heart gave a *thump* and it was all she could do not to stick out her tongue at the other woman. It was a childish impulse, of course, but then, Feenah

had been treating her like a child or a pet from the minute she'd met her. Would it really be so bad to at least say *Nyah, nyah, nyah, he's mine, not yours?* Probably so, she decided reluctantly. But she couldn't resist giving the fuming Feenah a little smirk as Sylvan took her in his arms and led her into the dance.

Me, he picked me! her heart sang as he held her close. It was true that she had no idea of the steps but Sylvan was a surprisingly graceful dancer for such a large male and he seemed to have a way of putting her exactly where she needed to be at any given time. Sophie relaxed in his arms, letting him lead, and everything was perfect.

"That was wonderful," she said as he held her close. The music was slow enough that she could talk to him comfortably as they danced. "Thank you for being so sweet, even after all the terrible things I said."

Sylvan smiled down at her. "You were upset and I was the cause of it. What did you say that I didn't deserve?"

"Still, I shouldn't have decided that I hated your whole planet on the basis of a few bad experiences. After all, I'm sure Earth seemed weird to you the first time you visited it as well."

"It was...*different*," Sylvan admitted. "I came mostly to try and keep Baird in line. He was about to claim Olivia and he was very much on the edge. I didn't understand that kind of emotion then."

"And now you do?" Sophie asked softly.

He nodded. "Now I do. I didn't think I could be affected the way other males are by the urge to claim a bride. But you proved me wrong."

Sophie bit her lip. "I'm sorry."

Sylvan smiled again. "I'm not. I'm indebted to you for showing me how much I could feel. When I think that I almost mated Feenah..." He shook his head.

"She's very beautiful," Sophie said generously.

"As well as vapid, shallow, and spiteful." Sylvan shook his head. "I would have been frozen all my life. She didn't have the necessary emotion to thaw my heart. Only you do, Sophia."

“Sylvan,” she murmured, looking up at him. “I—” Suddenly the world spun in a dizzy arc around her head and she felt herself falling.

* * * * *

“Are you all right?” Sylvan scooped her up and carried her quickly away from the dancing couples.

Sophia had her eyes tightly shut and she clung to him as if she was drowning. Seriously concerned, Sylvan took her to the edge of the snowdrop grove and settled under one of the trees with her on his lap. “Sophia?” he murmured, stroking her cheek.

She opened her eyes and rubbed her forehead. “I’m okay,” she said, trying to sit up. “It was just the dancing—it made me dizzy.”

“We weren’t spinning or doing any sudden moves,” Sylvan pointed out, still looking at her anxiously. “Were you feeling faint earlier? Is there anything else wrong?”

“Poor Sylvan.” She laughed. “Between the *tharp* and everything else I’ve nearly given you a heart attack several times tonight. But I feel fine, honestly.” She frowned. “Well, except for...”

“Except for what?” he demanded.

“It’s nothing.” She waved dismissively and started to get to her feet. “Come on, let’s dance some more. I was really enjoying myself for the first time since you brought me here.”

“Sophia, please...” Sylvan reached for her hand and tugged her back down. “No matter how small your symptoms, I want to know about them. Tell me, please.”

“It’s nothing,” she said, sinking back down on the bluish-green moss. “Probably just my nerves but well, I feel like...my blood feels *hot*. Like it’s warmer than the rest of my body.” She laughed nervously. “Isn’t that silly?”

Sylvan felt his heart drop. *It couldn't be! And yet...* “How long have you been feeling like this?” he said urgently. “Try and remember, Sophia, it may be vitally important.”

“Only since just before I came up to you and Feenah. I thought it was because I was nervous about, you know, confronting her and cutting in.”

Sylvan shook his head. “I don't think so. Have you had any chills?”

“No. I—wait. I *was* shivering after you left me back in the, uh, domicile. But then MM2 draped itself over my shoulders and I warmed right up.”

He raised an eyebrow. “MM2?”

“My *tharp*.” Sophie shrugged, looking embarrassed. “I know it sounds strange but I figured if I have to keep it, I might as well give it a name. And you know, I think it's sorry for what it did. I don't think it's *bad* so much as just *mischievous*.”

Sylvan almost smiled. Leave it to Sophia to make a pet out of what was supposed to be a strictly functional domesticated animal. “All right, leaving the subject of how odd it is to name a *tharp*, let's get back to your symptoms. So you had chills and then you started to feel like your blood was running hot in your veins?”

“That's it exactly—that's the feeling,” Sophie exclaimed. “Why, is it some kind of a Tranq Prime thing?”

Sylvan shook his head grimly. *I hope not. Oh gods, how I hope not!* Aloud he asked, “What did you eat at the feast?”

“Only a bite of that nasty beetle pudding.” She shivered. “I'm sorry, Sylvan, but that is one part of your culture I am *never* going to like. It's just terrible.”

“It's an acquired taste,” he said absently. “So you had some of the *fleeta* pudding. But there was no water in the glasses, only *woo*. So I don't see how it's possible...”

“I had some water though,” Sophia said.

“You did?” He looked at her sharply. “When?”

“When I was getting ready, before the feast. Nadia gave it to me in that huge, heavy hospitality cup.”

Sylvan groaned. “Gods! That’s right—I *did* hear her tell my mother’s sister that she’d let you drink from the cup.” He shook his head. “But still, it *can’t* be. You’re not a native of Tranq Prime. I don’t see how...”

“How what?” Sophia looked bewildered.

“Sophia, just tell me one more thing.” He lowered his voice and looked at her intently. “Are you feeling any sensitivity or irritation right now in your nipples or between your legs?”

“Oh, I...” Her cheeks went pink and she nodded. “Now that you mention it, I *have* been feeling, uh more sensitive, just since we’ve been sitting under this tree talking. But I thought it was just because this dress is so tight.”

“I’m afraid not,” Sylvan said grimly. “Sophia...” He took both her hands in his. “Do you remember me telling you about Blood Fever?”

“The disease that only affects unmated females and...oh!” She looked up at him in obvious dismay. “You don’t think I have *that* do you?”

Sylvan nodded. “I’m afraid so. The only way to be absolutely certain is to observe the coloration of your nipples and the inside of your sex. If you really do have Blood Fever, they’ll both turn deep red very shortly.”

“Really?” She put a hand to her breasts protectively. “Is there a cure? I know you said something about a vaccine...”

“The vaccine prevents you from getting the fever in the first place—it can’t cure it once you’ve contracted it.” Sylvan shook his head. “In the past, the only way to be cured was to let one of the Blood Kindred who’d had some of your blood bite you.”

She paled visibly and Sylvan knew why—she still feared him—feared his bite. Of course, knowing the trauma she’d endured in her childhood, he didn’t blame her. And now that he knew she cared for him—really cared—he felt he could go the rest of his life without biting her. They would have to have a purely platonic love, since Sylvan couldn’t make love to her and bond her to him without biting

her, but that was all right with him. If a passionate celibacy was all he could have with Sophia, well, that was still better than having sex with any other female as far as he was concerned.

“It’s all right,” he assured her, putting a hand to her pale cheek. “I’m sure I can use the vaccine as a basis and formulate a cure for you out of my essence. I’ve had your blood on several occasions, so my body will carry the antidote for you.”

“No, Sylvan.” Sophia looked him in the eye as she spoke. “No, I...I want you to bite me. Bite me and heal me that way.”

Sylvan shook his head. “You don’t know what you’re asking, Sophia. It’s not just about biting.”

“What else is it about?” she asked.

He frowned. “The antidote isn’t only carried in my essence—it’s in all my other bodily fluids as well. And in order to be certain you’re cured, I’ll need to fill you with as much, er, fluid as possible.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks went scarlet.

“So now you see,” Sylvan said gently. “Don’t worry—I have a small but fully functional lab on board the shuttle. I’ll start work on the antidote at once. But first I want to get you back to my mother’s sister’s dwelling.” He stood up and pulled her gently to her feet. “Just tell me one thing, are you having any other symptoms?”

“Nothing except...ow!” Bending down, she lifted her skirt slightly and scratched her knee. “Nothing except a really itchy knee.”

Sylvan frowned. “You were saying something about that when we folded space, weren’t you?”

She nodded. “So I guess that can’t be part of the, uh, Blood Fever. It’s just the scar from where the *urlich* bit me.”

“But I healed you,” Sylvan protested.

“I know—and you did a great job.” Sophia rubbed her knee again. “But there’s still this little lump of scar tissue. Just here, see?” She lifted her skirt again and showed him.

Sylvan leaned over and looked more closely. “There *does* seem to be some kind of a lump there. But I don’t understand—there shouldn’t have been any scaring at all.”

“It’s okay. It’s just itchy.” She dropped her skirt and gave him a small, uncertain smile. “Shouldn’t we be getting back to the domicile? I—”

Suddenly there was a blinding flash like lightning and a loud *pop!* Sylvan’s nose was filled with the scent of ozone and he was temporarily blinded by the explosion of light. *What in the seven hells...?*

“Sophia?” he said, blinking as he reached for her. “I don’t know what just happened but...Sophia?” For his hands touched only empty air.

“Sophia? *Sophia!*” Looking around frantically, Sylvan saw an empty red leather dress and black boots lying on the ground exactly where she had been standing.

But Sophia was gone.

Chapter Thirty-one

“What do you mean she’s gone?”

Kat watched unhappily as Olivia leaned toward the viewscreen, her face twisted in fear. She and Baird had been summoned to an emergency call and Liv had asked Kat to come along. She had told Kat she was worried about Sophie—it was in the wee hours of the morning and she’d been having a bad dream right before the call came in. So now here they were, all dressed in their nightclothes and robes. But even Liv’s nightmare couldn’t compare with the news that greeted them when they opened the call and saw Sylvan standing there looking almost wild with grief.

Sophie was gone.

“She can’t be gone just like that,” Liv said for what had to be the tenth time. “People don’t just disappear into thin air!”

“They do if someone is using a molecular transfer beam,” Baird said grimly. “Clothes left behind—nothing taken but her—it *has* to be. The beam won’t transport anything but living tissue.”

“What?” Liv rounded on him. “What are you talking about?”

“It’s a new technology—the Kindred have been working on it, mainly because we were pretty sure the Scourge were trying to develop it too.” Baird shook his head. “Looks like the Scourge beat us to it.”

“Well if you guys have a beam too, then can’t you just beam her back?” Olivia demanded. “Beam her home?”

“I’m afraid not, *Lilenta*.” Baird put an arm around her shoulders. “Ours isn’t operational yet and besides, we don’t know where she is. The universe is a vast place—I don’t think you realize how vast. And Sophia could literally be anywhere in it.”

“Not if the Scourge have her,” Kat said, frowning. “Chances are she’s back on their Fathership.”

“I don’t think so.” Baird shook his head. “If she was back in our area, we would have seen the fold in space. There’s been no energy disturbance at all from the Scourge—in fact, they’ve been remarkably silent for the past couple of days.”

“I tried calling her on a Think-me, but there was no answer—she must be someplace that’s shielded against thoughts. But that doesn’t matter—I’m going to find her.” Sylvan ran a hand through his hair. Kat thought that even on the viewscreen he looked terrible—like a man on the brittle, crumbling edge of insanity. “I *have* to.”

“How?” Baird said reasonably. “She could be *anywhere*.”

“If they didn’t fold space back to your sector, they should still be in mine.” Sylvan shook his head. “Only...there aren’t any unidentified ships in the Tranq Prime orbit. But gods, I *have* to find her.”

“I know how you feel,” Baird said grimly. “But you have to get hold of yourself, Brother. You won’t do her any good flying off half-cocked.”

“You don’t understand.” Sylvan’s voice was low and troubled. “I *have* to find her—and in the next forty-eight hours.”

Olivia frowned. “Why the next forty-eight hours?”

“Because...” Sylvan pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. “Because just before she was taken I found out that she’d contracted Blood Fever. I have to find her in forty-eight hours so I can cure her. After that...it will be too late.”

“Oh my God.” Liv put a hand to her eyes and started to sob. Apparently she knew something about the mysterious disease Sophie had been diagnosed with—maybe because of her work in the med station. Baird looked grim also.

Kat wished she could ask for details but there was really no time. Her eyes snapped back up to the viewscreen where Sylvan was talking again.

“I’m going to start with a narrow orbit and work my way out,” he was saying. “That way I can’t miss anything. And then—”

“Stop.” Kat spoke up for the first time.

Everyone looked at her. “Stop what?” Liv demanded.

“Sylvan, don’t go anywhere,” Kat told him. “Stay where you are—there’s no point in you flying around in circles. Just give me some time to see if I can locate Sophie.”

“You?” He frowned. “How are *you* going to locate her?”

Kat put a hand on her hip. “The same way I located you guys before when you were lost in the mountains.” Her heart was beating so hard she could feel it in every part of her body but she made herself go on. “I...I’ll get help from Lock and Deep.”

“But...but I thought you never wanted anything to do with them ever again,” Liv said though her tears.

“I don’t,” Kat said grimly. “But there’s no other way.” She looked back up at the viewscreen. “Just give me a little time, Sylvan. A couple of hours, that’s all I ask.”

“You may be asking too much,” Sylvan said grimly. “One or two hours could mean the difference between life and death.”

“But what if you go off and she’s in the opposite direction you’re flying?” Olivia demanded, swiping at her eyes. “Please, Sylvan, I believe in Kat. Just give her two hours to try.”

Sylvan looked at Baird. “Brother? What do you think?”

Baird nodded slowly. “I don’t honestly know if even Lock and Deep can find her over such a great distance. But my heart tells me we should try. Give Kat the time, Sylvan.”

Sylvan nodded reluctantly and looked at Kat. “Please,” he said hoarsely. “Please find her.”

Liv reached for her hand and squeezed it tightly. “Yes, Kat—please.”

Kat swallowed hard and tried not to let the fear she was feeling show. “I’ll do my best.”

* * * * *

“Well, well. Look who it is.” Deep’s voice was sardonic but his eyes blazed as he looked Kat up and down. He was standing in the doorway of the suite he shared with Lock wearing a pair of black sleep pants—and nothing else.

“Who is it?” Lock’s voice, floating out from inside the suite, sounded sleepy.

“Come see for yourself, Brother.” Deep folded his arms over his broad chest and leaned against the doorway, smirking. “It seems our little Kat has something to say...and apparently she’s in a hurry to say it. Too much of a hurry to even get dressed properly.” His eyes roved over Kat’s blue satin nighty and matching robe.

Kat resisted the urge to cover herself. “Give me a break,” she snapped. “It’s the middle of the night and I didn’t have time to change.” The set was a recent acquisition, bought from one of the clothing shops that catered to Earth brides. Kat had searched and searched for something more comfortable and less sexy—something like her sock monkey pjs back home—but apparently none of the new brides was into comfort over fashion. Which made sense—they were all essentially on their honeymoons. But still...

“What are you talking about?” Lock came to the door, rubbing his eyes. His dark blond hair was tousled and he was wearing sleep pants that matched his twin’s, but his were a deep maroon that showed off his golden tan skin. In fact, both brothers looked absolutely gorgeous. *Which isn’t making this any easier*, Kat thought grimly.

“Kat!” Lock seemed surprised, as though he hadn’t really believed his brother. “Welcome. Why are you just standing out there?”

Kat lifted her chin. “I haven’t been invited in.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Lock frowned at his brother. “How can you leave her standing there in the corridor half dressed, for any male to see? Invite her in.”

“Come in, Lady Kat.” Deep made a sweeping bow. “That is, if you can suddenly stand the sight of us.”

Kat took a deep breath. Well, she had known she was going to have to eat some humble pie—she just hadn’t known that Deep would start dishing it out quite so quickly.

“I’m here because I need your help,” she said. Stepping into their suite and passing between their two large, male bodies was incredibly hard but she forced herself to do it anyway. And she only jumped a little when the door *swooshed* shut behind her.

“Our help, hmmm? And why would we want to help *you*?” Deep arched one black eyebrow at her, his arms still crossed over his chest.

“Let her talk, Deep,” Lock snapped. He gestured at the couch. “Would you like to have a seat? It’s a little early for *klava* but I think I have some left from yesterday’s delivery.”

“*Klava* would be great.” Kat smiled at him gratefully as she sank down on the extra long couch. “But I really don’t have much time.”

“It’ll just take a minute.” Lock nodded at his brother. “Deep, come help me.”

Giving her a last, speculative look, Deep nodded at Kat and sauntered into the kitchen.

* * * * *

Deep leaned back against the food prep counter frowning. “I assume you can manage the *klava* by yourself, Brother. So the reason you need me in the kitchen must be for a heart-to-heart chat.”

“Exactly.” Lock put down the *klava* tray he’d picked up and came to stand directly in front of his irritating twin. “Listen to me,” he said, trying to keep his voice low and reasonable. “Kat is obviously here because she’s in some kind of trouble and we need to help her.”

“Why should we?” Deep frowned. “Why should we care if she’s in trouble?”

Lock pointed a finger at him. “*You care*. You can lie to yourself, Brother, but you can’t lie to me. I can feel the need inside you—you want her as much as I do.”

“And if I do? What good would it do me?” Deep growled. “What good would it do either one of us? She’s made up her mind, Lock—she doesn’t want us.”

“Well maybe we can *change* her mind—did that ever occur to you?” Lock ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “Maybe if you could get over your grief for Miranda for one second, you could see the possibilities.”

“There *are* no possibilities. Not with Kat. Not with *any* Earth female.” Deep pounded one fist on the food prep counter. “Can’t you *see* that by now?”

Lock took a deep breath. It wouldn’t do any good to get into a shouting match. Deep had been hurt—*deeply* hurt —by Kat’s rejection of them after their joining. And unfortunately that rejection had reinforced his negative ideas about claiming a bride from Earth. *Not that he needed any extra negative reinforcement after what happened to Miranda...* Lock pushed the painful memory out of his mind. He needed to concentrate on Kat now—they both did, if only Deep would see it. Lock could still see her in his mind’s eye, sitting on their couch waiting. She looked so lovely and vulnerable in her deep blue silky nightgown, her auburn hair spilling down around her shoulders...

“The fact that she’s here at all tonight means she must be desperate,” he said quietly. “She needs our help, so we’ll help her. Not because we want to claim her or have any hope of calling her as a bride. But because it’s the right thing to do.”

Deep smirked. “When have I ever cared about doing the right thing?”

“You care more than you let anyone see,” Lock said softly. “Come on, Brother—will you help me to help her or not?”

Deep frowned, his black eyes narrowed. “Once. Just this once I’ll help. But after that it’s over. And I don’t want to hear anything else about calling her as a bride. Understand?”

Lock nodded. “All right. I’ll try to keep my ideas to myself—though you know I can’t help how I feel.”

“I know. I’ve been trying to tune you out about her for *days*.” Deep nodded. “Come on, bring the *klava* and let’s get this over with—whatever it is.” He turned to go but Lock stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “What is it now?” Deep demanded.

“Thank you.” Lock squeezed his shoulder. “Just...thank you.”

Deep shook his head. “She really means a lot to you, doesn’t she?”

Almost as much as she means to you, Brother. But Lock didn’t say it out loud. Instead he just nodded. “Yes.”

Deep narrowed his eyes. “Then you’re a fool.” Turning, he pushed back through the door to the living area where Kat was sitting.

Picking up the *klava* tray with a sigh, Lock followed him.

* * * * *

“So what do you need?” Deep dropped beside her on the couch, slouching like a lazy predator. His pose was casual but his black eyes burned into her with frightening intensity.

“Sophie’s been snatched—we think by the Scourge,” Kat said, diving right in, as Lock sat on her other side and began making up cups of *klava*. “Baird and Sylvan think they must have used some kind of transport beam.”

Lock raised his eyebrows as he passed her a steaming cup. “A *molecular* transport beam?”

“Exactly.” Kat took a sip from her cup, grateful for the instant sense of warmth and well being the *klava* imparted. “Anyway, the Scourge haven’t folded space, so we think she’s still in Sylvan’s sector of space around Tranq Prime. But no one knows where.” She took another sip, trying to gather her courage. “So I need you two to help me find her—the same way we did before.”

“What?” Deep gave her an incredulous look. “Do you have any idea of the distance from here to Tranq Prime?”

“I know it’s far—”

“Far? It’s fifty damned light years! That’s more than *far*—it’s fucking *impossible*,” Deep snapped.

“All right, fine,” Kat snapped back, glaring at him. “Forgive me for not realizing your *limitations*. I was just trying to save Sylvan some time—if he doesn’t find her in forty-eight hours, Sophie will die.”

“What? Why?” Lock asked, looking concerned. “Have the Scourge sent some kind of message? Some ultimatum?”

“No, there’s been no contact with the Scourge. But Sylvan said that Sophie has contracted Blood Fever and...and...” Kat lifted her chin, trying not to cry. She wasn’t normally weepy, but somehow everything was sinking in now—especially since Deep had told her that finding Sophie was impossible. “Anyway,” she went on briskly after a brief internal struggle. “I don’t know much about the disease but apparently it’s fatal if he can’t find her and cure her.” She took a last sip of *klava* and set her cup carefully down on the low table in front of the couch. “I’m sorry I woke you up and thank you for your time. I’ll be going now—I have to let Sylvan know that we can’t help him after all.”

“Wait.” Lock put a hand on her arm when she started to get up. “It’s not impossible.”

“Yes it is,” Deep said. “No seeker/finder pair has ever been able to cast a net that far. Not with any accuracy.”

“None of them has ever had a focus like Kat, either,” Lock said quietly. “You’ve seen it yourself, Deep—her ability is extraordinary. I think we could do it.”

“Well, *I* don’t,” Deep growled.

“Why not?” Kat demanded impatiently.

“I’ll tell you why not.” Deep sat up and stared at her, his black eyes narrowed. “It’s impossible because it would involve a very deep and intimate joining. And *you*, my little Kat, made it abundantly clear the last time you were here that you weren’t prepared to go any deeper with us than you already had.”

Kat felt like someone had just dumped a bucket of ice cubes into her stomach. This was exactly what she had been afraid of—the intimacy of the joining. And now Deep was telling her that it would be even more frightening and invasive than she’d feared. She looked at Lock for confirmation and he nodded reluctantly.

“I’m afraid that Deep is right, my lady...er, Kat,” he said. “To cover such a vast distance would require an exceptionally tight connection between the three of us. I still believe it could be done...but—”

“No buts,” Kat heard herself say. She lifted her chin. “We don’t have a choice. I don’t have a choice. Sophie is out there lost and dying somewhere—I *have* to do this. So come on.” Standing, she turned to face both of them. “What do we have to do? Get naked? Have sex? What?” She tried to sound brave but her voice trembled.

“You really mean that, don’t you?” Deep gave her a look of grudging respect. “You’ll do whatever it takes to save your friend—even if it means taking both of us on at once.”

Kat swallowed hard but forced herself to meet his eyes. “Yes,” she whispered. “I will.”

“That’s very noble of you,” Lock said quietly. “And very courageous.” Standing, he took Kat’s hand in his. “It’s true we’ll have to have more direct skin-to-skin contact to make this work, Kat,” he said softly. “But it shouldn’t be necessary for us to enter your body—only your mind.”

Kat nearly sagged with relief. The thought of being pierced by both of their long, thick cocks at the same time scared the crap out of her. She’d made jokes about it in the past, but now that she found herself in this desperate situation it wasn’t funny—not at all. “All right,” she almost whispered. “Then how...how do we begin?”

“To start with, we can’t be standing this time,” Deep said, frowning. “Casting a net so far is going to take a lot of energy. I’ll go make up the sleeping platform.” Rising, he sauntered off to the bedroom, leaving Kat to clutch Lock’s hand.

“This is going to be bad, isn’t it?” she asked, looking up at him. “For Deep, I mean. He hates me now—really hates me.”

“No, he doesn’t.” Lock squeezed her hand reassuringly. “He just doesn’t know how to express his emotions. It’s hard for him to let himself feel. It’s always been hard since...”

“Since what?” Kat urged but he only shook his head. “Never mind. Come, the sleeping platform must be ready by now.”

Feeling a weird sense of unreality, Kat allowed herself to be led into the bedroom. Wasn't this the situation she had run in a panic from before? Yet now she was entering into it willingly. *Like a lamb to the slaughter*, she thought grimly.

But there was nothing else she could do.

Chapter Thirty-two

Sophie woke up with a blinding headache. The first thing she noticed was that she was completely naked. The second thing was that she was lying on a hard metal floor which was very, *very* cold. Stiffly, she sat up and wrapped her arms around herself. *Where am I and why am I naked? The last thing I remember Sylvan was going to take me back to the domicile and try to get an antidote...An antidote! That's right—I have Blood Fever.*

It still seemed like a strange idea. Remembering Sylvan's words about the symptoms, she parted her arms and peeked down at her nipples. Sure enough, they had turned a dark red—almost scarlet. Sophie was sure the inside of her pussy was probably the same color but she wasn't about to check that here—wherever *here* was. Shivering, she drew her knees up to her chest and looked around.

Dull gray metal walls and a metal ceiling met her eyes. Whoever had built this building or cell or whatever it was, wasn't much of a decorator. But at the moment Sophie didn't care about the lack of decoration—she was more concerned with her lack of clothes. *I'd give anything for something to wear—even my stupid tharp would be better than nothing.*

Sophie stood, rubbing her arms to try and get warm, and saw an open doorway on the far side of the plain metal room. Well, at least she wasn't a prisoner. Or if she was, whoever had imprisoned her didn't mind if she left the room. She was dreadfully afraid that she knew who had her but she didn't want to think about it. Didn't want to let the name enter her brain.

One thing at a time, she told herself sternly. *First, find some clothes and get warm.* The open doorway led to a long, dark hall that reminded her of the haunted house you always saw in traveling carnivals. It was the kind of place where people dressed as ghouls and vampires always jumped out at you, screaming—the kind of place Kat and Liv loved and Sophie hated.

Don't think about that. It's just a hallway and it's bound to lead somewhere. Go on—go through it. You're not going to find any clothes just sitting here and if you don't hurry up you'll freeze.

It was true that she was getting colder the longer she hesitated. Sophie wasn't sure if it was getting chillier in the room or if she was experiencing more effects of the Blood Fever. Certainly her nipples and pussy were feeling incredibly sensitive—just having her arms pressing against her breasts and crossing her legs was almost unbearably irritating. Not that she was about to stop covering herself.

Slowly, carefully, she crept down the spooky black hallway. The only good thing about having no clothes on was that she was completely silent in her bare feet. She was half expecting some horrible alien monster to leap out at her every minute, so it was a relief when she finally saw a pale light shining at the end of the corridor.

Cautiously, Sophie approached the light and peeked out into the large room it revealed. Standing at a bank of complicated looking instruments was a large, muscular man. His profile was to her, but he was looking away so Sophie studied him carefully. He had a strong nose and chin and thick black hair pulled tightly back from his forehead. In fact, if it hadn't been for his pale, pearlescent gray skin she would have thought he was Native American in origin. He was wearing some kind of uniform and a long cape which was also pure black. Above his head was a viewscreen—the biggest Sophie had ever seen. It filled almost the entire front wall in front of the instrument panel and it was showing a clear view of a grayish-white globe revolving in the blackness of space.

Tranq Prime, she thought, recognizing it from her earlier trip with Sylvan. *We're in a ship orbiting Tranq Prime. But this isn't anything like the shuttles the Kindred use.* In fact, it seemed much larger—almost spherical, if the curving, rounded shape of the ceiling and walls were any indication. What kind of ship was she in? And who was the person who was obviously piloting it? Sophie had no desire to find out.

Maybe I can sneak past him, she thought hopefully. His entire attention seemed to be centered on the controls and she knew she could be quiet enough.

This appeared to be a big ship—maybe there was some kind of life raft shuttle or something she could get into. Something that would take her down to the planet’s surface. Of course once she got there she would be stuck, but maybe there was some kind of radio—maybe even a Think-me that she could use to bespeak Sylvan...

Her hopeful thoughts were interrupted by a burst of static from the viewscreen. Suddenly the view of Tranq Prime was gone and a face filled the screen. A face so terrifying that Sophie had to bite back a gasp.

Burning red eyes filled pit-like sockets, blazing forth from the confines of a deep hood that seemed to be made of shadows. No other facial features were visible, but somehow Sophie knew there was no nose or lips beneath those burning eyes—only the stark outline of a skull. A sense of doom came over her—a dread so deep that all the strength ran out of her legs. Holding on to the wall, she sank to the cold metal floor, her eyes still locked on the viewscreen. *It’s the AllFather—it has to be.* She vividly remembered Liv’s description of the leader of the Scourge, but the reality was even worse than she’d imagined.

“Father,” said the man who was piloting the ship. “It is good of you to return my call.”

“Sso, you’re at it again.” The AllFather’s low, hissing voice sounded angry. “I have not given the word—you ssnatched her too early. Sshe is not yet bonded to the Kindred.”

“The marker indicated that something was wrong with her. I had to take her quickly.”

“Oh? And what might that be?”

“I don’t know. She’s still unconscious. I can tell you one thing though—she is not the one we seek.”

“*What?*” The AllFather’s red on black eyes blazed even more furiously. Sophie could almost *feel* the force of his rage pouring through the viewscreen like a flood of poisoned water.

“I told you—she is not the one.” The man at the controls sounded remarkably calm—or maybe numb was a better word. “There is no mark between her breasts.”

“I don’t believe it,” snapped the AllFather. “Bring her here that I may ssscan her.”

“Certainly, Father,” the man said blandly. Could the AllFather really be his actual father? Sophie shivered at the thought. “I’ll go get her now,” he added.

“There iss no need to fetch her. Ssshe iss already here—ssstanding right behind you.”

He knows! Sophie gasped and turned to run, but it was too late. The tall man was on her at once, taking her firmly by the arm and dragging her out of the shadows.

“Come,” he said sternly as she cringed back, trying to get away. “There is nothing to fear—you are not the one we seek.”

Nothing to fear? How can he say that? Sophie’s eyes returned involuntarily to the gruesome visage on the viewscreen. The AllFather looked like something out of her worst nightmares—of *course* she feared him!

“He is terrifying, is he not?” The man laughed humorlessly. “But don’t worry—he’s fifty light years away. He can’t touch your body—only your mind.”

That’s bad enough! Sophie couldn’t forget the way Liv had described having her mind scanned. She had hoped and prayed never to have to go through something like that. And now it looked like she couldn’t avoid it.

“Are you certain the marker wasn’t defective? Ssshe looksss fine to me,” the AllFather hissed.

The tall man shrugged. “Perhaps she has symptoms we cannot see. After all, it’s not as if we are experts in human anatomy—their skin and hair comes in such a strange variety of colors and this one is no exception.”

“Be that as it may, you ssshould *not* have taken her early,” the AllFather snapped. “Ssstill, ssshe iss here now. We must make the most of it. Come

forward, my dear,” he said, beckoning Sophie with one skeletal hand. “Let me examine you.”

Sophie didn’t have any choice. Try as she might to resist, the AllFather’s son dragged her forward until she was standing naked and shivering in front of the huge viewscreen. All she could do was turn her head away and shut her eyes.

“Look at me,” the AllFather commanded.

To her horror, Sophie found she was compelled to do as he said. She didn’t want to look at that awful face but her head turned toward it anyway. Still, at least she was able to keep her eyes squeezed shut. *I don’t want to see...I don’t want to see...*

“I can make you open your eyesss, my dear—it would be the sssimplest thing in the world,” the AllFather told her. “But I can think of other, more entertaining methodsss to make you look at me. Sssuch asss thisss—open your eyesss *now* or Xairn will cut off your eyelidsss ssso you are unable to close them ever again. Would you like that?”

Sophie opened her eyes at once and was almost overwhelmed by the sight that greeted her. The AllFather had moved closer, until his face completely filled the huge viewscreen. Each of those burning red eyes appeared to be as big as her head and they were trained on her—pinning her to the spot.

“Very good.” The AllFather nodded in approval. “Now drop your armsss. I wish to sssee your breastsss.”

“Please,” Sophie whispered. “Please, no...” But as before, she couldn’t help doing it. Slowly but inexorably, her hands left her breasts and dropped to her sides, leaving her bare and vulnerable. Sophie wanted to close her eyes again so she couldn’t see those evil, glowing orbs flickering over her naked body but she didn’t dare. Instead she stared straight ahead and simply trembled.

“You see,” Xairn remarked. “There is no marking between her breasts—I have examined her thoroughly.”

The AllFather hissed with displeasure, his eyes glowing angrily. “There must be sssome mistake. The DNA testsss were conclusive. A female from this line *must* be the answer to the prophecy.”

“She and her twin are the only ones left in her family,” Xairn said. “If neither of them is the one, I fear we are at a loss.”

“There *must* be another,” the AllFather insisted. “Look at me, Sssophia.” The red eyes bored into hers and Sophie was literally frozen with fright.

“W-what?” she stuttered through numb lips.

“Is there another female in your line? A sssister? Or perhaps the female offspring of one of your father and mother’ssss sssiblings?”

“D-do you mean do I have any c-cousins?” Sophia could barely get the words out.

The AllFather nodded. “If that is what you call sssuch relationsss.”

“No.” Sophie shook her head. “There’s n-no one, I swear. My father was an only child and my mother had an older sister but she d-died.”

“We seem to have hit a dead end,” Xairn said, but the AllFather obviously didn’t want to hear that.

“I will ssscan her. I cannot taste her properly at this distance, but ssshe must at least be ssscanned.”

Once more Sophie was forced to look directly into those burning red eyes. Suddenly, though he wasn’t touching her directly, she felt corpse-cold fingers digging into her brain. It was the same terribly invasive feeling she’d had when the priestess in the sacred grove had “looked into” her, only a thousand times worse.

“Please!” she gasped, but the AllFather wasn’t nearly finished. He sorted through all her memories, finding the worst ones and lingering over them. He spent the most time on the rape, making her relive the horror and pain, obviously enjoying the negative emotions.

Sophie felt like she was drowning in terror and pain. *Reliving it all over again. Just like when I saw him in my dream...* Then, suddenly, she decided she

wouldn't panic. Wouldn't let the dreadful memory break her again. *It happened but it's over*, she told herself grimly. *I let Burke steal enough of my life. I won't let him take any more.*

Lifting her chin, she narrowed her eyes at the AllFather. Let him do his worst. Sophie was tired of being a victim.

"Well, well...sssuch a brave little thing," she heard him hiss in her head. "Determined not to let me upset you, eh my dear? But what about thisss...?"

Then he turned his attention to her memories of Sylvan.

"A great pity," she heard him say. "Ssso very close to bonding. You would have let him bite you, would you not—despite your fearsss? Yesss, I think you would. You love him, this Blood Kindred, and he is desperately in love with you. The pain of losing you must be almost more than he can bear. He will be sssearching for you now—sssearching fruitlessly. For he will never find you..."

Despite her determination, a sense of hopelessness flooded her. *Never. I'll never see Sylvan again. Why did I waste so much time? Why didn't I admit that I loved him—needed him? Oh Sylvan, I'm so sorry...*

"Yesss, wallow in your ssorrow. Taste the disappointment anew. Let the pain wash over you, overwhelm you. You will never sssee your Kindred lover again..."

The AllFather's insidious voice fed her pain, magnified it, made it into a loop. Sophie felt tears running down her cheeks, hot and wet and hopeless, but she was helpless to stop them. Helpless to do anything but give in to the misery...

No, fight it! I have to fight it! Clenching her fists, she tried to remember all the good times she'd shared with Sylvan. The tender way he'd touched her, the fierce way he'd fought for her. *He loves me*, she told herself. *And I love him. Even if I never see him again, I have that much.*

It would have to be enough.

Just when she thought she was finally going to break, the AllFather released her, the chilly fingers leaving her mind as abruptly as they had entered.

Everything went grey and she sagged in Xairn's grip. She would have fallen if he hadn't held her upright.

For a time she seemed to float in and out of consciousness, as though her brain was trying to recover from what the AllFather had done to it. She wasn't aware of anything except a feeling of profound loss. *Oh Sylvan. Love you...miss you so much...* But finally the grey fog receded and Sophie realized that the AllFather and his son were discussing her fate.

"She is not the one." Xairn seemed to be arguing. "We should release her—send her back. If we keep her the Kindred will become even more vigilant."

The AllFather made a dismissive gesture. "They will be more vigilant no matter what. Sssending her back is a gesture of defeat."

"If we kill her, the warrior who loves her will stop at nothing to avenge her," Xairn warned. "Though they are not bonded, he will still go to his death for her."

"Then let him die. He will never gain accesss to our ssship and even if he did, my new guardsss would kill him long before he reached me." The AllFather's eyes gleamed. "I find myself much taken with this little one—ssshe has sssso much more pain to taste than her sssister did. Sssso many hurtful memoriesss to fondle." He nodded. "Yesss, you must bring her back to me. It hasss been many yearsss sssince I have tasted sssuch exquisite agony. And only think how much more unbearable it will be for her when I take her."

"What do you mean?" Xairn said sharply. "She is not the one. There's no point in you trying to breed her, Father—she can't conceive by you."

"But she *fearsss* it sssso—it isss the nightmare which keepsss her up at night, the dark vision ssshe cannot escape." The AllFather's eyes seemed to fill the viewscreen again and they burned with malevolent glee. "Ssshe hasss already sssuffered one sssuch attack—it isss why ssshe resisted her warrior sssso long—that and her foolish fear of his fangsss. But from *me* there will be no essscape."

Sophie felt like she was going to be sick. *God, no! Please don't let him—don't let him do that to me! Please!*

And then the AllFather began to laugh—a high, insane screeching sound that filled her head and drove out everything else. “Sssoon,” she heard him say, speaking directly into her mind again. “Sssoon *I will have you, Sssophia. Sssoon you will know the true meaning of pain...*”

Chapter Thirty-three

Deep was already lying on the bed, on his side when Kat and Lock entered the bedroom. Maybe it was because he was still bare-chested but to Kat, the dark twin looked even bigger and more imposing reclining.

“Lie down on your side with your back to me,” he said brusquely, patting the mattress in front of him. “Take off your robe first.”

Kat shivered as she removed the blue satin robe. The nighty that went with it had thin spaghetti straps and the front of it was mostly see-through lace. She could feel her nipples tighten with fear and anxiety as she laid the robe aside on the end of the enormous bed.

The bed itself—or sleeping platform as the Kindred called it—was bigger than anything she’d ever seen. It was about half again as wide as a King-sized mattress from Earth and Deep had covered it with a dark green duvet. *It has to be this big, she thought, trying not to look at him as she climbed onto it. To hold two guys their size...and a woman between them. Oh God, I can’t believe I’m doing this!*

“Wait.” Deep help up a hand just as she was about to lie down where he’d indicated.

“What?” Kat paused awkwardly on her knees, one arm held over the see-through front of her nightgown.

“Drop your arm.” Deep’s black eyes were half-lidded with lust. “I want to see you.”

“That’s enough, Deep.” Lock sounded angry. “Kat’s here for our help—not your personal enjoyment.”

Deep’s eyes flashed. “But I *should* get some personal enjoyment from this—and so should you, Brother. We’re about to engage in the most risky, strenuous joining of our lives, with a focus we’ve only used once before. I think that merits a little pleasure on our part—even if it is only visual.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Lock said angrily. “You—”

“It’s all right,” Kat interrupted and was amazed at how calm she sounded. “Deep’s right—I’m asking you to do something you wouldn’t normally do, in

order to save my friend.” She looked at Deep directly. “I know you hate me and that’s all right—I don’t care how you feel about me as long as we find Sophie. But if this is what it takes to make you hate me a little less...” Slowly, she dropped her arm and sat back, allowing him a perfect view of her full breasts pressing against the see-through blue lace.

Deep’s eyes widened as he drank her in. “Brother,” he said hoarsely to Lock, who was still standing behind Kat. “You should really see this for yourself. I’ve never seen an elite so generously endowed before.”

“No.” Lock sounded grim. “I won’t exploit the lady Kat that way. I refuse—”

“Lock...” Kat looked over her shoulder at him and beckoned. “It’s all right,” she said again. “If...if you want to look too, I mean.”

“I shouldn’t...” He seemed frozen by indecision but Kat could see the hunger on his face—the same need that burned in Deep’s black eyes.

“Come on,” she said quietly, still surprised at her own bravery. “Join us on the bed.”

Reluctantly, Lock came around the side of the bed and sat across from Deep. At first he didn’t look at her but finally he raised his eyes. “Beautiful,” he whispered reverently, and Kat swore she could almost feel his gaze caressing her like the softest touch imaginable. “So full, so ripe...”

Kat sat there quietly, allowing the brothers to look at her. Once again she was filled with a sense of unreality. No one had ever stared at her with such longing before—or such naked lust as she saw in Deep’s eyes.

Her too-large breasts and full hips had always been a source of shame to her. How often had she been the butt of a well placed fat joke? How many years of her life had she spent dieting and exercising, trying vainly to get thinner? A size eighteen was the lowest she’d ever gotten to, despite all her hard work. Her body didn’t seem to care that she was eating lettuce instead of chocolate and going to the gym every day—it was determined to stay curvy. As her grandmother often told her, *“Honey, some people just aren’t meant to be skinny.”*

Do they really like what they see? Despite the admiration in the coal black and chocolate brown eyes, it was still hard to believe. Kat knew lots of guys who liked big breasts, but only if they were attached to a stick-thin, skinny-minnie woman. As though it was normal to see a pair of triple-Ds on a petite size two. And Kat was anything but petite. Thinking of that made the old body insecurities rise in her again and she longed to cover up.

Clearing her throat, she looked at Deep. “Are you satisfied? Seen enough to make you happy?”

“It’s never enough, not with you little Kat.” His voice was a deep, lustful growl. “And nothing would *satisfy* me but filling you with my cock while Lock did the same.”

“Deep...” There was a warning note in Lock’s voice. “Don’t scare her. Can’t you see this is hard enough for Kat as it is? She’s very gracious to allow us to view her beautiful body so openly.”

“I’m not scared.” Kat raised her chin and gave Deep a level look. “You can fantasize all you want to, as long as you realize that you will *never* have me that way. Understand?”

Some emotion flashed in his black eyes and was gone before she could recognize it. “Of course, my Lady,” he murmured in a soft, angry tone. “I understand *completely*.” His eyes met Kat’s and he held her gaze for a long, breathless moment of silence. Though she wanted badly to look away, somehow she couldn’t.

“Enough stalling,” Lock said at last, breaking the strange stalemate. “Come lie between us, Kat. We need to find Sophia if we can.”

“You’re right.” Taking a deep breath, Kat moved up to the head of the bed and lay on her side facing Lock. “Now what?” she asked, looking up at him.

“Now *this*.” Suddenly Deep was right behind her—the entire expanse of his broad, bare chest pressed against her thinly covered back.

Kat jumped in surprise, but then Lock was there too, facing her with an arm over her hips. "It's all right, Kat," he murmured, reaching up to stroke her cheek. "Just breathe. We won't hurt you."

The familiar, frightening tingle of pleasure raced through her as they both touched her at once and Kat wasn't sure if she believed him. On one hand, she would have bet any amount of money that Lock would behave like a perfect gentleman. On the other, having Deep right behind her was like lying unprotected in the jungle and knowing that a hungry panther was at her back. Still, panicking wasn't going to help anything.

Have to stay calm, she told herself sternly, even as the pleasure of their touch teased her unmercifully. *I can't help find Sophie if I'm freaking out. Relax, just breathe like Lock said. Breathe...*

Slowly she got control of herself. The claustrophobic feeling of being sandwiched between two large, male bodies faded somewhat, to be replaced by a sense of enveloping warmth. The pleasure was still there but now it was like an undercurrent—something she could control if she concentrated hard enough. That alone made Kat feel immeasurably better. *It's all right*, she thought. *I don't have to lose control if I don't want to—no matter how good it feels.*

"Better now?" Lock asked softly, his brown eyes anxious.

"Yes, thank you," she whispered. "It's just...a little scary."

"You wouldn't be the first Earth female to be frightened of being between us." Deep's voice rumbled through her and she could feel his hot breath on the back of her neck.

"Yes, but I'll be the first to slap you if you try anything," Kat responded tartly.

"You mean like this?" A large, warm hand suddenly cupped one of her breasts, making her gasp and tremble with a combination of anger and pleasure.

She twisted her neck around to look at him. "You—I just told you—"

"What?" Deep murmured, his black eyes blazing into hers. "What did you tell me, little Kat?"

"That I wouldn't put up with anything. So stop it right now!"

The hand cupping her breast stayed firmly in place. “I’m afraid you’ll have to put up with more than this if you want to find your friend,” Deep drawled in her ear.

“He’s right.”

“What?” Kat looked back to find Lock giving her an apologetic look.

“We’ll need skin-to-skin contact—a lot of it, in order to cast the net so far,” he said. “Deep in particular will need to touch you in order to build up enough power to generate the net. So it’s better that you get used to his hands on your body now, Kat.”

“I...I don’t buy that,” she said, her voice trembling. “Is this what you did with your old focus—the one who trained you?”

“Of course not—F’lir was male,” Deep said.

“His mind meshed much more effortlessly with ours than yours does,” Lock explained. “It was enough for us to all simply lay in close proximity to each other with a bare minimum of contact. But your mind, Kat...”

“Is different. Very different,” Deep finished softly. “So we have to work extra hard to achieve a good connection. Like this.” The hand holding her breast squeezed gently, making Kat bite back a gasp.

“We’ll go slowly,” Lock promised her, his deep brown eyes searching hers as he stroked her cheek. “But you must accept the fact that we need to touch you very intimately, my lady.”

Kat closed her eyes briefly. *I can do this. I can do this. I **have** to do this.* “All right,” she said at last, looking at Lock again. “But try...try not to go too far.”

“And how far would that be?” Deep murmured, plucking her nipple gently through the thin lace, sending tingles of pleasure through her body. “How far would you go to save your friend, little Kat? Would you let me touch your bare skin? Stroke these beautiful breasts with nothing between us?”

Kat bit her lip and tried to breathe. “If...if you have to,” she whispered hoarsely.

“And what if I have to go farther?” Deep growled, his breath hot in her ear. “Would you part your legs for me and let me cup your pussy? Would you let me spread you open? Let me stroke your inner folds and slide my fingers deep inside your cunt?”

His hot words brought back the erotic image the three of them had shared during their first joining and Kat felt herself trembling with a mixture fear and desire. “Is that...” She cleared her throat and tried to keep her voice from trembling. “Will that really be necessary?”

“Hopefully not,” Lock assured her. “Deep is just laying out some possible scenarios.”

“But...but...I understand about the skin-to-skin contact,” Kat said. “But why does it have to be so...so intimate?”

“So *sexual*, you mean?” Deep tugged at her nipple again. “*Because*, little Kat,” he rumbled as he cupped her other breast with his left hand. “Sex generates emotion and emotion generates *power*.” He pinched both nipples lightly to emphasize the last word and Kat couldn’t help but gasp.

“Are you all right?” Lock looked at her anxiously. “Did he hurt you? I won’t allow that.”

“N-no,” Kat admitted in a choked voice. “He...he didn’t.”

“Of course not.” Deep pulled her closer until she could feel the long, hard ridge of his cock pressing against her ass. “I would never hurt our sweet little Kat. I only wish to bring her pleasure—even if she doesn’t want anything to do with me.”

“I never said—”

“Oh, yes you did,” Deep interrupted her. “Of course I’m sure when you said it, you never thought you’d be in this position, did you? But that’s all right,” he continued softly in her ear. “I’m not the type to hold a grudge for more than forty or fifty of your Earth years.”

Oh God! Kat squeezed her eyes closed. *I’m in trouble. So much trouble here.*

“Kat,” Lock murmured. He called her name again and finally she opened her eyes. “It’s all right,” he told her. “Deep isn’t as unforgiving as he’d like you to believe. If you can relax and open to him, he’ll be less angry and it will make the connection between the three of us deeper.”

How can I relax with someone who so obviously hates me? she couldn’t help thinking.

*But he **doesn’t** hate you,* Lock murmured into her mind and she realized the mental connection was open—between herself and the light twin, at least. *Quite the opposite, my lady. He cares more deeply than you might suppose. More deeply than he will even admit to himself.*

Kat didn’t know if he was right or not but she did her best. She took a deep breath and stopped fighting the hands that were cupping her breasts. Up until now she’d been tense, trying to hold herself away from the intimate invasion of Deep’s touch as much as possible. Now she let the tension melt from her body and allowed herself to press forward, letting her breasts fill his palms completely and with no resistance.

Kat? The new voice inside her head was hoarse and uncertain—very definitely Deep’s.

“Do what you have to do,” she whispered. “Just this once I give you permission. I give you...myself.” *But only for Sophie’s sake,* she thought but didn’t add.

“That’s good.” Lock kissed her forehead gently. “Very good, Kat. Just relax for a moment and let Deep see if he has enough power.”

Kat rested between them. Deep was still gently twisting her nipples and she tried to ignore the sparks of pleasure his touch shot through her body and straight to the vee between her legs. God, she felt like she was on fire and every instinct she had was screaming that this was wrong, was *dangerous*. That she had to jump up and run away again. *But we have to find Sophie. And this is the only way.* Grimly, she ignored her instincts and concentrated on opening herself instead.

Your self sacrifice is most touching, little Kat, she heard Deep growl in her head. *But I'm afraid your resolve is about to be tested.* Strong hands twisted in the lace of her nightgown and gave a sharp jerk.

Kat gasped as the fragile spaghetti straps popped and the blue satin material slithered down to her waist, leaving her breasts completely bare. For a moment panic took her but then she heard Lock's soothing voice in her mind.

It's all right, he reassured her as Deep cupped her now naked breasts. *Deep just needs more power. Let him touch you, Kat. Don't fight him.*

So beautiful. So full and ripe and luscious, Deep murmured in her head. *And your scent...gods, it's enough to drive a male crazy.*

They smelled pretty incredible themselves, Kat couldn't help thinking. Deep was exuding a dark spice that seemed to get inside her head and make her drunk. Lock's aroma was lighter but just as enticing. It was warm and comforting, making her wish she could wrap herself up in it and just breathe it in. *Isn't there something I should remember here? Something about when a Kindred warrior smells really good...?*

The thought was driven clean out of her head by Deep's next words.

Brother, he sent, now speaking to Lock. *Taste her for me. Suck her plump nipples and let me know if her flavor is equal to her delicious aroma.*

May I? Lock held her gaze for a moment, his true brown eyes filled with longing and need.

Kat felt like she was drowning between them. God, she *really* shouldn't be doing this. And yet...somehow she couldn't seem to stop. Slowly she nodded.

Thank you, my lady. Lock pressed a chaste kiss to her lips and then moved lower and cupped one of her breasts, which Deep reluctantly relinquished. Keeping his eyes locked with hers, he lapped gently at the sensitive pink bud, making Kat gasp with sudden pleasure.

Well? Deep wanted to know. *How does she taste?*

Give me a moment—I haven't finished yet. I need to taste her more deeply. Slowly, deliberately, Lock sucked her nipple deep into his hot, wet mouth, taking as much of her breast between his lips as he could.

Kat moaned aloud as he sucked, drawing on her nipple gently at first and then harder. Though neither one of the brothers had tried to touch her between her legs, her pussy throbbed with desire and she could feel Deep's cock throbbing in response against her ass.

Well? Deep said again.

Lock released her nipple with obvious reluctance and answered aloud. "Delicious," he assured his brother, his voice hoarse with need. He looked at Kat. "May I taste the other one as well?"

"If...if you want to." Kat wished her voice didn't tremble so much but she couldn't help it. The feeling of being bracketed by two hard, male bodies and the sweet sensation of both Deep and Lock teasing and tasting her tight buds was almost too much to bear.

Watch him do it, Deep whispered in her mind, as Lock leaned down to take her other nipple in his mouth. *Watch him taste you, little Kat.*

Kat couldn't have looked away if she wanted to. The sight of Lock lapping and sucking her bare breast was intensely erotic. Once again she felt sparks of pleasure shooting from her sensitive tip to her swollen pussy.

Does it feel good? Deep murmured inside her head. *Do you like letting Lock suck your sweet nipples?*

Yes, she whispered back, using her mind voice again, giving in to the connection.

And does it make you wet, little Kat? Is your soft little pussy all hot and slippery with your juices?

Kat squirmed uncomfortably. Of course she was wet—how could she help it? But she didn't want to admit it, not to Deep. And for some reason it was much harder to lie through their mental connection than when she was speaking out loud. "I...I don't know," she said at last.

You don't know, hmm? Deep sounded both aroused and amused. *Maybe I should find out. Tell me, Kat, what would I find if you spread your legs for me now? If I parted your pussy with my tongue, would you have honey for me to taste? Or would I have to keep tasting you, licking and sucking your sweet little cunt to make it flow?* As he spoke, he sent her a mental picture of his broad shoulders splitting her thighs wide, as she opened for him. His dark head was pressed between her legs and he was working her hard with his tongue as Lock continued to suck her nipples...

"Don't," Kat whispered out loud. "You...you're not playing fair."

Who said it was a game? Deep whispered inside her head. *I'm deadly serious, little Kat. I want to know if you're wet. Want to know if the way Lock and I touch you affects you.*

I'm wet, all right? I...I can't help it, she sent in frustration. *Are you happy now?*

Not nearly as happy as I'd be if I could taste your wetness. He sent her the erotic image again and Kat thought she was going to explode. But just then Lock released her nipple and looked up.

"Thank you for allowing me to taste you, my lady," he murmured.

"It...it's all right," Kat whispered breathlessly. "Do...do we have enough power now to find Sophie? Or do you need...need to do more?"

"What do you mean by 'more?'" Deep growled softly in her ear. "Are you asking if I need to do *this*?" His large hand parted her thighs and Kat gasped as his long, seeking fingers slid into her panties. *Mmm, you **are** wet. So hot and wet and swollen I can feel your pussy lips opening for me...inviting me in.* One long finger slid up and down her slit, not quite entering her but threatening to at any moment.

"Deep..." she gasped helplessly as his fingertip barely brushed her swollen clit. "Are you sure? Do...do you have to?"

His hand lingered on her, cupping her pussy intimately in his warm palm. "Do I have to? No," he murmured in her ear. "But will you let me, little Kat? Will

you let me spread you open and explore your pussy, as you allowed Lock to suck your nipples?”

There was a depth of longing in his deep voice that was hard to deny. Again Kat had the sensation of drowning, of getting into something she didn't understand, far over her head. *This is dangerous*, screamed a little voice in her head. *Don't go too far. Stop while you still can!*

“I...I can't,” she said at last. “I'm sorry Deep but if you don't really need to...”

“Very well.” His voice was cold as he withdrew his hand. “I understand—you're only here to find your friend.”

“Deep—” she began.

Well then, let's find her. His mental tone was brisk. *I think we have enough power now. But you'd better prepare yourself, Kat. You must open yourself to both of us. Let Lock and I fill you completely before we can cast the net.*

Are you serious? Kat could scarcely believe him. *Like I'm not open enough already?*

You're not, Kat, Lock murmured. *There are places in your mind...doors you have closed against us. We could break those doors down if we wanted to—your mind is unshielded, after all. But if we do that, we'll damage the fragile connection between us. You have to open up on your own.*

And this is really necessary? Mentally, she cringed at the idea of what they might see.

If you want to find your friend, it is. Deep sounded stern. Then his tone became a little gentler. *Don't worry, little Kat...it's not as though we're going to linger over your most intimate secrets. We just need to fill you completely in order for this to work. No door must be shut against us.*

All right then. I...I'll try. It was an effort, and the warm tingle of sexual current running through her body didn't help. But Kat forced herself to stop holding back mentally as she had forced herself to stop holding back physically earlier.

At once a new rush of memories raced by her. Horrible, embarrassing, mortifying memories she never wanted anyone to see—they came out in a flood. *Learning to skate and falling down in front of everyone when I was a kid...*

That time in class when the teacher called on me to give a book report and I hadn't even read the book...

Being stood up on junior prom night when everyone else had a date. Spending the night alone eating ice cream and crying...

And then, worst of all—the one thing she really wanted to forget and didn't want anyone else to see...

*My first time. It was with Tommy Barnes in the back of his dad's van. He spent weeks pretending he really cared, telling me he loved me, taking me out and then I finally let him do it. It hurt so much I could barely breathe but at least it was over fast. It was worse the next day when he told everyone in the senior class what we'd done. Walking the halls with everyone looking at me, knowing that I had let him do **that** to me. The laughter and jeers... Feeling horrible...ashamed, stained. If it hadn't been for Sophie and Liv sticking by me I don't know how I could have stood it...*

Suddenly Lock's mental voice interrupted the flow. *This male hurt you and then bragged about it to his friends?*

Where does he live? Deep demanded, his mental tone filled with rage. *Tell us, Kat and I swear he won't draw breath for very long.*

Kat didn't know whether to laugh or cry. They had seen her worst memory and instead of reviling her, they wanted to avenge her. *I really appreciate the offer you guys but that was a long time ago. Besides, Tommy wound up living in a doublewide and working at a greasy spoon type diner on the wrong end of town. So you **could** say he got what was coming to him already.*

I don't agree with you. Such callous treatment of a female ought to be punished. Deep's tone was ominous. *You gave yourself to him—gave him the pleasure of your body and the purity of your heart and he returned your trust with betrayal. Such a male should not be allowed to live.*

I'm with you, Brother, but Kat is right about one thing—we need to concentrate on finding Sophia, Lock sent. *Never fear, our grudge against the male who hurt our Kat will keep.*

Kat sensed some mental grumbling from the dark twin as though he wasn't nearly satisfied to leave Tommy Barnes alone. But before she could answer she saw something amazing.

Oh, she gasped as the connection between them deepened immeasurably. She saw the blue and white globe of Earth, just as she had before. Then, suddenly, they began to rush forward. Past the grayish, pocked face of the moon, past the arid red deserts of Mars—she watched them zip by with wonder. The immensity of Jupiter made her mind whirl and the rings of Saturn were barely a blur. Onward they sped, making Kat feel lighter than air as heavenly bodies whizzed past her. Then she heard Deep's voice in her mind.

Did you enjoy the tour of your solar system, Kat?

Yes. It was...amazing.

I'm glad you liked it. Because now that we've reached the edge of it, we must go faster or we'll never get to Tranq Prime.

As he spoke, the space around them began to blur. Distant stars that were mere diamond specs set in dark velvet suddenly grew terrifyingly immense and then receded to nothing again as they sped by them. Or in one case, *through* them. Kat barely had time to cry out as they entered a burning ball of flame so bright it would have blinded her if she'd been looking at it with her physical eyes. But almost before the cry left her lips, they were through it and whooshing forward again at a dizzying speed.

Lock laughed softly in her mind. *Bet you never thought you'd see the inside of a star first-hand, did you my lady?*

No. Kat still couldn't believe it. *This is unbelievable!*

It's fairly amazing, Lock admitted. *I never knew Deep could take us so far.*

I've always wanted to test the limits of our power. Deep sounded as though he was smiling for once and Kat could see why. Shooting through the universe

this way was the most exhilarating sensation she'd ever had—it was like every roller coaster she'd ever been on, to the thousandth power. How could anyone help being elated at the giddy, exciting feeling of flying through space at the speed of light?

I'm glad you're enjoying yourself but we're actually moving faster than the speed of light now, Deep informed her. *We have to if we want to get to Tranq Prime in time to find Sophia.*

But...but I thought that was impossible, Kat protested. *How can we be moving faster than the speed of light?*

Because we're not physically here, Lock explained. *Our bodies are still lying on the bed. But our minds are free to wander. Anything is possible on the astral plane.*

*Especially if you have enough **power**,* Deep growled. *Hang on, we're about to go even faster.*

As soon as he spoke, everything began to blur. Kat half wished she could close her eyes but that seemed to be impossible in this state. The sensation of speed was so great she could barely stand it. She was sure if her physical body had been subjected to such stress she would have been vaporized in an instant. Then just as she thought she couldn't take it anymore, they came to an abrupt halt in front of a graying white globe.

Tranq Prime, Deep explained. *It's mostly ice locked and the people live underground. Lock, is the net ready?*

I have it woven. I just need to cast.

I hope you made it big enough. We need to cover the entire planet and all the outlying space around it as well. Remember, she could be anywhere in this sector.

I understand. Get ready.

Kat sensed a tension from Lock, as though he was about to lift an immensely heavy weight or do some other physically strenuous activity. She hoped that he had gotten enough power from their earlier exchange to do what he needed to do.

I'm all right, Lock assured her, obviously feeling her worry. *It was Deep that needed most of the power to get us here and hold us in position. Just be ready when the net is cast—concentrate on Sophia.*

All right. Concentrating hard, Kat pictured her friend—Sophia's large green eyes fringed thickly with dark lashes, her lovely long chestnut hair, the sweet, shy way she spoke, her willingness to help, her compassion, her tender heart that ached for anyone in pain, even if it was someone who had hurt her... *Sophie*, she thought urgently, as the brilliant, shimmering net flowed outward, covering Tranq Prime and all the space around it. *Sophie, I know you're here somewhere—at least I think you are. I found you once—please let me be able to find you again! Please!*

But though she searched and searched for the tugging of a familiar mind, she felt nothing.

Anything? Lock sent after a few moments.

Kat wanted to cry. *No, nothing. I—wait!*

What is it? Deep asked but Kat shushed him.

Let me concentrate. Something was moving in the corner of her mind. A tugging so faint she could barely feel it. As she focused on it, it began to grow stronger.

Kat rushed outward along the shining strands of the net, following the tiny familiar tug. It was leading away from Tranq Prime, taking her into deep orbit around the frozen planet—so deep that it was barely a speck in the sky by the time she found...

Wait a minute. Kat frowned. *That's not a ship. It's just a rock.*

An asteroid, Deep sent.

But...how can Sophie be inside a rock? Kat doubtfully eyed the vaguely spherical shape floating in space.

If that's where the tugging is leading you, let it, Lock told her. *Go deep, Kat. Let the feeling pull you in.*

All right but I still don't see how she could be in there. Again feeling like an unseen bird, Kat dived straight at the rocky grey surface of the asteroid which seemed to be about the size of a large house.

To her surprise instead of speeding through a solid mass of rock and gravel, Kat suddenly found herself inside a hollow metal shell. *What the...?*

It's a ship! Lock sent excitedly. *One built to look like an asteroid! Quickly, Kat, can you see Sophia?*

Very quickly, Deep growled in her mind. *I can't hold us here, this far from our bodies much longer. Hurry Kat!*

I'm hurrying! Speed was no issue. In her disembodied state she could flit around more quickly than a hummingbird fluttered its wings. Sophie was very near now, she could feel it—could feel the terror and distress emanating from her friend.

She rushed through a dark, narrow hallway and out into a larger room with a wide bank of controls and an enormous viewscreen. Projected on its vast surface was a being in a shadowy hood with burning red eyes.

Oh my God! Kat flinched at the sense of pure evil that flowed from the enormous image.

The AllFather, Deep sent grimly. *So it **is** the Scourge who have her.*

Was there ever any doubt? Lock returned. *We knew they were hunting her, though we still don't know why they want her.*

And we don't have time to find out, either. Deep's mental voice was strained. *Where's Sophia?*

Here! And oh my God... Kat couldn't go on. Sophie was standing naked with her hands fisted at her sides, looking up at the viewscreen. The terror on her face was heartbreaking but she wasn't crying aloud. Instead, silent tears ran down her cheeks as her eyes remained fixed on the hideous face of the AllFather. Behind her stood a tall man, as massive and muscular as any Kindred, but with pale grey skin. He had proud, stern features and red eyes with black hair, which she

assumed was normal for the Scourge. It was hard to know since she'd never seen one in person before.

Sophie, she sent, trying to make contact with her friend. *Sophie, hang on! We can see you and we'll tell Sylvan where you are. Help is coming, just hold on!*

She can't hear you, Deep said, his mental voice still strained. *We're on a different plane than she is right now. But we have to get back soon.*

I know, Kat whispered through their link. *But poor Sophie. She—*

Just at that moment the viewscreen went blank and the horrible face of the AllFather disappeared. Kat felt an immense sense of relief—as though a burden had been lifted from her mind. *Oh, he's gone! Thank—*

And then the man behind her drew a knife.

Oh God! No—no! Kat rushed forward, forgetting that she couldn't be heard or seen, and tried to knock the long, black-edged blade from his hand. *No, don't you touch her you son of a bitch! Don't you dare—*

Suddenly she felt the rubber band sensation she'd felt before—the feeling of being pulled backwards at tremendous speed whether she wanted to go or not.

No! No, please! she begged, but there was no stopping. Helplessly she watched as her friend disappeared. Suddenly they were through the metal hull of the asteroid ship and then it was nothing more than a spec in space. Tranq Prime disappeared and its far distant sun became nothing but a winking dot. Stars, planets, and vast swatches of black, open space rushed by them twice as fast, fifty times as fast, a *hundred* times as fast as they had on the journey there.

The rest was a blur so intense she couldn't distinguish anything but black and white, dark and bright. In less time than she would have thought possible, she found herself back in her body which felt terribly tired and weak. A throbbing, pounding headache bloomed behind her eyes like a poisonous black rose. Not that she cared how she felt at the moment.

"He's going to kill her," she gasped, sitting up despite her dizziness and pain. "I know it! I *know* it."

“Not if Sylvan can get to her in time,” Lock said grimly. “Did you mark the location, Deep? We don’t have time to triangulate right now.”

“I’ve got it.” Deep was already climbing out of bed. He half staggered and then regained his balance, which made Kat wonder if the joining had drained him too. “On my way to the view-room now.” He looked at Kat. “You said Sylvan’s waiting for the call?”

She nodded weakly. Now that she was sitting up, colored lights were flashing before her eyes and she was feeling decidedly nauseous. The headache was growing in intensity, becoming so sharp it was blinding.

Deep gave her a worried look. “Take care of her, Brother. I must go now.”

“Go!” Lock sat up as well and pulled Kat into his arms. “I’ll care for our Kat.”

Deep frowned. “She’s not ours, Lock—not really. You’d do well to remember that.” And then he was gone, running to warn Sylvan and give him the location of the strange ship where Sophie was being held.

Oh please, Kat thought as the world spun around her and started to go dark. Please let him be in time. I don’t see how he can be, but please...

* * * * *

Deep pounded down the long metal corridor in his bare feet, grimly intent on his mission. He felt weak from the incredibly intense joining, but he ignored the physical limitations his body wanted to impose on him contemptuously. There was no time for frailty or hesitation—his second brother’s life was in danger.

Because it wasn’t just Sophia that would die if Sylvan didn’t get to her in time.

Deep had seen the look in the male’s eyes when he stood ready to protect her—to defend her with his life if need be. Sylvan might have survived Feenah’s rejection but he wouldn’t survive Sophia’s death, of that Deep was certain.

Amazing that he could let himself feel so intensely for a female again after what Feenah put him through. Amazing and stupid—such emotional weakness

only leads to pain. But he hoped he was wrong in Sylvan's case. Hoped his second brother was in time to save the woman he so desperately loved.

He was running so fast he nearly passed the view-room. It was basically a lounge with a large viewscreen mounted on the wall for long distance and multi-light year communications. Skidding to a halt, he rushed inside to see a red eyed Olivia huddled against Baird, who was doing his best to comfort her. She looked up the moment he came in, a mixture of hope and fear flitting across her face.

"Deep? Did you find her?"

"We did," he said shortly. "Call Sylvan—*now*."

Baird was already punching a series of numbers into the viewscreen's controls and in less than a minute Sylvan's face appeared on the screen. Deep bit back a startled curse when he saw his second brother—Sylvan had never looked worse.

Gone was the cool, collected warrior who never showed the least emotion no matter how hopeless the situation. Desperate eyes stared into his and it was like looking into the abyss. But there was no time for commiseration.

"Where is she?" Sylvan asked hoarsely. "Is she alive?"

"She was a moment ago," Deep said grimly. "But she's in danger—grave danger, my brother."

The change in Sylvan was immediate. The pupils of his ice blue eyes expanded and went blood red. At the same time his fangs punched out, long, sharp and utterly lethal. "Where?" he growled, his voice dropping an octave from its usual baritone to a menacing bass. "Tell me *where*."

Deep rattled off a string of coordinates and then repeated them more slowly to make sure Sylvan got them right. "She's in a ship that's built to resemble an asteroid," he added. "I don't know where the entrance is."

Sylvan cursed. "The asteroid that followed us through the fold! I wondered how the Scourge could've gotten all the way to Tranq Prime without us knowing!" He glared at Deep. "Don't worry about the entrance—I'll cut my way in."

“Go quickly, Brother,” Deep said. “And be cautious—I only saw one Scourge holding her but he’s armed.”

“Armed or not, soon he’ll be *dead*.” Sylvan’s eyes blazed with *rage* and then his image was gone—popping out of view as quickly as it had appeared.

Deep shook his head and stared at the blank screen. *The goddess give you speed, Brother! I hope you reach her in time.*

Chapter Thirty-four

“Please,” Sophie gasped, backing away. “Please don’t!”

“I’m doing you a favor.” Xairn’s voice was distant, his red-on-black eyes calm and emotionless as he approached her with the long, curving knife. “Do you know what your fate would be if I took you back to my father as he commanded?”

“But...but I’ve got Blood Fever,” she said desperately, groping for any excuse to live just a little while longer. “So I’m going to die anyway even if you just...just leave me alone.”

He laughed humorlessly. “So *that* is what the marker detected. Well, then I am saving you from *two* unpleasant deaths.” With a quick lunge he caught her arm and drew her close. “Come, Sophia, I’m not going to violate you,” he said quietly. “Those urges are still buried in me—never to awaken, I hope.”

“So you’re just going to kill me instead? No thanks!” Fighting with all her might, Sophia struggled to get away. Kicking and squirming, she twisted in his grip. She fought so hard she almost broke free...until Xairn swept her feet out from under her. With a cry, she landed flat on her back with a bone-jarring *thump* on the hard metal floor.

The fall knocked the breath out of her and for a moment all she could do was gasp, trying to get air into her lungs. She was going to roll away from him, to try and buy more time, but a moment was all it took. Before she could move, Xairn was on her, pinning her down.

“Please...” Sophie could barely speak and now tears were forming in her eyes, making it hard to see. “Please, no. I...I need to live. I need to tell him...”

“Tell him what? That you love him?” Xairn’s eyes were flat as he raised the knife again. “I’m sure he knows.”

“But I never got a chance to *tell* him.” Suddenly that seemed like the worst thing—worse even than the fact that she was about to die. *Oh Sylvan, I spent so much time fearing you for one reason or another that I never let myself love you. Oh please, God—if you’ll give me one more chance I swear I won’t waste it!*

I'll tell him how I feel. I'll let him bite me and bond me—anything so that we can be together. Together one more time...

But the gleaming black edge of the alien knife grew in her vision and no one seemed to be listening to her prayers.

Then, for some reason, Xairn withdrew the knife. “Let me look at you,” he demanded, leaning over her.

“What? Why?” A thought suddenly occurred to her—was he the Scourge commander who had demanded that Sylvan surrender her when they’d been caught in the energy net? His *voice* sounded the same. Sophie closed her eyes as the memory of his words echoed in her ears... *We will strip her naked before we take her to the AllFather. Strip her and take her in front of you where you stand, helpless to do anything but watch as she begs for release...*

Xairn seemed to sense her fear because he spoke very softly. “I told you I wouldn’t violate you, didn’t I? Now open your eyes, I need to see them.”

“Why?” He didn’t seem to have the same kind of power in his voice that the AllFather did, but Sophia found herself looking up at him anyway. His eyes were terrible—pure black where they ought to be white, with oval red pupils. For some reason, he appeared to be studying her eyes as well.

“*Green*,” he murmured at last, his face twisting. “Why do they have to be that exact shade of *green*?”

“What?” Sophie blinked back the tears that kept threatening to blind her. “What are you talking about?”

“Hold still.” He lifted the knife again but this time it was directed below her waist.

“What are you doing? Let me up! Let me go!” Sophie thrashed wildly but his grip was unbreakable. Suddenly there was a sharp, stinging pain along the side of her knee—the feeling of cold metal slicing through flesh. *My God, he’s like a serial killer! He’s going to cut me up into little pieces!* Panic rose up and overwhelmed her and for a moment everything went gray.

When she came to—only a few seconds later, she was sure—he was leaning over her again with something in his hand.

“Do you see this?” he demanded, showing her a small chunk of bloody metal.

Sophie nodded doubtfully. *At least it's not the knife—but what is it?*

“It's a marker,” he said, answering her unspoken question. “It's how we were able to track you even after my father lost his lock on your warrior's mind.” With a contemptuous flick of his wrist, he threw it away and Sophie heard it clatter and clang off the metal wall.

“Why...why did you do that?” she whispered through numb lips. “I don't understand.”

“Neither do I.” He shook his head. “But as you're not the one we're looking for, I see no need for you to die in agony and torment just because my father demands it.” He frowned. “The murderous bastard has enough pain to feast on—he doesn't need to glut himself on yours too.”

She felt numb all over. “So instead you're going to kill me quickly.”

“I'm not going to kill you at all.” His face twisted again and for a moment his red-on-black eyes looked almost human. “I can't. You look too much like *her*.”

There was real pain in his tone and for a moment Sophie almost felt sorry for him. Who was the woman he was talking about and what had happened to her? And what must it be like for him to have the horrible AllFather as his father? How had he stayed sane, being raised in the presence of such evil and terror? Then her instincts of self preservation kicked in.

“Please,” she whispered, barely daring to hope. “Does that mean you'll let me go? Will...will you take me back to Tranq Prime? Will you—”

A grinding, shrieking noise, like metal being ripped apart, cut through her words.

Xairn gave her a humorless smile. “I would, but it appears I won't have to. Your warrior has arrived. Though the gods alone know how he found you.”

The shrieking noise ended with a resounding *clang*—the sound of metal bouncing off metal. And then...

“Sophia!” The deep, furious roar sounded like something that might come from a male lion on the African veldt. It was Sylvan’s voice—she was sure of that—but so thick with fury it was barely recognizable.

Xairn scooped up the now bloody knife again. “You’d better stand clear—he’s coming. I hope he doesn’t have a blazer with him—if he slices through the ship’s walls we’ll all be space dust.”

He started to stand but before he could, Sylvan was already in the room. Blood red pupils took in the tableau before him and suddenly Sophie understood how it must look. She was naked on the floor with a strange male crouching over her, holding a bloody knife. Of course Sylvan thought she was being attacked.

“Sylvan, no—” she started to say, but he was already on Xairn, the two of them rolling over and over on the metal floor, fists and boots clanging and pounding as they struggled.

Sophie gasped and leaped to one side. She wanted to stop the brawl before Sylvan killed the other male, but she didn’t know how. There was no way to get between them without risking serious injury and besides, she was completely naked and unprotected. She tried shouting Sylvan’s name several times but he didn’t seem to hear her. The protective *rage* must be blinding him right now—and keeping him from hearing anything but his enemy’s cries.

The fight didn’t last long. Xairn was every bit as big and muscular as Sylvan but he had no female to protect, no *rage* to fuel his struggle. After a short, brutal scuffle, Sylvan had the other male down on the ground with both hands locked around his throat.

“Go ahead.” Xairn’s red eyes bulged from their sockets as he gave a strangled laugh. “Choke the life from my body. You’ll be doing me a favor.”

“Oh, I’m not going to choke you—that’s too painless.” There was a murderous glint in Sylvan’s crimson eyes. “I’m going to rip your fucking throat out—just like I promised.”

His mouth contorted in a grimace as he bared his fangs. They glittered like white daggers in the cold, artificial light but Sophie knew they wouldn’t stay white

for long—soon they would be red with blood. *If the Scourge have red blood, that is*, she thought with distant horror, remembering the black ichor that had come from the *urlich*.

As Sylvan crouched over the other male, he seemed to grow bigger somehow, more menacing than Sophie had ever seen him. Suddenly her paralysis broke. *I have to stop him! Xairn was going to let me go.*

“Wait!” she said desperately, daring to touch his shoulder. “Sylvan, *wait*.”

He turned on her with a snarl—a beast disturbed while it crouched over its prey. For a moment Sophie cringed back. At that moment he was everything she feared in a man—everything that haunted and terrified her. There was nothing left of the sweet, gentle male who had carried her when she couldn’t walk and healed her wounds when she was hurt. There was only a huge alpha male with needle sharp fangs and blood-red eyes waiting to attack.

Run! screamed the primal part of her. *Get away! He’s dangerous right now. You can’t stop him. You can’t do anything but hide and hope he comes back to his senses before he kills you too!*

But Sophie was done running.

“I...I’m not afraid of you,” she said in a low voice, uncertain if she was trying to convince him or herself. “And you need to stop what you’re doing *right now*, Sylvan.”

“After what he did to you?” His voice was still thick and distorted with *rage*. “*Never*. He deserves to die.”

“He didn’t do *anything*,” Sophie said firmly. “He didn’t...didn’t try to touch me. Not like Burke,” she added in a softer voice, trying to make him understand.

“She’s right.” Xairn nodded as well as Sylvan’s hands around his throat would allow. “I was under orders to bring her back for the AllFather to despoil, but I did nothing myself.”

“There, you see?” Sophie asked.

Sylvan tightened his hold, making the Scourge commander's face go a strange, dusky grey color. "He was taking you away to be raped and killed," he said harshly. "Whether he touched you or not, I will show no mercy."

"But he *wasn't*," she protested. "He was going to let me go. Look..." She pointed to the small wound on the inside of her knee. "He even cut out the, uh, tracking device thing they'd implanted so they could find me."

The sight of her wound had a definite effect on him. Sophie could see the urge to kill warring with the urge to heal in those blood red eyes—she only prayed the latter won out.

"Sylvan," she murmured, daring to touch his shoulder again. "Please—can't we just get out of here? I feel...wow, I *really* don't feel good." She put a hand to her head and wobbled unsteadily. It wasn't an act—suddenly she was dizzy and faint. She stumbled and would have fallen if Sylvan hadn't caught her with one hand.

He pulled her close and looked at her anxiously. "Sophia?"

"Want to go. *Please*," she whispered.

Sylvan uttered a low curse and looked down at Xairn. He still had the Scourge commander by the throat with one hand, but his grip wasn't nearly as tight as it had been. It didn't need to be—Xairn was completely still. Whether he was dead or unconscious Sophie couldn't tell. She thought she saw a faint motion of his broad chest but then Sylvan let him go and turned to swing her up into his arms.

"Thank you," she whispered, laying her head on his shoulder. "And thank you for coming for me, Sylvan."

"I will always come for you, *Talana*," he said hoarsely. "No matter what happens or who stands in the way. You're *mine*."

"Sylvan..." She wanted to say more but her head was swimming again and then she started shivering.

Sylvan looked at her with obvious concern. "Let's get you back to the ship."

She caught one last glance at the still form of Xairn, lying on the floor, and then he carried her away.

Chapter Thirty-five

Sylvan didn't know why he did it, but after getting Sophie safely strapped in he sealed the hole in the side of the artificial asteroid before disengaging from the enemy ship. *Should have just let the bastard suck vacuum and die—if he's not dead already*, he thought as the last of the sealant compound adhered to the Scourge ship's rocky outer surface. But Sophia's tender heart and soft plea had stopped him. How she could be so forgiving was beyond Sylvan—he was still deep in *rage* and ready to kill anyone who so much as looked at her the wrong way.

"Sylvan," she whispered faintly, her teeth chattering. "I'm c-cold. Do you have a b-blanket?"

"I have something better than that." Reaching down, he found something soft and warm and handed it to her.

"My *tharp!* MM2!" Sophia cuddled under the moss green *tharp* which folded itself around her affectionately. Almost at once her shivering stopped. "I never thought I'd be so glad to see you again," she told it. Then she looked up at Sylvan. "Thank you for bringing it."

"I almost didn't bother to get it but I thought you might need it to warm you," he said shortly. "How do you feel?"

"Better. Much better. Well..."

"Yes?" Sylvan asked anxiously.

"It's just that...I guess now that everything's over I'm starting to feel the, uh, Blood Fever more. My, um...parts of me are feeling really *sensitive* right now," she admitted in a low voice.

Sylvan nodded. "The effects of the fever. But don't worry—I started a compound here in the ship's lab, using my essence and the Blood Fever vaccine as the basis." He nodded to the back of the small ship where a counter was filled with delicate looking but surprisingly tough equipment. "I did it while I waited for Kat and Lock and Deep to locate you."

“You did?” Her eyes widened. “They did? But...Kat said she didn’t want anything else to do with them.”

“Apparently she changed her mind so they could help find you. It was...” Sylvan pressed a hand to his eyes briefly, trying not to think of the horrible uncertainty—wondering if she was dead or alive, if he would ever see her again... “It was the longest two hours of my life, waiting to hear where you were. I had to do *something* to keep from going mad and I knew if...*when* I found you that you’d need the cure.”

Sophie frowned. “So this cure—this antidote you’ve concocted—I just take a shot and the Blood Fever will be gone? And then you and I, our lives, everything—will just go back to normal?”

Sylvan nodded. “Yes, thank the Mother. And it’s not even a shot— I know how much you hate needles or anything sharp so I formulated it as an emulsion you can take by mouth. I need to get some glucose mixture to dissolve it in but they’ll have that at the med station on the Mother ship so—”

“I don’t want it.”

“What?” He frowned. “I assure you, Sophia, it’s perfectly safe.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt that. But I’m through playing it safe with you.” She leaned forward as far as her straps would allow and placed a hand on his knee. “I want you to *bite* me, Sylvan. Bite me and...and do whatever else you have to do.” Her cheeks turned pink but her eyes never left his. “*That’s* how I want you to cure me.”

Sylvan opened his mouth to answer but just then he caught sight of himself in the shiny, reflective surface of the blank viewscreen. Red eyes and fully extended fangs greeted him—the visage of a male still deep in *rage*. He tried to force his fangs to retract but they wouldn’t. Though he had rescued Sophia, the possessive need that had been raised in him by her abduction refused to die. With a sinking heart, he felt his blood burning again, the desire for her growing like a fire that threatened to blaze out of control and consume everything in its path.

I can't take her in such a state. Can't trust myself not to hurt her, to scare her. Besides, in order to heal her, he would have to bond her. Once he did that there would be no going back—no escape for her from his fangs, which she feared so. Because if he took her, if he allowed himself to fill her with his cock and pierce her with his fangs even *once*, he would never be able to stop. He would need her under him, open for him every night for the rest of their lives.

“No,” he growled, flipping on the viewscreen so that it showed the blackness of space instead of his own grotesque and frightening countenance. “I won’t do that.”

“Is it your vow holding you back? Because I release you of it,” she said softly. “I...I don’t want you to be foresworn of me anymore.”

“I appreciate that but it doesn’t make any difference,” Sylvan said stiffly. Gods, couldn’t she see how difficult this was for him? He hated to keep refusing her but it was for her own damn good.

Setting the coordinates, he turned the ship toward Tranq Prime. He wasn’t taking her back to his native planet, however. He’d had enough of his relatives to last a life time and besides, he wanted her back on board the Mother ship where he could care for her properly. The Kindred High Council were just going to have to understand.

“Sylvan—” she began, but he was already punching in a call to Baird.

“Brother.” Baird’s golden eyes were wary when he appeared on the screen. When he saw Sophia wrapped in the moss green *tharp*, he looked cautiously relieved. “She’s all right?” he demanded in a low voice. “She’ll live?”

“I’m fine,” Sophia answered before Sylvan could speak. “Just fine.”

Baird’s dark face broke into a grin of pure joy. “*Lilenta*,” he shouted over his shoulder. “She’s all right!”

“Oh, thank God! *Thank God.*” Olivia came running, appearing abruptly in their line of vision. Her eyes were red and her long blonde hair looked like she’d been running both hands through it in agitation. “Sophie, are you okay?” She looked at Sophia anxiously. “Really and truly? Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m okay—really and truly, wombmate.” Sophia smiled at her twin. “I’m fine.”

“She’s *not* fine,” Sylvan corrected sternly. “She still has Blood Fever and needs to take the antidote I made for her from my essence. I need a glucose mixture to dissolve it in—Olivia, you know where it’s kept in the med station, don’t you?”

Olivia nodded eagerly. “I’ll have it waiting for you in your suite.”

“Good.” Sylvan nodded. “And Baird, get ready to fold space. We’re coming home.”

Baird grinned. “I was hoping you’d say that. In fact, I already got permission to create the fold. Had to call in a hell of a lot of favors but it’s ready and waiting for you.”

“Thank you, Brother.” Sylvan felt an immense sense of relief that they weren’t going to have to wait for the fold to appear. He needed to get Sophia back to the Mother ship and healed quickly so that he himself could visit the sacred grove. Another trip to the priestess to cool his burning blood was definitely in order. Even now he could smell Sophia’s sweet scent and the outline of her naked body under the soft green *tharp* was almost more temptation than he could bear.

“Fly straight and true, Brother,” Baird said, interrupting his thoughts. “Come home to us safely.”

“We’re coming,” Sylvan promised. He started to cut off the communication but Sophia spoke up quickly.

“Liv, I need to talk to you. Bespeak me as soon as we come out of the fold—all right?”

“Of course,” Olivia promised. Something seemed to pass between them—something Sylvan couldn’t quite catch. He frowned, but it was probably just a twin thing. Deep and Lock often did the same thing—communicating with nothing more than a look or a touch.

“We’ll see you soon,” he said and cut the link. Immediately the viewscreen showed Tranq Prime racing toward them. Hovering in space above the grayish

white sphere was a deep red wound in space—the fold. “Hold on,” he told Sophia. “We’re going through.”

“Good.” She gave him a warm smile that tugged at his heart. “I want to go home.”

* * * * *

“*Sophie, are you there?*” Liv’s voice popped into her mind the minute the small ship exited the fold.

“*I’m here,*” Sophie sent back at once. “*God, Liv, you have no idea how good it is to hear you. To be home again.*”

Olivia laughed delightedly, a warm sound that echoed in Sophie’s heart as well as her head. “*Hard to believe you left barely a day ago.*”

“*Well it seems like a lot longer than a day, believe me,*” Sophie sent back grimly. “*You won’t believe everything I have to tell you. But for right now I just need a favor.*”

“*Name it. Anything,*” came the immediate reply.

“*Thanks.*” Sophia smiled. “*I just need you to hold off on getting that glucose stuff for a little while.*”

Liv’s mental tone changed from agreeable to stern. “*What? No way, Sophie. You’re sick—you need to take the antidote Sylvan made you. In fact, I’m in the lab getting the glucose right now.*”

“*I don’t need the antidote—that’s not the only way to cure Blood Fever,*” Sophie argued. “*Look, how much do you know about it?*”

“*I know that it’s fatal if you don’t treat it within forty-eight hours.*”

“*And I’ve had it less than eight. Come on, Liv, just look it up.*”

“*Hang on.*” There was a short silence and Sophie pictured her sister tapping away on the info unit at the med lab. In a very short time her voice was back in

Sophie's head. "So you want him to cure you the **traditional** way? Do you know what that involves?"

"I know," Sophie sent. In the past the idea of letting Sylvan sink his fangs into her had freaked her out. But the memory of her time with the Scourge and the things she had vowed to herself was still fresh in her mind. "I've just been through hell, Liv," she told her sister quietly. "I thought I was going to die and you know what I realized? I haven't really let myself **live**."

"Sophie—"

"I've been so busy dwelling on the past, I haven't allowed myself to enjoy the present or look forward to the future," Sophia continued. "And I haven't let myself love because loving someone means pain."

"That's doubly true in this case," Olivia sent dryly. "Remember Sylvan's fangs."

"I remember," Sophia sent calmly. "They're out right now. But you know what? I'm not afraid of them anymore. I'm not afraid of **him** or of letting myself love him. I want him, Liv. And I don't care if it hurts."

"Sophie, you've just been through a lot. Maybe you should take some time to consider—"

"Do you remember when you told me you had to get to the place where you were more afraid of losing Baird than of letting him bond you?"

There was a long silence and then Olivia said, "Yes. Yes, I remember."

"Well I'm at that point with Sylvan now," Sophie told her. "I want him and I know he wants me. Only he's afraid to do anything about it—afraid he'll hurt me."

"I'm a little afraid of that myself," Liv sent. "I've never seen him look so scary as when you called on the viewscreen a little while ago. Those red eyes. And his fangs look so **sharp**."

"That's because he needs me," Sophie sent simply. "As badly as I need him. I just have to convince him to...to take me."

Olivia sent a mental sigh. *“All right—I trust your judgment. So what do you want me to do?”*

“Stall him. Meet us at the suite and tell him you’re out of glucose on this side of the ship and you’ll have to send for some more. Or better yet, offer to go get some yourself. Just say anything that will keep him in the suite with me while you ‘locate’ another supply.”

“My, my, my. Aren’t we devious?” Liv’s mental voice was filled with admiration. *“Okay, I can do that.”*

“Thanks, Liv. I owe you one.”

“I’ll be sure you pay up later. Because you know Kat and I are going to want all the juicy details.”

*“How **is** Kat? Sylvan said she went back to Deep and Lock in order to locate me. Is she all right?”*

“I haven’t talked to her. According to Lock she’s resting in her suite. Apparently she left him and Deep as soon as she was able to, after they, uh, located you. Of course the minute she wakes up we’ll want to talk. We should get together later on tonight.”

“We’ll see.” Sophie cast a sidelong look at Sylvan who was currently busy landing the ship. Besides the obvious signs of *rage*—the red eyes and extended fangs—there was a strained look on his face. She remembered what he had said to her before...*My blood was burning. And I had no way to quench the flames.* His blood was burning now, she was certain of it. He was on edge from wanting her—needing her. There would never be a better time to convince him to bond her to him. She just hoped she could manage it.

“What do you mean, ‘We’ll see?’” Liv demanded.

“I mean this might take a while. I think you know what I mean—or you should, anyway.”

“Oh.” Liv laughed. *“Of course, what was I thinking? Especially if you, uh, succeed in your little mission.”*

"I'll succeed, all right," Sophie promised her. "I'm not letting him out of that suite until he bites me. And does...everything else he has to in order to bond us together."

Liv laughed again. *"Okay, forget tonight. Kat and I will see you next week."* Her voice was suddenly sober. *"Just be careful, Sophie. I hope you know what you're doing."*

*"I do. For the first time since Burke hurt me, I know what I want—what I **need**—and I'm not backing down now. I'm not missing another chance to be with the man I love,"* she told her sister.

"Okay, okay—you've convinced me. I'm behind you one hundred percent."

"Thank you," Sophie sent.

She just hoped she could convince Sylvan as well.

Chapter Thirty-six

Sylvan frowned as they walked into his suite. "I can't understand how we could run out of glucose solution. Whoever has been doing the ordering at the main med station must be completely incompetent."

"I'm sure it will be fine," Sophia said, closing the door behind them. "Liv said she can get some from the other side of the ship in an hour or two."

Sylvan tried to repress a sigh. An hour or two sounded like an eternity at the moment. Especially when he wanted Sophia so badly he could almost taste the salty-sweet flavor of her skin. When all he wanted to do was take her to bed and part her thighs while she offered him her throat. *Stop it*, he ordered himself. *Stop thinking that way. You're only making it worse!*

Sophia shivered. "I'm chilled to the bone. Do you mind if I take a quick bath?"

"Of course not. Be my guest." Sylvan was relieved. Maybe she would spend the next few hours soaking in the bathing pool. And though the thought of her naked and wet would be a torment, at least she wouldn't be in the same room with him, where he could see her beautiful body under the thin *tharp* and smell her devastatingly feminine scent.

Sophia headed for the bathroom but then she hesitated and turned back. "You could join me, if you want. You look really tense. I could, ah, rub your back."

Sylvan raised an eyebrow at her. "Join you naked in the bathing pool?"

"Well..." Her cheeks were suddenly pink again. "Yes. Why not?"

*Because I want you. Because even the **thought** of you slippery and wet and naked makes me feel like I'm losing my mind with desire.* "It's a bad idea," he said shortly, frowning. "A very, *very* bad idea."

"Oh." Her face fell. "I just thought...never mind. I'll just be a minute." Quickly she went to the bathroom and shut herself in.

Sylvan felt terrible for turning her down so abruptly but it was obvious she didn't understand. He was right on the edge of reason, his blood burning for her

as it never had before, even after the second time he'd tasted her. If he allowed himself to get too close...*I have to keep my distance from her until I can get to the sacred grove. Have to keep her at an arm's length until the priestess can cool my blood. Otherwise I'll do something we'll both regret for the rest of our lives.*

* * * * *

"Okay," Sophie muttered to herself, shedding the *tharp* and draping it carefully across a shelf. "This is not working. Time for plan B."

The only trouble was, she had no plan B. She'd never tried to seduce anyone before and she had no idea how to go about it. Obviously just offering herself wasn't going to work. Sylvan was on his guard against her. He was so certain that he would hurt her that he wasn't about to touch her with a ten foot pole. *And that's what I need*, she thought as she dipped her foot in the bathing pool. *His hands on me. And his mouth. If I could get him to go that far, I'm pretty sure I could get him to take me all the way.* But how could she get past the wall he'd erected between them and get him to touch her?

The bathing pool was beautifully hot and having no answers, Sophie decided to take a soak and think about it. Liv had promised to stall for as long as she could, so Sophie figured she had a good two or three hours to work on Sylvan before he finally got fed up with the situation and went to fetch the glucose himself. In the mean time, she had to think up some kind of plan for the seduction—even though she had no idea what she was doing.

She hissed as she lowered herself into the pool. The hot water felt wonderful on the rest of her body but it stung the small wound Xairn had made on the inside of her knee fiercely. *Ouch! Wish I'd had Sylvan heal that before I got into the pool. I should've asked him but—Wait a minute!* Suddenly, it clicked. She'd been wondering how to get his hands and mouth on her—asking him to heal her knee was an excellent start. *But only a start*, she thought. *I'll have to get him to go further. But how?* An answer popped into her brain. *Of course! That should work. It'll take a little subtlety but I think I can pull it off...*

Sophie spent a little more time in the bath working out the details and then stepped out, feeling both refreshed and extremely nervous. Her plan *seemed* workable but how did she know if it would do the trick? She wasn't exactly a legendary seductress. *I don't even have anything sexy to wear*, she thought ruefully as she toweled off. *I should've asked Liv to loan me a set of her naughty underwear. Of course then it would be really obvious I was trying to seduce him and this would never work. Still, if I had anything at all to wear...* Her eyes fell on moss green *tharp* and she frowned. Maybe she *did* have something sexy to wear after all.

"Listen, MM2," she murmured, taking the *tharp* off the shelf. "I know I said I'd never wear you again but we're friends now, right? And you owe me one for that scene at the feast—you *know* you do." She couldn't be sure but she thought she felt a sense of agreement from the *tharp*. It was making a soft humming sound that seemed to indicate that it understood what she was saying and agreed with her. "Good," she said. "So here's what I want you to do..."

* * * * *

She came out of the bathroom much sooner than Sylvan had hoped she would. And she looked, if possible, even more lovely and desirable than when she'd gone in. The steam had given her fair skin a rosy glow and turned the little wisps of hair that framed her face into delicate ringlets. Even worse, the heat from the bath had brought out her scent—it drifted to his nose like an enticing perfume, warm and sweet and utterly desirable. It made him instantly hard, his cock aching for release. Sylvan shifted, hoping she wouldn't notice the sudden bulge in his flight pants. But he was almost too busy looking at her to notice if she was looking at him.

Sophia was wearing the moss green *tharp* as a dress again and *what* a dress! It had a deep V neckline that showed the inside curves of her creamy breasts and outlined the tight points of her nipples clearly. The bottom was a long straight fall of soft green to her ankles, but there was a slit up the center that went to the

middle of her thighs and showed her shapely legs quite clearly with each step she took.

Sylvan tried not to look after his initial assessment but it was difficult—almost impossible. Especially when she came and sat right on the couch beside him, so close their legs were touching.

“Mmm, I feel so much better.” Her voice was low and throaty—as contented as a cat’s purr. The soft, feminine growl seemed to go directly to Sylvan’s groin, making him harder than ever.

He shifted uncomfortably, trying to move his leg away from hers as unobtrusively as possible. “I’m glad.” His own voice sounded stiff and wooden in his ears—forced. But it was difficult to sound relaxed when he was more tense and agitated than he could ever remember being in his entire life.

“Thank you.” She shifted toward him again, her knee brushing his and suddenly one of her sleeves slipped down her shoulder, baring most of her right breast. In fact, if her nipple hadn’t been erect, it might have slithered all the way down to her waist. As it was, though, the edge of the *tharp* caught on the tight point so that only the upper curve of her areola was revealed.

“Oh!” Sophia gasped, fumbling with the *tharp*. “I’m so sorry. This stupid thing...” She got the sleeve up and her breast mostly covered...and the other side promptly fell down. She grabbed for the *tharp* again, trying to get it to cover her but it was apparent it didn’t want to cooperate.

Instead of going back to its original shape, the front of the *tharp* formed indecently small triangles that clung tightly to her breasts. The upper points of the triangles started just above her nipples and barely covered the bottom curves of her ripe mounds. The final configuration outlined her jutting peaks and left most of the rest of her breasts bare in a way that was distractingly erotic—and so tempting Sylvan thought he might explode at any minute.

“There.” Sophia looked down at her chest uncertainly. “I *think* it’ll stay now. It certainly has a mind of its own.”

“You...you have to be firm with them,” Sylvan finally heard himself say in a hoarse voice. He forced himself to look away as Sophia spoke again.

“Sylvan, there’s just one thing...” She hesitated so long he was forced to turn and look at her again.

“Yes?” he asked, trying desperately to keep his eyes above her neck.

“The place where he—the Scourge commander—cut me to take out the tracking device. It still hurts...*a lot*.” She bit her lip, her lovely eyes filled with pain. “And well... if you don’t mind I was wondering if you could heal it for me. The way you healed my other injuries at the cabin.”

Kneeling on the floor in front of her, tasting her skin. I would start at her knee and run my tongue up the inner part of her thigh. Then I would part her legs so I could see her wet, ripe pussy. Her cunt lips would be swollen and sensitive, hot and wet with desire...No! Sylvan closed his eyes for a moment, trying to get control of himself. *I can’t think that way. She’s asking me to heal her and that’s what I need to do. **All** I need to do.*

“Sylvan?” she whispered. “Did...did I ask too much? Did I offend you?”

“Of course not,” he said in a strangled voice. “It’s fine. *I’m* fine. And certainly I can...can heal you.”

“If you really wouldn’t mind...”

“Not at all. I never want you to be in pain—especially when I can help ease that pain.” He slid off the couch and positioned himself stiffly in front of her. “Where is the wound again?”

“Here,” she murmured, pointing. “On the inside of my knee.”

Sylvan had been meaning to lean over and heal her from the side but Sophia spread her legs, beckoning him in. Somehow he ended up between her thighs, which were thankfully mostly covered—at least from mid-thigh and up—by the *tharp*.

Struggling to keep his composure, Sylvan bent his head to the small wound and lapped gently, laving it tenderly with his tongue as he savored the delicious taste of her skin.

Sophie hissed at first, in apparent pain, and then moaned softly as he continued to lick her.

Sylvan looked up. “Did...did I hurt you?”

“No.” She ran one hand gently through his hair, sending shivers of pleasure down his back. “It...actually, it felt good. But I *am* having pain somewhere el—oh!” Her words ended in a gasp because the slit in her *tharp* had suddenly opened up, exposing her all the way to the waist.

Sylvan tried not to look but he couldn’t help catching a glimpse of her soft little pussy with its neatly trimmed thatch of dark brown curls. Her scent was suddenly much stronger and even more enticing, making his cock and fangs ache with the need to sink deep in her flesh. He pushed the need away roughly and forced himself to look away.

“I’m so sorry,” Sophie was saying as she tried to get the *tharp* back together again. “Naughty MM2!” she scolded it. “You should know better than that!”

“It’s all right.” Sylvan rose stiffly and sat beside her on the couch again. “I’m, uh, fairly certain you’re healed now. But...” He cleared his throat, wanting to change the subject. “You were saying you had pain someplace else?”

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“Well, yes...” Sophia blushed as she spoke. It really *was* embarrassing to be exposed this way, even though MM2 was only following orders. But it was kind of hot too—especially since she could tell she was affecting him. “My, uh...” She looked at Sylvan uncertainly. “My nipples and my...between my legs. I’m so sensitive there it’s almost painful. And they’ve turned dark red—at least my nipples have.”

Sylvan shifted beside her and she couldn’t help noticing the hard ridge of his cock outlined against the fabric of his black pants. “I told you that was a symptom of Blood Fever,” he reminded her hoarsely. “The deeper coloration and sensitivity should go away as soon as you take the antidote.”

“I know but it really *hurts*,” Sophia said, trying to look pitiful. “I just wonder if it’s normal for it to hurt this much. I mean my nipples are so tight and achy and the inside of my...well, it just feels really sensitive and swollen.”

Sylvan frowned. “I suppose it’s possible the fever is progressing faster in you because you’re human.”

She bit her lip and looked down. “Do you think you could examine me? Just to make sure everything’s all right? I’m kind of worried.”

He hesitated for so long she was afraid she’d overplayed it. But finally he nodded. “Yes, I suppose,” he said in a low voice. “As long as we keep it completely professional...”

“Of course,” Sophie murmured. However, peeling down the tiny bikini-type top her *tharp* had formed turned out to be a little more difficult than she’d anticipated. Not because MM2 wasn’t cooperating—actually the *tharp* was doing its part beautifully. But because she really was nervous to be exposing herself so blatantly.

Her uncertainty must have shown on her face because Sylvan stroked her shoulder reassuringly. “It’s all right, Sophia, I’m just going to examine you. And I have seen you undressed before.”

“I know,” she whispered as she let the *tharp* fall to her waist. “I’m just...I guess I’m still just a little shy.”

“You have no need to be embarrassed,” he murmured, cupping her cheek. “You have the most beautiful body I’ve ever seen.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, feeling her cheeks get warm with the compliment. “That’s so sweet of you. Do...do you think my nipples are too red? I mean...” She nodded down at her jutting peaks which were a dark crimson. “Is that *normal*?”

Leaning down, Sylvan examined her closely—so closely she could feel his warm breath on the valley between her breasts. “You say they’re extremely sensitive?” he murmured.

“*Extremely.*” Sophie nodded and it was no lie. Even feeling his breath on her skin was enough to make her hot and bothered.

“Does this hurt?” Gently, Sylvan ran the tip of one finger around her right areola.

Sophie moaned softly as the nipple tightened even more and a spark of pleasure shot from her breast to the vee between her legs. “It doesn’t *hurt* exactly but I can *really* feel it,” she admitted.

“And this?” He licked his lips and then placed a soft, close-mouthed kiss against the tip of her nipple.

“Oh!” Sophie jumped at the sudden jolt of pleasure the simple action gave her. “That...actually, that feels nice.”

“I thought my lips would be softer than my fingers,” he said, looking up at her.

“They are,” Sophie assured him. “They really are. In fact...it feels better than it did before...before you kissed me. Why is that?”

Sylvan cleared his throat. “Probably because I licked my lips just before I, ah, kissed you. Remember I told you the healing compound wasn’t just in my essence but in all of my, er, other fluids?”

“Of course.” A light bulb suddenly went off in Sophie’s head. Up until now she’d had no idea how to seduce him other than just getting him close and letting him see her. But now another idea presented itself. “Sylvan,” she said softly, looking up at him. “Do you think...would you mind doing it again? And with...with the other one too? I know I’ll be completely healed once I take the antidote but in the meantime, it really *hurts* and if you could ease the pain just a tiny bit...”

He closed his eyes for a moment and she could sense him struggling with himself. He was still deeply in need—his fully extended fangs looked lethal and sharp—but Sophie no longer had any wish to ask him to retract them. In fact, although they were still frightening, the sharp points had begun to look sexy to her. Because the sooner she got him to bite her with them, the sooner they would be bonded together forever.

“Please,” she whispered, touching his thigh lightly. “If you could just lick... just a little bit...”

“Of course.” Sylvan opened his eyes and tried to smile but she could see the strain on his face. “But...” He cleared his throat. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to retract my fangs. I’ll be very careful not to bite you but I know in the past you said —”

“Forget what I said,” Sophie murmured. “I...I’m not afraid of your fangs any more, Sylvan. I’m not afraid of *you*. And to prove it...here.” Rising up on her knees, she pressed forward so that the tip of one nipple rubbed against his lips. “Go ahead,” she murmured. “Suck me. Take me all the way into your mouth.”

“Sophia...” her name was a low groan on his lips, almost a prayer. “I don’t think—”

“It’s all right,” she said softly. “I know you won’t hurt me.”

Apparently unable to withstand the temptation anymore, Sylvan did as she asked and sucked her nipple between his lips.

Sophie gasped in pleasure at the sensation of his hot, wet mouth on her incredibly sensitive peak. Sylvan sucked her nipple gently but she could feel the sharp points of his fangs pressed against the curve of her breast, though he didn’t break the skin. To her surprise, the sharp little pain of his fangs pricking her increased her pleasure rather than dampening it. Tentatively, she ran her hands through his hair, holding him to her. Sylvan growled low in his throat and switched to the other nipple, lapping it tenderly before taking it deep into his mouth.

“Sylvan,” she whispered, pressing forward, wanting to give him more. “God, that feels so *good*.” Sparks were flying from her breasts to her pussy, making her hot, making her want him. She could feel herself getting wetter and wetter, more and more ready...

Then Sylvan pulled back and looked up at her. “You’re feeling better then?” His breathing was ragged but his eyes were determined.

Damn! Sophie's heart sank. *He's only going to do what he has to in order to make me feel better. He's not going to go any further unless I push him.* Well then, she would just have to push.

"My nipples do feel better," she admitted breathlessly.

"Good." He started to sit back but she touched him lightly on the arm to stop him.

"But...but Sylvan. Where it really hurts is...you know." She nodded at the juncture of her thighs and saw with a kind of pleasurable embarrassment that her *tharp* had ridden up, exposing her pussy again. "I mean, you don't have to...to do what you did for my breasts," she added hastily. "But if you could just examine me and make sure everything is all right..."

Sylvan put a hand over his eyes for a moment and made an agonized sound deep in his throat. "Sophia, forgive me but what you're asking...it may be difficult for me to be professional."

"That's all right." She stroked his arm gently. "You know I won't be offended if you...you know, lose control a little."

"But that's exactly what I can't afford to do." He looked at her, his eyes half-wild with need. "I have to be careful with you, Sophia. So careful..."

"You won't hurt me," she assured him again. "I trust you, Sylvan."

"You trust me too much. More than I trust myself," he said grimly. "Very well, let's take a look and make certain you're all right. Lean back and spread your legs for me."

God, if only he was asking me that for a different reason. Sophie shivered involuntarily but did as he asked. Her *tharp* parted obligingly, leaving her completely naked and open to him. She bit back a gasp at the sudden feeling of intense vulnerability. Part of her wanted to close her legs and cover up at once but Sophie squashed that instinct immediately. She couldn't give Sylvan any reason to doubt that she trusted him. So instead of shutting her thighs, she opened them wider as he leaned forward.

“All right now.” Sylvan’s voice was dry—obviously he was trying desperately to remain impersonal. “Let me check your sensitivity first. Does this hurt?” Lightly he ran a fingertip over her outer pussy lips, making Sophie squeak and jump slightly.

“Uh, no,” she said, trying to keep her voice steady. “It...it mainly hurts on the...on the inside.”

“Very well.” He looked up at her briefly. “I’m going to spread you open, Sophia. Are you ready?”

It reminded her so much of the first time he’d marked her—tasted her—that her breath caught in her throat and a shiver of anticipation coursed through her body. “Yes,” she whispered at last. “Yes, Sylvan you can open me. I *want* you to.”

“And I want to, much more than I should,” he murmured, his voice hoarse with need.

He stroked her outer mound once more and then she felt the broad pads of his thumbs opening her, parting her pussy lips to bare her inner folds for his inspection. “Well?” she murmured after a long moment of silence. “Do...do I look okay?”

“You’re certainly very wet.” His deep voice sounded strangled. “And I can tell you’re a little swollen too. Mostly...mostly around your clitoris. Here...” Licking his lips, he pressed a gentle kiss to her throbbing clit.

Sophie jumped and moaned softly as he prolonged the kiss, parting his lips to lave her little bud with the tip of his tongue. She squeezed her hands into fists at the intense sensation. She was so much more sensitive now that even such a gentle touch made her feel like she’d been struck by some kind of sexual lightning. It felt so *good* but she needed more...so much *more*.

At last Sylvan pulled back, licking his lips. “Gods, your honey is so sweet.” His voice was a low growl of lust. He looked up at her. “Did that help or does it still hurt?”

Sophie bit her lip. “It helped *some* but to be honest, I’m still in a lot of pain. Could you...do you think you could...”

“Ease your pain?” His eyes were burning red and half-lidded with desire but his voice still had that stubborn ring to it, as though he was determined not to go too far.

“Yes, please,” Sophie whispered. “If...if you don’t mind.”

His eyes softened. “You know I don’t, *Talana*. Tasting your pussy is a great pleasure to me. Even if I’m only doing it to make you feel better.” He frowned. “But we’ll have to be careful. Your increased sensitivity will make it easier for you to come and I don’t...don’t think that would be a good idea right now.”

Because he doesn’t think he could stop himself from biting me, Sophie thought with a little shiver. Fear and anticipation were warring inside her, creating an emotional mixture more potent than anything she’d ever felt. God, how she *wanted* him. But she didn’t need his fangs in her thigh—she needed them in her neck, piercing her at the same time as he filled her with his cock. Unfortunately, she still had no idea how she was going to manage that but she would take what she could get for now.

“All right,” she said, nodding. “I...I’ll try not to come.”

“And I’ll try not to make you come,” he said seriously. “I’m just going to press my tongue against you and let you rub against me. That way you can control exactly how much pleasure you receive.”

It was an intriguing and embarrassing notion. “So...I’ll be in charge?” She raised an eyebrow at him and he nodded.

“Exactly.” He pressed a soft kiss to the inside of her thigh and looked up at her. “I’ll be at your service. Are you ready?”

Sophie nodded hesitantly. “I...I guess.”

“Then spread your legs wider for me, Sophia. Open yourself and let me in.”

Despite what he’d said about her being in charge there was a note of command in his deep voice that she found it impossible to disobey. Spreading her thighs wide, she leaned back against the leather couch and opened herself completely for him.

True to his word, Sylvan didn't try to kiss her or tease her with his tongue. He didn't even lap up the excess honey which had collected on her inner thighs. Instead he simply pressed the flat of his tongue against her, covering the entire length of her open pussy.

Sophie gasped at the sensation of enveloping heat. Even though he wasn't moving it, his tongue seemed to be everywhere at once. It felt amazing—hot and wet and perfect—but she wanted more. And she could have more, couldn't she? After all, hadn't he told her that she was in charge?

Tentatively, she moved against him. Sylvan gave a soft growl and tightened his grip on her thighs. Sophie froze. *Shouldn't I have done that? Is he upset now?* She dared to look down at him but when his eyes met hers, he nodded very slightly. *Go on, it's all right*, he seemed to be saying. So his growl must have been one of lust—apparently he was as affected by what they were doing as she was.

Encouraged by his wordless approval, she did it again. And then again and again until she was rubbing against his tongue shamelessly, working herself against him as her pleasure built and built until she felt like she was going to explode. “God, Sylvan...*Sylvan*,” she gasped, burying both hands in his hair and pulling him closer. The delicious feeling of his hot tongue against her sensitive pussy was amazing—*intoxicating* and she was close...so close... But just as she was about to jump over the edge, he pulled back.

“That's enough.” He was panting, his mouth shiny with her juices.

“Why?” Sophie was ready to cry with frustration. How could she ever seduce him when he was so damned determined not to let himself be seduced?

“Because.” He licked his lips with obvious pleasure but then looked at her sternly. “You were close, weren't you?”

“Well...yes,” she admitted. “But...but how could you tell?”

“I could feel your body tensing. And your pussy started making even more honey, my *numala*.”

Sophie felt her cheeks getting hot but a sudden thought occurred to her. “You told me back at the cabin that it was a good thing to be a, uh, *numala*. That men, er, males who had one for a mate were envied. Why is that?”

Sylvan sat back beside her on the couch, looking uncomfortable. “We lack the hormones that the Beast Kindred have, which allow their mates to accommodate their shafts. So a female who makes a lot of cunt honey will have an easier time accepting a Blood Kindred’s cock deep in her pussy.”

“Oh.” Sophie felt like her cheeks must be on fire by this point. “I...I didn’t know.”

“It’s the same reason we make so much precum,” he went on dryly, as though lecturing her on the subject would take his mind off what they had just been doing. “For lubrication—to ease the way.”

“Well you *are* kind of large, uh, down there,” Sophie said, scarcely able to meet his eyes. “In fact...” *Wait a minute*. A thought tickled the back of her brain... a way to make him go even further.

“Yes?” Sylvan spoke politely, though it was obvious he was as on edge as she was.

“You...what you just said gave me an idea,” Sophie said candidly. “I know you don’t think you should, you know, taste me any more because I might accidentally come. But I’m still hurting and sensitive so I was wondering...”

“Yes?” he said again.

“Well...you said that the healing compound was in all your, uh, fluids, right?”

He nodded.

“But it’s strongest in your essence and in your...your, uh, seed?”

He nodded again. “But I’m not going to come in you, Sophia.” His voice was a low, dangerous growl. “That would be much, much too risky. I couldn’t possible hold myself back.”

I don’t want you to hold back! The words were on the tip of her tongue but she swallowed them back down. “You don’t have to,” she said instead. “I was thinking that you could just, you know, rub yourself against me. That way enough

of your, uh, precum would get on me and make me feel better until I can take the antidote.”

“You *are* still going to take it?” He searched her eyes earnestly. “It’s very important, you know. I can tell by your increased sensitivity and the deep color of your nipples and pussy that the fever is progressing rapidly in you. You need to be cured.”

“Of course.” Sophie nodded. “Of course I want to be cured.” *Just not the way you think!* “But right now it still hurts...hurts a lot. Please, Sylvan...please?”

He ran a hand through his hair in obvious agitation. “So you want me to rub the head of my shaft against your open pussy without entering you? Without filling you completely with my cock?”

Sophie bit her lip. “I...I guess so. Do you...am I asking too much?”

“Only the impossible.” He laughed ruefully and then gave her a serious look. “Gods, this isn’t going to be easy but I can deny you nothing, *Talana*. Sometimes I wish I could.”

“It’ll be okay,” Sophie reassured him softly. “We won’t go too far.” She was already unbuttoning the pale blue shirt he wore to bare his broad, muscular chest. Hopefully he would take care of his pants himself. She might be in seductress mode but it would be really embarrassing if she had to go fishing around in his black flight pants and pull out his cock herself.

Thankfully, Sylvan got the hint and unfastened his pants. Immediately his cock sprang free, the broad, plum shaped head already shiny with precum.

Sophie bit her lip at the sight of it. Somehow she’d managed to forget exactly how very large it was, and how thick. *Will I really be able to take all that inside me?* Even though she was, as he said, a *numala*, could the extra lubrication her body made really enable her to take something so big in her inexperienced pussy? *Well, I’m going to find out*, she decided firmly. If she could get over her fear of his fangs, there was no way in hell she was going to let a fear of his size keep her from consummating this relationship. And besides, she *wanted* him inside her, wanted

to feel that thick shaft filling her completely while Sylvan held her and called her *Talana*. She wanted to *be* his Talana—his mate—in fact as well as in name.

Here goes, she told herself as Sylvan motioned for her to straddle him. *Just try to take it slowly or he'll suspect and this will all be over before you can get anywhere.*

She got herself settled with one knee on either side of his thighs, feeling her pussy part wide in the new position. It made her feel hot and vulnerable at the same time, being naked in his lap and spread out in such a shameless fashion. She was pretty certain that the old Sophie would never have done anything this blatant but she was the new Sophie now. She'd made a vow to herself aboard the Scourge ship—a vow to not waste another minute of her life—and she wasn't about to go back on it just because the position she found herself in felt embarrassing and naughty.

"Is this good?" she asked, when she was settled comfortably. The head of his cock wasn't quite touching her open folds but she hadn't lowered herself all the way down yet.

"Very good," Sylvan growled softly. "All right." He put his hands on her hips and nodded down to where his shaft was jutting up between them. "I'm going to let you take the lead. Just take me in your hand and rub me against you."

"L-like this?" Hardly able to believe she was doing it, Sophie wrapped her fingers around this thick, hot shaft and brought the broad, slick head to her slippery folds. She liked the feel of him in her hand—it was like holding a heated bar of iron covered in velvet. Even better, though, was the delicious friction of his flesh rubbing against hers. His precum felt warm and soothing against her swollen clit and the intimate contact made her toes curl with pleasure.

"Yes, exactly like that." His deep voice was strained and she could feel his fingers gripping her hips tighter and tighter. Clearly this was a real test of his self control—a test Sophie was determined to make him fail.

"Thank you, Sylvan," she murmured. "I'm feeling better already and I think it's helping with swelling and sensitivity. See?" Reaching between her legs with

her other hand, she parted her pussy lips with her middle and index finger. The new position gave him an excellent view of the head of his cock sliding over her swollen clit and slippery inner folds.

Sylvan groaned at the erotic sight. “*Gods*,” he said hoarsely. “Be careful, Sophia.”

“I’ve done this before, remember?” she reminded him breathlessly. When you were...were marking me for the second time in the cabin.”

“Yes, but then you were just rubbing yourself up and down my shaft,” he rumbled. “This time you’re rubbing the head of my cock against your open pussy. And since we’re both extremely wet, it would be very easy for me to slip into you.”

“You mean like *this*?” Deciding to take a chance, Sophie slid the broad head down the length of her slit until it lodged in the entrance to her pussy. At first she wasn’t sure he would fit but when she allowed herself to relax and spread her thighs a little wider, the spongy tip slid completely inside her channel, followed by at least two inches of his thick cock.

“Sophia, what are you doing?” Sylvan’s deep voice was a soft, warning growl but at least he made no move to pull out of her. In fact, he held himself completely immobile inside her, as though he didn’t dare to move an inch.

“I just wanted to feel you in me—just a little bit,” she whispered, biting her lip. Had she gone too far? The look on his face and the tension in his big body made her wonder for a moment. But she needed to go this far and farther if she was going to have Sylvan in her life permanently. “Please, Sylvan, don’t be mad,” she murmured, daring to cup his cheek. “It just felt so good on the outside and, well, I hurt on the inside too.”

His gaze, which had been almost scary in its intensity, softened at once. “I didn’t know you had pain on the inside as well.”

“I do,” Sophie told him, lying only a little. To be honest it was more like intense sensitivity than pain, but it *was* true that having him inside her, leaking precum in her unprotected pussy was making her feel better. She was even getting used to the thickness of his shaft—although she knew it was much thicker

toward the base. "Sylvan," she murmured, wiggling her hips just a little bit. "Do... do you think you could put it all the way in me? Just once?"

"To ease your pain?" he asked sternly. "Or do you have some other motive, Sophia?"

"Both." She looked him boldly in the eye. "I'm curious. I want to know what it feels like to have you all the way inside me."

"You're taking a risk, you know." But he was already moving, sliding the two inches she'd managed to capture along with the head of his cock out of her and then back in.

"How...how do you mean?" Sophie moaned as he pressed even deeper into her.

"My blood is burning." His blood red eyes flashed, emphasizing the truth of his statement. "And filling you with my cock makes me want to do more than just fuck you—it makes me want to bite you. To bond you to me. And if I do that—if I sink my fangs in you and inject my essence while I fill you with my cum—you'll never be free of me."

"What...what if I don't want to be free of you?" Sophie could barely get the words out. Despite his harsh words, Sylvan was fucking gently into her, entering her slowly, inch by inch, to allow her pussy to get used to the thickness of his cock.

"Don't say things you don't mean," he growled, thrusting a little harder. "I know how you feel about me, about my fangs. I've looked into your eyes when I gave you an injection and I've seen the fear and pain there. I don't want to see that look every time I make love to my bonded mate."

"You won't," Sophia promised him softly. He was almost all the way in her now—she could feel him stretching her wider with every shallow thrust. Soon he would fill her completely. "I...I swear you won't, Sylvan," she murmured.

"How can you be sure?" He demanded, sinking the final inch inside her. "How can *I* be sure?"

Sophie sucked in a breath at the feeling of fullness. God, she'd never had anything this big inside her before. Looking down she could see the place where they were joined—the root of his cock thrusting up into her open pussy, filling her to the hilt. And yet it still wasn't enough. But if she wanted more, she would have to convince him she meant what she said. That she really wanted him.

Reaching up, she pulled her hair to one side and bared her throat to him. "I offer myself to you freely, warrior, blood, body, and soul," she said softly, remembering the words Nadiah had taught her.

Sylvan's eyes flashed crimson with need. "I tell you again, do not say such things if you don't mean them, Sophia!"

"But I *do* mean it," she protested. "Take me, Sylvan—bite me. I *want* you to."

"Gods, *Talana*," he groaned. "You don't know what you're asking."

"Yes, I do. And Nadiah told me what *Talana* means, you know," she murmured, looking up at him. "She said that Blood Kindred only use it for their bonded mates."

A look of sorrow passed over his face. "That's true. I know I shouldn't have started calling you that in the first place. It just slipped out the first time and after that...it felt so right."

"I don't mind." Sophie's heart was racing and her body was aching for something she couldn't name—aching to have him move inside her, to fill her, fuck her, make her his. "In fact, I think...think you should make it a reality, not just a nickname."

Sylvan frowned. "Are you truly serious? You want me to bond you to me? You want to be my bride?"

Sophie felt like a thousand butterflies had just taken flight in her stomach. "Yes," she whispered. "I...I do, Sylvan. You know, I took a long hard look at all the problems standing between us a little while ago."

"And?" he murmured, raising an eyebrow.

She shrugged. "And they're not really problems at all. They're just excuses I made to myself because I was afraid of you—afraid of feeling so much. I...I guess

you could say that you thawed my heart too—the way you told me I thawed yours when we were dancing on Tranq Prime.”

“Oh, *Talana*.” He cupped her cheek and looked into her eyes. “Your heart was never frozen—it was just bruised.”

“Well, you healed it.” She smiled at him and wiggled her hips suggestively. “So please, Sylvan, heal the rest of me. Fill me with your seed and your essence—bond me and heal me at the same time. Make me yours.”

The look on his face was one of agony. “Gods, I’m still not sure if I’m doing the right thing but I can’t help myself. I need you too much!”

“I need you too,” Sophie assured him. “Please, Sylvan. *Please...*”

“As I said, I can deny you nothing. Sophia,” he said. Looking her in the eyes, he asked, “May I have your permission to penetrate you fully? To fill your pussy to the hilt with my cock?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, Sylvan—that’s *exactly* what I want.”

“Very well.” Taking a new grip on her hips, he pulled almost all the way out of her and then thrust back in.

Sophie moaned at the intense pleasure and spread her thighs wider, trying to be open enough for his thickness. “God, Sylvan, *yes!*” Grabbing his broad shoulders she dug her fingers into his flesh, letting him know how much she wanted him, how good it felt to take him so deep inside herself.

“Love the feel of you around me,” he growled softly, thrusting in again, even deeper this time. “I knew the first time I tasted you that you’d be able to take me. That you’d be deep enough and wet enough for me to sink my shaft to the root in your sweet, hot pussy.”

“God!” Sophie loved the way he talked to her while he fucked her—his hot, dirty words excited her almost as much as his thick shaft pounding into her over and over. Part of her could scarcely believe she was doing this, opening herself to him, letting herself go with such primal abandon. But another part—a part that had been buried for years and was only now emerging—gloried in her new

sensuality. “More,” she begged Sylvan, digging her fingernails deeper into his shoulders. “Give me *more*. Take me *harder*.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he objected but she shook her head.

“You’re not. Feels...incredible. Please...”

With a low growl he redoubled his efforts. “Is this what you want?” he demanded, thrusting up hard and then grinding himself into her, rolling his hips to press the head of his cock against the end of her channel. “You want to feel me inside you, fucking you, making you mine?”

“Yes...God, *yes*,” she almost sobbed. She could feel the pleasure inside her building to a peak. She just needed a little more...

Sylvan seemed to sense her need because one hand left her hip and slid across to the place where they were joined. Sophie cried out and bucked against him as she felt the broad pad of his thumb slide over her throbbing clit. The firm, knowing touch was exactly what she needed to send her into orbit. With a low, gasp, she felt herself beginning to come.

“Sylvan...oh God, I can’t...I’m...I’m...” She couldn’t get the words out but he seemed to understand. The hand that was still holding her hip tightened convulsively and his fangs seemed to grow even longer. *He wants to bite me*, she thought, still half delirious with the overwhelming pleasure that flooded her body. *Not just wants to...needs to. But he’s still not sure*. “Please,” she whispered hoarsely, looking him in the eye. “Please, Sylvan, do it. I...I offer the gift of my blood freely.”

“Sophia, I...” He shook his head and the look of agony was back in his eyes. “You have no idea how much I want to but I don’t think—”

Leaning forward, Sophie bit him on the neck as hard as she could.

It was the one thing Nadiah had assured her was guaranteed to make a Blood Kindred bite you—if you bit him first. Apparently it was a very erotic gesture and indeed, as Sophie sank her small white teeth into the strong column of his throat, she did feel incredibly sexy and primal. *I want you*, the gesture said in no uncertain terms. *And if you won’t take me, then I’ll take you*.

She tasted a small drop of blood on the tip of her tongue, salty and somehow delicious. And then all hell broke loose.

Sylvan pulled her away from his neck roughly and stared at her. For a long moment, Sophie was lost in his blazing eyes. All reason and logic was gone and the beast was there again—the same one she'd seen when he fought the Scourge commander. The one that had snarled at her when she tried to pull him from his prey.

She bit her lip at the sight. *This is it. This is what I get.* But this was what she *wanted*. And if this was the only way to get it—to get *him*—well then...

Heart pounding, she looked into those burning red eyes and bared her throat again. “Go ahead,” she said in a low voice, pressing the side of her neck to his mouth. “Bite me, Sylvan. I’d rather have a bite from you than a kiss from anyone else.”

There was no going back now. She felt his hot breath as he parted his jaws. As the sharp points of his fangs settled against her vein, the old fear rose up in her again and tried to crush her. *Needles piercing me, nurses holding me down, the smell of rubbing alcohol, that sharp, gonna-get-a-shot smell...No!*

It was the last thought that brought her out of it, that allowed her to push her panic aside. Because the only scent she smelled right now was Sylvan’s mating scent. Fresh and clean and rich and deep, it enveloped her completely, making her feel safe and loved, even as his fangs pierced her neck.

His scent made her feel safe and loved but the sharp pain of all four of his sharp points penetrating her vulnerable flesh still made her gasp and tighten her grip on his shoulders. *God it hurts, it hurts, it...* But suddenly the pain was gone. In its place was a warm, intoxicating pleasure that raced through her, triggering another orgasm almost at once.

“Oh!” she gasped as she felt herself tighten around his shaft. There was a heated, liquid rush inside her and she realized he must be coming in her as he bit her. And yet, he didn’t stop moving—in fact, it felt like he was just getting started.

Another orgasm rushed over her and then another. Sophie moaned in disbelief. *Feels so good. What **is** that?*

My essence.

Sophie was startled. The voice in her head very definitely wasn't her own. It sounded like Sylvan but how could he—

Because we're bonded now. His mind voice was full of tentative joy. As though he could hardly believe his good luck and he desperately hoped she felt the same way.

Oh right—the mind bond. Liv had told her about it—about how you gained the ability to speak telepathically with your Kindred mate without a Think-me once you were fully bonded. *So this means...we're together now? Forever?*

Yes. He thrust into her again, his hips rolling up in a deep, deliberate rhythm as he continued to fuck her. *Forever, Talana. You're mine and I'm yours. And I'm going to want to make love to you like this every day and every night for the rest of our lives. I'll want to bite you too. To fill you with my essence. Do you mind?*

Oh Sylvan... Wrapping her arms around his neck, she pressed the side of her throat harder against his mouth. *Does that answer your question?*

Indeed, it does. With a low growl he bit her again, this time sinking his fangs in deeper even as he sank his cock to the root inside her.

Sophie moaned as the fresh rush of pleasure washed over and through her. *Love you,* she whispered through their new link. *Oh, Sylvan, I love you so much...*

I love you too, Talana. Blood of my blood. My mate. My bride.

And then he was taking her higher and harder, making her his forever. Sophie gave herself to him completely, thinking that she didn't know how she would stand the pleasure or the joy of knowing that they would never be separated again...

* * * * *

“You tricked me,” Sylvan accused as he kissed his new bride playfully on the cheek. They were lying in his large bed, having finally moved from the couch after the third time they’d made love. Even now they weren’t done but they were taking a break so Sophia could rest.

“Only a little,” she admitted, kissing him back. Her cheeks were flushed with pleasure but her nipples and the inside of her pussy had gone from crimson back to their usual warm pink, Sylvan noted with relief. Obviously the Blood Fever was completely cured. “I had to,” she went on. “You were so determined never to touch me because you were so afraid of hurting me. I had to do *something*.”

“How did you know that biting me would be the one thing I couldn’t resist?” He’d enjoyed it immensely—the feeling of her little, white teeth sinking into his flesh was one of the most erotic experiences of his life. But it wasn’t something he would have expected Sophia to do.

“Oh, well...you can thank Nadiah for that. She, uh, gave me some pointers on the Blood Kindred.” She looked down, tracing a pattern on the blanket with one finger. “She was also the one that told me that your bite would only hurt for a second before it became extremely, ah, *pleasurable*.”

“What?” Sylvan was shocked. “Nadiah is much too young to know things like that! She’s just a child.”

Sophia appeared to be trying to smother a smile. “She may seem like that to you but I think she’s grown up a lot since the last time you visited your home world.” She frowned. “Why didn’t you tell me yourself what your bite would be like?”

“Because I didn’t know—I’d never bitten anyone before. And the experience of being bitten seems to be different for different females.”

“Not according to the romance novels Nadiah reads.” Sophia grinned. “They seem to be full of swooning damsels in distress who can only be saved from certain disaster by the bite of a virile Blood Kindred warrior. She even has Kindred posters on her walls.”

Sylvan shook his head. “I can’t help feeling that she knows too much for someone her age.”

“Why, how old is she, anyway?”

“Twenty-five,” Sylvan said absently.

“Twenty-five?” Sophia stared at him blankly. “You *do* realize that I’m only twenty-four myself, don’t you?”

“What?” Now he was truly startled. “I had no idea you were underage.”

“I’m *not*.” She laughed. “On my world—well, in my country anyway—we’re considered adults at eighteen.”

“Becoming an adult and being sexually mature are two different things,” Sylvan objected. “Residents of Tranq Prime come to sexual maturity much later than some other sentient species.” He frowned at Sophia. “Are you *certain*—”

“That I’m fully sexually mature?” She raised an eyebrow at him and grinned. “I think I just proved it, didn’t I?”

“I suppose...” Sylvan was still troubled by the idea that he might have taken advantage of her youth but Sophia didn’t seem bothered in the least.

“Come on, Sylvan, you shouldn’t be upset—about me *or* Nadiah. In fact, we should send her a thank you card—without her little pep talk I might never have gotten the courage to go after you.”

Sylvan frowned. “Send her a what?”

“You know—a thank you card. A little printed card with a verse or a poem in it? Sometimes they have funny pictures or sayings on them too.”

Sylvan was baffled. “I don’t understand. Why not just call her up and thank her over the viewscreen? Or tell her how we feel the next time we see her?”

“Because sending a card is *nice*. It shows you care and you’re thinking about the person you sent the card to,” Sophia explained. “And it...oh never mind.” She shook her head.

“No, really,” Sylvan protested. “I *do* want to understand your Earth customs.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She patted him on the shoulder. “You don’t have to be from another planet to not understand the importance of greeting cards—you only have to have a penis.”

He shook his head. “How does my shaft impair my inability to grasp your thank-you card custom?”

Sophia laughed. “I meant you just have to be *male*. Most Earth males don’t get the significance of sending a thank you card either. Anyway...” She stretched languidly and smiled up at him. “I’m going to let Nadiah know that she helped us—helped *me*—in some way. Maybe she could be in our wedding—as one of my maids of honor. Or...oh, no.” She sat up in bed suddenly, her cheeks going bright red.

“What? What’s wrong?” Sylvan was instantly on the alert. “Are you feeling ill again?”

“No, nothing like that. It’s just...I was kind of assuming a lot.” She looked down at her hands. “I mean, here I am planning the wedding, er, bonding ceremony and you haven’t even asked me to, you know, marry you.”

“Only because we haven’t stopped making love long enough to talk until now.” Sitting up beside her, Sylvan took her small, delicate hands in his and looked into her eyes. “Sophia Waterhouse, will you do me the honor of officially becoming my bride?”

“Oh Sylvan...” Her eyes suddenly brimmed with tears but she was smiling at the same time, making him marvel again at the enormous range of emotions Earth females were capable of. “Yes,” she whispered, pulling him down for a kiss. “Yes, yes, *yes*. And now we definitely have to have Nadiah in the wedding. So I can tell her I took her advice and went for it instead of holding back.”

“You should have waited,” he admonished her gently. “I had good reason to fear I would hurt you. My blood was burning—I was more beast than male before I bonded you.”

“You needed to be healed.” Sophia cupped his cheek and looked into his eyes seriously. “As much as I did. We healed each other—what’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, I suppose.” Sylvan smiled.

“It wasn’t just Nadiah that changed my mind about you...about *us*, you know,” she said softly. “I thought I was going to die on that Scourge ship. And my biggest regret was the fact that I’d kept you away—held you at arm’s length because of my fears.” She kissed him lightly on the mouth. “I swore to myself if I got out of there alive I wasn’t going to let fear stand in the way of having the male I loved anymore.”

“*Talana...*” He returned her kiss gently and then pulled back to look at her. “I’m so glad some good came of your ordeal. Although when I thought I’d lost you I wanted to die.” He felt a growl rising in his chest. “And when I saw that bastard crouching over you with a bloody knife I wanted to rip his throat out with my fangs. I thought—”

“But you thought *wrong*.” She put a hand on his arm as though to gentle him. “He didn’t hurt me or...or touch me inappropriately. That was what the AllFather wanted to do. Even though I wasn’t the one they were looking for, he still wanted to...to...” She shook her head, her face turning pale.

“Sophia...” Sylvan put an arm around her and looked at her with concern, but she shook her head.

“No, it’s all right. It’s over now and I’m not going to dwell on it. And like you said, some good *did* come of it. I finally got over my fear enough to let myself love you.” She looked at him shyly. “To return the love you gave me.”

“But are you *sure*?” Sylvan couldn’t help asking. “Are you certain you won’t change your mind about my fangs? About being bitten?”

Sophia smiled. “*Positive*. Here, I’ll prove it—show me your fangs.” When he hesitated she made a “come on” gesture with one hand. “Go ahead, let them come out. Or come down or whatever it is you do.”

“Very well.” Baring his teeth, Sylvan did as she asked, allowing his double set of fangs to extend completely.

“Good. *Very* good.” Sophia was staring at his fangs just as she’d used to before they were bonded. But now there was no fear in her face, only anticipation.

She lifted her wrist to his mouth and looked into his eyes. “Now bite me,” she murmured throatily.

“Why?” Sylvan demanded. “You’re already healed.”

Sophia arched an eyebrow at him. “You told me back at the cabin that a Blood Kindred only bites for two reasons—to heal his mate when she’s ill or injured or to arouse her during sex. So bite me, Sylvan...” Her voice was suddenly husky, her lovely eyes half-lidded with need. “Bite me because it turns me on to feel you in me—any part of you.”

“Sophia,” he murmured hoarsely. “*Talana...*” Taking her hand in his, he licked the underside of her wrist, tracing the delicate blue bracelet of veins with his tongue. She shivered under his touch and her breathing suddenly grew more rapid.

“That’s right,” she whispered as he pierced her tender flesh. “Now isn’t that a much better use for your fangs than ripping out someone’s throat?”

Sylvan stopped biting long enough to answer. “You probably should have let me do it, you know,” he said seriously. “The death I would have given him would have been gentle compared to whatever the AllFather will do to him for failing to bring you in.”

She shivered. “I don’t want to think about that right now. I just want to spend more time with you.”

Sylvan kissed her and smiled. “Biting or being bitten?”

“Both.” Leaning forward, she offered him her throat in a gesture so sensual it made his cock ache and his fangs fill with essence once more. “Warrior,” she murmured, “I offer you the gift of my blood freely. Will you accept it?”

“With all my heart,” Sylvan growled softly and then he was on her again, biting her, filling her, bonding her to him forever.

Chapter Thirty-seven

“You have failed yet again. The girl I commanded you to bring is gone.”

Xairn put a hand to his aching head as he bowed before the black iron throne. “What does it matter? She was not the one we sought.” When he’d woken up the Blood Kindred and his female were long gone. For some reason the warrior had sealed the hole he’d made in the hull of the asteroid ship, sparing Xairn’s life. Though he couldn’t fathom why.

He should have killed me, he thought dully. *It would have been better that way*. Of course, if he’d died, there would have been no one to care for Sanja. The automatic feeder would have kept her alive but there would have been no one to stroke her glossy fur and love her. Xairn wished she’d been with him earlier, before he folded space to go home. He’d been fifty light years away from the Fathership and so close to freedom. If he’d had his pet he could have simply left, never to return. And maybe—

“It matterssss because I *wanted* her.” The AllFather’s angry words broke his train of thought. “Her pain was unique—*exquisite*.”

“Sorry to deny you your favorite dish, father,” Xairn said heavily. “But there was nothing I could do. The warrior was deep in *rage*—I don’t even know why he let me live.”

“I don’t either.” The AllFather’s voice softened suddenly. “But I am glad you ssstill live my ssson.”

The words caught Xairn off guard and for a moment his heart felt as though someone had squeezed it. Could it be that his father was showing some emotion for him after all these long, barren years? Could it be that the AllFather actually *cared* whether he lived or died?

“And...and why is that, Father?” he asked, forcing his voice to stay even and calm.

“Because I would have missed you, of course.” The AllFather’s hissing voice was as soft as Xairn had ever heard it. Almost *gentle*.

“You would?” Xairn tried to smother the small flame of hope that grew in his starved heart. “Truly?”

“Truly.” The blazing red eyes seemed almost to smile. “Ssso I will forgive you for losing the girl—just this once. And sssince we ssstill have the marker in place, all you need do iss locate her and use the beam to retrieve her. Ssshe will be bonded to her warrior by now, ssso her pain will be even more deliciousss when I take her.”

Xairn swallowed, trying not to let his dismay show. “About the marker...”

“Yesss?” The AllFather’s eyes glittered dangerously. “It isss ssstill in place, isn’t it? Or could it be...” He rose from the black metal throne and began pacing, his shadowy robes billowing around his skeletal frame. “Could it be that you very *unwisely* removed it before letting the girl go free?”

“What...” Xairn swallowed again with a dry *click*. “What would make you think something like that?”

“Because when I activated the detection sssystem, the sssignal led back to your ssship.” The AllFather continued to pace as he spoke. “I was puzzled at first. I thought that maybe you’d brought the girl after all and had hidden her away to keep her for yourssself. But none of my guardsss could find her anywhere.” He nodded at the huge, vat grown guards at his back and Xairn noticed for the first time that there were only three of them this time. Where was the fourth? Before he could say anything, the AllFather continued.

“I did *eventually* find the missing marker—which sssomeone had detached from the girl.” He held up the small metal chip, its silver surface tarnished with dried blood.

“Father—”

“Of course I had a little help *sssniffing* it out,” the AllFather continued, ignoring his interruption. “Alpha,” he added, turning his head slightly. “Come forward and ssshow my ssson our little helper.”

Xairn had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach—a feeling of dread he tried desperately to dismiss. *No, it couldn't be. He couldn't have found out*—Then the AllFather's fourth guard came forward and all his worst fears were confirmed.

Sanja barked when she saw him, her stump of a tail wagging madly as she strained to get to her master. But the huge guard jerked on the metal leash she was attached to, causing the spiked choke collar around her throat to strangle her sounds of joy.

"No!" Xairn couldn't stop himself from reacting. "No, leave her alone!"

"Green eyesss." The AllFather laughed as Sanja stopped trying to bark and settled down at once. "Sssuch a pathetic little code. A reference, perhapsss, to your mother?"

Xairn just looked at him, refusing to answer.

"Did you truly think you could hide anything from my ssscan?" his father demanded. "Oh, you may have obscured a few detailsss—I wasss unable to retrieve the combination to your roomsss for instance, but with a little patience and a laser torch, my guardsss took care of that. It took them sssome time but the end result was sssatisfactory." The AllFather nodded at Sanja.

"She's just a pet," Xairn pleaded. "Beneath your notice, surely, Father."

"Sssuch emotion." The AllFather sounded like he was licking his nonexistent lips in anticipation of the pain to come. "Sssuch care you have sssquandered on this sssimple beast."

"Leave her alone, *please*." Xairn struggled to keep his voice level. "I will go after the girl myself. Even if it means infiltrating the Kindred Mother ship. I can use a pigment dye on my skin and eyes to fit in with them. I swear I will bring her back to you. Please, Father..."

"It isss too late." The AllFather shook his head. "The Kindred have already increased their ssshielding. Our the molecular transport beam cannot penetrate their new armamentsss. But I do not want the girl anyway. Not now." He began to pace again. "For now we mussst concentrate on finding the one the prophesy

spoke of—the *true* one this time. I am certain ssshe is of the sssame line as Sssophia and Olivia Waterhouse.”

“But the girl said there were no others. That all her relatives were dead. Did she lie?” Though he spoke of other things, Xairn’s eyes refused to leave his pet. How had the AllFather found her? *How*, when he’d been so careful to shield his mind? Or had his father known all along and only let him *think* he was keeping his secret safe?

“Sssophia told the truth—as far as ssshe knew it.” Absently, the AllFather put out a hand to scratch Sanja’s head. She whimpered and ducked away from him, obviously fearing his touch, but he took no notice. “But I believe that there iss another—one that neither Sssophia or Olivia knowsss of. We musst find her sssoon for I am nearing my peak—the time when my ssseed will be most potent. I musst have her here and ready for breeding before that happens.”

“Of course,” Xairn murmured. And then he couldn’t help asking, “And Sanja?”

“Your little pet?” The AllFather glanced down at the cowering *urlich* with obvious contempt. “I sssimply brought her forward to prove to you that you cannot hide thingsss from me. To teach you a *lesson*.”

“Yes, of course, forgive me, Father.” Xairn felt a great wave of relief wash over him. “I will never do it again.”

“Of course not.” The AllFather spoke gently as though to a naughty child. “For I ssshall remove that which you tried to hide.” Sitting back on the green-etched throne he nodded at his guard. “Alpha, bring the bitch to me.”

“No!” Xairn lunged forward but suddenly there were two huge guards at his sides, holding him back. “No, you said you just wanted to teach me a lesson. *Please*, Father!”

“And I ssshall teach you a lesson, my ssson.” The AllFather still spoke softly, but his crimson eyes were filled with a horrible kind of glee. “Fear not—I do not intend to kill your little pet. Though I dare ss say ssshe will be much altered when I am finished with her...”

Leaning down, he took Sanja's head between his hands. The *urlich* whined with fright at his cold touch, but the guard held her firmly, despite her struggles.

"Please," Xairn begged again. "She's never been modified—she can't defend herself! Can't...can't you do it to me instead?"

"Oh, I ssshall." The AllFather looked up briefly. "Never fear, Xairn, I will harve~~ss~~st your pain when I am finished driving this little bitch mad. It ssshould *almost* compensate me for the los~~ss~~s of the girl. And now..." He looked down at Sanja again, his red eyes boring into her soft brown ones. "Let me sssee, it hasss been yearss~~ss~~ sssince I practiced my art on a life form ssso sssimple but I believe... Ah yesss." His grip tightened on Sanja's head and she let out a painful *yip* that tore at Xairn's heart.

He's going to do it. He's going to drive her mad and it's going to hurt—he'll make it as agonizing as he possibly can. Xairn felt like he was going mad himself. To see his pet subjected to such torture—the one source of love and sanity he had on the cold, barren Fathership—was almost more than he could bear. *He'll damage her. Twist her the way he twisted me. Torture her in ways she'll never recover from.*

Sanja let out another pained cry and then another. She was whining continuously now, though her body had gone limp in the Alpha guard's arms. In fact, he no longer had to hold her still at all—she hung loosely in his grip, held in place only by the AllFather's will.

Xairn struggled mightily with the guards on either side of him but though he was six foot six and very muscular, the genetically engineered giants were larger by a foot and a half and hundreds of pounds each. Had Sanja been a female he was fighting for he might have had a chance. But she was a pet—a dearly beloved pet—but only a pet when all was said and done.

I don't care if she's just a pet—I can't let her be driven mad. Can't let her endure the torment and torture I've felt myself so many times before. But how could he stop it? How could he save her from the AllFather's evil grip, save her from the madness and pain and horror of his hungry, malevolent scan?

The AllFather's voice rang n his head. *Did you truly think you could hide anything from my ssscan? Oh, you may have obscured a few detailsss...*

Yes, a few details, Xairn thought grimly. *And if he couldn't get the combination to my rooms from my mind, surely he missed other things. Like the plans I put in place just in case he ever found Sanja.* A coldness fell over him and suddenly he knew what he had to do.

"Sanja," he called clearly, praying she wasn't too far gone to hear and obey his command. "Sanja, come to me, girl. *Come.*"

She trembled in the guard's massive arms, clearly fighting the AllFather's hold. Fighting...fighting with all her might to go to the master she loved.

And somehow love won over compulsion.

Though it should not have been possible, Sanja broke loose from both his father and the Alpha guard and rushed to Xairn's embrace. And though it nearly tore his arms from his sockets, he somehow found the strength to free himself from his captors and catch her.

"Good girl," he whispered, burying his face in her warm ruff. He didn't have much time—already the AllFather was issuing orders and the massive guards were converging on them, ready to pry her from his arms and return her to torment. "But I won't let that happen," Xairn whispered, hugging her fiercely. "I won't let him hurt you any more, girl."

"Take the bitch," he heard the AllFather command. "Bring her back to me and be certain my worthlesss ssson doesss not escape again. *Release her,*" he snarled at Xairn.

Xairn felt the compulsion...and somehow managed to overcome it. Somehow managed to disobey just this once, when it really counted. He kept Sanja firmly in his arms and ignored his father's orders.

"I'm sorry, girl. So sorry. I tried to protect you," he murmured, looking into her true, brown eyes one last time.

"Xairn!" The AllFather's voice rose with fury. "*I sssaid release her!*"

Again he fought the compulsion and again he won though it was harder this time—so much harder. It was now or never—he had to give the order he had always feared giving. The only one that could save his beloved Sanja from the evil and madness inflicted by his father. Save her from living a life as worthless and miserable as his own.

“Sanja,” he told her, his voice breaking as he voiced the dreaded command. “Sanja, *die*.”

At his order, the voice activated chip buried beneath her ruff went into action. The capsule containing a fast acting, painless poison broke open and the deadly substance spread throughout the *urlich*’s system instantly.

“Sanja,” Xairn whispered. Anguish coursed through his veins as the poison coursed through hers. “I’m so sorry. So very, very sorry...”

Faithful to the last, she licked his face, swiping away his tears with her long pink tongue. Then with a soft whimper, her eyes closed and she went limp in his arms.

“Idiot! Fool!” The AllFather was in a towering rage such as Xairn had never seen. “How dare you cheat me again of the pain I desssire!” He glared at Xairn. “Very well—I will sssimply have to extract twice as much agony from *you*.”

“You can try.” Xairn laid the limp body gently on the floor. He swiped once at his wet cheeks and when he rose to face his father, his eyes were dry.

The AllFather’s blazing red eyes narrowed but Xairn didn’t flinch or turn away from their probing stare. “What do you mean, *try*?” his father demanded at last.

Xairn shrugged. “Only that you’re welcome to scan me, Father. Do whatever you like. I don’t care.”

The AllFather made a curt gesture. “Beta, Gamma—bring him to me.”

Xairn was dragged forward roughly though he would have gone willingly. He no longer feared the AllFather’s cold caress—what more was there to fear? The worst had already happened.

“Look at me,” the AllFather snapped and Xairn looked dutifully into the red eyes. He felt the frigid fingers in his mind, saw his worst and most horrifying memories laid bare, but they no longer mattered. Even the face of his mother, her mouth shaping his name, her green eyes filled with tears, didn’t bother him. He was cold now—impervious.

The AllFather scanned harder, digging deeper and more brutally than he ever had before, but Xairn was unmoved. At last there was a savage curse and he felt the corpse-cold fingers withdraw from his brain.

“Why?” The AllFather glared at him. “You ssshould be brimming over with pain—ssshould be filled with agony. But I find nothing to feed upon, nothing to sssate my appetite.”

“There is nothing left,” Xairn replied, and knew it to be true. He was hollow inside now, a shell. The part of him that had been capable of love, of pity, of pain, was gone. It had died the moment the spark in Sanja’s eyes had gone out. “You should be glad, Father,” he said, looking into the AllFather’s crimson eyes, so hatefully like his own. “Finally you have a son in your own image. One who feels as much—and as little—as you.”

Chapter Thirty-eight

“So are you and Sylvan going to wait awhile before you tie the knot?” Liv asked. It had been over three weeks since Sophie’s return to the Mother ship and the three of them were sitting on the floor in Kat’s suite having a girl’s night in. Due to Liv’s cravings, the menu consisted mainly of ice cream, ice cream, and more ice cream. “Well?” Liv asked again and took another spoonful of Chunky Monkey from the carton the three of them were sharing. She licked it slowly, clearly savoring its rich flavor. “Mmmm. So *good*,” she moaned.

Sophie shook her head and laughed. “You’re too funny, Liv. The way you act, anyone would think you’d never tasted ice cream before.”

“I haven’t—not like this,” Olivia protested. “I’m serious, you guys. You have no idea how good food can taste when you’re pregnant. It’s like everything I eat is the best thing I’ve ever eaten.”

“Except for spaghetti and meatballs, right?” Sophie asked. There had been an incident just the other night with the now infamous Italian staple—one she was sure would never be repeated. Especially by poor Baird, who had been doing the cooking at the time. Liv had taken one look at the plate he’d placed proudly in front of her and promptly lost all the ice cream she’d had earlier for lunch.

Olivia shivered. “Ugh, don’t even *talk* about that! Don’t even *say* it. Just the idea of...of S and M makes me feel like I’m going to hurl.”

“Oh yeah? I thought you said Baird was uh, into *S and M* now.” Sophie nudged her sister and grinned at Kat, who gave her a weak smile in return.

“Ha-ha, very funny,” Olivia said dryly, taking another spoonful of ice cream. “I never should have told you about that. I should have let you find out about the Law of Conduct on your own.”

“Oh I’m not worried about Sylvan spanking me.” Sophie grinned. “He’s too busy *biting* me for that.”

Liv shook her head. “How you got over your fear of needles enough to be into *that* I’ll never know. And if he’s biting you all the time, how we can’t see any marks on your skin?”

“He heals me too,” Sophie answered promptly. “He just licks me and the little holes disappear. It’s *amazing* what he can do with his tongue.”

“I’ll bet,” Liv said dryly.

Sophie blushed. “I didn’t mean—”

“I know what you meant. Anyway, back to your wedding—when are you having it?”

Sophie licked her own spoon of ice cream thoughtfully. “I want to wait until Nadiah comes of age so she can be part of it. Of course her parents think I’m crazy, so they don’t want her to have anything to do with me. But she swears she’ll be here the minute she can legally come.”

“Sounds like you bonded pretty quickly out there on Tranq Prime,” Olivia remarked.

“Well, yeah. She was the only person there besides Sylvan that wasn’t absolutely horrible.” Sophie shivered. “I mean, don’t get me wrong—I’ll give the place another shot if I *have* to—especially now that MM2 is behaving itself.” She stroked the green *tharp*, which she was wearing as a shawl at the moment. “But I *really* don’t want to.”

Liv made a face. “I just can’t believe you came back with one of those creepy live blankets and you actually made a *pet* out of it.”

“So what?” Sophie said a little defensively. “MM2 is actually really sweet—you just have to know how to talk to it. Isn’t that right, MM2?” she cooed, stroking the *tharp*.

Olivia just shook her head. “So how does Sylvan feel about you two ‘living in sin’ until Nadiah can be part of the bonding ceremony?” she wanted to know. “I mean, you *do* know that’s what Grandma and Grandpa Jakes would have called it, right?” Their mother’s parents had been notoriously strict about anyone living together without being legally wed.

“Yes, I know.” Sophie sighed. “But they’re dead so it’s not like I can invite them to the wedding.”

“I wouldn’t think you’d want to even if they were alive,” Olivia said. “That’s the reason they kicked mom’s sister, out of the family, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know,” Sophie admitted. “Mom would never talk much about Aunt Abby to me but I always got the idea that they were really close—almost as close as the three of us.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s the reason they got rid of her.” Liv took another bite of the ice cream which was almost gone. “I got the story out of Dad once. He said Aunt Abby got pregnant ‘out of wedlock’ and they kicked her out of the house when she started to show. Mom wanted to go be with her when she had the baby but Grandma and Grandpa forbid it. And then Aunt Abby died having the baby. It was a little girl and she was going to name it after Mom, only the...the little baby g-girl didn’t make it either.” She sniffed and her eyes began to water. “Dad said Mom never forgave herself for not being with her sister when...when she d-died. Oh God, I’m sorry.” She wiped her eyes on a stray napkin. “Stupid pregnancy hormones.”

“It’s all right.” Sophie put a hand comfortingly on her twin’s shoulder. “It is a really sad story. But to get back to your question, Sylvan doesn’t care how long we wait. I think the Kindred really do these ceremonies more for our benefit than for theirs—in his mind, we’re already married.”

“I think Baird felt the same way once we were bonded,” Liv said thoughtfully. She blew her nose on a paper napkin and then nudged Kat playfully. “What about the Twin Kindred, Kat? How do they feel about ‘living in sin?’”

“I wouldn’t know, since I’m not talking to any of them at the moment.” Kat tried to smile but it turned into kind of a grimace instead.

“Kat, are you all right?” Olivia leaned toward her anxiously.

Kat made a shooing motion with one hand. “Fine, I’m fine.” But her voice was barely there and her usually rosy cheeks were as pale as paper. Worse, the circles under her deep blue eyes were almost as dark as bruises.

“No, you’re not,” Liv said firmly. “You’ve been quiet for weeks. Sophie and I were hoping you’d open up in your own time but we can’t wait anymore. You *have* to talk, Kat—tell us what’s going on. You’ve hardly said a word all night.”

“And you haven’t eaten a bite,” Sophie pointed out. “I figured you and Liv would do battle once I pulled out the Ben and Jerry’s but you haven’t even had a single spoonful.”

“Yeah, Kat woman, if you keep on like this you won’t be one of the ‘elite’ for long.” Liv’s tone was joking but it was clear she was really worried about their friend.

“Sorry girls but for the first time ever, I’m just not hungry.” Kat put a hand to her head. “I’ll tell you, messing around with the Twin Kindred is a great diet plan.”

“Really?” Liv asked.

Kat nodded. “Seriously, Weight Watchers had better watch their ass. If word gets out they’ll lose half their membership and the HKR building will be packed with plus sized ladies looking for love in all the wrong places.” She tried to laugh but it turned into a groan.

Sophie felt horribly guilty. “It’s because you had to join with Deep and Lock again to find me, isn’t it? Are you still feeling all their emotions?”

Kat nodded. “They’re not fading like they did last time. And this headache...” She shook her head and then winced, as though she regretted the movement. “It just won’t quit.”

“Oh God, Kat, I’m so sorry!” Sophie put an arm around her and pulled her into a hug. “I feel terrible. If you hadn’t been trying to find me you would never have put yourself through that again.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Kat hugged her back tightly before letting go. “I’d do it again if I had to, Sophie. Even if it *does* mean having two of the most annoying males in the history of the universe stuck in my skull. Well, Lock isn’t so bad—he’s really sweet, actually. But Deep...” She shook her head and winced again.

“Damn—gotta stop doing that. Anyway, Deep is a piece of work. And he feels the same way about me that I do about him.”

“Which is?” Olivia raised an eyebrow at her.

“Let’s just say our mutual feelings aren’t all sunshine and rainbows,” Kat said dryly. “And we’re both feeling them just as hard as we can 24/7. Or however you measure a day on this stupid ship.”

“Well it faded last time after awhile,” Sophie said hopefully. “Maybe it’s just taking a little longer this time because you had to look so far away to find me.”

“It *was* an intense joining,” Kat admitted in a low voice, running one hand through her long auburn hair. “But I just—”

“Just what?” Sophia had turned her attention to the empty ice cream carton again, which Olivia was scraping to get the last spoonful. She looked back over at Kat just in time to see her eyes roll up before she collapsed in a heap on the floor. “Omigod—Liv!” she gasped.

Olivia threw down the ice cream carton and spoon and went into action at once. “She’s having a syncopal episode. Get her feet higher than her head and call Sylvan—*now!*”

“A *what* episode?” Sophie grabbed her friend’s feet and began piling cushions from the couch under her knees.

“She fainted,” Liv clarified, helping with the cushions. “Is Sylvan on the way?”

“*Sylvan come quick! Kat fainted!*” Sophie sent.

“*On my way. Where are you?*” she heard him send back through their new link.

“*Kat’s suite. Hurry, Sylvan! I’m scared!*”

“*Is she breathing?*”

“Is she breathing?” Sophie asked, repeating his question to Liv.

“Breathing is shallow and her pulse is thready.” Liv had two fingers pressed to the side of Kat’s neck. “I hope Sylvan’s bringing his med kit.”

“I’ve got it right here.” Sylvan burst into the room, a grim look on his face. After checking Kat’s breathing and heartbeat, he lifted her eyelids carefully and examined her eyes.

“Well?” Sophie and Olivia spoke together.

“I was afraid of this.” Sylvan shook his head grimly.

“Afraid of *what*, Sylvan?” Liv demanded. “Just tell us what’s wrong and if she’ll be okay.”

“I’m sorry.” He shook his head. “I don’t know the answer to either question. “She came to me a little while ago complaining about severe headaches and spells of dizziness. I did several scans but everything came out negative.”

“Then what’s *wrong*?” Sophie was crying, she couldn’t help it. “I mean if all her scans are clear?”

“I don’t know but I think it has something to do with the joining she had with Deep and Lock.” He touched her shoulder gently. “I’m sorry, *Talana*. I should have told you earlier but Kat wanted to keep it from you. She was afraid you’d feel guilty.”

“If it has something to do with their joining, then maybe Deep and Lock have an idea of what’s going on,” Liv said practically. “Sophie, run get them *now*. Sylvan and I will stay with Kat.”

“Don’t bother.” Sylvan shook his head. “Get me a Think-me—I’ll bespeak Lock.”

“Of course.” Liv snapped her fingers. “I brought mine with me—now where did I put it?”

“Here it is!” Sophie snatched it from the end table and jammed it on Sylvan’s temples. “Hurry!”

Sylvan concentrated for a moment and then looked up. “He and Deep are on the way. They’re just down the—”

“Where is she?” Deep burst into the room, a wild look on his dark face. “What happened?”

“She just collapsed.” Sophie was still crying as she looked at the still form of her friend. *Oh God, Kat...Kat, please be okay. Please!*

“We were just coming to see her.” Lock came in behind his twin. “To tell her our ship was ready to leave for Twin Moons. We...we were going to try and convince her to go with us.”

“She never would have,” Liv objected fiercely. “You know that—you know how she feels.”

“Yes, Olivia, we are *intimately* acquainted with the way Kat feels,” Deep snarled sarcastically. “Both day and night.” He tapped his temple. “We can’t get away from her feelings, no matter how much we might want to.”

“You’ll have to excuse Deep,” Lock told Liv apologetically. “Kat, uh, doesn’t like him very much.”

“So she was just telling us.” Olivia gave Deep a challenging stare and he glared back in return.

“Enough!” Sylvan’s deep voice rumbled with authority. “Kat’s been complaining of severe headaches and dizziness for weeks and her symptoms weren’t getting any better. Deep, Lock, what can you tell me? Does it have anything to do with the joining the three of you shared?”

“It’s possible.” Lock knelt on the floor beside her and cupped Kat’s pale cheek gently. “It might have to do with the fact that we used her as a focus to find Sophia, even though she’s female and we’re male. Or—”

“Look! Look at her,” Olivia interrupted excitedly. For some of Kat’s color had returned and her breathing seemed more even—at least to Sophie, who was still watching from behind Sylvan’s broad shoulder.

“Is she getting better?” Lock withdrew his hand and sat back, watching Kat hopefully.

But the moment he withdrew his hand, the color faded from her cheeks.

“Oh no!” Liv moaned. “Her pulse was getting so much better but now it’s weak again. Sylvan, can’t you give her some kind of stimulant?”

Sylvan had been watching the situation, his ice blue eyes taking in everything with his typical cool, logical precision. “She doesn’t need a stimulant—not a chemical one, anyway.” He turned to look at Lock. “Touch her again. Put your hand on her bare skin and keep it there.”

Lock followed orders at once, holding one of Kat’s limp hands. Sophie was relieved to see the color return once again to her friend’s cheeks.

“Now you.” Sylvan nodded at Deep. “Come over here—take her other hand.”

Deep looked like he wanted to protest but Lock gave him a pleading glance.

“Please, Brother,” he murmured. “Our Kat *needs* you.”

Deep didn’t answer but he did act. Scowling, he knelt beside Kat and took her hand with infinite gentleness, as though he was afraid he might break her somehow.

The effect was immediate. Color rushed to Kat’s face and her eyelids fluttered rapidly. “No!” she moaned, writhing on the floor. “Too much...*too much!*”

Deep dropped her hand as though he’d been stung and she subsided at once.

“She’s stabilized again,” Liv reported, relief in her voice. “For a minute there I thought she was going into cardiac arrest but she’s all right now.”

“It looks like you were wrong, Brother,” Deep sneered, rising to his feet. “*Our Kat* doesn’t need me at all. She only needs *you*.”

“Deep—” Lock began but his brother had already stalked away, making room, presumably, between himself and the scene around Kat.

“She’s doing better now but she can’t stay here,” Sylvan said decisively.

“Of course not,” Olivia agreed. “She’ll have to be moved to the med station. I’ll call for a stretcher.”

“No, Olivia.” Sylvan shook his head. “I ran a full battery of tests on her a week ago and I reran them again yesterday. Every one was negative. There’s nothing more I can do for her here on the Mother ship.”

Sophie was aghast. “But then where are you saying Kat should go? If you can’t help her, who can?”

“Someone on Twin Moons, I hope.” Sylvan looked at Lock. “Your people are the only ones that know anything about how the seeker/finder/focus relationship works. Is there anyone on your home planet that might be able to help Kat?”

“There is a very ancient healer—Mother L’rin,” Lock said slowly. “She knows more about seeking and finding than anyone else on the planet. She might be able to help Kat.”

“What?” Olivia demanded. “You want to just send her off to a strange planet with two men she can’t stand, with the hope that some old witch woman who probably has no formal medical training *might* be able to help her? No, Sylvan. *No!*”

Sylvan faced her squarely. “Then she’ll die. Look at her, Olivia—she’s been steadily deteriorating for days. This is the best she’s looked since I saw her at your joining ceremony, but Lock can’t spend the rest of his life holding her hand.”

“I can try.” Lock had been staring down at Kat but now he looked up at Olivia, his heart in his eyes. “I’ll do whatever I can to heal the lady Kat,” he said softly. “I care for her and so does Deep—he just doesn’t know how to express it.”

“I’d say he expresses his emotions just fine,” Liv said sourly. “But that’s not the point. Who even is this Mother L’rin person? What are her qualifications? Where did she do her residency?”

“Olivia...” Sylvan put a steadying hand on his sister-in-law’s shoulder. “Please. You’ve trusted me in the past. I wouldn’t be recommending this course of treatment if I thought there was any other way to save Kat.”

Liv looked at him, her mouth open to say something...and then she seemed to deflate. Her eyes filled with tears and she shook her head. “I’m sorry, Sylvan. But Kat...”

“She’s like a sister to us,” Sophie finished for her twin. She came out from behind Sylvan’s shoulder and went to hug Liv. “And if anything happens to her...”

“It won’t.” Deep was suddenly there beside his brother, standing over Kat protectively. “Lock is right—Mother L’rin has saved more lives than anyone can count. Only the most hopeless and desperate cases are brought to her and with

good reason—she generally cures them.” He looked at Liv. “Are those credentials good enough for you?”

Liv swallowed hard. “And...you say she’s an expert at this kind of thing? The...seeker/finder thing?”

Lock answered for his brother. “She is. She’s the one who trained our mentor, F’lir. She’s revered on our planet.”

“She sounds really great,” Sophie ventured. “But to send Kat away to a strange planet—”

“We’ll go with her,” Olivia said, squeezing Sophie’s hand. “Of course we will.”

“Oh, no you won’t.” Baird walked into the room, frowning and Sophie wondered if Sylvan had called him. Liv opened her mouth to protest but he shook his head. “You’re expecting *Lilenta*. You can’t go.”

“Baird is right,” Sylvan said quietly. “You can’t go through folded space while you’re pregnant. The effects on the fetus are...bad. Very bad.” He shook his head.

“Well then, *I’ll* go,” Sophia said. “Sylvan and I have only been together three and a half weeks so—”

“Three and a half weeks in which we’ve been making love every spare minute, *Talana*,” Sylvan reminded her in a low voice. “How can you be sure you’re not with child as well?”

“I could take a test,” Sophie said weakly but he shook his head.

“It wouldn’t be conclusive—not at this stage. But if you wish to take the risk...”

It was on the tip of her tongue to say that of course she would take the risk but Sophie looked in his eyes and saw the sadness there. Though he hadn’t spoken of it, she knew he yearned for what Baird and Liv had, knew how he wanted a son of his own. And her period *was* late. It might be a false alarm and she kind of hoped it was—she wasn’t sure if she was ready to be a mom just yet. But if it wasn’t...

“Sophia,” Baird said softly, looking at her. “Kat risked her life to save you. I don’t think she’d want you to lose a child just to go with her.”

Sophie bit her lip. “But to send her all by herself, alone and unprotected to an entirely different planet—”

“She won’t be alone,” Lock said in a low voice.

“And she won’t be unprotected.” Deep’s black eyes flashed. “Kat may hate me,” he said, speaking to Liv and Sophie both. “But I swear to you now, I will protect her with my life. Lock and I will die before we see her come to harm.”

“Deep speaks for us both,” Lock said quietly. “The lady Kat will come to no harm while she is in our care. This we both swear, on our honor as Kindred warriors.”

Sophie looked at the two huge males, one kneeling beside Kat and the other standing protectively over her. And suddenly she knew she could trust them. “Liv,” she said softly, turning to her twin. “They mean it—they really do.”

Liv sighed. “I know,” she whispered, wiping away a tear. “I...I can tell. Do you think Kat will ever forgive us?”

“I don’t know.” Sophie squeezed her hand. “But I think we have to let her go.”

“You’re making a wise decision,” Sylvan sent through their link. *“Kat will thank you for it later.”*

“Will she? I don’t know.” Looking down at Kat’s still form, Sophie felt tears rise in her throat and swallowed them down with difficulty. *“Oh Sylvan, I just don’t know...”*

THE END

Brides of the Kindred Glossary

AllFather—the evil head of the Scourge, a race that are the byproduct of a failed genetic trade. The AllFather is one of the Old Ones and has the power to reach into a person’s mind to harvest emotional pain and trauma. He lives for the fulfillment of the Scourge Prophecy.

Bespeak—to contact someone mentally using a Think-me device. It is considered rude to bespeak someone you don't know intimately.

Beast/Rager Kindred—come from Rageron—a jungle planet full of beautiful but deadly flora and fauna. They have dark hair, golden eyes, and hot tempers but their most defining characteristic is the mating fist. The mating fist is an area at the base of the Beast Kindred's shaft which engages fully only during bonding sex with his chosen mate. When engorged it swells to keep the Beast Kindred and his bride locked together until she is completely bonded to him. This ensures sex that is both extremely long lasting and multiorgasmic for both partners.

Blood Fever—a condition suffered by unmated females on Tranq Prime, the home world of the Blood Kindred. Blood Fever or Burning Blood, as it is often called, is caused by a parasite living on the icy world that affects only women. The parasite—found in the *fleeta* or blood beetle—reacts with a compound in the Tranq Prime water supply to cause the fever. Symptoms include chills, the feeling of the blood heating in the veins, and increased coloration of the nipples and inner sex. If the fever is not treated in forty-eight hours, it will result in death.

Once a Kindred male has had a female's blood, he forms a natural antidote to Blood Fever which he can pass on by sharing body fluids with her. The most effective way to get the antidote into the female's system is for a Blood Kindred to bite her, thereby injecting it along with his essence. However, it is also possible to pass along the healing fluid through sex.

Blood Fever used to be very common on Tranq Prime which is what prompted the cold, proud natives to initiate a genetic exchange with the Kindred in the first place. A recent vaccine has nearly eradicated the disease, however, and the original inhabitants of the ice bound planet have little reason to continue the trade. A faction calling themselves Purists are against any further trade with the Kindred.

Blood/Tranq Kindred—are blond with pale blue eyes and come from Tranq Prime where ice, snow, and arctic-like temperatures are the norm. To combat the severe weather conditions, the Blood Kindred have higher than normal body heat with double the human amount of red blood cells. They have developed specific biting rituals to share their supercharged blood and take the blood of their mates during their own version of bonding sex. They have a set of double fangs located where a human's canine teeth would be. These fangs do not develop fully or become sharp enough to pierce flesh until a Blood Kindred is with a woman he wishes to mate and bond with.

Bonding Ceremony—a wedding-type ritual which takes place after the Claiming Period if the bride chosen by a Kindred warrior has allowed him to have bonding sex with her and joined her mind to his.

Bonding Sex—the extra step a Kindred warrior takes to bind his bride to him permanently during intercourse. For the Beast Kindred, it is the use of the mating fist. For the Blood Kindred, bonding sex means biting to inject his essence during penetration. Twin Kindred bind a bride to themselves by entering her as one and coming in her at the same time.

Claiming Ceremony—a sort of engagement service that takes place when a bride is first claimed by a Kindred warrior. He declares his intentions toward her and she vows to obey the laws of the Claiming Period.

Claiming Period—women who are drafted are required to go up to the Kindred Mothership and spend a thirty day “claiming period” with the warrior who has chosen them. If, at the end of that time, they have managed to resist the charms of their Kindred mate, they are allowed to go back down to Earth and resume their normal life. However, if they succumb to their Kindred male's

seduction, they are mated for life and must move to the Kindred ship to live, leaving everything else behind and seeing their family and friends on Earth only infrequently. Of course, many women are unwilling to give everything up at the drop of a hat, draft or no draft. But the Kindred have a secret weapon—devotion to their female’s pleasure and attention to detail during incredibly hot sex.

Claiming Period Rules—The Claiming Period lasts for four weeks during which the Kindred warrior attempts to seduce his chosen bride and she tries to resist him:

The Holding Week: the Kindred warrior may hold his bride.

The Bathing Week: the warrior and his bride bathe together and he is allowed to massage her with scented oils and make her come.

The Tasting Week: the warrior is allowed to perform oral sex on his bride.

The Bonding Week: sex is allowed but it is completely up to the bride whether she will take things a step further and allow bonding sex which is a special and specific process to the three different types of Kindred males. (Most women have given in well before this point but a few do resist.)

The only way out before the claiming period is up is a breach of contract. This can happen if the Kindred warrior does not strictly follow the rules and tries to skip forward in the order of allowed events or by breaking one of the rules laid down by the Kindred High Council. These rules—mostly to do with restrictions on communication with Earth—are for the safety of everyone aboard the Mothership and are nonnegotiable. Ignorance is no excuse for breaking them and will result in immediate termination of the claiming period.

Dream Sharing—occurs when a Kindred warrior’s mind aligns with that of his bride and they begin to see each other’s day to day activities and memories in their sleep. However, the alignment of the two (or three in the case of the Twin Kindred) minds can take several forms and is not limited to sleep.

Fireflower Juice—an alcoholic beverage made from the Fireflower plant native to Rageron. It resembles milk in appearance but has the flavor of honey, vanilla, lavender and blueberries.

Kindred—a race of genetic traders who have traveled the universe for centuries looking for viable matches to expand their gene pool. Since a genetic anomaly ensures that their population is ninety-five percent male, they are specifically looking for women.

The three genetic trades the Kindred have already made have resulted in three very specific types of men. But though they take on some of the physical characteristics of the race they are trading with, the Kindred gene always ensures three things: physical prowess, extremely large and muscular body structure, and undying loyalty to the female of their choice.

Krik-ka-re—a Scourge tradition in which the mind life of one being may be traded for or ransomed by another.

Law of Conduct—the Kindred law which says every warrior is responsible for the good behavior of his bride and gives him the right to punish her—within reason. Often the “punishment” is sexual in nature and some brides become serial offenders simply to experience their Kindred warrior’s particular form of discipline. ;)

Luck Kiss—a kiss performed by the best man and maid of honor at a Kindred Bonding Ceremony in order to bring the happy couple good luck.

Mate of my kin—the way Kindred warriors refer to the brides chosen by their brothers. It is analogous to the English term sister-in-law.

Mother of All Life—the main Kindred Deity, a kind and benevolent goddess whose teachings include respect and reverence for all things female.

Numala—a Blood Kindred name which means “liquid pussy.” It refers to a female who produces more than the regular amount of lubrication when aroused. *Numalas* are much prized by the Blood Kindred and sought after as mates because they are more likely to be able to accommodate a Blood Kindred warrior’s larger than average cock.

Rage—also ***Protective Rage*** or ***Berserker Rage***—a state of altered consciousness that comes over a Kindred warrior when his bride is threatened. It floods the bloodstream with endorphins and causes such intense anger and aggression that a Kindred in this state becomes a killing machine who will die to protect the woman he has claimed.

Sacred Grove—an area of green and purple trees that houses the temple of the Mother of All Life. The Kindred Mother ship has been equipped with an artificial green sun like the one on their home world in order to allow these holy trees to grow and flourish.

Scourge—a genetic trade gone wrong, these menacing outsiders have twisted desires and sexual needs fierce enough to frighten away even the most adventurous. Their need to dominate and possess their women completely has led to a strange prophesy that they must fulfill...or die trying.

Scourge Prophecy—“One of two, alike and yet different—the double fruit of a single womb from the third planet of a yellow sun. She shall be marked with a white star between her breasts.” These words were spoken by Mee’ah—the last living female of the Scourge race who was believed to be a great seer. The Scourge are a dying race, forced to create new members in artificial wombs called flesh

tanks because they have no females. Yet, because they have some of the same genetic characteristics as the Kindred they are able to create only male children and each new generation is weaker than the last. The prophesy refers to the woman the Scourge believe will be able to mate with the AllFather and bear only daughters to rejuvenate their race.

Take-me—an animal native to Twin Moons that has been domesticated by the Kindred for transportation aboard their ship. The Take-me has green fur and two heads, one on either end. Each head has three purple eyes. The Take-me has the unique features of being to expand and compress its mass which makes it ideal for storage. Because they originally lived in caves, most Take-mes stay very contentedly in small dark areas in the Kindred food prep areas where they live off the scraps and leavings of their master's meals. They can eat almost anything except banana peels which they are allergic to.

Tharp—an animal that looks very much like a thin fur blanket which can be worn as a garment. *Tharps* are cultivated on Tranq Prime and prized for their ability to multiply their host's body heat and keep them warm in even the most frigid conditions. A *tharp* can be worn by only one person— as a neophyte or youngster it imprints upon a host and will slowly starve if parted from them. *Tharps* are intelligent and capable of limited movement. They live as long as their host and subsist only on body heat, needing no other form of sustenance to survive.

Think-Me—a thin silver wire worn around the temples which facilitates mental communication between people who already have an intimate connection.

Touch-U—a flat black mat-like animal native to Tranq Prime which the Kindred have adapted to be a home health appliance. The Touch-U is capable of

giving a gentle massage or an all-out erotic experience depending on which button is pushed.

Twin Kindred—come from Twin Moons—a world of vast, stormy oceans dotted with craggy but beautiful islands. True to their namesake, Twin Kindred always come in pairs. The brothers are not identical, however. There is always a light twin and a dark twin. These labels refer not just to skin, hair, and eye coloring but to the twin's moods and perceptions of the world. The dark twin in the pair is usually more moody and withdrawn while the light twin takes a substantially brighter view of life. The twins are closely linked and able to sense each other's emotions. They cannot be separated by long distances or for long periods of time without severe pain. They must also share a woman, linking her into their mental and emotional exchange for very intense ménage sex.

Urlich—a type of dog bred by the Scourge. At maturity they are modified with machinery to heighten their sense of smell and intelligence which results in a cyborg-type animal. Once in pursuit of whatever scent has been programmed into their brains, the *urlich* are utterly single minded and incapable of stopping until their prey has been cornered and captured.

Wave—a Kindred cooking appliance which emits thousands of finely collimated beams of heat to cook food in under a minute.

Zichther—an animal native to the jungles of Rageron, the zichther resembles a small bright blue teddy bear in appearance until it opens its mouth and reveals three rows of incredibly sharp, shark-like teeth.

Read on to find out about Brides of the Kindred 3—Sought, coming later this year.

Kat O'Connor is no pushover. She's a no nonsense girl with a commonsense approach to life. But there's nothing common about what's been happening to her lately...

First she was forced to have a kinky mind-ménage with two of the hottest and most irritating men in the galaxy—Twin Kindred warriors, Deep and Lock—in order to locate her kidnapped friend. But the mental three-way left her with a little gift—she can't get their feelings out of her head. Now she's on her way to their home planet, Twin Moons, to find a cure for the debilitating illness their unorthodox joining caused, when all she *really* wants to do is go home.

Locks Tight, the light twin of the two, is already in love with Kat. Her curvy plus-sized body is the epitome of beauty on his home planet and her sharp mind and snarky wit make her doubly attractive. But though he fell for her the moment he saw her, Twin Kindred are unable to mate a woman alone. Lock knows nothing can happen between them without his brother...

Stabs Deep. The dark twin has a secret agony in his past—a tragedy he feels he and he alone is to blame for. He too, hungers for Kat, but he hides his fear of rejection behind an impenetrable wall of angry sarcasm. For if he lets anyone get too close, the unbearable pain he has already endured once may happen again.

Now Kat and her twin warriors are on a quest—but they're all looking for different things. Kat wants to find a way to dissolve the half-formed bond between them so she can be alone in her own head again. Lock wants to convince both her and his brother to complete the bond which will keep them together forever. And Deep is trying to protect his heart and love Kat from afar...though it grows more and more difficult to deny the hunger he feels for her.

Their travels will take them from the uncharted wilds of Twin Moons to the Deadworld of the Scourge home planet. Will Kat find a cure for having other people's emotions crowding her mind? Will Lock convince his brother and the woman they both love that they're all meant to be together forever? And will Deep ever unshield his heart long enough to let Kat in?

You'll have to read *Sought*, the third book in the Brides of the Kindred series, to find out...

About the Author

Evangeline Anderson is a registered MRI tech who would rather be writing. And yes, she is nerdy enough to have a bumper sticker that says "I'd rather be writing." Honk if you see her! She is thirty-something and lives in Florida with a husband, a son, and two cats. She had been writing erotic fiction for her own gratification for a number of years before it occurred to her to try and get paid for it. To her delight, she found that it was actually possible to get money for having a dirty mind and she has been writing paranormal and Sci-fi erotica steadily ever since.

You can find her online at her website www.evangelineanderson.com Come visit for some free reads and to find out what's coming soon.

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