



RESCUED

BRIDES OF THE KINDRED. 30

EVANGELINE

NEW YORK TIMES & USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

ANDERSON

RESCUED

BRIDES OF THE KINDRED, BOOK 30

EVANGELINE ANDERSON

Rescued, 1st Edition,
A Brides of the Kindred Novel
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RESCUED

Two couples, two quests...one ultimate evil to defeat. Will the four of them survive? You'll have to read this D/s, Wounded Warrior, Enemies to Lovers, Touch her and Die, Spicy Romance Brides of the Kindred 30, *Rescued*, to find out!

Davrik is a Kindred warrior who lost his beloved wife in a shuttle crash five years ago. Unwilling to accept her loss, he embarks on a mission to find her doppelganger in alternate universes. Sonya, trapped in a world devoid of love, becomes the center of his desperate rescue mission.

Captured by the Scourge and sold to an alien brothel, Sonya's life has taken a dark turn. When Davrik arrives, offering salvation, she is overjoyed at first. But that's before she discovers a secret that shatters her heart and changes everything she thought she knew.

Lan'ara, an Empath Kindred, senses the emotions of others. Guided by her connection with Nate, a captured ex-Navy Seal, she races against time to save him from the brink of destruction. But Nate is suffering from severe PTSD, which makes him a danger to everyone around him. Can Lan'ara's unique abilities can offer him a chance at healing?

As both couples navigate their separate paths towards redemption, they converge in a final confrontation. Facing the malevolent AllFather's tyranny, they must join forces to overcome the darkness that threatens to consume them all.

In *Rescued*, the 30th installment of the Brides of the Kindred series, follow these two couples as they battle their own demons, find love against all odds, and confront a danger beyond imagination. Will they emerge victorious, or will they succumb to a fate worse than death? Find out in this captivating, spicy sci-fi romance that intertwines D/s, wounded warriors, and an enemies-to-lovers journey.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

As those of you who have been following my main Brides of the Kindred series probably know, at the end of BOK 29, [TRAPPED](#), I left the door open for two separate storylines. One is about a Kindred warrior who has lost his wife in the regular Kindred universe. Using the Far Box, he travels to an alternate universe where she is still alive and rescues that version of her and brings her back to his own plane of existence.

The second story I envisioned was that of a female Kindred and the human man she falls in love with. Both of these storylines take place in the alternate universe where the Kindred are 95% female instead of 95% male, as they are in all my original stories.

So...to make a long story short, my muse decided it would be good to write BOTH stories in the same book. That's why you'll get twice the spice—two heroes, two heroines, and two separate romances in this book, that all tie together in the end.

I want to be clear—both of these stories are M/F. This isn't an orgy book—the two couples do NOT get busy together. But they affect each other's lives and work together to rescue each other from various dangers—hence the title, *Rescued*.

I hope you'll enjoy reading this book as much as I enjoyed writing it. It was a bit complicated and took me two months to write instead of the usual 3-4 weeks which is how long most of my books take. So you know I put extra love and attention into it.

Drop me a line on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), or [TikTok](#), when you finish and tell me if you liked Nate and Lan'ara's storyline or Davrik and Sonya's storyline the most. I want to know!

Hugs and Happy Reading,

Evangeline
August 2023

ONE

DAVRIK

“Commander Davrik, I understand how deeply the loss of your wife affected you—it is an unimaginable pain,” Commander Sylvan said gently to the large male sitting across from him. “But I don’t know if searching for her double in another universe is the answer.”

Davrik took a deep breath, trying to control his emotions. Since losing his beautiful wife five years before in a shuttle crash, his sole purpose has been to get her back. Some might say this was an impossible goal, but it was all that kept Davrik going. And now it seemed he had finally found a way—but he had to convince the Head of the Kindred High Council first.

“Please, Commander,” he said to Sylvan, who had a look of deep sympathy on his face. “If only you knew how things were between Sonya and me. Our Bond went deeper than most.”

“Oh? How so?” Sylvan arched an eyebrow at him.

“We...she...” Davrik ran a hand through his thick black hair, trying to think how to explain the special relationship he’d had with his lost mate. He could still see her in his mind’s eye—her petite, curvy figure and her smooth brown skin, the long ringlets of her black hair hanging down to the small of her back. Her big brown eyes were like pools of melted chocolate—an Earth confection she had loved.

“We had what the humans call a D/s relationship,” he said at last. “That is, I was her Dominant and Sonya was my submissive.”

Sylvan frowned.

“Are you referring to the human practice of BDSM? Where one partner has control over the other and the situation brings them both sexual pleasure?”

“In a way, but it was more than that,” Davrik said. “Sonya let me care for her. I would choose her clothes...dress

her...bathe her...cuddle her. She used to have night terrors and when she woke screaming, I would hold her in my arms like a child and soothe her. She *gave* herself to me—completely and with perfect trust.” He shook his head. “I cannot explain it better than that.”

Sylvan nodded.

“That *does* sound like a unique relationship.”

“It *was*.” Davrik said. “Sonya...she was incredibly intelligent—she taught Musical Theory at the human university. She had what the humans call ‘perfect pitch’ and she was held in high esteem by all her colleagues and superiors but when we were home together, she was different with me. She was my...” His voice dropped. “I used to call her ‘baby girl’. We were so close—our very *souls* were entwined.”

He put a hand over his face briefly, remembering the way Sonja had melted in his embrace, giving herself completely to be comforted and loved and cradled in his arms. Missing her was like having a gaping hole in his chest—the ragged remains of what was left of his heart.

Most Kindred warriors didn’t survive the loss of their spouse—the Soul Bond that tied them together was so strong that the demise of one’s mate often pulled the warrior into the void with her. But somehow Davrik had lived even after his beloved Sonya had died. If you could call the existence he was currently enduring “living,” he thought grimly.

“Please, Commander,” he said raggedly. “You don’t know what it’s like—food has no taste, the sweetest flower has no smell. And as for music...” He shook his head. Music had been their love language—the many times they sang together, Davrik harmonizing with his mate’s beautiful contralto voice. Now he couldn’t even bear to *listen* to anything resembling a melody—it was too damn painful.

“I can’t imagine how hard losing your mate must be,” Commander Sylvan said gently. “But the Multiverse is vast—even if I let you use the Far Box to try and find one of the universes where your Sonya is still alive—”

“Just one,” Davrik interrupted him. Making an effort to put away his grief, he sat up straighter and looked at the other male. “There’s only *one* universe where my Sonya is still alive. In every other universe I’ve seen—and I’ve spent the last five years looking through PORTAL—she died in the crash.”

PORTAL—short for Positronic Orbital Rotating Time/Space Allocating Locator—was a device invented by a human scientist who lived aboard the Mother Ship. It was made for viewing other universes in the Multiverse and it had been known to act as a transportation device for traveling to some of those universes as well.

However, there were limits on its travel capabilities—it seemed to choose at random whether to suck someone into another universe. Which was why Davrik desperately needed to use the Far Box—an ancient Kindred device which allowed a person to visit other universes at will.

“So...there’s just one possibility?” Commander Sylvan asked.

“Yes—only one universe where Sonya didn’t get killed in that shuttle crash.” Davrik squeezed large hands into fists in his lap. He was a Blood Kindred like Sylvan, but far back in his heritage he had some Giant Kindred DNA. The result was that he was eight feet tall instead of the usual seven and his fists were bigger than most.

He also has pearly gray skin and black hair, instead of the usual pale blond of the Blood Kindred but the double set of fangs which proved his heritage were there—though they had been blunted since his female had died. Unsurprising, since a Blood Kindred’s only use for his fangs was to heal or pleasure his mate. They sharpened when he first encountered the female who was right for him...and dulled if he lost her.

“I suppose if you were only going to *one* alternate universe, the risk to you would be much less,” Commander Sylvan said thoughtfully. “Tell me about this one universe—the only one where your wife survived. Why did she survive

there? Is it the only universe where she didn't board the shuttle that crashed?"

Davrik nodded.

"It is. And the reason she didn't board is because that is the only universe where the Kindred *didn't* save the Earth from the Scourge. So she couldn't get on a shuttle from the Mother Ship headed for Earth because the Mother Ship wasn't there at that time. Neither am I, for that matter—this is the only universe where I have no doppelganger. So I can go there without fear of running into myself and causing any kind of a paradox."

"This is beginning to sound much more plausible." Commander Sylvan leaned forward, his long fingers steepled on his desk. "Tell me more. Why aren't you there? I mean—a version of you?"

Davrik shook his head.

"To be honest, I don't know. I thought maybe the doppelganger of me had died in that universe, but I can't find any trace of him. It's the only universe where I never existed and Sonya is still alive." He leaned forward, tension coursing through his body. "But she might not be if I don't hurry and get to her."

"Oh? What do you mean?" Sylvan asked.

"I've been watching her—I finally found her yesterday on the PORTAL," Davrik explained. "But I saw her being sold—the Scourge have decimated the Earth in that universe and killed and enslaved many of the humans. They have no use for the women, since most of their warriors are sexless monstrosities grown in the Flesh Vats. So they sell the human females to slavers—I saw Sonya being sold and sent away on a Saurian slaver ship." He gripped his fists so tight the knuckles turned white. "Commander, I *have* to get to her!"

"I can understand how upsetting seeing that must be," Sylvan said gravely. "And I think I know a little about the universe you're speaking of. If I'm correct, it's the same universe that Commander Nox, the Dark Kindred, visited not

long ago when he and the human female who is now his mate went to retrieve the second half of the Far Box.”

“You know about it? What do you know?” Davrik asked eagerly. “Any information I can find on it would be helpful!”

“Well, to start with, it *is* the only universe where the Kindred didn’t come in time to save the Earth from the Scourge, when they first came to threaten it,” Commander Sylvan said. “But Commander Nox called for the Kindred Mother Ship—which *does* exist in that universe as well—and from what I understand, they were going to wage war on the Scourge to free the Earth from their grip. Whether they have succeeded or not yet, I do not know.”

“It didn’t look like it from what I saw,” Davrik said, frowning. “Why else would the Scourge still be able to sell off the human females to Saurian slavers?”

Sylvan shook his head.

“I don’t know. If the Scourge already have a significant foothold on the Earth, evicting them could be difficult—even for the Kindred of that universe. And speaking of them...”

He paused for a long moment until Davrik made an impatient gesture.

“Go on—please! What about the Kindred there? Are they dark and heartless like the Cru’ell Ones were?”

The Cru’ell Kindred lived in a universe where the Kindred race had been created by a dark, vengeful God instead of a benevolent Goddess. Before they had come into contact with the Kindred of Davrik and Sylvan’s universe, they had been cruel to the females they took instead of cherishing them as the Goddess intended.

But Commander Sylvan shook his head.

“No—they are not heartless or cruel. In the universe you propose to travel to, the Kindred are almost all *female*.”

“What?” Davrik stared at him blankly. “I don’t understand.”

Sylvan ran a hand through his spiky blond hair.

“Instead of being ninety-five percent male, the Kindred there are ninety-five percent female. Indeed, Commander Nox informed me that he met my own counterpart there—a female warrior by the name of ‘Sylvania.’” He shook his head, looking bemused. “I have to confess, I can’t imagine myself as a female, but apparently my counterpart there was most helpful to Commander Nox. Maybe she would be helpful to you as well.”

Davrik jumped up from his seat so suddenly it fell over with a clatter.

“Does that mean you’ll lend me the Far Box and let me search for my Sonya?”

“Yes.” Sylvan nodded. “I will. There must be something special about this universe—something that makes it unique from all the other universes in the Multiverse.”

Davrik knew what made it unique—his beloved Sonya was there, alive and well. Or she had been when he saw her being forced aboard the Saurian Slave Ship that morning. He had to get to her and save her before it was too late!

“Thank you, Commander Sylvan,” he said hoarsely, fighting the lump that suddenly rose in his throat. His eyes stung and he blinked back tears. The thought of seeing his beloved again after five long years of agony and separation was overwhelming.

“Meet me at the Docking Bay,” Sylvan said, nodding gravely. “I’ll go get the Far Box out of the secured storage and bring it to you there. I know you’re eager to get started.”

Davrik thanked him again—in fact, he already had his ship packed and loaded with everything he might need. He was grateful that his Commanding Officer understood how vital time was in this case.

Sylvan rose and held out his arm for a warrior’s clasp. Davrik took it and squeezed hard in appreciation.

“Thank you,” he said once more.

“I pray that the Goddess will grant you success,” Sylvan told him. “Now go—I’ll meet you in the Bay.”

Davrik nodded and hurried out of his CO's office. As he made his way down the long metal corridors of the Kindred Mother Ship, his mind was a whirl.

Of course, he knew the human female he was going to find in the other universe wasn't *his* Sonya. She didn't have the same life experiences which had shaped his mate—in fact, her life had been considerably worse since the Kindred hadn't been there to save her from being enslaved by the Scourge. She probably wouldn't trust Davrik and she certainly wouldn't know him. Even after he found her, it would take time to establish trust and build a relationship.

Davrik knew all that...and he didn't care. He just wanted to see his baby girl and hold her in his arms again...and this time he vowed he would *never* let her go.

TWO

LAN'ARA

“Bad dreams again, Lan’ara?” Commander Sylvania raised an eyebrow at her new aide.

“Some,” Lan’ara admitted. “I can see him so clearly—I can *feel* his distress. But...I don’t think he’s on Earth anymore.”

Lan’ara was an Empath Kindred—she had the ability to feel the emotions of others and often to calm them as well—but only when she was touching them. Which was what made the dreams she’d been having of the big human male who had been invading her sleep so unusual.

With him—she thought his name was “Nate”—she could feel his emotions even in her dreams. She felt his fear and his fury as he fought against the Scourge invaders who had overrun his planet and killed his family. Then his horror when he was captured and interrogated by the AllFather.

Even worse, she had visions of him in chains with wires coming out of his skin as the evil being who ruled the Scourge fed on his pain. Sometimes the bad emotions were so strong they woke her, panting and heart pounding, from a sound sleep.

She longed to go to the human she kept dreaming of—to rescue him—but there was no way to reach him, not with the current situation. The Scourge had dug in deep and had total control of the Earth—the AllFather visited regularly and he wouldn’t have done so unless it was completely secure.

In her mind’s eye, Nate’s appearance was clear. He was big for a human—well over two meters tall and extremely muscular. He had long, shaggy golden-brown hair which he wore tied in a club at the back of his neck. His eyes were blue and filled with uncontrollable rage.

The Scourge feared him for good reason—he had killed more of them than any other human male since their invasion

had begun. And yet, there were always more and more and more...innumerable soulless soldiers climbing from the Flesh Vats to swell the ranks of the enemy—driving Nate on, forcing him to kill, robbing him of his reason and his sanity as he fought a losing battle to save his home world.

He had been in some branch of the human military before the Scourge had come—Lan'ara was able to glean that much from her dreams. He had been working with seals for the human Navy—was that it? Lan'ara thought so, anyway. A seal was an aquatic Earth mammal—or it had been, before most of the animals on the planet had been killed by the Scourge—some harvested as a protein source for their Flesh Vats and others simply eradicated for the sheer pleasure of destruction. The AllFather loved to despoil and destroy.

Lan'ara had been having the dreams for weeks—she'd been trying to get to Nate, but the Scourge had put an energy net around the Earth which made extraction of the humans still trapped there extremely difficult. Kindred warriors had to wait for certain times when the net was down—mostly only when the Scourge were selling a new shipment of human slaves—to get to the small blue and white planet. Many humans had been rescued, but the Kindred weren't always in time to save everyone.

“What do you mean your human is not on Earth?” Commander Sylvania asked sharply. “What happened to him?”

“From what I could see in my dream, Nate was taken on a Saurian slave ship after...after the AllFather fed on him.” Lan'ara rubbed her temples. “I came to ask you if we could try and trace all the exhaust signatures of any ships that have left the planet in the past twelve standard hours—I don't think it was that long ago that he was taken since I just dreamed it last night.”

“Of course we can.” Sylvania nodded quickly.

They had been fighting this war with the Scourge, trying to liberate the small blue planet, for many solar months now and she was always sympathetic to any of her warriors who

started Dream-sharing with a human. Maybe because she herself had found her own mate that way. The human male named Simon—or just Simon for short—was devoted to his new bride. Sylvania had dreamed of him for weeks before meeting him—he was the twin brother of Oliver, the mate of her half-sister, Bairdida.

Both men had been rescued in the same mission and, following the Claiming Period, there had been a double Bonding Ceremony. It had been beautiful to behold, but Lan'ara couldn't help thinking wistfully of her own human male—caught in the clutches of the Scourge. Her need to get to him—to soothe his distress and heal him—was growing daily. She'd almost been ready to ask for permission to do a single woman run down to the planet the next time the energy net was down. She knew it would be suicide, but at least she would get to hold him in her arms before she died...

“We'll find him.” Commander Sylvania's soothing voice cut into her bleak thoughts. “I promise you, Lan'ara—we will find the male the Goddess promised to you.”

“Thank you so much.” Lan'ara ran a hand through her long, silky black hair and rubbed at the delicate circular ridges at her temples again. These “receptor ridges” as they were called, were common to the Empath Kindred—as were her delicate lavender skin tones. Her exotically tilted eyes, which were a deep purple several shades darker than her skin, also proclaimed her heritage.

“I know it's hard to wait.” Commander Sylvania squeezed her shoulder. “When I was Dream-sharing with Simon, I was half crazy with worry for him.”

Lan'ara let out a shaky laugh.

“That's exactly how I feel. It's almost like Nate's emotions are driving my own.” She looked up at her commander. “And I fear the time he spent with the AllFather, when that evil creature was *feeding* on his pain has made him wild. It might even have stripped his sanity away.”

“You'll be able to heal him,” Sylvania said firmly. “The Goddess wouldn't have linked the two of you if you weren't

able to.”

“Yes, but—” Lan’ara began.

Just then the Com-box on Sylvania’s desk made a noise and a voice said,

“Commander Sylvania, Communications Officer Tania here—there is an incoming craft hailing us. The pilot claims to be a Kindred warrior from another universe and says he needs our help.”

“‘He’, hmm?” A few months earlier, such a statement would have provoked incredulity and disbelief. However, they’d had dealings with the denizens of another universe recently—a male named Commander Nox and his human female, Seline, who had pointed them in the direction of the Earth in the first place as a source of possible mates. So Commander Sylvania barely blinked at the news.

“I’ve scanned the ship and the pilot appears to be Kindred,” the Communications Officer acknowledged. “Should I give him permission to land?”

“Yes—and tell him I’ll meet him at the Docking Bay,” Commander Sylvania nodded and turned to Lan’ara. “Are you coming? I’d like you with me to read his true intentions.”

Lan’ara felt a surge of impatience, which she tried to push back.

“Yes, of course.” She nodded.

“Don’t worry—I’ll have the Science staff do a trace of the emissions signatures of all ships leaving Earth in the past twelve solar hours while we go meet this new male,” Commander Sylvania assured her. “You’ll be able to track your human very soon.”

“Thank you, Commander!” Lan’ara felt a rush of gratitude. Impulsively, she hugged the other woman.

As she brushed Sylvania’s skin, she felt the warmth and sympathy coming from her Commander. Sylvania really *did* care and wanted her to find her mate—the one male in all the universe that the Goddess had put aside just for her.

“You’re welcome,” Sylvania said with a little smile, after hugging her back briefly. “Come on—let’s go and see what this male from the other universe has to say to us.”

She led the way and Lan’ara followed her, grateful for a Commander who understood her people so well. She just hoped the interview with the male Kindred wouldn’t take too much time—she was anxious to go searching for Nate!

THREE

LAN'ARA

“Well, well—and where do you think you’re going, sweetheart?”

The deep voice belonged to Simon, the human male who Commander Sylvania had rescued and Bonded with. He was taller than her—and much taller than the average human male—with broad shoulders, brown hair and a beard to match, and green eyes. He had turned into the corridor leading to the Docking Bay and now he looped an affectionate arm around Commander Sylvania’s waist.

“Oh, Simon—I’m just going to meet—”

“An alien from another universe? Yeah, I picked that out of your head,” he rumbled. “The Soul Bond is useful that way.”

Lan’ara watched the two of them from the corner of her eye as they walked along the corridor. She saw her Commanding Officer sigh, but it was a good-natured sigh—the affection between Sylvania and her human mate was clear.

“I can handle myself you know,” she pointed out. “You don’t always have to be so protective.”

“Yes, he does,” a new voice rumbled.

Lan’ara looked around and saw Oliver—Simon’s brother—coming up beside them from the other side. Bairdida, who was his mate and also the half sister of Commander Sylvania, was at his side.

“Looks like we’ve got a whole welcome party here,” Bairdida remarked, smiling. She was a Beast Kindred and had thick black hair and golden eyes. Her mate, Oliver, couldn’t have looked more different. He had wheat colored hair and silvery-gray eyes. Though he and Simon had the same facial features, their different coloring made it easy to tell them apart even though they were twins.

Commander Sylvania let out another exasperated sigh and looked at her mate.

“Let me guess—you contacted Oliver, who contacted Bairdida and all of you decided you had to come along.”

“Just want to make sure you’re safe, sweetheart.” Simon dropped a kiss on her cheek.

“Yes—we couldn’t let you and your aide go alone to meet an alien from another universe,” Oliver pointed out. He was a doctor and since Sylvania was also, the two of them had a lot in common and got along quite well. Simon was a master craftsman—he’d been a carpenter before the war with the Scourge began and he still enjoyed making furniture and intricate carvings from wood. His artistic efforts decorated the suite he and Sylvania shared—Lan’ara had admired them when she visited.

“Don’t worry, Sister—we won’t step on your toes,” Bairdida told Sylvania. “We just wanted to come along and watch the action.”

“Well, all right. But don’t scare the poor male,” Sylvania said. “And after we greet him, maybe you can go with Lan’ara to try and trace the ship which took the male she’s been Dream-sharing with away from Earth,” she added, speaking to her sister.

“You’ve been Dream-sharing?” Oliver asked, looking at Lan’ara. “Who’s the lucky man—maybe Simon and I know him.”

That might have been a ludicrous statement to make before the war with the Scourge when the Earth had over eight billion people. But so many humans had been wiped out by the enemy that the remainder had banded together as best they could into several different enclaves. It was entirely possible that the two human males might know Nate.

“What enclave is he from?” Simon asked. “You know Oliver and I were fighting with the Eastern North American faction when Sylvania and Bairdida swooped in and rescued us.”

“ENA all the way!” Oliver clenched a fist in solidarity.

“I don’t actually know what enclave he was from,” Lan’ara said hesitantly. She was uncertain about telling so many people about Nate—so far she had only confided in Commander Sylvania.

“Can you describe him? Do you know his name?” Commander Bairdida asked. She switched places with her mate so she could walk closer to Lan’ara. “Anything you know might help.”

“Well...he’s really tall and muscular,” Lan’ara said. “He’s got long brown hair that he wears in a club at the back of his neck, and he has blue eyes. Also, he used to work with aquatic animals before the Scourge came.”

“Aquatic animals?” Oliver frowned. “Was he a Zoologist?”

“Or maybe a Marine Biologist?” Simon suggested.

“He was a seal—or he *worked* with seals. Navy seals,” Lan’ara said. “I’m sorry—the dreams I share with him are so chaotic—it’s hard to say. I don’t know what it means.”

“Holy shit!” Oliver’s eyes grew wide. “Are you talking about Nathaniel Jakes?”

“Yes!” Lan’ara stopped dead in the middle of the winding metal corridor, so surprised she felt frozen to the spot. “Yes—that is his full name! I heard it spoken once in one of the dreams we shared. How did you know?”

“Because we knew Nate,” Simon said quietly, answering for his twin. “He led the ENA Enclave for a while.”

“The guy is an ex-Navy Seal—a total badass,” Oliver added. “He was fearless and he knew all the tactics—he got our squad out of some really tight spots.”

“So where is he now?” Simon asked. “We got separated from him in a firefight right before Sylvania and Bairdida came for us.”

Lan’ara shook her head sadly.

“I don’t know. I saw him being captured by the AllFather and...” She trailed off, unable to tell about the way the evil creature who headed the Scourge had fed on Nate’s pain.

“And?” Simon prodded gently. He and Oliver were staring at Lan’ara anxiously, waiting to hear their friend’s fate.

“And last night I saw him being taken off Earth—on a Saurian slave ship, I think,” Lan’ara said. She would keep the knowledge of her fated mate’s agony to herself, she decided. It was better that way.

“He might be headed for anywhere, then,” Bairdida remarked. “Fucking Saurians sell slaves to every corner of the galaxy.”

“Which is why I’m so anxious to find him before the trail goes cold,” Lan’ara said earnestly. “I can feel his pain and it’s *agonizing*.”

“We’ll find him.” Commander Bairdida squeezed her shoulder firmly and her golden eyes sparked with determination. “Count on it, Lan’ara.”

“Thank you, Commander. But first we must go meet this new Kindred from another universe,” Lan’ara said firmly. She knew that Commander Sylvania needed her there to shake the male’s hands and determine his true motivations.

“Let’s make this quick then, so you can start searching,” Commander Sylvania said. “Come on—the Docking Bay is just ahead.”

They moved off again and Lan’ara felt a bit better. She wanted to ask Oliver and Simon more about Nate, but she decided that could wait.

First they had to interrogate the new Kindred and see what he wanted.

FOUR

DAVRIK

There was a whole delegation to meet him when Davrik landed in the Docking Bay. It was surreal, really, he thought. It felt like he had done nothing more than fly his long-range shuttle away from the Mother Ship and then turned around to fly right back again.

But he had gone through the fold in space—a fold that was a green, vertical slash in the blackness rather than the usual red horizontal gash. And before flying through he had gripped the Far Box tightly in his palm and said,

“I wish to go to the universe where my mate, Sonya is still alive.”

There had been a strange feeling as he passed through the vertical fold in space—an indefinable buzzing sensation that he had never felt before, though he had folded space many, many times. And then Davrik had found himself hovering just outside the Mother Ship—the Mother Ship which was owned by the Kindred of this alternate universe.

As he stepped out of his shuttle, he saw there were five people coming to meet him—two human males and three Kindred females. The tall female with the pale blond hair drawn back in a plait down her back must be Commander Sylvan’s counterpart, he thought. And the human male beside her with a possessive arm around her waist must be the counterpart of Sophia, who was mated to Commander Sylvan in his own universe.

The other two he guessed must be the female counterpart of Commander Baird and the male counterpart of his wife, Olivia. But the third female Kindred surprised him. She had pale lavender skin and large purple eyes. Also, she was shorter than the other female Kindred, though still taller than a human woman. She had long, straight black hair and pale pink, swirling ridges at her temples.

“Hello,” he began, holding out a hand. “I am—”

“Holy shit—he’s a fucking Scourge!” one of the human males growled, taking a protective stance in front of his mate. The other male did as well—watching Davrik warily.

“No, he’s not a Scourge!” The female Commander Baird said impatiently.

“Yes, he is!” her mate insisted. “Look at his gray skin, Bairdida!”

“Yes, but also observe his eyes,” the female Commander Sylvan remarked. “He has blue irises with white sclera. A true Scourge has red irises and black sclera—this male doesn’t have the red-on-black eyes that denotes our ancient enemy.”

“I am *not* a Scourge,” Davrik said quickly, hoping to end their suspicion. “My gray skin tones can be attributed to the Giant Kindred blood I have in my ancestry. Though I mostly identify as a Blood Kindred.” He bared his teeth to show his dull double fangs.

“See? He’s *not* Scourge,” the female Commander Baird said impatiently. “Now could you please step aside, Oliver? I can handle myself—I’m the head of Security for the entire Mother Ship, you know.”

“I know, baby—I just want you to be safe,” the human male with dark blond hair murmured.

“You must be the female counterpart of Commander Baird in my own universe,” Davrik remarked. “Only on *my* version of the Mother Ship, Commander Baird is the head of the Fleet, rather than the head of Security.” He turned to the female Kindred with the blonde hair. “And *you* must be Commander Sylvan’s female counterpart—Commander Sylvania?”

“I *am* Commander Sylvania. And this is my half sister, Commander Bairdida and our mates, Oliver and Simon. As well as my assistant, Commander Lan’ara.” She nodded at each person in her party in turn as she made the introductions and then stepped forward to hold out her arm for a warrior’s clasp. “Welcome to our Mother Ship—and to our universe.”

“Thank you, Commander. I am Davrik, of the other universe where the Kindred are mostly male, rather than mostly female.”

Davrik took her arm carefully, very aware of her human mate’s protective gaze. Both he and the other human male were much taller and more muscular than most human men, though neither was as tall as Davrik himself. His Giant Kindred blood gave him a definite advantage in this universe, he noted. Not that he would use it in any way except to find his beloved Sonya.

When he finished clasp ing arms with Commander Sylvania, Commander Bairdida came forward and offered her arm as well. Then Commander Lan’ara stepped up but instead of her arm, she held out a slim, lavender shaded hand.

“Please take my aide’s hand, Commander Davrik,” Sylvania said. “She is an Empath Kindred—she will be able to tell your true intentions in coming here.”

“With pleasure.” Davrik took the slim lavender hand willingly in his much larger one and waited to feel the same sensation he felt when a Priestess of his own Mother Ship “Saw Into” him. It was a very uncomfortable process—the feeling of someone rifling through your brain and searching your thoughts and memories, but Davrik was prepared to endure it—he was prepared to endure *anything* to get to Sonya.

However, the sensation inside him when he took the Empath’s hand was much different from what he had expected. Instead of the feeling of cool fingers rifling through his brain, he had a warm sensation which started at the center of his body and moved outward. It was like coming in from the cold on a chilly day and having a heating element wrapped around him. Only instead of the heat coming from the outside, it was coming from the inside.

At once, he felt some of the anguish he’d carried for the past five years dissipate. It wasn’t gone completely—nothing could completely erase the agony of his loss and the never

ending need to find his mate again. But he felt like he could take a deep breath again and look at the world with fresh eyes.

At the same time, however, he saw his own pain reflected in the deep purple eyes of the female before him.

“Ahh,” she moaned softly. “I feel it...to lose a mate you loved so dearly...to break a Bond that entwined both your souls—how terrible!”

“Forgive me!” Davrik pulled his hand away hastily. “I didn’t mean for you to bear my pain,” he said stiffly.

“No...it is all right.” Commander Lan’ara straightened up and took a deep breath, as though trying to rid herself of the pain. She turned to Commander Sylvania. “This male—Commander Davrik—lost his mate in a shuttle crash in his own universe. He has come to our universe to find her again.”

“Or her doppelganger,” Davrik said. “This universe’s version of her.”

Commander Sylvania frowned.

“But surely you know the woman you find here won’t be the same one you lost, Commander Davrik. She will have different experiences.”

“And probably a great deal of trauma if she happens to be human and she’s been trapped down on Earth with the Scourge,” Oliver added grimly.

“Yes, I know all that.” Davrik nodded. “She might not even want anything to do with me once I find her. But I *must* find her and rescue her. She is the only one left—in every other universe my beloved Sonya boarded a shuttle from the Mother Ship, intending to go visit her family back on Earth. In every other universe—other than this one—the shuttle lost power and she died in the crash.”

He swallowed hard—it was difficult to talk about the horrible accident that had taken his mate from him, but necessary so they could understand his urgency.

“I see.” Commander Sylvania nodded thoughtfully. “Well, we will help you in every way we can, of course. But

I'm afraid the Scourge have put an energy net around the Earth which we so far haven't been able to penetrate. So if she's down there, we'll have to wait until the net drops to let another ship in or out before we can swoop down and scoop her up."

"But she's not on Earth—not anymore," Davrik said quickly. "I saw her being taken off Earth by a Saurian slaver ship very recently."

"Oh!" Commander Lan'ara gasped and her lavender skin went so pale it was almost white.

"What? What is it?" Davrik asked anxiously. He hoped she wasn't still picking up his emotions and feeling them as her own. He wouldn't wish the anxiety and pain he felt when he thought of his beloved Sonya on anyone.

"It's just that Lan'ara is Dream-sharing with a human male and he also was taken off of Earth in a slave ship," Commander Sylvania explained. "In fact, we were going to try and track the emissions signatures of all the ships that have left Earth in the past twelve hours to try and find him."

"You said it was a Saurian slaver ship?" Commander Lan'ara asked, seeming to recover herself somewhat. "Because that was what I saw in my dream—a huge, scaly Saurian slaver paying one of the Scourge as the prisoners were marched on board."

"Did one of them have brown skin?" Davrik asked anxiously. "My Sonya, her skin is a warm, beautiful brown. She has long black ringlets that hang down to the small of her back and big, chocolate brown eyes. She loves chocolate—or at least, *my* Sonya did," he added, wistfully.

Carefully, he withdrew a small holo disk and held it in the palm of his hand. A flick of his thumb and a holo of Sonya, only about twelve inches high, appeared hovering above the coin-sized disk. It had been taken only a few days before her death and she was laughing and smiling, with her hands on her beautiful full hips.

"Yes! Yes, I saw her—I'm sure of it!" Commander Lan'ara nodded eagerly as she looked at the holo. "She was in

line, three prisoners behind Nate! Your mate and mine—they're on the same ship!" Then she paused, blushing a deep purple. "Well, at least, he *will* be my mate if I can find him and heal him. And if he wants me," she added quietly.

"This must be the will of the Goddess," Commander Sylvania said firmly. "She must intend for the two of you to work together, in order to find and rescue your mates."

"I'd be more than happy for any help," Davrik said at once. Though Commander Lan'ara was petite by Kindred standards, he was certain that having an Empath along on his quest to find Sonya would come in handy.

"I'd be happy for help as well," Commander Lan'ara said quietly. She still looked rather flushed, Davrik thought.

"Then what are we waiting for? Come on—let's go find that ship!" Commander Bairdida exclaimed.

Davrik felt a rush of relieved excitement—finally, it was happening. Finally he was going to see his Sonya again!

FIVE

DAVRIK

He was considerably *less* excited three solar weeks later. They had found the trail of the ship which they believed was carrying both his own mate and Lan'ara's...and then they had been led on what the humans called a "wild geese chase" or something like that, Davrik thought bitterly.

The ship had seemed to go in circles and every time they thought they were going to catch up, they lost the trail and had to stop and find it all over again. At last they had followed it to the worst possible place—the Flesh Bazaar.

"Well, this is what I was afraid of," he muttered, as he pulled his long-range shuttle into a docking space near the entrance of the massive complex. "In my universe this is the biggest slave center in the galaxy."

"It's the same here," Lan'ara confirmed grimly. "Nate and Sonya must have been brought here to be auctioned off. But unless we're very lucky, they've already been sold to the highest bidder by this time."

"Well, we know the owner of the ship was a Saurian called Grieb'lick," Davrik said. (This was knowledge they'd picked up at a space station during one of their stops to find the trail again.) "We just need to find where he sells his slaves and hope they can tell us who Sonya and Nate were sold to."

"I hope they're all right." Lan'ara looked troubled. "What if they sold Nate to the Blood Circuit? He's a warrior—they would be happy to have him there!"

"Haven't you had any more dreams of him?" Davrik asked, frowning.

She shook her head.

"No—not since the one I had where he had broken loose from his chains and was going after the slavers on the ship. That dream faded to blackness and then...nothing." She bit her lip, looking troubled. "I would worry that they killed him but I

can still feel him out there, somewhere—it's just that his emotions are so faint now. Barely there at all.”

“We'll find him—we'll find *both* of them,” Davrik said, trying to comfort her. She was a quiet female and not very talkative, but they had shared some with each other in the weeks they'd been traveling together. Mostly he talked about Sonya and she talked about Nate. And both of them spoke of their longing to see the mates they cared for so desperately.

“Have you dreamed of Sonya at all?” she asked as he locked down the ship and they prepared to exit it and enter the atmosphere bubble that encased the immense complex which was the Flesh Bazaar.

Davrik shook his head.

“Afraid not. I wish I could but I didn't Dream-share with her—or with the Sonya in my world—either. I think it had something to do with the night terrors she experienced sometimes—they blocked any other kind of dreams from getting through.”

He wondered if the Sonya of this universe also had night terrors. If so, was there anyone to hold her and comfort her? To wake her from her dreams and cuddle her in their lap and kiss away her tears? He wanted so much to do that for her again—to care for her and love her and cherish her and call her “baby girl.” His arms *ached* to hold her.

Lan'ara put a hand on his forearm, her lavender fingers cool against his skin.

“I can feel how much you miss her,” she said simply. “And you know how desperately I want to find Nate. Let us say a prayer to the Goddess that we may find them before we go into the Bazaar.”

“Good idea.” Davrik nodded and bowed his head. “Goddess—you know how badly we need to find our mates—the ones you set aside just for us. Please help us in our quest—let us get to them before harm befalls them.”

Lan'ara murmured agreement and when she raised her head, her dark purple eyes were bright.

“I feel better,” she said. “Let’s go find them.”

Davrik nodded and felt his heart swell. The Goddess might not have answered their prayer directly, but he still felt that her hand was on this situation.

He and Lan’ara left the long-range shuttle together.

LAN'ARA

“**H**oo-mans you say?” The Listerian Slaver blinked both sets of eyes owlshly as he looked down at them from his great height. Listerians had short, round bodies but their necks resembled those of the Earth animal called the “giraffe.” Luckily, Davrik was tall enough to speak to the slaver, Lan’ara thought. Or else they would never have gotten anywhere.

“Yes—*humans!* We’re looking for two human slaves sold to you by a slaver named Grieb’lick around three solar weeks ago!” Davrik bellowed impatiently.

The Listerian seemed to be slightly hard of hearing. Or maybe it was just the fact that his head was so much higher than theirs. But his stall was the place where the Saurian slaver, Grieb’lick, had sold his slaves—they had verified it by checking the records of sales for the past three weeks, which all incoming slavers were required to fill out. So he *must* know where Nate and Sonya were.

Lan’ara hoped, anyway. She looked around the crowded main area of the Bazaar. All around them were slavers shouting their wares. If they were to be believed—the most beautiful, the most muscular, the most talented, the most agile and the most intelligent individuals in all the galaxy—were located right here. And of course, all of them were for sale.

But Lan’ara only wanted one—she wanted the male she had never met in person, though she had seen him so often in her dreams. She wanted Nate—but could they find him?

“Ahhh, yes—Grieb’lick.” The Listerian nodded, his long neck bobbing. “Yes, he is one of my best suppliers.”

“Did he bring in a human woman who looked like this?” Davrik produced his holo coin again and showed the image of Sonya which he carried with him everywhere. Lan’ara wished that she had something similar to show the slaver what Nate

looked like, but as yet, she had only seen the big human in her dreams.

The Listerian leaned even further down and Davrik held his palm up so that the holo image was right in front of both sets of the slaver's eyes.

“Ah yes! Yes, I know this one!” he exclaimed.

Lan'ara felt the relief coming from the Kindred male in waves. She wasn't usually able to feel the emotions of another without touching them—with Nate being the exception—but her traveling companion's feelings for his lost mate were some of the strongest she had ever encountered.

“Where is she?” Davrik demanded. “Is she still here? Do you have her?”

“No. No, I'm afraid not.” The Listerian slaver shook his head, his long neck wagging ponderously from side to side. “Sold her to a brothel owner from Yonnie Six—he said he wanted her for his ‘House of a Thousand Flowers.’”

“A brothel owner?” Davrik's big hands clenched into fists and once more Lan'ara could feel his emotions—waves of fury that his beloved had been sold to such a place and sharp fear for her safety.

“Yes—she was talented, that one,” the Listerian remarked, clearly not aware of how angry his statement had made the Kindred warrior. “A voice like a F'leurian songbird! He wanted her to sing for his customers in the ‘Flower Lounge’ he said.”

Davrik's fists loosened a little and Lan'ara felt cautious relief coming from him. He was hopeful that maybe his mate *hadn't* been abused after all, Lan'ara thought. She hoped so as well.

“Thank you—do you know the name of the male you sold her to? Do you have any record of the sale? I have plenty of cred chips—I'm willing to pay for the information,” he added.

The Listerian frowned and seemed to consider.

“I do believe he was a Sluggorn by the name of ‘Oozle,’” he said. “But let me check my records to be for sure.”

“While you’re looking in your records, could you please check to see if you sold a human male as well?” Lan’ara shouted up at him. “He’s very tall with long brown hair and blue eyes and he might have been very aggressive!” At least, that was what the dreams she’d shared with Nate seemed to indicate. He had been in a near constant state of fury by the time the Scourge finally captured him and being fed on by the AllFather had only increased his aggression.

“Aggressive, you say?” The Listerian frowned, the corners of his broad, lipless mouth turning down thoughtfully. “Ah yes—I think I know who you mean. That one is still here—at least, if the trash has not been jettisoned from the air lock yet.”

“Jettisoned from the air lock?” Lan’ara’s heart began to pound and her stomach was suddenly clenched tight. “What do you mean? Are you just going to throw him away? Wait—never mind that—just tell me where he is!” she demanded, before the Listerian could start on some long, ponderous explanation.

“His stasis frame was moved to the back right airlock this morning.” The slaver pointed with one short, stubby arm in the general direction. “It is down the back hallway. If you want him, he is yours. He was too aggressive to sell. Every time we tried to thaw him, he attacked. At last, I gave up and decided to dispose of him. After all, what use is a slave which cannot be sold?”

But he was speaking to empty air. Lan’ara had taken off at a run, rushing down the crowded rows, past the many waist-high pedestals where the slaves were displayed and dodging prospective buyers and slavers alike. There was only one thought pounding in her brain—she had to get to Nate!

SEVEN

DAVRIK

Davrik ran after her, but she was *fast*. It seemed that panic had given Lan'ara's feet wings. Not that he blamed her. He'd be running too if his mate was about to be blown out the airlock!

They reached the back door which read, *No Admittance—Airlock Disposal*—and pushed through it breathlessly. Down another corridor and they came to what they were looking for—there was a huge pile of trash and two short, squat Brothians with moist green skin were piling it into a chamber labeled *Airlock One*.

“Stop! Stop what you're doing!” Lan'ara gasped, rushing up to them.

The two of them turned their broad, toad-like faces to look up at her curiously.

“Why should we stop? Seeing as how this is our job, Miss Lady?” one asked in broadly accented Standard.

Lan'ara didn't bother to answer him.

“A frame—there should be a stasis frame in here somewhere! Have you seen it?” she demanded.

“The stasis frame? Aye, so we did. We put it in first, since it were so bulky,” the other Brothian said. He pointed to the enormous pile of trash already loaded into the airlock and Davrik saw the corner of a tall black frame poking out of the rubbish.

“Get it out! Get it out *right now!*” Lan'ara demanded. Her normally soft and soothing voice had turned imperious and commanding and her purple eyes blazed.

Davrik was surprised to see the change in her but he understood—she was defending her mate. Even though she hadn't met him yet, she knew he was meant for her and she was going to do everything in her power to keep him safe.

It was exactly the way a Kindred warrior would act to protect his mate, he thought. It seemed that the trait of extreme protectiveness carried through, even in this universe where the Kindred were mostly female rather than mostly male.

The Brothians grumbled about undoing all their hard work, but they didn't dare to disobey Lan'ara when she was glaring at them so sternly. Slowly they cleared the mountain of trash, finally revealing the tall black stasis frame, which was well over two meters high and nearly as wide across.

"That's it! That's him!" The relief in Lan'ara's voice was palpable as she stared up at the male frozen inside the frame. His face was twisted in a rictus of fury and his hands were upraised and clenched into fists, as though he was ready to fight someone.

When he was first getting to know Sonya, Davrik had watched a lot of human movies, as a way to try and understand the culture of his fated mate better. One of those movies had featured something like this, he thought as he stared at the figure in the stasis field. A character had been frozen in a substance called "carbonite" and he had been stuck in a very similar frame.

"We have to get him out of there!" Lan'ara was already reaching for the button which would kill the stasis field.

Davrik put a hand on her wrist.

"Wait. Not here," he told her. "If what the slaver said was true, he's already in a state of heightened aggression—it might even be the human version of Rage. You need to unfreeze him someplace quiet and calm, someplace where you can reassure him that he's safe and no longer a slave."

"All right. You're right." Lan'ara's hand dropped to her side and she nodded, her eyes still fixed on the frozen features of her fated mate. "It's just...this is the first time I've seen Nate in person—outside of the dreams we shared. I want to talk to him—to comfort him!"

"I understand," Davrik said quietly. "But let's at least get him back to the ship first."

“All right.” Lan’ara frowned. “I think there’s a hover option on this frame—we should be able to float it right out of here.”

They found the controls on the side of the stasis frame and soon it was hovering about a third of a meter off the floor, the hidden motor humming softly. Davrik helped her steer the bulky frame carefully through the corridor and out into the main floor of the Bazaar.

“Can you handle it from here to the ship?” he asked Lan’ara. “I’d like to go talk to that Listerian slaver some more and make sure I can pinpoint Sonya’s location.”

She nodded.

“I’ve got it. I’ll meet you at the ship.”

“I won’t be long.” Davrik hesitated, taking another look at the enraged features and clenched fists of the frozen human male. He was extremely large for a human—as big as a Kindred warrior and Lan’ara was on the small side—at least by Kindred standards. “Look,” he said, touching her shoulder to stop her a moment. “Do me a favor and wait until I get back to the ship to unfreeze him, all right? He looks...agitated.”

She frowned and lifted her chin.

“I can handle him. He’s my fated mate—we’ve been Dream-sharing for months!”

“Well...” Davrik shrugged uneasily. He had a natural urge to protect females—all Kindred did. But he also didn’t want Lan’ara to think that he believed she was less than competent to handle her own mate. “Do what you want,” he said at last. “Just please—be careful.”

“I’ll be fine,” Lan’ara reassured him—a bit frostily, he thought. “See you at the ship.”

“See you at the ship,” Davrik echoed and watched her push the bulky stasis frame down the aisle.

EIGHT

LAN'ARA

Lan'ara got the frame back to where they had docked the ship with no problems. She probably looked like any new slave owner, she speculated—though most of the slaves at the Flesh Bazaar didn't have to be frozen in a stasis frame.

She got the frame into the long-range shuttle and pushed it to the back. Once she got it to the middle of the living space—which consisted of a short couch and a screen for showing entertainment vids—she deactivated the hover mode.

The frame lowered to the carpeted floor, settling with a *hiss* of escaping air and Lan'ara came around to stand in front of it.

Nate's features were familiar from the many dreams she'd had of him—though she had seldom seen them so distorted with fury. That was the main emotion she felt coming from him too—though it was extremely muted. For a moment she hesitated—should she wait for Davrik to return to thaw the big human?

I shouldn't have to wait, she argued with herself. I know him and he knows me! We've been Dream-sharing for ages. He'll recognize me at once—I'm sure he will.

Confident in the connection they had formed in their dreams, she reached up and pressed the button on the side of the frame which killed the stasis field.

And then all Seven Hells broke loose.

NINE

NATE

Nate couldn't see a fucking thing. Everything was blackness—he was frozen. Frozen in space and time so that every minute felt like an eternity. He strained against the invisible wall that held him in place, but it was too strong for him.

Fucking thing! He felt a growl of pure fury rising in his throat—or it would have risen if everything hadn't been frozen.

He was living in a nightmare—his existence had been turned into one long, endless bad dream, he thought. After getting out of the Seals, he'd just wanted to find a quiet job and decompress—try to forget some of the bad shit he'd seen. At first, it seemed that he had done that. He'd found a good job with an engineering firm—that had been his degree before he'd joined the military—and a nice townhouse in a quiet neighborhood.

And then just a few months later, the Scourge had arrived.

Nate had put his Seal training to use, leading endless counteroffensives against the alien hordes that came from the sky to despoil Earth. He'd lost everything—and everyone—he'd ever loved or even cared about. The Scourge poisoned the planet, burning the forests and shooting toxic chemicals into the water supply. They killed most of the animals and rounded up all the humans they could and sold them off-planet as slaves.

Somehow, most of Nate's battalion had escaped capture again and again. But then there was a firefight and three of those big Vat-grown fuckers had come against him at once. He'd run out of ammo—always in short supply—and had to resort to hand-to-hand fighting. Nate was big—pro-wrestler big. But the Scourge soldiers were all nearly nine feet tall. Despite fighting for his life, he'd been overpowered. And then they had taken him to the AllFather...

No! Nate forced the awful memory out of his head. He wouldn't think of the "feeding sessions" where every bad memory was sucked from his brain and pawed over like a trophy and every good memory was twisted and distorted. He refused to remember the black throne covered in glowing green markings and that hissing voice as the icy fingers dug through his brain...

Fucking stop it! You're doing it again! Stop—push it away! Don't remember! Don't!

The memories made him crazy and he couldn't always stop them. He pushed against the invisible barrier again, hoping for release, even though it always ended the same way. Every time they let him go for a minute, it was so some other alien freak could look him over and decide if they wanted to buy him. And every time, Nate went in for the kill.

This time was no different. He heard a familiar hiss of escaping air and suddenly the barrier was gone—just gone.

His vision was blurry but he lunged forward anyway, reaching for the figure in front of him—the one who sought to buy him—to own and destroy him.

"You fucker!" he rasped, clenching his fingers around a slender throat. "I'll fucking kill you!"

TEN

LAN'ARA

“Nate, no! *No!*” Lan’ara tried to scream, but the words came out in a choked whisper. His long fingers were wrapped around her throat, cutting off her air supply, squeezing the life out of her. His rage was flowing through her like a torrent of burning lava—he wanted to make someone pay for the pain he carried like a vine of thorns wrapped around his heart, and she was the closest target.

“Please!” she whispered again, prying uselessly at his hands, which were locked around her neck. She tried to send him calming and reassuring emotions but he was blocking her. The rage he felt was too strong—too overwhelming. She couldn’t get through to him—it was like throwing kisses at someone behind a brick wall.

Her vision started to get spotty as she struggled uselessly. Was this really how things were going to end for them? With Nate choking the life out of her before she even got a chance to know him? To heal him?

Should have listened to Davrik, she thought to herself. Please, Goddess—I need help! I’m sorry I didn’t wait...I’m sorry...sorry...

At that moment, just as her vision was going completely black and she felt herself sagging in the big human’s grip, someone else came into the living area and shouted her name.

Lan’ara’s eyelids fluttered open and she saw a huge fist headed at Nate’s face. It connected with his square jaw and the hands that were squeezing the life out of her abruptly loosened as Nate turned and lunged at the new opponent.

She fell to the ground, gasping and choking, and was vaguely aware of deep male voices shouting as currents of anger streaked back and forth above her head like lightning.

“I don’t think so!” a familiar voice growled. “Come at me then, if you’re so eager to fight.”

Looking up, she saw Davrik standing on the other side of the stasis frame, taunting the enraged Nate. As the big human lunged at the Kindred warrior, stepping through the frame to get to him, Davrik reached out and slapped the controls, once more engaging the stasis field.

Nate froze abruptly, his hands still upraised to fight and his features twisted into a rictus of rage. Lan'ara could feel his fury, now muted by the field, but most definitely still there. But at least now the intensely negative emotion wasn't being shoved down her throat like a river of lava.

"Are you all right?" Davrik rushed over and knelt beside her, an anxious look on his face.

"I...I'm fine," Lan'ara tried to reassure him. But the words came out in a squeezed whisper. She winced and put her fingers to her throat. "Think...my windpipe might be bruised," she husked out.

He frowned.

"You're damn lucky it's not crushed! Come on—sit on the couch while I dig out my med kit."

He got her settled on the low leather couch and Lan'ara sank gratefully into the cushions. She touched her wounded throat again and winced. There was going to be swelling and bruising for sure. She hoped that Davrik had something to heal it.

The big warrior came back shortly with a flat silver case in one hand. He popped it open and took out a small golden canister of spray.

"Here," he said, handing it to Lan'ara. "Spray that down your throat—it should help with the swelling so your airway doesn't shut."

She opened her mouth and squeezed several long sprays of the stuff—which tasted faintly minty—towards the back of her mouth. To her intense relief, she could feel the medicated spray working at once. The pain lessened considerably and she was able to breathe more freely.

“Thank you,” she said. While her voice was still hoarse, at least she could now speak above a whisper.

“Here—wrap this around your throat,” Davrik said, handing her a wide, white bandage. “It should help with the bruising, though it won’t erase it completely.”

Lan’ara did as he said, wrapping the wide bandage around her throat—she wore it like a choker necklace, rather than a scarf. Once it settled against her skin, she felt a healing warmth coming from it. It was almost as soothing as the cool, minty spray, though in a different way.

“Thank you,” she said again. “I should have listened to you. I didn’t realize...” She coughed and winced at the jagged little pain it caused. “Didn’t realize how completely blind with fury he would be.”

To his credit, Davrik *didn’t* say “I told you so.” But he shook his head gravely as they both studied Nate’s rage-distorted features.

“He...he tried to kill me,” Lan’ara whispered, as the fact began to sink in. “If you hadn’t come back when you did—”

“He must have been through a lot—he didn’t recognize you,” Davrik said in a low voice. “You need to take him someplace that has the facilities to handle him.” He frowned. “I don’t suppose there’s anyplace like that on Yonnie Six, where Sonya was sold?”

Lan’ara shook her head.

“Yonnie Six is a planet owned and run exclusively by males and ruled by a male council called ‘The Sacred Eight.’ They buy and sell a lot of slaves—almost all female—but I don’t know that they have any special facilities for taking care of them. Especially disturbed ones, like Nate,” she added.

Davrik gave her a surprised look.

“Really? In *my* universe Yonnie Six is a planet owned and dominated by females who keep *male* slaves exclusively. “It’s ruled by a council called The Sacred Seven.’ But here you say it’s owned by males?”

Lan'ara nodded and winced as the small gesture sent a bolt of pain up her neck.

“Yes—we Kindred leave it strictly alone for that reason. Since most of us are female, it's not a safe place.”

“No, I imagine not.” He frowned and Lan'ara knew he was thinking of his mate—of Sonya.

“Did you find out any more about where she's located?” she asked. “From the slaver, I mean?”

He shook his head.

“Not much. All I know is that ‘The House of a Thousand Flowers’ where she was taken is located in the Pleasure District of Opulex—the capital city of Yonnie Six.” He frowned. “*That's* stayed the same, at least.”

“I know you're extremely anxious to get to Sonya—and I don't blame you,” Lan'ara said. “But if you could drop me and Nate off at Careesa Prime, I'd really appreciate it. It's on the way to Yonnie Six.”

“Careesa Prime?” Davrik frowned. “I don't know if we have that planet in my universe.”

“It's the home world of the Empath Kindred,” Lan'ara told him. “The Careesans had three males for every female so when the Kindred proposed a genetic trade, they were eager to take us up on it. It's where we get our empathic powers.”

“We have no Empath Kindred that I know of in my universe,” Davrik said thoughtfully. “Though it's possible that a trade was done long ago and forgotten about. Anyway, I don't mind dropping you and Nate off. From what the slaver said, Sonya was bought for the beauty of her voice. Not for... other reasons.”

His face grew dark and Lan'ara felt the protectiveness rising in him. He wanted badly to get to his mate and keep her safe from any who would harm her.

She didn't blame him and normally she would have waited until he had secured Sonya to ask for a ride to her home world. But she could still feel the rage emanating from Nate

and she feared for his emotional and mental well-being. Until she could free him of the stasis field and calm him, she couldn't begin to heal the wounds in his spirit—of which there were many. She could feel them, each and every one, pecking at him like angry crows.

“Thank you—I promise it won't take long to drop us off,” she said gratefully. “Come on—let me show you where Careesa Prime is on the star charts and you can put it into the Nav-com along with the coordinates to Yonnie Six.”

“Of course.” Davrik nodded and they walked together to the front of the ship. But Lan'ara couldn't help throwing a glance over her shoulder at Nate, still frozen in the stasis frame.

Don't worry, she thought, wishing she could reassure him in some way. I know you didn't mean to hurt me. I'm going to get you help, Nate—I swear I will!

She just prayed to the Goddess that his pain wasn't too deep to heal.

ELEVEN

DAVRIK

Davrik nodded a last goodbye as Lan'ara exited the ship and then closed the door and prepared to take the long-range shuttle back into space. Their stop on Careesa Prime had been, as she had promised, extremely brief.

Lan'ara had called ahead, asking for permission to bring Nate to a place called a "Healing Grotto." Permission had been granted, after she explained the circumstances, and they had landed in the middle of what appeared to be a tropical paradise.

The broad, feathery leaves and flowers were all soft, muted shades of blue and purple and green—and so were the people, to Davrik's surprise. The Careesans seemed to blend in with their environment and the pervading mood of the whole planet was that of peaceful reflection and healing.

The Careesan males who helped move the stasis frame with Nate inside it weren't quite as tall as the Kindred of his own universe but they all seemed very fit. They wore long white trousers that billowed around their legs and were gathered at the ankles. They went bare-chested, not needing to wear shirts in the balmy warmth Davrik could feel flooding into the shuttle from the jungle outside.

The females wore long white gowns which flowed down to their feet in the back but were split high in the front. Both males and females were barefoot—Lan'ara had explained that there were no thorns or weeds but only soft grasses on the surface of the planet. They all nodded and made gestures of peace as they murmured a muted welcome.

Davrik had wondered if their calm and peaceful attitudes prevailed over the entire planet or were unique to the Healing Grotto. He supposed on a planet of Empaths, where everyone could feel everyone else's emotions, it would be especially important to maintain a tranquil atmosphere.

But he couldn't keep his mind on Careesa Prime for long—he wished Lan'ara and Nate all the best and hoped she could heal the fury festering inside her human mate—but now he had other things to attend to. At last he was headed for Yonnie Six and his beloved Sonya. He just prayed he was in time and nothing horrible had been done to her.

A short jump through a stable wormhole found him in orbit around the small but prosperous planet. If the Yonnie Six of this universe shared any physical characteristics with the Yonnie Six of his own universe, they were heavily into Dream Gas mining and production. It was the only planet where the hallucinogenic gas could be found and it was a much sought after commodity.

If he had been in his own universe, Davrik would have had to pose as the bodyslave of a rich Mistress to land on Yonnie Six. However, in this universe he simply stated that he was a wealthy male interested in visiting the Pleasure District and he was granted immediate entry.

He docked on the outskirts of the Pleasure District and took a luxury hovercoach directly to The House of a Thousand Flowers. His body was tight with coiled tension. Soon he would see Sonya—or at least, this universe's version of her.

As he waited impatiently for the sleek, navy blue hovercoach to get to the club, he debated for the hundredth time on what he should tell her. He didn't know if he should try to explain about the other Sonya—his Sonya—from his universe or not. After all, he didn't want this new Sonya to feel like she was nothing but a replacement. She was going to be a different person—her life experiences and the trauma she'd been through would ensure that.

No, he decided, he couldn't tell her about the other Sonya. Later, after he'd gained her trust he would be able to explain. But for now, he needed to approach this situation as though she was a whole different woman he was trying to woo—because essentially, she was.

I'll just pretend to be a wealthy male interested in a beautiful woman, he told himself. Though of course he

intended to buy her from the pleasure house as soon as possible, he wouldn't let her know *why* he was buying her until much later.

The luxury hovercoach finally hummed to a stop in front of a soaring skyscraper with a golden awning over the large, double doors. *The House of a Thousand Flowers!* read a holo sign in glowing, florid lettering which floated above the awning.

Davrik climbed out and squared his shoulders. He had taken the time to change into his best clothing—a suit of heavy black sateen with a crisp white shirt and a deep blue Frizian silk cravat at his throat. Sonya had helped him pick it out to wear to her cousin's wedding, what felt like a lifetime ago—she'd liked the cravat because she said it brought out his eyes. Davrik hadn't worn it since, but he was glad he'd thought to bring it with him—it would help him play the part of a wealthy playboy interested only in pursuing pleasure.

The cred chips he had brought would also help with that illusion. They had been regular currency in his own universe, but in this one, they had turned into rare gold-edged chips that were worth ten times as much. He was grateful that Commander Sylvan had explained about the currency conversion between the two universes—apparently Commander Nox, the Dark Kindred who had first visited this reality—was the one who had discovered it.

So Davrik had a small fortune to bargain with and he was sure it would come in handy. He was willing to spend every last cent of it to get Sonya back. Or to get this version of Sonya, he reminded himself. He had to stop thinking of this as a way to get his old mate back—*his* Sonya was gone forever. Instead, he would be courting a new version of her, who was an entirely different person even if she looked the same as his mate. He had to remember that and be mindful of it.

The doorman, who was a short, squat Gordian dressed in golden livery, let him in at once. It was proof that his best suit and the attitude of wealth and privilege he had adopted were working, Davrik thought. He didn't even acknowledge the

male as he walked past him, keeping his chin high and a haughty look fixed on his face.

Inside, The House of a Thousand Flowers was ostentatious to say the least. The flooring was shiny black Barithian marble, polished until he could see his reflection if he looked down. Hovering over his head were expensive floating glows which hummed musically and tinkled against each other when they knocked gently together. The walls were covered in short, dense scarlet flowers which let off a subtle scent that smelled like sex and money put together, Davrik thought. At least Sonya had been taken to a nice place—he just prayed to the Goddess she hadn't been mistreated here.

He walked briskly up to the front desk, which was made of pale blue Zrethian teakwood, and rapped his knuckles on it sharply. At once an attendant wearing the same golden livery as the doorman came out from behind the hanging curtains behind the desk and made an obsequious bow. He wasn't from any species Davrik knew but he was short and slender and had springy green curls growing in a single line down the center of his scalp. It looked a little like the hairstyle he had heard humans call a "Mohawk."

"Hello, my good Sir! How may I be of assistance to you, today?" the clerk asked, looking up at Davrik. "Are you interested in tasting the delicious and rare liquors of our collection or listening to the beautiful music in our lounge? Or perhaps you'd like to spend some personal one-on-one time with one of our incomparable 'flowers.'"

He made a gesture in the air and a holo illumination suddenly appeared. It looked like a poster you might hang on a wall, except it was made of light and hovered in front of Davrik's face. And it showed at least a thousand women.

"Here we have our Zenthian blossom—she goes by the name of Treela," the clerk said, highlighting one of the small squares and causing it to grow large so that it took up the entire holo. It showed a slender female with green skin and three large yellow eyes. She was wearing a slinky black dress that showed the curving tops of her three breasts and her long blue hair was waved over one slim shoulder.

“And here is Hi’la—our flower from Goisha Prime,” the clerk went on glibly. He shrank the first picture and highlighted another, showing a second woman—this one with pink skin and four arms—wearing a knowing smile.

“I *am* looking for a female—a human woman,” Davrik said, deciding to get straight to the point. “She looks like this.”

He pulled out his own holo disk and displayed the image of Sonya to the clerk, who hastily waved a hand and disappeared the glowing poster of the many “flowers.”

“Ah...I see.” The clerk studied the holo and nodded. “You have very good taste, Sir. I see that you’re interested in our brightest and most beautiful blossom—Sonya the Songbird, we call her.”

“Yes, that’s her!” Davrik’s heart jumped painfully in his chest as he put the holo disk back in his pocket. “I want to see her at once! No, first I want to talk to the manager here—I want to buy her contract.”

The clerk frowned doubtfully.

“Well...I don’t know about that, Sir. Here in The House of a Thousand Flowers, we’re not in the habit of selling our blossoms—though you can, of course, spend time with them—for a price.”

“I don’t want her for an hour, damn it!” Davrik growled. “I want to *buy* her! I need to *own* her! Who can I talk to about that?”

He didn’t have to fake the impatience in his voice—yes, he was pretending to be a rich asshole, but in this case, he was speaking from the heart. He *needed* to get Sonya and make sure she was safe!

The clerk shook his head.

“You’d have to speak to Master Oozle, I’m afraid. But he’s out right now.”

“In that case, just let me buy time with Sonya until he returns,” Davrik said. He didn’t want to take a chance on some other male coming in and “buying time” with his female and

doing the Goddess knew what to her while he waited for the manager to arrive!

“I’m afraid she’s not at liberty to entertain guests right now, Sir,” the clerk said apologetically. “She’s singing at the moment—in our Flower Lounge. Her voice is positively heavenly—every one of our patrons says so.”

“All right, where’s the lounge?” Davrik asked impatiently. He just wanted to see her again, damn it! She was so close and he couldn’t get to her—it was *maddening*.

“I’m afraid the lounge is for members only,” the clerk told him. “Would you care to buy a membership?”

“Yes—yes, whatever you want,” Davrik growled.

“Excellent!”

The clerk made another holo poster appear, showing a complicated looking graph with several colors shading into each other.

“Now the next question is, what level of membership do you want?” he asked cheerfully. “The Silver membership allows you access to the Flower Lounge only, as well as some time with one of our lower tier flowers. The Golden membership includes access to our Flower Spa, where you can have the most luxurious and relaxing treatments administered by the delicate fingers of our Spa Flowers and also private time spent with any two mid-tier flowers of your choosing. The Platinum membership—”

“Yes, yes—give me that one. Or whichever one is the highest,” Davrik snapped. “Whichever one will buy me the most time with Sonya—that’s what I want.”

“Ahh...you must be speaking of our *Diamond* membership.” The clerk nodded knowingly. “Which will give you access to—”

“I don’t fucking care what it gives me access to!” Davrik growled. “Just hurry up and let me buy the damn thing so I can go and see her!”

“At once, Sir.” The clerk nodded obsequiously. “Now, how would you like to pay?”

Davrik reached in his pocket and pulled out a handful of the rare gold-edged cred chips. He watched the clerk’s eyes widen with grim satisfaction.

“Is this enough?” he demanded. “I have more. Enough to buy Sonya’s contract ten times over.”

“That, as I said, you’ll have to discuss with our manager when he returns,” the clerk said. “For now, allow me to process your payment and welcome you as the newest member of our Diamond Level Club.”

“Just *hurry*,” Davrik told him.

He watched impatiently as the clerk began to fill out the long membership form. The process looked like it was going to take forever! He had an urgent feeling that he needed to get to Sonya soon...before someone else had the same idea as him and tried to buy time with her.

But all he could do was wait as the clerk filled out the form...

TWELVE

SONYA

The three headed Trollox in the corner of the lounge was staring at her with all seven of his yellow eyes—the middle head had three eyes instead of just two—and it was throwing Sonya off.

“Love has no pride, when I call out your name...

Love has no pride, when there’s no one but myself to blame,” she sang, trying to ignore the greedy, lustful look on all three of the monster’s faces.

Luckily, she knew the old torch song cold. Back on Earth, before the Scourge had come and taken over, she’d sung at an old-fashioned lounge called The Speak Easy in Ybor City, the historic district of Tampa, every weekend. The gig had gotten her through grad school and Sonya had enjoyed it—she loved music. It was her joy and her relaxation...but she’d never thought it might also be her salvation.

Music—and her voice—had saved her when the Scourge had finally caught her.

After years of running and hiding, living off scraps and crouching in abandoned buildings, her luck had finally run out. The huge, soulless monstrosities the Scourge called soldiers had cornered her along with a group of other squatters who had been hiding in an abandoned warehouse. They had herded the lot of them into a ship owned by a Saurian slaver—a being who looked like a walking, talking gator, to Sonya’s Florida girl eyes—and she had ended up at the Flesh Bazaar.

“If you have any ssspecial talentsss, now isss the time to come forward,” the gator-looking slaver had hissed. “I can sssell you for more, but you may benefit as well. It isss better to be sssold as a skilled slave than a common laborer or whore.”

His words had galvanized Sonya into action.

“I can sing,” she’d said, stepping forward at once. “I mean, I can *really* sing—not just karaoke or singing in the shower. I used to perform professionally.”

“Give me a demonstration,” the slaver had commanded.

Heart in her throat, Sonya opened her mouth and belted out *Cry Me a River* from start to finish. It was one of the songs she’d been required to sing at the Speak Easy and she gave it everything she had.

When she finished, the Saurian slaver had nodded his long, scaly snout thoughtfully.

“I ssee. It is not the kind of sssinging that my people enjoy, but I believe humanoids and other bipeds may like it. I will make note of your talent and sssell you accordingly.”

And that was how Sonya had come to be one of the many “flowers” in The House of a Thousand Flowers on Yonnie Six. The slaver had her sing for the owner—a disgusting looking creature named “Oozle” who looked like a slug if it was six feet tall and standing on its hind legs. (Did slugs have legs? Sonya didn’t know, but that was what Oozle looked like.)

His long, blobby antennae had pulsed in time with her singing and he had declared—in a burbling, underwater voice—that she would be the “brightest bloom in the bouquet” and the headliner act at the Flower Lounge.

Of course, just because she had a special status, didn’t mean that Sonya didn’t have to “entertain clients”—which was what they called sex work here at The House of a Thousand Flowers. On the contrary, she was a “top-tier flower” which meant that she earned more for the establishment than ninety-nine percent of the rest of the girls put together. Luckily, so far she’d mostly attracted males who were interested only in her vocal abilities.

She’d spent time with an Urfull—a tall, thin creature with ears all over his chest and abdomen. He had only wanted her to hum softly to him—after he had removed all of the wax earplugs he was wearing first, of course. Loud noises were painful to him, he explained, but soft, tuneful humming was

considered extremely erotic. While Sonya hummed, he rubbed his various ears until he seemed to achieve an orgasm—or maybe in this case it was an *eargasm*? At any rate, he loved her humming and had visited her several times.

She had other “clients” too. There was a Bosporous—a male with green skin and a nose like an elephant’s trunk—that wanted her to sing three pitches loudly over and over as he trumpeted along with her on his oversized nose. Sonya had complied. What else could she do? It certainly wasn’t the most unpleasant thing she’d been asked to do to entertain a client since she’d come to The House of a Thousand Flowers.

Speaking of unpleasant, she hoped she didn’t have to entertain any more Zoporans. The one Zoporan client she’d entertained had insisted on sucking her toes into his gummy, toothless mouth while she sang any songshe wanted to him. Sonya appreciated the artistic freedom, but *not* the horrible feeling of getting her toes sucked and coated in slime. She’d taken a long, *long* bath after that particular “session.”

And yet, that *still* wasn’t the most uncomfortable time she’d had. That award went to the three headed Trollox who was currently watching her with all seven of his greedy little yellow eyes, Sonya thought. Sir Grox, as she had been instructed to call him—(though each individual head had names she couldn’t pronounce)—had first visited her the night before.

But first, Master Oozle had come into her room with no warning as usual. Sonya couldn’t even hear his footsteps in the hall outside, since he oozed everywhere, leaving a trail of slime behind him. For this reason, he was constantly followed by a little robot vacuum, not unlike a Roomba, which cleaned up after him. But even the robot was silent, so she never knew when her new owner, who was also the manager of the club, would come bursting in on her.

“You’re about to have a very special and important client,” he told her in his burbling voice with no preamble. “You must treat him extremely well and give him anything he wants.”

“What choice do I have?” Sonya demanded. She tried not to let bitterness rule her life, but she didn’t like being “owned.” Or being forced to sing on command and let strange alien males suck her toes or whatever it was they wanted to do to her!

Oozle had waved his antennae at her warningly.

“Be careful how you speak to me, girl! You may be a top-tier flower now, but I can cast you down to the bottom tier any time I wish if you displease me. Would you rather spend your days on your back entertaining client after client in the basement? Or do you want to keep your lovely penthouse view and sing more than you fuck?”

He gestured with one slimy hand—which was more like a tentacle—to the view of Downtown Opulex with its high, shiny spires and gleaming glass buildings visible through the floor-to-ceiling windows that walled the corner apartment on two sides.

“I’ll keep the view,” Sonya said shortly.

Because what else could she say? Her situation was bad, but it could always get worse if she wasn’t careful. She’d heard that the bottom tier flowers had to “entertain a client” every solar hour. At least she was limited to one or two clients a day, since she was often in the Flower Lounge performing.

“What does this client want?” she asked, trying to keep her temper in check. “Does he want me to sing to him?” That was what she hoped, anyway. Please, God—no more toe sucking!

“I do not know what he wants—but whatever it is, you will provide it for him,” Oozle had burred sternly. “He is the Trollox ambassador to Opulex—a very important male!”

At that point, Sonya hadn’t known what a “Trollox” was, so she simply nodded her head.

“All right. I understand.”

“Good. On your best behavior, girl! Do whatever Sir Grox tells you and do it with a smile!” Oozle had pointed one

slimy digit at her and then oozed out of the room with the tiny vacuum following behind him to clean up his trail of slime.

A moment later, the Trollox had stepped in and Sonya felt her heart freeze in her chest.

The monster! a panicked little voice in the back of her brain whispered. *Oh God, the monster—he's here!*

Sir Grox had to duck his head to get into the large penthouse room and once inside, he seemed to fill it with his presence—and not in a good way. He had taken a seat in the reinforced chair that had been brought into her room earlier—apparently just for him.

Despite the reinforcements, the chair had creaked ominously as he lowered his ponderous bulk onto it. He had settled himself with his legs wide apart and Sonya hadn't been able to keep from staring at the massive bulge in his leather trousers which looked as big as an enormous roll of bologna in a deli case. She tried looking at the top of him instead—but the view didn't improve.

Two of Sir Grox's heads were bald and the one in the middle had greasy orange hair that was slicked back from its temples. He smelled too—a rank odor like rotting meat and dirty feet and unclean genitals.

Smells like he hasn't taken a shower or washed his junk in a month of Sundays! Sonya thought dismally as her heart began to beat again. The old saying about a “month of Sundays” made her think with longing of her granny who had died right at the beginning of the Scourge invasion. What would she think if she could see her granddaughter now? If she knew what Sonya was being forced to do?

“Er, hello...” Her heart had been in her throat and her skin felt clammy with fear as she forced herself to face her latest client. “How...how can I entertain you?” she'd asked him, just as she had been taught. “Would you like me to sing you a special song? Just for you?” she added hopefully.

But Sir Grox had shaken all three of his heads. He looked like the ogre in the book of fairy tales her mother used to read

to her as a child, Sonya thought. That damn picture had given her night terrors—for years she'd woken up screaming and crying in the darkness, terrified that the horrible ogre was going to get her and “grind her bones to make his bread.” And now, here he sat—a ten-foot-tall nightmare come to life—and there was nowhere to run and no one to wake her up from this horror.

The monster, whispered the voice again. *He's here for you, Sonya and there's no getting away from him!*

“Take off your clothes.” Only the middle head—the one with the slicked back hair—spoke. It had a surprisingly high voice, considering the enormous body it was attached to. The cartoon sound of it might have made Sonya laugh if she hadn't been scared stiff.

“Take off...take off my clothes?” she'd whispered, feeling sick.

“Take them *off*. Grox wants to see your cunny, little female,” the middle head said and the other two heads on either side nodded and giggled—high, evil laughter that raised the short hairs on the back of her neck and made her stomach clench into a slick fist.

Sonya wanted desperately to run—to hide. But there was nowhere to go. The Trollox was between her and the door and even if she could get out, she'd only manage to make it into the corridor which was regularly patrolled by the Flower House guards. And even if she dodged past them and managed to get all the way out onto the street, where could she go?

She'd been told—along with the other new “flowers”—that the planet they were on, Yonnie Six, was completely ruled and dominated by males. A woman wasn't allowed to go anywhere without a man because all women here were slaves and property—it was like the Patriarchy on steroids.

“Unaccompanied females will be reported and rounded up the moment anyone sees them,” Oozle had informed them in his burbling voice. “You will simply be brought right back here and punished severely. You will lose your ranking and be immediately cast into the bottom tier of flowers. There is no

escape from Yonnie Six or from The House of a Thousand Flowers—do not even *attempt* it.”

So Sonya was stuck here and she knew it.

She was a sex worker now—she had *almost* accepted that. But she’d been able to imagine that she would only have to go on *singing* for the various “clients” she entertained. None of them had asked her to undress before now—not even the Zoporan who had wanted to suck her toes.

Hands shaking, she had taken off the long, slinky gown she’d been wearing during her last performance in the Flower Lounge and draped it over the vast silver platform bed in the corner of the apartment. Then, feeling cold all over, she turned around and stood naked before the enormous Trollox.

The monster...the monster... the little voice kept chanting in her head.

Sonya was horribly afraid he wanted to touch her—to paw her with those huge, grimy sausage fingers with dirt under every nail. Or God, what if he wanted to *fuck* her? How could that even work? There was no way the enormous thing she saw bulging in his brown leather trousers would ever fit inside her! It would be like trying to have a baby in reverse—as if you were cramming it back up into yourself instead of pushing it out!

It was a sickening thought and it did *not* appeal to Sonya. She stood there naked, rubbing her arms with her hands to try and dissipate the chill bumps that had broken out on her skin. But it was useless—she was cold and frightened and horrified at what might happen to her. Her nightmare was coming true and there was nothing she could do to stop it.

“Show Grox your tits,” the middle head directed her.

“I...what?” Sonya’s voice had come out in a paper-thin whisper.

“Come here, little female—show us your tits,” it commanded.

Sonya had taken a hesitant step forward and then another and another until she was standing there in front of the

enormous ogre-looking creature. All three heads were far above her but Sir Grox bent down to stare at her and she was suddenly enveloped in a horrible, moist cloud of hot, fetid breath blowing from all three of the mouths, which were open. Two of the heads were drooling, as though they were staring at something they wanted to eat...to bite and grind and chew...

She tried not to look at the blunt, jagged teeth—half of them stained yellow or black. There were chunks of flesh caught between them and she tried not to speculate what kind of meat the giant had been eating. His breath smelled almost as bad as his body odor—which was truly saying something.

After what felt like forever, the middle head spoke again.

“Spread your legs for Grox,” it ordered. “Show Grox your cunny.”

Feeling like she might throw up, Sonya had parted her thighs.

Oh God, if he touches me...

If Sir Grox touched her, she was certain she really was going to be sick. She would probably puke all over his three massive boulder-like heads. And she was certain that wouldn't make Master Oozle happy at all. Grimly, she held on to her gorge.

To her surprise, though, Sir Grox had simply sat there and *looked* at her, examining her bare pussy with his greedy little eyes.

But it was the *way* he looked at her—it was the way he was looking *now*, Sonya thought, trying to keep her voice from wavering as she sang her set in the Flower Lounge. There was something so sinister in those slitted yellow eyes—it made her sick with fear and loathing and brought back all the old night terrors.

It was like he was trying to decide if he wanted to eat her or fuck her...or both.

Sonya had been vastly relieved when their solar hour was up and he had done neither. He had made her spread his legs for him and lift her breasts close to his faces so that the hot,

fetid breath of all three of his mouths blew on her at once, making Sonya feel like she was standing in a humid, poison fog. But he hadn't touched her, thank God! She felt like a part of her might die inside if he did—if she had to feel those dirty fingers on her skin. Just the thought almost made her gag.

It felt like a narrow escape and she'd taken a long, *long* shower and scrubbed every bit of her body afterwards. Then she'd sprayed the whole room with air freshener to get rid of his horrible stench.

"It's over," she'd told herself aloud in a shaking voice. "He didn't touch you—he's gone. You'll never have to see him again. Clearly, he didn't like you enough to want to see you more than once. Don't think about it, Sonya—forget it. He's gone."

She'd gone to sleep in the vast silver platform bed which she hadn't had to share with anyone so far and drifted into an uneasy slumber. But then, for the first time in a long time, she'd woken up screaming.

The nightmare was as strong and vivid as the ones she'd had when she was a child. A big hand pawing for her...a hungry mouth with broken teeth gaping wide...hot breath on her bare flesh as the monster sought to devour her.

When she'd had night terrors as a child, one of her parents or her granny was always there to wake her and comfort her. But no one came to comfort her now—no one put their arms around her and held her tight, whispering that everything was going to be okay, that she was safe now, safe and it was all right and the monster wasn't real.

"Just your imagination. Shh, Sonya—hush now, sweetheart. It was just a bad dream and now it's over."

But there was no one to say those words—no one to reassure her. And this time the nightmare was real and she couldn't escape the monster just by waking up.

Sonya had curled into a trembling ball as the sobs wracked her.

Of course no one came to comfort you, whispered a mean little voice in her head. Your whole family is dead—remember? Momma, Daddy, Granny—all of them dead! And you're all alone, stuck on an alien planet millions of light years from home and no one cares about you. Grow up and get over it, Sonya! No one is coming to save you.

She'd tried to comfort herself again by reminding herself that the huge Trollox hadn't actually *touched* her—clearly, she wasn't to his liking because he hadn't done anything to her. Probably she would never see him again.

But her hopes had been dashed when she'd walked out onto the glittering, floating stage in the middle of the Flower Lounge and saw him sitting there in the corner of the club, as though he was waiting for her.

Clearly, she wasn't done seeing Sir Grox yet. Why else would he be watching her set in the Flower Lounge?

Sonya knew she had been lucky so far—having clients that were mainly interested in her vocal talents. No one had made her do anything overtly sexual yet—other than standing around naked or sucking her toes. It had made her feel dirty and objectified, but it still wasn't as bad as being raped. Thank God that hadn't happened to her—yet. Yes, she'd been relatively lucky, considering her circumstances.

But now, with Sir Grox's greedy yellow eyes watching her, she had a bad feeling that her luck was just about to run out...

THIRTEEN

NATE

The next time the invisible barrier released Nate, he was immediately restrained. Something soft but strong was wrapped around his wrists and ankles as he lunged forward, trying to attack whatever fucker was trying to buy him this time!

“Get off me!” he shouted, struggling against the new bonds. “Leave me the fuck alone! I’ll fucking kill you!”

“Gently, Nate. *Gently*,” a soft, feminine voice breathed in his ear. And then a sweet smell was wafted into his nostrils and he felt himself going limp.

“No!” he growled, trying to fight it. They were drugging him—he could feel himself losing control! But though he turned his head and tried to get away from the smell, the world went hazy around him.

“Gently,” he heard the strangely familiar voice murmur again.

And then he was out.

When he woke again, he was no longer restrained. There was a feeling of something warm and wet all around him and a sound like waves lapping in his ears.

Opening his eyes, he looked down the length of his body and realized he was lying on his back. No, not lying—*floating*. He was floating in a pool of cloudy blue water with purple swirls in it. It must be nighttime or twilight, because the lighting was dim. He was wearing a pair of long white trousers but they were wet through and sticking to his long legs. His chest was bare and his hair was loose—unbound from the club at the back of his neck where he normally kept it and floating freely around his face.

Nate was a very strong swimmer. Instinctively, he tried to right himself. If he was in water, he needed to get oriented—there might be predators here—he needed to be alert!

But again, he couldn't move. His arms and legs refused to obey him—they just lay there, floating in the water like dead branches someone had lopped off a tree.

“What the *fuck!*” he growled, straining again to make something move—anything at all! But not even his toes—which he could see floating above the surface of the milky blue water—would wiggle.

“Be calm, Nate,” a soft, feminine voice said.

It was coming from behind him somewhere. Nate rolled his eyeballs as far back in his head as he could—at least *that* part of his body wasn't paralyzed—trying to see who was speaking to him.

“It's just me,” the voice told him. “It's Lan'ara. I'm sorry about using a paralytic agent on you, but we had to be sure you wouldn't hurt yourself...or anyone else.”

“Who the fuck is 'Lan'ara'?” Nate demanded.

“*I am Lan'ara.*”

There was a faint swishing sound and the speaker came around to his right side so that Nate could look up at her.

She was undeniably beautiful—fucking gorgeous to be honest—with long, straight black hair and delicate features. But there was no doubt in his mind she wasn't human—not even close. She had pale lavender skin tones and exotically tilted deep purple eyes several shades darker, which were fringed thickly with dark lashes.

“I am Lan'ara,” she said again, looking down at him. “Do you know me now?”

Nate glared up at her.

“How the fuck am I supposed to know you?” he growled. “I've never seen you before in my life!”

A look of shock and hurt came over her lovely features.

“But...we've been Dream-sharing for months!”

Nate felt the fury surge in him—the absolute rage which was all that had enabled him to survive for the past five years

—ever since the Scourge had first invaded.

“I don’t know what the fuck that means or who the fuck you are but let me go *right now* or you’re going to be fucking sorry!” he snarled.

She looked down at him sadly.

“I’m afraid I cannot let you go—I am supporting your head.”

As she spoke, Nate became aware that this was true. A small, soft hand was under the back of his head, lifting it ever so slightly so that he could see and hear—otherwise the water would have gotten into his ears. A second hand was between his shoulder blades. He couldn’t think why he hadn’t felt her hands on him before she mentioned it—maybe because her touch was so light it was barely there.

“You know what I mean,” he snapped. “Un-paralyze me—undo whatever it is you did to me, so I can move again!”

“Not until you release some of your anger and calm down,” the purple girl said sternly. Her voice softened. “I know you’re upset—you’ve had to live your life in a state of constant rage for so long now. It was the only way you could survive.”

Nate stared up at her suspiciously.

“How do you fucking know that?”

“I wish you wouldn’t swear so much,” she said mildly. “I know all about you because of the Dream-sharing.”

That term again—it made no sense to Nate.

“Dream-sharing? What the fuck is that?” he demanded, ignoring her request that he not swear.

She looked troubled.

“It’s what happens when the mind of a Kindred aligns with the mind of a male of another species. You have dreams—visions—of each other. You see each others’ daily activities—the trials and tribulations the other person is going through.

You and I have been Dream-sharing for *months*,” she emphasized again.

“So you’ve been watching me for months?” he demanded.

“Only in my dreams. And it wasn’t something I did consciously.” She looked at him earnestly. “Every time I closed my eyes at night, I found myself in your world, Nate. I saw what you went through—my heart aches for your pain.”

He felt something clench in his chest at her soft words. For a moment he was almost tempted to believe her. But no—what she was saying was *crazy*. She was clearly an alien—she’d even admitted she was a different species. It was probably another plot by the AllFather to fuck with his mind so he could suck up more of Nate’s pain.

“I can feel your disbelief,” she said softly, startling him. “I know it will take some time for me to prove myself to you, but the dreams don’t lie.” She bent closer, her large, lovely eyes looking into his. “Can you honestly say you don’t know me at all? After all the dreams we shared...”

“I never remember my dreams,” Nate said roughly. “So no, lady—I don’t fucking know you! Now are you going to let me go or not?”

An expression of heartbreaking sadness crossed her lovely face and for a moment Nate almost felt sorry for hurting her. But then he hardened himself—it was all a trick! He probably wasn’t even here, floating in this weird, warm pool of milky blue water. He was probably back at the Father Ship, hooked up to all those fucking wires while the Scourge pushed fucked up images into his brain to make his pain taste sweeter for the AllFather...

“Ah...so much pain and fear and distrust!” the girl moaned softly and her eyes closed tight, as though she was fighting not to be overwhelmed. “Oh, Nate...I’m so sorry for all you went through! I’m so sorry I couldn’t get to you earlier!”

When she opened her eyes again, they were bright with tears. Seeing her distress tugged at something in Nate's heart. He hated to see a woman upset or in tears—his natural urge was to comfort and protect her. But how could he trust that her tears were for real? How could he trust that *any* of this was for real?

"I can feel you struggling with doubt," she said, looking down at him. "You wonder if you're really here or if you're back at the Father Ship, being tortured, don't you?"

Nate stiffened—as much as he could anyway, since his body still wasn't obeying any of his commands.

"How the fuck do you know about that? No wait—let me guess—the 'Dream-sharing.' Right?"

He said it sarcastically, but she only nodded.

"Yes. I've seen what they did to you—it's one of the reasons I brought you here, to my home world of Careesa Prime. You need *healing*, Nate." She looked at him earnestly. "I just want to help you—to heal you. But I can't do that if you won't trust me."

"Why the fuck should I trust you?" he demanded. "What have you done but kidnap me and paralyze me and put me in a fucking lake where I can't even fucking swim?"

"This is the Outermost pool—I brought you here to heal your outer wounds," she said softly. "*After* I rescued you from being blown out the air lock at the Flesh Bazaar," she added.

Nate frowned. He *did* remember the Flesh Bazaar—the huge auditorium bigger than a football stadium lined with pedestals where slaves were displayed. They had thawed him out several times there and tried to sell him—and every time he'd done his level best to kill the fuckers!

"I know what you've had to do to survive," the purple girl said softly. "I've watched you, Nate—I've ached for your pain. But you're safe now. No one will hurt you here. You have to try and let go of some of your paranoia and believe me. *Trust* me."

Nate felt a growl of frustration rising in his throat.

“How do you expect me to do that? Why should I ever fucking trust you?”

“Because, until you can trust, you cannot begin to heal,” she said softly. “Watch...”

Looking up, she murmured something in a language he didn't understand. At her call, a long, purple vine dropped down from the ceiling.

Nate wanted to flinch away from it instinctively—it acted too much like a fucking snake for comfort! But he couldn't move—all he could do was watch as tightly furled buds along the vine's length burst open and blossomed into large, softly glowing flowers.

The glow lit up the purple girl's face—what had she said her name was? Lan'ara? Anyway, it lit her face with a dim, golden glow and made her eyes shine like stars.

“Feel me touching you,” she murmured softly, looking into Nate's eyes. “Feel my hands supporting you—you can trust me not to drop you, Nate—not to let you drown. I only want to help you—I only want to *heal* you. Release your rage to me—let me take it for you.”

Nate looked up at her and felt something in his chest loosen...just a little bit. He had to admit, none of the images the Scourge had forced into his head were anything like this. They had all been of torture and war—horrible mental snapshots of his family being killed, his little sister being raped. Every single thing they'd showed him had been meant to make him angry and horrified and sad and afraid. There was nothing like this—floating in a calm lake with a beautiful girl speaking softly to him.

As he remembered the awful things the enemy had forced into his mind, Lan'ara closed her eyes again and a look of pain came over her beautiful face.

“So horrible!” she murmured. “Oh, Goddess, Nate—what you've endured!”

Nate stared at her, wonderingly. Was she really seeing what he had seen? Feeling what he felt, somehow? Was that

even possible? And why did it feel like the mental and emotional burden he had been carrying for so long, like a mountain of heavy bricks, was lighter now? Only lighter by a few bricks, but still...*lighter*.

“How...how can I trust you?” he asked again. “Trust that you’re real, I mean?” This time his voice came out hoarse instead of defiant.

Lan’ara opened her eyes and looked down at him. He thought she looked weary now—as though she’d lifted some heavy weight. For the first time he noticed she had slightly raised, circular ridges at her temples. They were a lighter color than the rest of her skin and they were glowing a faint pink.

She had a white cloth around her slender neck too—a kind of bandage, maybe? For a moment he had a brief, violent image of wrapping his fingers around a slim throat and squeezing as hard as he could. Had he done something to her? Tried to hurt her? Fuck...

“You don’t have to trust me when I say I’m real,” she said, breaking into his thoughts. “But you *can* trust your senses. Think about it—the images that the AllFather showed you were just that—*images*. There were no sounds or smells or tastes or touch associated with them. So I’ll ask you to concentrate on the physical stimuli around you. The warmth and wetness of the pool...the soft sound of the wind sighing in the caverns and the faint humming of the glow blossoms...the feeling of my hands supporting you. Feel all these things, Nate, and *trust your senses*.”

Nate looked up at her and did as she said. He didn’t know why he was willing to do it—maybe she’d broken though a tiny bit of the barrier he’d built around himself since the Scourge invasion. Maybe she’d found a tiny chink in his carefully crafted armor. But he found himself listening to the glowing flowers—they *did* make a soft, musical hum...and feeling the warm waves of the pool lap against his body and the softness of her hand supporting his head...

There was a faint scent too—a warm, fresh, feminine fragrance that teased his nose and made him want to get closer

to her for some reason. God, he'd never smelled anything like it—was that coming from her? From Lan'ara? If so, it was the most amazing perfume he'd ever smelled.

After a long moment, Lan'ara let out a soft, relieved sigh.

“Ah...I feel the calm overcoming some of your fear. Good, Nate...that's very good.”

“Will you let me go now?” he asked. “I'll stay right here if you do—I won't try to escape.”

She frowned down at him.

“I can't help knowing when you're lying, you know,” she said mildly. “I am an Empath Kindred—I can sense everything you feel.”

Nate sighed restlessly.

“Fine—I'll probably look for a way out of here. I need to get back to Earth—I was a leader in the resistance. They need me there.”

“That fight is over for you now,” Lan'ara said softly. “The Kindred are working to free your home world from the Scourge. Our weapons are far superior to yours, so there is no need for you to go back.”

Nate glared up at her as the anger surged in him again.

“Earth is my *home* and those fuckers are trying to destroy it! Of *course* I have to go back!”

Lan'ara winced, almost as though he'd struck her.

“Please, Nate...you were just beginning to be calm. I am not asking you to give up the fight for your home world completely—only to join it from a different place—from the Kindred Mother Ship. Two of your friends are there already, you know,” she added. “Oliver and Simon are living aboard the Mother Ship, mated to my colleagues, Commander Bairdida and Commander Sylvania.”

Nate felt a shock of surprise go through him.

“What? I thought they were killed! I lost them in that fire fight and I thought—”

“You thought their deaths were your fault, didn’t you?” Lan’ara said gently. “That’s one piece of guilt you can put away for good—they’re well and safe and mated to Kindred females, like myself.”

Nate had heard of the Kindred—supposedly they were an alien race, like the Scourge. But instead of being evil despoilers, they were a race of beautiful women who had come to try and save the Earth from the invaders.

He had always thought the Kindred were nothing but a legend—a hopeful story started by people who would have no hope otherwise. A sweet lie to help the few children that were left on the despoiled Earth sleep at night.

But now, here was Lan’ara, telling him that the Kindred were real—and that his two old buddies were married—or “mated,” to use her term—to two of them! And that she was one herself.

“You’re really not fucking with me?” he demanded, looking up at her. “Ollie and Simon are alive?”

“They sent you their best wishes because they knew I was coming to find you,” Lan’ara told him. “Oh, and Oliver said to tell you something. He said...” She frowned, a slight wrinkle forming between her sharply arched eyebrows. “He said, ‘Tell Nate I still miss his coffee can casserole.’ Does that make any sense to you?”

Nate felt a shock run through him. Coffee can casserole was a name they’d given to a meal he’d made many nights when their unit was under cover, hiding from the Scourge. It was just chopping up whatever meat or veg you could find and mixing it up in a big, empty metal coffee can, like the kind by Folgers or Maxwell House, and cooking it over a fire. A can of condensed soup or a packet of gravy mix provided the sauce and it came out different every time.

Nate had gotten damn good at making it—coming up with some really tasty concoctions. The other guys in his unit always begged him to play chef, claiming that nobody else could make coffee-can casserole like he could.

“Yes,” he said at last. “Yes, I know what he meant.” He looked up at her wonderingly. “You really *do* know Ollie and Simon!”

“Not extremely well—they are mated to my colleagues, as I said,” Lan’ara told him. “But they are eager to see you again.”

“Let’s go see them now, then!” he exclaimed. Forgetting he couldn’t move, he tried to get up, only to remember all over again that he was paralyzed.

“We can’t go yet,” Lan’ara said softly. “Not before you’re healed and we go through our Claiming Period. You cannot go aboard the Kindred Mother Ship until you’re no longer a danger to yourself and others...and you can’t take up permanent residence there unless you’re mated to a Kindred, as Oliver and Simon are.”

Nate frowned.

“Are you saying that in order to see my friends again, you and I have to get married or some shit like that? Because, don’t get me wrong—you’re fucking gorgeous—but I don’t even *know* you.”

She winced, a look of pain crossing her features.

“You don’t have to be mated to me in order to see your friends, but we should at least *attempt* the Claiming Period. It will help us grow closer and enable me to heal your emotional wounds. That way you’ll be considered safe to board the Mother Ship.”

“And what exactly does this ‘Claiming Period’ entail?” Nate demanded suspiciously. “What are you going to do to me? How do you expect to ‘Claim’ me?”

Lan’ara shook her head, her silky black hair swishing in the water.

“It will be *you* Claiming *me*—but only at the end of the period and only if you choose to Bond with me, Nate.” She gave him a serious look. “I would never try to force a Bonding. It must come from the heart and entwine both souls.”

Nate didn't have the least idea what she was talking about, but he knew he wanted to see his combat buddies again. He and Ollie and Simon had gotten damn close—the two of them were like the brothers he'd never had. Seeing them would help him make sense out of this craziness—it would help him get his head on straight, as his old CO in the Seals used to say. He was willing to agree to just about anything to do that. Just to feel *normal* again and to see his friends.

“All right,” he said, looking up at her. “I'll do it. Whatever this Claiming thing is, we'll try it. And you have my word as a Seal I'll give it my best shot. As long as I can see my friends again after it's over.”

Lan'ara nodded.

“You have my word as a Kindred—you will see them as long as we at least *attempt* the Claiming Period together.”

“Good.” Nate nodded. “Then will you let me go now? I swear I won't try to get away,” he added. “Though I *do* want to explore some—this is some freaky shit you've got around here.” He nodded at the milky blue water and the glowing flowers on the hanging vine.

Lan'ara gave him a serious look.

“I can give you the anti-paralytic, but I want you to remember something—you're trusting me but I'm also trusting you, Nate. You're much bigger and stronger than me—you could hurt me if you wanted to.”

Nate scowled.

“I don't hurt women! That's not the kind of guy I am!”

But as he spoke, he got an uneasy feeling and a brief flash of his hands closing around a slender throat resurfaced...and then was gone again so fast he barely registered it.

Lan'ara nodded.

“I know you're not that kind of male. The Goddess would never allow one of her daughters to align with an abusive or hurtful soul.”

Nate didn't know about any "Goddess" but he *did* know he wanted to be able to move again.

"Look," he said, as gently as he could. "I know I'm a big guy, but I swear I won't hurt you. I was raised to protect women—not hit or hurt them."

She smiled faintly.

"I would like to know more about your childhood someday and your family."

"They're all dead now," Nate said bleakly. "At least, I know for sure that my mom and dad are. Not sure what happened to my little sister. I thought she was someplace safe—an underground bunker. But the fucking Scourge found it and I don't know if she escaped or not."

"I can feel how much you loved her—how much you wanted to protect her," Lan'ara said gently. "What was her name?"

"Madison." He sighed unhappily. "Used to call her 'Maddy' for short. She always hated that nickname."

He couldn't help remembering how Maddy used to shout, "Na-*than*-ial!" when he teased her. She always punched him with her little fists. He would give a million dollars to see her and have her punch him like that again.

"I can't promise anything, but we can at least look for your sister when we get to the Mother Ship," Lan'ara offered. "We've been scanning the Earth for human survivors for months now—it's possible someone has seen her or heard of her."

"That would be fucking amazing if we could find her." Nate's voice had gone hoarse on him again. Maddy was ten years younger than him and so *innocent*. She'd still been in college when the Scourge invaded.

"We'll look for her," Lan'ara promised firmly. "For now, I'm going to give you the anti-paralytic. It will probably take a few minutes to work and thrashing around in the water could be dangerous. So please, don't try to move too much until all the feeling returns to your body."

She reached behind her to a place Nate couldn't see and came back with a tiny white bottle in one hand.

“Just a few sniffs will do it,” she told him as she held the bottle under his nose. “Breathe in slowly and you'll soon start to feel your extremities tingling.”

Nate did as she said, inhaling something that smelled sweet and faintly minty deep into his lungs. The tingling began at once but he held still, waiting impatiently until it spread from his fingers and toes up his arms and legs and finally reached his torso.

“You feel it?” Lan'ara asked, arching an eyebrow at him.

“Yes—I feel it.” Experimentally, he lifted an arm, then kicked out with one leg. He was immensely relieved when his body did what he told it to do.

“All right—you should be okay to—” Lan'ara began but he was already rolling over in the water and finding his feet.

It was a fairly shallow pool they were in—when he stood up, he found it only came up to his chest. It came up to Lan'ara's shoulders and when he stood straight, he towered above her. But that was usual for Nate—he'd always been the biggest guy in the room.

“The shore is this way.” Lan'ara moved gracefully through the water and Nate followed her, looking around cautiously as he did. They were in kind of cavern, he saw. Now that he was upright, he could see that the ceiling, high above them, was covered with the hanging purple vines. More and more of the glow blossoms were blooming, casting a soft, golden glow over the milky blue water.

Up ahead, he could see a smooth, sandy beach and a kind of jungle glade filled with plants that had broad, feathery leaves, all of them in muted shades of blue, purple, and green. Beyond that was the opening of the cavern. It was a truly vast underground space and it wasn't even really underground, since the mouth of the grotto was so big, it showed an enormous section of the evening sky.

It seemed to be dusk, Nate thought, because there was still a dim purple glow outside that was fading slowly to black. All around him was the soft humming of the blossoms and the gentle lapping of the waves as they waded slowly through the milky blue water, making their way towards the shallows. It was nothing like Nate had ever seen before—he didn't even mind that the wet, white trousers someone—presumably Lan'ara—had put on him were sticking to his legs.

“Do you like the view?” she asked and he looked down to see that she had reached the sandy shore of the pool and turned to face him. His eyes automatically flicked over her, taking stock of the alien woman who had rescued him from the Flesh Bazaar.

Lan'ara was wearing a white, sleeveless gown which trailed low in the back and was cut high in the front to show her long legs. The wet fabric clung to her full curves—especially her large breasts. The gown molded to her there and the sharp points of her ripe nipples were clearly visible.

“I said, do you like the view?” she repeated and for a moment, Nate didn't know what to say.

“Uh...” He cleared his throat uncomfortably, his eyes still fixed on her breasts.

“Many have said that the Outermost Pool is the most magical place in the Healing Grotto,” she continued. “Especially at sunset.” She gestured to the purpling sky.

“Oh, right! The view—it's *amazing*.”

Nate coughed and dragged his eyes away from her luscious globes. What the hell was wrong with him, staring at her like some kind of creep? He became uncomfortably aware that his cock had risen to attention and was currently pressing insistently against the wet fabric of his white trousers. *He* might not know how to feel about this strange woman, but his *body* certainly did.

“I am glad you enjoy the view,” Lan'ara said, smiling up at him. Showing no evidence that she felt uncomfortable about

him staring at her earlier, she came up to him and looked closely at his chest.

Nate looked down at himself. Aside from the embarrassing erection, which still persisted, he didn't see anything special about his chest. He was muscular—he always had been and a life of constant running and fighting over the past five years had kept him in excellent shape.

He had a small patch of dark hair between his pecs which led in a little trail down his washboard abs. He didn't work on the abs out of vanity, however—it was important to have a strong core, especially when you had to be constantly ready for anything.

Then he realized that something *was* different. Earlier, he'd been covered in the small red marks which were scars left from the wires the Scourge had shoved under his skin when they'd hooked him up to the machine that fed him bad images so the AllFather could feed on his pain. Now...they were gone. Every last mark had been erased completely.

And that wasn't the only thing missing.

“Hey—my appendectomy scar!” Nate muttered, looking down at his right side. As a kid, he'd suffered a burst appendix that had gone septic on a camping trip and nearly killed him. By the time they'd gotten him to a hospital, there had been no time to do a laparoscopic surgery—the surgeon had been forced to open him up the old-fashioned way which had left a jagged scar.

“We had to gut you like a fish, boy! You're lucky you lived through it,” he'd told Nate cheerfully, when he came to check him after the surgery. *“Your guardian angel was looking out for you—that's for sure.”*

Guardian angel...was that what Lan'ara was? Was this some kind of heaven or afterlife? How had all his scars been erased?

He was also missing the various war wounds he'd gotten while fighting the Scourge. The twisted, puckered spot on his left triceps where a laser blast had gone right through the

muscle...the knife cut he'd gotten from hand-to-hand combat with one of the Flesh Vat grown monsters the Scourge called soldiers...even the burn marks on his wrist he'd gotten cooking for the guys one night. All just...gone.

"I see the Outermost Pool did an excellent job on you."

Lan'ara was looking at his bare chest with what appeared to be satisfaction.

"Is *that* what happened to my scars?" Nate demanded. "That pool healed them?"

"The Outermost Pool can heal most any physical wound, as long as it is not life threatening," she said. "You had an old scar here I wasn't sure it could get rid of. But it did." Her slim fingers brushed along his abdomen, causing his flesh to pebble into goose bumps. At the same time, his cock surged in his trousers, making Nate clear his throat and take a step back uncomfortably.

"Yeah, my appendectomy scar," he muttered and found that his eyes had somehow been drawn back to her breasts. He'd always liked full curves and big breasts and the erotic sight of the wet white dress, which was practically transparent, clinging to her tight peaks was damn hard not to stare at.

Get hold of yourself, Nate! he lectured himself. *You're acting like some kind of kid who's never seen breasts before!*

He looked away, dragging his eyes back up to her face—which was really gorgeous, in an alien, exotic way. Her big eyes were like stars in her heart-shaped face and her lips were softly rounded and looked very kissable.

For a moment he had the urge to cup her cheek and bend down to taste those sweet lips...but he forced the impulse away. Such a tender gesture wasn't appropriate with a woman he didn't even know, even if Lan'ara claimed that *she* knew *him*, due to this weird "Dream-sharing" thing she said had happened between them.

If she was upset with him for looking at her, Lan'ara didn't show it. She simply smiled, as though pleased at how well the pool had healed him.

“Are you feeling better now that you’re able to move and see your surroundings?” she asked, looking up at him.

He nodded.

“Yeah—hell of a lot better. Still want to explore some, though. I’ve never been on another planet before.”

“We’ll explore together.” Lan’ara held out a slim, light purple hand to him and, after a moment, Nate took it.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s go.”

They went.

FOURTEEN

LAN'ARA

“H e doesn't know me. Months of Dream-sharing and he doesn't even *know* me!”

Lan'ara could hear the anguish in her own voice, but she couldn't seem to help it. She'd been so sure that once Nate calmed down and saw her face, he would recognize her instantly. But no such thing had happened. It was like she was a complete stranger to him—just some strange female who had wandered into his life who meant nothing in the grand scheme of things.

“I know it's hard, child.” Tante Na'lla patted her shoulder soothingly. “But not everyone remembers their dreams—Dream-sharing is different for everyone, as you know.” She picked up a long stick and stirred the driftwood fire she'd made on the beach, causing golden sparks to fly upward. The Healing Grotto wasn't far from the Inland Sea and the faint hush of the waves breaking along the shoreline was soothing.

Lan'ara was grateful for the comfort of her old mentor. Tante Na'lla had been like a second mother to her, after her parents had died. It felt good and cathartic to come and speak to her about the trouble with Nate, now that he had finally drifted off into a troubled sleep. Lan'ara had slipped away from the hut they were sharing in the Healing Grotto so she could meet Tante Na'lla and express her feelings.

On Careesa Prime, venting your feelings meant asking someone else to share your pain—quite literally since everyone here had empathic abilities and could feel what you were feeling when you shared. So it was no small thing to have a person who cared about you enough to literally help you carry your emotional burden.

“I know Dream-sharing is different for everyone, Tante but he's supposed to be my fated mate!” she said, looking up at her mentor.

“Are you sure he’s the one?” Tante Na’lla asked. She pointed to the healing wrap which was still around Lan’ara’s neck. “Did he hurt you?”

“That was an accident—he didn’t know me when I first released him from the stasis frame. He was half crazy with fear and anger. Besides, the pool healed me—see?”

Lan’ara reached up and removed the wrap, glad that she’d gotten into the Outermost Pool with Nate. She wouldn’t have wanted him to see the finger marks he’d left on her when he tried to choke her. He’d been out of his head and she had been foolish to release him without anyone to help her control him and calm him. He had told her he wasn’t the kind of male who hurt women and she had felt the truth of his statement as a certainty.

“I’m *sure* he’s the one,” she told her mentor. “And he’s promised to at least *attempt* the Claiming Period...but I know he only agreed to it so he could see his friends again.”

“It doesn’t matter *why* he agreed—the main thing is that you calmed him and helped him process some of his anger and pain.” Tante Na’lla gave her an anxious look. “Though perhaps you took on a bit *too* much of his burden. You’re pale child, and I can feel how tired you are.”

“He has such *strong* emotions, and so many of them are negative,” Lan’ara said. She rubbed her aching temples where a headache was brewing. Nate’s emotional burden was vast indeed—greater than almost any she’d ever felt before. She wondered how he could bear it—it must be like carrying a mountain on his back all the time.

“You need to pace yourself,” Tante Na’lla said sternly. “Don’t try to heal him all at once—you’ll break if you’re not careful.”

“I just want him to feel *better*.” Lan’ara blinked her stinging eyes and swiped at a tear that had escaped to roll down her cheek. “I want to heal him, Tante—but there’s so *much* to heal!”

“Slowly,” her mentor counseled her. “Don’t take too much of his burden upon yourself too quickly, my dear. Try to enjoy your Claiming period. Are you going to do the entire month here at the Healing Grotto or go someplace else?”

Lan’ara bit her lip.

“I had thought that maybe we would shorten it a bit,” she admitted. “Nate is very anxious to be allowed aboard the Mother Ship to see his friends and he can’t go until I can promise that he’s at least *somewhat* healed of his trauma and won’t be a danger to anyone.”

Tante Na’lla frowned, her wrinkled face creasing in disapproval.

“What did I just say? Take things *slowly*. You shouldn’t rush the Claiming Period, child.”

“I’ll *try* not to,” Lan’ara promised doubtfully. “It’s just...I want so much to heal him. And I know that seeing his friends again would make him feel so much *better*.”

“If you’re not careful, your body will begin cannibalizing itself to try and heal your prospective mate,” Tante Na’lla warned. She fixed Lan’ara with a stern look. “Have your breasts grown heavy with Healing Nectar?”

“No,” Lan’ara denied quickly. But she couldn’t help crossing her arms over her chest protectively. Were her breasts fuller than they had been? And were her nipples more tender? Surely not—she must be imagining it, she told herself.

A female Empath of Careesa Prime only began to make the Healing Nectar in extreme circumstances—often when her mate had suffered a debilitating physical injury or had gone through a traumatic emotional loss.

The nectar was a sweet, sticky, amber liquid that distilled a female’s healing Essence into its most concentrated form. It was good for healing almost any ailment—mental, emotional, or physical—but it drained the female who made it—sometimes almost to the point of death.

“No, I’m not making any nectar,” she said again, trying to reassure herself as much as her mentor. “I’m sure everything

will be fine. We'll just have to get to know each other—or *Nate* will have to get to know *me*—during our Claiming Period. I already know him—much of him, anyway.”

“Be careful and don’t rush things,” Tante Na’lla lectured. “You need to think of yourself as well, child. Not just your fated mate.”

Lan’ara started to say something...but then she felt an uneasiness coming from the direction of the hut she was sharing with Nate. It wasn’t far from the beach where she and Tante Na’lla were meeting, but she didn’t want him waking up alone and getting upset.

“I have to go,” she told her mentor. Bowing her head formally she said, “Thank you for sharing my burden.”

“Your burden is my burden,” her mentor said, giving back the traditional reply. “But please—be careful, Lan’ara. Don’t let him drain you!”

“I won’t,” Lan’ara promised. Getting up, she brushed the sand from her long white gown and bent down to plant a kiss on her mentor’s wrinkled cheek. “I love you, Tante. I promise I’ll be careful.”

But how careful could she be when every part of her was crying out to heal her fated mate? Lan’ara just didn’t know...

FIFTEEN

DAVRIK

“I ’m very sorry, Sir Davrik, but I am afraid that Sonya is *not* for sale. She is our resident songbird after all, and her lovely voice and prodigious talent brings in many, many customers who are *aurally* inclined, if you see what I mean.”

Davrik clenched his fists under the table and tried to remain calm. Just as he had finished signing the ridiculously long contract to join as an Ultra Diamond Plus member of the House of a Thousand Flowers, the Sluggorn manager had finally arrived. The obsequious clerk had introduced them and Davrik had asked for a meeting at once. He was, of course, desperate to go see Sonya, but buying her contract and setting her free had to take precedence.

But now the manager—who looked like a human-sized slug—was telling him that Sonya was *not* for sale. It was maddening! However, there didn’t seem to be anything he could do about it...for now.

“Then I want to buy time with her,” he said, struggling to keep his voice even and calm. “I want to buy *all* her time for the next week.” That ought to give him time to get to know the new Sonya and hopefully gain her trust. And he would figure things out after that.

The manager waved his antennae in what Davrik took for a gesture of surprise.

“I see...so you want the *Supreme* Treatment?”

“Sure, if that’s what you call it.” Davrik shrugged his shoulders. “I just want her all to myself.”

“Let me check the schedule,” the slug-like manager burred.

He pulled up a holo screen like the one the clerk at the front desk had used to show the various “flowers.” This one was color coordinated and thickly printed with the names of the various flowers and their clients.

“Hmm...yes. Yes, all right.” At last, he nodded, his antennae bobbing with the gesture. “You are in luck, Sir Davrik. You can have all of Sonya’s time for the next week except for two solar hours which have been reserved for another client.”

“What? What other client? What does he want with her?” Davrik felt the first stirrings of Rage—the berserker-like fury that all Kindred warriors went into when they thought a woman they loved was being threatened or harmed.

“Please. Sir Davrik—calm yourself,” the manager said soothingly. “As I told you, most of Sonya’s clients are aurally stimulated—which is to say, they mostly just want her to *sing* to them. I believe the client who booked those hours is a Xebashla—they are a species with very large hearing receptacles located on each of their three buttocks which they use to sense the vibrations of a song.”

“Well...all right.” Davrik took a deep breath. “Are you sure I can’t buy those hours too, though? I’d be willing to pay double whatever the other male is paying.”

“I’m afraid we cannot do that. Here at The House of a Thousand Flowers, we pride ourselves on integrity and good customer service! We cannot simply cancel a reservation just because someone else offers more money.” The huge slug drew himself up importantly—an effect which was somewhat ruined by the slime dripping down his blobby body.

Davrik swallowed his irritation and nodded.

“Very well. But I want her immediately. I need my week with her to start *now*.”

“I’m afraid it won’t be possible for your time to start until she finishes her set in The Flower Lounge,” the manager said smoothly. “Perhaps you would care to go and listen to her lovely voice? Afterwards, I’ll introduce you and instruct her on the Supreme Treatment you’ll be receiving from her.”

Davrik nodded.

“All right—as long as my time with her starts directly after she’s finished performing.”

“You have my word as a Sluggorn,” the manager said. “Let me show you the way to our sumptuous lounge.”

Davrik followed the male, making certain to steer clear of the slimy trail he left behind and the little cleaner bot which followed him to suck the slime off the polished marble floors.

The inside of the club was even more luxurious than the lobby—he saw the muted gleam of gold and platinum everywhere and the walls were covered in the same net of densely packed, tiny scarlet blossoms which gave off a subtle scent that spoke of wealth and decadence and privilege.

At last they arrived at the entrance of the Flower Lounge.

“If you’ll just slip in and have a seat, you’ll be able to watch the last part of Sonya’s act,” the manager told him. “And I’ll be back to introduce the two of you a few minutes after she finishes.”

Davrik nodded and opened the heavy *Treal* wood door to slip into the lounge. His heart was pounding as he stepped into the darkened area, where most of the light was provided by the shimmering footlight glows which hovered around the bottom edge of the circular stage.

Sonya’s back was to him as he slid into the lounge and found a seat in the shadows to one side of the stage, but Davrik recognized her at once. Her full curves were encased in a sleek red gown which glittered in the dim light and contrasted with her velvety brown skin tones. Her long black hair, which hung in natural ringlets, cascaded down to the small of her back and her lovely, ethereal voice filled the air. She was singing what she called a “torch song”—a yearning love ballad filled with longing.

“Each time I see a crowd of people,

Just like a fool, I stop and stare.

It’s really not the proper thing to do,

But maybe you’ll be there...”

The song was one Davrik knew and it sent a shiver of pure emotion down his spine. This reminded him so *much* of

the very first time he had seen his mate!

Sonya had been singing in a club called The Speak Easy in Ybor City. Davrik had stopped in for a drink on a whim, because he'd heard that there was live music there. He worked for the Kindred Mother ship as a scout, looking for new worlds to explore, but music was his passion. One of the things he loved to do was experience the music of other cultures and peoples and Earth had a very rich musical scene to explore.

The moment he had heard Sonya's beautiful voice, Davrik had been mesmerized. She had a three-octave range that could growl a low, sultry contralto or soar into a dizzying soprano. She took his breath away before he even saw her and then, when he *did* see her, well...

The humans had something they called "love at first sight." The Kindred called it "the lightning strike." Davrik had felt it the very first time he had seen his future mate and he felt it all over again now as Sonya turned to face him. Gods, she was so beautiful it almost hurt to look at her and yet he couldn't tear his eyes away!

Her eyes slid over him in the darkened lounge and came to rest on another male who was sitting a few tables away. A look flitted across her face—a look that Davrik had seen before, but only when he woke her from the nightmares that stalked her in her sleep.

Terror. It was there for just a moment, in the widening of her brown eyes and the set of her lush lips, and then gone again, but her gaze remained glued to the male at the other table.

Davrik cast a sidelong glance to see what had upset her and felt his heart stop in his chest.

It was a Trollox—a really huge one with three heads and yellow, slitted eyes—all of which were trained on Sonya.

He understood at once why the sight would upset her. She had told him of the origin of the night terrors that ruined her sleep so often. It was a book of stories for children called

“fairytales”—though why the humans would write tales that would terrorize their young, Davrik couldn’t understand.

This particular book had a picture of a mythical creature called an “ogre” in it—a great, lumpish brute with more than one head who lived in the dark forest. The story associated with the picture had been a bloody one, about how the evil creature loved to catch and cook children for dinner, grinding their fragile bones between its sharp, jagged teeth.

Of course, the end of the story had a plucky human child defeating and killing the monster, but that hadn’t been nearly enough to mitigate the fear it had caused in Sonya. She’d had dreams of an evil creature that looked like the ogre in the fairytale book coming after her for *years* afterwards. The night terrors had even followed her into adulthood and disrupted her dreams on a regular basis.

Now as he watched, Sonya’s eyes stayed fixed on the Trollox in the corner. The Trollox stared back with all three heads...and then a thick, slimy tongue slipped out and the middle head licked its chops. The message was clear—hunger and lust mixed in a sickening combination. The Trollox used smaller humanoid species as a source of food and to gratify their sexual needs—though said gratification often killed the much smaller female.

Sonya’s eyes widened again and her voice dipped and wavered in a moment of weakness—something Davrik had never heard before. Usually she was completely unflappable—a consummate performer.

She’s scared to death! he thought and his fists clenched into knots of protective fury. He wanted to pound the fucking Trollox for even being there—for daring to look at *his* female and frightening the woman he loved!

Sonya’s voice faltered again and some of the males sitting at the small, round tables placed around the circular stage began to murmur. Davrik didn’t think she even knew that she was messing up the song. Her eyes seemed glued to the menacing creature in the corner of the room, as though she couldn’t look away.

He wished he could jump up and go sweep her off the stage to protect her from the menacing Trollox. If she had been *his* Sonya, he would have done exactly that. He was fiercely protective—as were all Kindred. He wouldn't stand for anyone or anything frightening his female!

But she is NOT your Sonya, he reminded himself sternly. *She doesn't know you in this universe. You have to be subtle... move slowly.*

Not knowing what else to do, Davrik began humming along with the song she was singing. First he hummed the melody, to bolster her faltering voice and then—when Sonya's eyes widened and she finally jerked her gaze away from the Trollox—he hummed the harmony to compliment her lovely tones.

He saw her deep brown eyes darting over the audience but he was well hidden in the shadows and she didn't seem to know where the humming was coming from. That was fine with Davrik—he was just glad he'd been able to pull her out of the horrified trance she'd fallen into and gotten her attention off the menacing Trollox, who was trying to stare a hole through her with its seven, beady yellow eyes.

With his subtle help, Sonya was able to finish the song.

“Someday if all my prayers are answered,

I'll hear a footstep on the stair.

With anxious heart,

I'll hurry to the door.

And, darling, you'll be there!”

There was clapping and cheering as the final note faded. Sonya had finished strong and the audience seemed to have forgotten the few, faltering notes that had slightly marred her performance.

Davrik was glad he'd been able to help her and he was relieved when she bowed and thanked the audience sweetly.

“Thank you for coming to The Flower Lounge!” she said, giving them all a smile that didn't quite reach her eyes. “It has

been my privilege to perform for you. I'm here every day, twice a day to sing for your aural pleasure!"

Then she bowed gracefully and exited the stage, going through a black curtain which clearly led backstage.

Davrik remained at his seat, keeping an eye on the Trollox in the corner. The Sluggorn manager had promised to come back for him so he could introduce him to Sonya, so he was biding his time even though he was desperate to see her up close.

A few minutes later, the door to the Flower Lounge opened and the manager oozed in, his little cleaner bot following close behind. Davrik started to rise, but the Trollox reached out an extremely long arm and grabbed the Sluggorn by one slimy appendage. He dragged the manager over to his table and Davrik heard the two of them talking.

"I *want* her." It was the middle head talking as it glared with all three of its yellow eyes at the Sluggorn manager. "I will buy her for my own."

Davrik felt a rush of possessive Rage sweep through him as he realized the Trollox was talking about Sonya. His hands clenched into fists and he had to fight the urge to go kill the big bastard!

"I am afraid that our lovely Sonya is not for sale," the manager protested.

"Then I will buy her time," the Trollox insisted. "I want her *now!*"

"I'm afraid most of her time is already spoken for—she is booked for the entire next solar week with another patron," the Sluggorn said smoothly. "But after that, she will be free."

"No! *Now!*" The Trollox's meaty hand squeezed tight around the slippery appendage but the Sluggorn manager simply slipped it up and out of the other male's grip. Davrik supposed grimly that was one of the few benefits of being covered in slime.

"I am afraid, that's just not possible, Sir Grox," he said smoothly, as he slid away. "Contact me about next solar week,

though—she should be free then.” He oozed up to Davrik’s table, his antennae vibrating slightly. “Sir Davrik, excuse that interruption. Would you like to come meet our lovely Sonya now? She’s waiting in her room for you.”

“Yes, thank you.” Davrik rose, looking at the Trollox as he did so. The creature was glaring at him with all three heads, its triple gaze filled with murderous jealousy. He stared back coolly, feeling a surge of relief that he’d been able to meet with the manager and book Sonya for an entire week before the Trollox had the same idea.

She’s mine! he thought, refusing to drop his eyes as Grox glared at him. *Mine, you bastard and you can’t fucking have her!*

But she was only his for a week, and after that she would be fair game for any other customer—including the Trollox. He had to think of a way to keep her safe—and to get her out of this place, Davrik told himself.

He was still considering options as the Sluggorn manager led him out of the lounge and up the marble hallway to a lift with golden doors.

They stepped inside and the manager swiveled his antennae towards Davrik.

“Please observe, Sir Davrik—this will be your own special code which will bring you up to the Penthouse suite, where Sonya currently resides as one of our top tier flowers,” he said. He punched in an alphanumeric code into the glowing keypad on the wall of the lift and Davrik took note of it.

“Can anyone else access the penthouse area?” he asked, after committing the code to memory.

“No—not without a code. And your code will expire after the week which you paid for,” the manager told him. “But until your time is up, you will have unlimited access to our lovely Sonya!”

The lift rose smoothly and swiftly and then stopped with a muted *ding* at the one hundred and second floor, which was

the very top of the building.

“After you.” The Sluggorn held out one oozing arm. “Sonya’s suite is the one on the far left, at the end of the corridor.”

Davrik stepped out of the lift and took a left. The hallway was a long one and he saw two other doors on his right and one on his left before he reached the end of it. All of them had the names of girls in holo letters above them but he didn’t bother to read them.

The last door on the left was made of thick, dark wood and had a red holo sign hovering just above its frame which read, *Sonya the Songbird. Top Tier Flower.* On the wall beside it, about shoulder height, was a rectangular silver scanning plate.

“Here we are! Now if you would please just press your palm to the scanning plate, Sir Davrik?” The Sluggorn manager stepped forward and nodded at the silver rectangle. “That will enter you as an approved visitor for the week.”

Davrik did as he said and the plate lit up—first red and then green as he pressed his palm to its cool surface. There was a muted click and the door popped open.

His heart was pounding as he surveyed the open door. Finally...*finally* he was going to see her! He could still remember the last time he’d said goodbye to her—the kiss she had given him as she stepped onto the shuttle which would take her down to see her family and attend her cousin’s baby shower.

The shuttle which had crashed into the Gulf of Mexico and killed her.

Davrik had meant to go too, but he’d been called away on a work assignment at the last minute. Sonya had forgiven him cheerfully.

“It’s going to be a girl thing anyway,” she’d told him. “Lots of cute games like tasting baby food and guessing the gender before the big reveal—you’d probably hate it.”

“You know I’m interested in anything that interests you, baby girl,” Davrik had told her, cupping her cheek and looking down into her eyes. “I wish I could come.”

“I wish you could too, but you have to do your job. Besides, I’ll be back before you know it.”

She had stood on her tiptoes and Davrik had lifted her into his arms and cradled her tenderly as they kissed—a long, sweet, passionate embrace that promised more to come.

Only there had never been any more, because Sonya had never come back.

Davrik still remembered the moment her shuttle had crashed into the ocean and the life had left her body. He’d felt it—felt the severing of their Bond like someone suddenly stabbing him in the chest with a sharp and lethal blade. He had fallen to his knees, filled with horror and disbelief. He—

“Well, what are we waiting for, Sir Davrik? Do come in.”

The Sluggorn manager oozed past him, sliding through the doorway and entering the penthouse suite. Davrik shook himself, trying to push aside the awful memory of pain and loss. This wasn’t his Sonya, he reminded himself again. She was gone. But this new Sonya needed his help and he wanted badly to protect her.

Taking a deep breath, he stepped into the suite himself. There, kneeling on the floor with her arms out in front of her and her forehead on the shiny white tiles of the entryway, was Sonya. She still had on the sparkling red gown she’d been wearing to perform in the Flower Lounge but her face was down so he couldn’t see her expression.

“Why is she kneeling like that?” Davrik asked, frowning at the obvious subservience. He and his own Sonya had practiced a form of D/s relationship and he had definitely been the Dominant. But Sonya’s part hadn’t been based on abject humility. She had submitted to him sexually in a very special way and Davrik had cared for her and cherished her—but he had never required her to kneel before him like this and grovel

at his feet! The display was insulting and dehumanizing as far as he was concerned.

“Why, she is showing you that you are her Lord and Master, Sir Davrik,” the manager burred. “This *is* part of the Supreme Treatment, which you paid for.”

“It is?” Davrik scowled as Sonya continued to hold her submissive pose.

“Yes, indeed! For the next week, you may do anything and everything you wish to her—there are no limits...although we *do* ask that you do not damage her physically more than can be fixed with minor surgery. No broken bones, please—but burns, cuts, bite and belt marks are acceptable if you’re into that kind of thing. We have a quick-skin grafter that can take care of most dermal damage.”

“*What?*” Davrik felt a surge of anger. Was this piece of shit actually saying he could abuse Sonya so much that she would require *surgery* and the management of The House of a Thousand Flowers would be perfectly fine with it? What in the Seven Hells was *wrong* with him?

“I’m not here to hurt or abuse her,” he said gruffly, trying to keep his temper in check. “I just want to spend time with Sonya—want to get to know her.”

“Oh, you’ll have plenty of time to ‘get to know her,’” the manager waggled his slimy antennae in a suggestive manner. “In fact, she’s currently wearing a sensor that will let me know when she has physical contact with you. Not enough contact will be punished severely, you can be sure of that!”

“What? But I never asked for that!” Davrik protested. This Sonya was going to think he was a monster before they even got to know each other!

“All part of the Supreme Treatment which you paid for,” the Sluggorn said smoothly. “We find that it’s best to keep an eye on our flowers while they entertain VIP patrons such as yourself. It makes them extra eager to please—and then *everyone* is happy.”

Everyone except for the poor female you're forcing to have contact with some random male who bought her! Davrik thought but didn't say. At this point he just wanted the fucking manager to get out of here so he could finally meet the Sonya of this universe and start getting to know her. And hopefully prove to her that he *wasn't* an abusive monster.

"She is required to provide you with oral pleasure often—we keep track of that as well," the manager burred. "And you may use her in any way you see fit. For all intents and purposes, our lovely songbird is *yours* for the week, Sir Davrik. You will sleep every night in her bed, spend every day together, and eat every meal together—which will be catered by our personal VIP chef! Please feel free to request anything you want to eat or drink—the kitchen staff is completely at your disposal, just like Sonya."

"All right," Davrik said shortly. There was no point in protesting all this—apparently it was all part of the ungodly expensive Supreme Treatment package which he'd had to agree to in order to get a whole week with Sonya. He would just have to try and convince her that he wasn't some rich asshole who only wanted to abuse her and exploit her body after the manager left.

"Good. Now then, Sonya—you may raise your head and meet your new Lord and Master, Sir Davrik," the Sluggorn said.

Davrik's heart thumped painfully. He couldn't help wondering if maybe *somehow* she might know him. He knew it was foolish—this wasn't his Sonya, even if she looked exactly like his lost mate. But what if she had been dreaming of him, as so many people did when their souls entwined with a Kindred's? He had never Dream-shared with his own Sonya but maybe this new Sonya was different. What if she looked up and he saw recognition on her lovely face?

And then she *did* look up. Her eyes widened and an expression passed over her beautiful features. But not an expression of recognition or even happiness.

No, to Davrik's horror, the look on her pretty face was the exact one she'd been wearing when she stared at the Trollox back in the lounge. It was an expression of stark, utter terror.

For some reason, he scared her to death.

SIXTEEN

SONYA

The moment Sonya had gotten off the stage, Oozle had been there, waiting for her. She was afraid he was angry about her missed notes—the way she'd faltered in the song she'd been singing. But she hadn't been able to help it! That awful Sir Grox—the way he'd been staring at her and licking his lips! It made her shutter to remember the hungry lust in those beady yellow eyes!

And then the humming had saved her. It had been a male, obviously—someone with a warm, mellow baritone just loud enough for her to hear. It had bolstered her and helped her get her mind off the Trollox and finish the song. Sonya wished she could thank whoever it was—they had really saved her!

But it turned out that the Sluggorn manager wasn't angry with her at all—instead he had some very unwelcome news.

"I don't have much time, so listen up," he'd snapped at her. "You're about to have a VIP client to entertain and he's bought your services for the entire week. Not only that, but you're to give him the Supreme Treatment—do you understand me?"

Sonya had felt her stomach drop. She'd heard terrible stories about the Supreme Treatment Package—it the most expensive package a male could purchase, here at The House of a Thousand Flowers and it gave the client who purchased it *carte blanche* to do any horrible thing he wanted to the girl he had selected. She had hoped she would never have a client buy the Supreme Treatment package with her, since most of her clients just wanted her to sing to them.

"I...I understand," she'd said, the words nearly sticking in her throat.

"I don't think you do! You're going to do everything he asks of you and *more*," Oozle told her. "You're going to make him feel like a king! Here—wear this."

He held out a gold chain bracelet with a clear stone about as big as her thumb set in the center.

“What is it?” Sonya asked, taking it delicately from his slimy fingers and wiping it clean as well as she could.

“Put it on!” Oozle insisted and watched with both antennae as she snapped it around her wrist. “Good. It will let me know if you’re making enough physical contact with the client. I want you touching him and in close proximity at all times! Also, you’ll be required to give him oral pleasure at least twice a day—once in the morning, and once at night.”

“What?” Sonya demanded—she hadn’t known about the oral part. She started to take the bracelet off again, but she found it was firmly fixed around her wrist and wouldn’t unclasp.

“You’ll also spread your legs for him anytime he wants you to and do anything else he orders,” Oozle went on relentlessly. “I’ll be bringing him up to your room shortly, so get up there and be sure you’re in the submissive position to greet him. And *don’t* look up until I give you permission. Am I understood?”

Sonya felt sick, but this was her life now. She had no choice—no say in the matter. She had to obey or worse things might happen to her. But she had a sudden, desperate thought.

“Please,” she begged Oozle. “Please, tell me it’s not Sir Grox again—not that horrible Trollox!”

“Oh, he *wanted* you all right.” The Sluggorn let out a burbling laugh that sounded like someone gargling with pudding. “But the other patron paid for your time first. So Sir Grox will have to wait his turn. Now go on—get up to your room and assume the submissive position!”

And Sonya had no choice but to do as he said, hurrying up the golden lift to the penthouse room where she lived now that her life was not her own.

As she arranged herself on the floor, kneeling with her forehead against the white marble of the entryway, her face down, and her arms stretched out in front of her, she wondered

what her VIP client would be like. Whoever or whatever he was, at least it wasn't the horrible Sir Grox!

But I'm going to have to be all over him and give him blow jobs and God knows what else! she thought unhappily. How had her life come to this awful point? She'd felt relatively safe before, always singing for her clients and never having to do much of anything else. Now it looked like her luck had taken a downward turn.

What was she going to do? How was she going to handle this?

As she was asking herself these questions, the door opened and Oozle came in, followed by the VIP patron. Sonya didn't dare look up at him—all she could see were the tops of his shiny boots—extremely *large* boots, she noticed. God, how big was he anyway?

She wouldn't get a chance to see for a while because Oozle was going on and on about how the client could do anything he wanted to her—including cutting, burning, or biting her! Sonya felt sick as she listened to the list of injuries he could inflict if he chose to. She didn't remember the Supreme Treatment being this horrible! The client must have paid a shit-ton of money in order to get the right to hurt her as much as he wanted.

The client said a few things about wanting to get to know her and she noticed he had a deep, baritone voice. But that did nothing to soothe her fears. He sounded big—*huge*. And Oozle was giving him permission to torture or rape her as much as he wanted to! A whole week of abuse was what she had to look forward to.

She could feel herself trembling as Oozle finally ordered her to raise her head and look at the VIP client. Was he going to be some kind of alien she'd never seen before? Maybe something like the horrible Trollox, Sir Grox?

And then she looked at him and found it was somehow even worse. He was huge—almost as big as the Trollox, she thought. But it wasn't just his size that drew her eyes—the

VIP patron had the pearly gray skin she had become so familiar with back on Earth.

Her new Lord and Master—the man she must serve and submit to for an entire week—was a Scourge.

SEVENTEEN

NATE

T here was crashing in the undergrowth...the sound of huge, heavy boots crushing their way through the forest.

The sound of soldiers too big to be human headed in his direction.

Nate's heart was pounding and he gripped his gun harder. They'd run out of the armor piercing rounds weeks ago and regular bullets were nothing but an annoyance to the huge Vat-grown Scourge.

Still, he had to stand and fight—they were protecting the outpost. If the enemy got through, they'd be able to access the underground bunker where his little sister, Madison, and so many others were hiding.

He had to keep her safe, Nate told himself. She was so petite and their parents were gone—victims of the first Scourge attacks during the initial invasion. Maddy was the only family he had left and he *had* to protect her!

The tramping got louder and he tensed, ready to leap out from the ambush point and begin firing. But suddenly he heard the rattle of shots being fired to his left and behind him—inside the barricade!

Inside! They're fucking inside! Maddy—they'll get to her!

He turned to run back and protect his sister but suddenly a monstrous Scourge soldier was right in front of him! The evil red-on-black eyes glared down from an unimaginable height. Black body armor covered him, making the Vat-grown soldier an impenetrable target. But Nate knew if he didn't get past that big bastard, he wouldn't be able to get to Maddy on time.

Baring his teeth and gripping his weapon, he rushed the target, roaring in rage and fear and fury...

“Nate? Nate, please—wake up!”

A soft hand shaking him and a feminine voice in his ear brought him back to himself.

Nate jerked upright, his body pumped with adrenaline. At first he didn't know where he was. His head was pounding and he was covered in cold sweat as he peered around in the unfamiliar darkness. He could still see the huge Scourge soldier coming at him and feel the terrible fear that he wouldn't be able to get to Maddy in time...

The soft voice brought him back to the present and he remembered where he was. The planet of Careesa Prime with the Kindred girl, Lan'ara. Right now, she was staring at him with a worried look on her lovely face.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “I can feel your anxiety and fear—I've never felt anything that strongly before!”

She'd been sleeping beside him on the large, comfortable mattress which was raised just a few feet off the floor of the hut they were staying in. Nate had offered to take the floor—he was used to sleeping rough and he didn't want her to feel uncomfortable.

But Lan'ara had said that she wanted to be close to him—though he couldn't figure out why. She hadn't made any moves and Nate hadn't either—he wasn't the kind of guy who would take advantage of a woman—especially a woman he barely knew.

“Sorry,” he said, shaking his head. God, he was a fucking mess! His hands were shaking! He balled them into fists and crossed his arms over his bare chest protectively. *Fucking dream!* It always fucked with his head, whenever he had it.

“There's nothing to be sorry about—I can feel your pain,” Lan'ara protested.

The pink swirls at her temples were glowing in the dim light—Nate wondered if that meant she was picking up on his negative emotions. She had explained to him that everyone here on her home planet was an empath—meaning they could feel the emotions of others. If so, what she was feeling from him couldn't be good.

“Sorry,” he said again. “Look, I’m going to go for a walk or something. I can never sleep again after I have that dream.”

“*What* dream?” She put a hand on his arm—his muscles were all bunched up, his biceps bulging with tension. “Tell me about it—please.”

Nate shook his head and looked down at his legs. He was wearing another pair of the loose white trousers which seemed to be what all the men wore around here. They looked kind of like pajama pants to him, but they were damned comfortable, so he wasn’t complaining.

“You don’t want to know. It’s stupid really—just a dream I have sometimes.”

“Nate…” She placed a soft hand on his jaw—which was clenched with tension—and tilted his face up so their eyes met. “Please—I want to help you,” she said softly. “I want to *heal* you, but you have to meet me halfway. You have to tell me about your trauma.”

“It’s not trauma—just a dream,” he protested uneasily. “A bad dream.”

“A bad dream you have over and over again—right?” She looked at him, a slight frown playing around the corners of her lush lips.

“Well…” Nate cleared his throat. “Yeah, I guess.”

“So tell me about it. Maybe I can ease some of your pain—let me share your burden.”

Nate was tempted to refuse her offer and shake her off. He didn’t need help, damn it! Everybody had bad dreams sometimes. What the fuck was the big deal?

But Lan’ara had been kind to him…and she’d rescued him from death or a life of slavery at the Flesh Bazaar. He had to admit he owed her his life…the least he could do was give in to her request to talk about his recurring dream—even if he *really* didn’t fucking want to.

“Fine,” he said shortly. “I have this dream that I’m hiding in the forest, protecting an outpost—trying to keep anything

from getting past the barricade. Because I know if they do—if the Scourge break though—they’ll find the underground bunker where all the women and kids are hiding. And...”

He trailed off, having a difficult time continuing. Talking about it was bringing everything back, even worse than the dream!

“And?” Lan’ara prodded softly. Scooting closer to him on the bed, she placed one cool hand against his forehead, as though she was checking him for fever. “Please, keep going,” she murmured. “I want to help you bear this if I can but I need you to talk me through it as I touch you.”

Nate didn’t see how the hell she could help him like this, but he had to admit he liked the feel of her cool hand on his forehead. Also, she smelled fucking *amazing*. What was that perfume she was using? It must be pure pheromones because it made him feel drawn to her, like a bee to a flower.

“Please continue,” Lan’ara murmured. “The Scourge—you were afraid they would break through to find the bunker where all the females and children were hiding. And someone else too. Who, Nate?”

Nate sighed and took a deep breath.

“My little sister—the one I told you about,” he said. “Maddy.”

“You told me you thought she was safe in the underground bunker.”

“She *should* have been safe—she *would* have been, if I’d kept her safe.” Nate scrubbed a hand over his face, hearing the dry scratch his palm made against his whiskers. “We... couldn’t hold back the Scourge,” he admitted at last. “They broke through. I think they must have taken Maddy because her body wasn’t...wasn’t one of the ones we found.”

He swallowed hard, hearing a click in his throat. The Scourge had gone though the underground bunker like a fucking hurricane, killing indiscriminately. The broken bodies of women and children had been everywhere and Nate had

been forced to look through all of them to be certain his little sister wasn't among them...

He heard a soft moan and looked up to see Lan'ara's eyelids fluttering and a look of pain on her face. The pink spirals on her temples were glowing again and her hand was still pressed to his forehead.

"Hey..." Reaching up, he took her wrist and pulled her hand gently but firmly away from his face.

Lan'ara looked up, her deep purple eyes shiny with unshed tears.

"I can feel how much you loved her—how much you miss her. I can feel your guilt," she whispered. "Nate, I'm so sorry!"

"It's not your fault," he said shortly. "It's mine. I should have been stronger—done better. I should have kept her safe."

Lan'ara shook her head and a silver tear slid down her cheek.

"You did all you could."

He was a little unnerved by her reaction—he'd never had anyone weep for him before. It was almost like she was shedding the tears he couldn't bring himself to cry. But Lan'ara's next question surprised him even more.

"Will you let me hold you?" she asked earnestly, looking up at him. "Since it is our Holding Time, after all."

Nate wasn't sure what she meant by "Holding Time" and he wasn't quite sure what to make of her request. He had never had a woman ask if *she* could hold *him*—usually it was the other way around. He was so much bigger than anyone else, girls loved to be the "little spoon" and have him wrap himself around them, making them feel small and safe and protected.

That was how Nate usually preferred things—he liked being the big spoon—but he found himself intrigued. There was something about Lan'ara—he felt *drawn* to her—and not just because she was beautiful and smelled amazing. There

was something about her that called to something deep inside him—some part of him that was buried perhaps.

“Well...all right,” he said at last, shrugging uncomfortably. “Uh...how do you want to, um, hold me?”

“Like this.” Lying back against the round, bolster-like pillows, she beckoned for him. “Come here. Put your head here.” She put a hand on her chest, right between her breasts. She was wearing another long white gown—this time made out of some thin, silky material which clearly showed the sharp points of her nipples. She was a tempting sight but Nate knew she was only trying to be comforting.

He cleared his throat, frowning.

“Uh...you sure?”

“Of course. Come here.” She beckoned for him again and this time he complied. Lying on his side, he rested his head carefully where she’d indicated. Her breasts were soft and full and her warm, feminine scent filled his senses.

He wasn’t quite sure what to do with his arms and hands, but Lan’ara reached down and took his right arm and placed it firmly around the curve of her waist.

“Hold on to me as I hold you,” she directed. “Get closer—I want you as close as you can get.”

Obligingly, Nate snuggled closer, pressing his hard, muscular body against her small, curvy one. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d laid in bed with a woman, just cuddling like this. If he had done it at all, it must have been before the war with the Scourge started. He hadn’t dated anyone in the past five years—he hadn’t had time what with trying to defend the Earth from the fucking invaders.

“Good...” Lan’ara ran cool, soothing fingers through his hair and massaged the nape of his neck, easing some of the tension there.

“God...” Nate groaned appreciatively. “Feels fucking *amazing*.”

“And are you feeling calmer?” Lan’ara asked.

He looked up.

“Yeah, you know, I *am*. Usually when I have that dream, I have to get up and run a mile or do sit-ups or push-ups or something—*anything*—to push it out of my mind. But you... you made it go away. Or at least, the bad feelings that went with it. How did you do that?”

“You let me share your burden,” she said simply, stroking his hair again. “Do you think you can sleep again? We still have a few hours before dawn.”

“I *think* so.” It was a new experience for him, feeling so calm after the dream. Usually it fucked with his head for hours, if not days. But now, he could already feel his breathing slowing and his heartbeat growing calmer. How had Lan’ara done that for him?

He decided to worry about it later. For now, her full breasts were the softest, sweetest pillow he’d ever pressed his face to and the feeling of her slim, cool fingers carding through his hair and massaging his neck was incredibly soothing.

“Sleep a little longer, my love,” Lan’ara murmured. “I will hold the nightmares at bay.”

And for a wonder, Nate believed her. With a deep sigh, he let his eyes close and pulled Lan’ara a little closer. She felt so good in his arms. She was still a stranger to him and yet...she felt familiar too. Did that make any sense?

Nate decided to worry about it later. He slipped back into sleep and this time he had no dreams.

EIGHTEEN

LAN'ARA

Lan'ara held her human and stroked his hair, listening as his emotions gradually quieted. Her heart ached for him! Nate had so much pain and darkness inside him—she'd caught glimpses of the things he'd seen and been forced to do while they were Dream-sharing and often what she saw horrified her.

But his heart was good. He was just damaged...wounded. She wanted badly to be the one to heal him. As his fated mate, she was perhaps the only one who could. His wounds went so deep though—healing him was going to be a long, tiring job.

She was glad he'd been able to calm down enough to go back to sleep. Taking the pain from that awful memory, which had been masquerading as a dream, had taken most of her strength. She needed to stay here, lying down for a while to recover.

Nate murmured something in his sleep and shifted his head against her breasts. Lan'ara winced at the pressure she felt in them. She wanted to deny it, but there was no doubt they were bigger and fuller than they had been even a day ago. And her nipples were so sensitive—almost as though they were aching to be sucked.

Were her breasts filling with the Healing Nectar? Lan'ara was afraid they might be. Nate's pain went so deep, it seemed her body was reacting as though he was in a life-threatening situation.

She had mixed feelings about the situation. On one hand, she knew that making the nectar would drain her strength. But on the other hand, if it would heal Nate's wounds, she was more than willing to give of herself.

Also, the idea of him sucking it from her breasts was undeniably erotic. She could imagine his lips molded around one nipple as he stroked and teased the other with his long fingers. Her breasts had always been an incredibly sensitive

area for Lan'ara—she was one of the rare females who could come just from having her nipples stimulated the right way. And she had a feeling that Nate would know the right way...

Just the thought of it made her squeeze her thighs together. Her pussy was getting hot and wet just thinking about giving him her nectar. It would be hard though—it might drain her to the point of utter exhaustion.

Stop worrying about it, she told herself. If you make the Healing Nectar, it will be for his benefit. But there's always a chance you can heal him without it—just by taking his pain as you did tonight.

Which was true—the nectar making process might reverse itself if she could mitigate her fated mate's pain enough just by sharing his burden in the usual Empath way. And that would bring them almost as close as letting him suck the Healing Nectar from her breasts. After all, they had the rest of the Claiming Period to go through—that would bring any couple closer together.

Lan'ara stroked his thick brown hair lovingly. She knew that Nate couldn't remember any of the dreams they had shared, but she felt certain that he felt the connection between them.

I'll heal him, she swore to herself. With the Goddess's help, I'll heal him and make him whole, one way or another. Whatever it takes, I am willing to give.

She dropped a kiss on her human's forehead and closed her eyes. Tomorrow she would take Nate to the Singing Woods and they could officially begin their Claiming Period. They were already in the Holding Week—though Lan'ara intended to cut down the time for each part of the Period in order to get back to the Mother Ship sooner. But it would be good to give each other formal vows and let Nate understand what each part of the Claiming Period entailed.

As she drifted to sleep in her fated mate's arms, Lan'ara was already longing for the Tasting Week...

NINETEEN

DAVRIK

Davrik couldn't miss the look of abject fear on Sonya's face. She was staring at him as though he was a monster who wanted to eat her up. That look of terror in her big, beautiful eyes tore at his heart—especially since he knew *he* had put it there.

“Sonya, please—get up,” he said, since she was still crouching, frozen on the white marble floor. When she didn't move, he leaned down to help her to her feet.

But the moment he put a hand under her arm, Sonya suddenly came to life. With a gasp, she jumped to her feet and skittered away from him.

Then she seemed to realize what she was doing and made herself stop. He could see her breasts heaving over the top of her sparkling red gown as she turned and stared up at him.

In the five years since Davrik had lost his own Sonya, he had somehow forgotten how extreme their height difference was. She was so much smaller than him the top of her head just barely reached above his elbow. No *wonder* she was frightened.

“For...forgive me, my Lord and Master,” she said in a low, trembling voice. “I...I didn't mean to run away from you like that. Please don't tell Oozle on me!”

“Oozle?” Davrik frowned. “Do you mean the Sluggorn? Your manager?”

“My *owner*,” she corrected him. “Though I guess, technically *you're* my owner now. For the next week, at least.”

There was a faint bitterness in her lovely contralto voice but she kept the expression on her face respectful—doubtless out of fear.

Davrik shifted uncomfortably—he *hated* it that she feared him. If only that idiotic Sluggorn hadn't gone on and on about

how he could beat her or burn her or bite her if he felt like it! It had certainly gotten them started off on the wrong foot, as the humans said.

“Look, I’m not here to hurt you,” he said, holding out his hands, palm-up, in a gesture of peace. “I’m sorry if the horrible things your manager said made you frightened of me.”

“I’d be frightened no matter what Oozle said—you’re a Scourge!” she exclaimed, lifting her chin with a hint of defiance. “Your people came and *ruined* my world. You’re the reason I’m here in the first place!”

Suddenly her fear of him made sense—Davrik remembered how Oliver and Simon had thought he was a Scourge too. In his own universe the ancient enemy of the Kindred had all but been wiped off the face of the galaxy, so he never had this problem. But here, the Scourge were a force to be reckoned with and the fact that he had the same skin and hair tones as the enemy was extremely inconvenient.

“I’m not a Scourge,” he said firmly. “I’m a Kindred.”

“A Kindred? That’s just an urban legend,” she protested. “A story desperate people made up to give themselves hope. Besides, I thought all the Kindred were supposed to be beautiful, strong warrior women.”

“Not in my universe—I mean, not where I come from,” Davrik corrected himself quickly. “Where I come from, the Kindred are ninety-five percent male. But you only have to look at my eyes to see that I’m telling the truth,” he added. “See?”

He leaned down, showing her the white sclera and pale blue irises of his eyes.

Sonya took a cautious step towards him and stared up at him, meeting his gaze. For a long moment they looked into each other’s eyes and Davrik felt his heart swell. He wanted so badly to gather her into his arms—wanted so much just to *hold* her.

If she was his Sonya, he would have swept her off her feet and cuddled her close to his chest, but this Sonya didn't know him. And more importantly, she didn't trust him yet. He had to earn her trust and take things slowly. So he only looked into her eyes until Sonya's light brown cheeks grew dark with a blush and she dropped her gaze.

"I...see," she said at last. "So you're not a Scourge. I'm sorry if I offended you, my Lord and Master."

"Please—you don't have to call me that. My name is Davrik." He became aware that he was looming over her, doubtless not helping the trust situation. "Look, can I just... here, let me sit down."

He looked around the room for someplace to sit but didn't see anything except the vast silver platform bed in the corner of the room. He went and had a seat on the side of the thick luxury mattress, spreading his legs to get comfortable and trying to look more approachable.

The move seemed to work, because after a moment, Sonya approached him. She even came right up to him, to stand between his legs. Then, to Davrik's surprise, she dropped to her knees and reached for the magno-tabs that held his trousers together.

"Hey, wait—what are you doing?"

He pushed her hands away, looking down at her uncertainly.

"Giving you a blow job—isn't that what you sat on the bed for?" she asked flatly, looking up at him. "I'm sure Oozle told you that I'm supposed to blow you twice a day."

"I don't care *what* he said—you don't have to do that," Davrik insisted. "Please, stand up. You don't have to be down there."

"Where do you want me then?" Sonya stood and looked at him uncertainly. Due to their height difference, they were still nearly eye-to-eye even with Davrik sitting and her standing.

“Look, can we just *talk* for a minute?” he asked. Things were moving too fast here—and in the *wrong* direction.

“I guess so.” She shrugged. “You can do anything you want, Master.”

“Right now I want to *talk*,” Davrik said firmly.

Gently, he took her by the arms. Sonya stiffened but didn’t pull away.

“All right—so talk,” she said. Davrik could tell she was trying to be defiant, but he could hear the fear in her voice, under the bravado.

For a moment, he hardly knew what to say.

She looked exactly like his Sonya—right down to the golden flecks in her chocolate brown eyes and the tiny scar above her right eyebrow where she’d poked herself with a branch while she was riding her bike in the woods as a child. She was so beautiful it made his heart fist in his chest. He didn’t want to hurt her or scare her—he needed to win her trust.

Please, Goddess! He sent up a silent prayer. *Let me do this right—help me to earn her trust and rescue her from this awful place!*

“I’m not here to hurt you or scare you, Sonya,” he said at last, deciding to get right to the point. “I just want to get to know you.”

She raised one eyebrow in obvious disbelief—an expression he knew well.

“If *that’s* what you want, then why did you pay for the Supreme Treatment? Everyone knows that package is for club members who want to hurt or torture the girls they pay for!”

Davrik shook his head.

“I paid because I thought it was the only way to have you all to myself—*not* so I could hit you or hurt you. I’m sorry if you thought otherwise.”

The look in her lovely brown eyes said she was still skeptical.

“So if you don’t want me to suck your dick and you’re not interested in hurting me, what *do* you want? Why pay so much to get me ‘all to yourself?’”

The words, *Because I love you!* hovered on his lips, but it was much too soon to say them. Davrik didn’t want to scare her but he couldn’t explain the truth either.

If he told this Sonya about his own Sonya and how she had died, back in his home universe and the way he had searched through hundreds of thousands of other alternate universes to find one where she was still alive, he would sound crazy. Also, she would think he only wanted her as a replacement for the mate he had lost and that wasn’t what Davrik wanted. He just wanted her in his life again—even if she wasn’t the exact same woman he had lost. There was a hole inside him without her—he wanted the other half of his soul back.

But again, he couldn’t say any of this to her—she wouldn’t understand and too much intensity too soon would only frighten her away.

“I heard your act,” he said, hoping to find a credible excuse for spending such an egregious amount to be with her. “Your voice is...lovely. *Incomparable*. I was hoping you might sing for me.”

“Oh, well...” Her face cleared and she looked more confident. “Of course—do you have a special song you want me to sing?”

“*Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow*—do you know that one?” he asked. It was one of his favorite songs that his own Sonya used to sing—a soulful, bluesy tune that had been made famous by Roberta Flack.

Her eyes widened in surprise.

“Well...yes. But I’m kind of surprised that *you* know it. That’s a song from my home planet—from Earth.”

“I’m a connoisseur of all kinds of music,” Davrik said quickly. “The Earth has many rich musical traditions.”

“Yes, it does,” she said slowly. “But how—”

“I’m a scout for my people, so I visit a lot of different planets and finding new music while I’m there is a hobby,” Davrik said quickly. “Can you sing it for me?” He was hoping that if he got her singing, he could avoid further questions. Luckily, Sonya seemed not to mind—probably because singing for a strange man was infinitely preferable to giving him a blow job, Davrik thought grimly.

“Okay—it’ll have to be a cappella, though—I haven’t had time to add that particular song to my music maker. That’s the little device that accompanies me while I sing on stage,” she added. “It’s about the only good thing I’ve gotten out of being here. Um...except getting to spend time with you of course, Master,” she added quickly.

“Please—you don’t have to lie to me,” Davrik said quietly. “I can’t imagine what your life has been like here but I’m sure it hasn’t been good.”

He wanted to add that he was so sorry he hadn’t been able to get to her sooner, but he was afraid that would make her suspicious of him. It would be really difficult to explain why he had been tracking her without telling her about the other Sonya.

She lifted her chin.

“All right—I won’t lie. It’s not great here. I mean, I was a Professor of Music Theory in my old life on Earth and now I’m a singing sex worker.” She pointed a finger at him. “But if Oozle hears me saying that—or you tell him I complained—I’ll get in a whole hell of a lot of trouble.”

“I have nothing to say to the Sluggorn,” Davrik growled. “He has no right to own you or to force you to...to do whatever it is you’ve been forced to do.”

He desperately wanted to ask her what she’d had to do... and what had been done to her. He’d been under the impression that she was only singing here at The House of a

Thousand Flowers. But it seemed he had been wrong. Gods, how many times had she been taken against her will? How many times had she been hurt because he hadn't gotten to her fast enough?

But he couldn't say any of that. He could only sit there, hands squeezed into fists as he tried to keep his emotions in check.

Sonya was watching him carefully, as though trying to decide if she could trust him or not.

"All right, I guess," she said at last. "Well...do you still want me to sing?"

"Please," Davrik got out. Again he had the urge to sweep her into his arms and take care of her—to promise her he would get her out of here and keep her safe forever. But he didn't know how he was going to manage that, so he kept his mouth shut and waited.

Sonya hummed a little, finding her pitch and tuning her voice. Then she began, her beautiful contralto filling the room.

"Tonight you're mine, completely..."

You give your love so sweetly...

Tonight the light of love is in your eyes,

Will you still love me tomorrow?"

As she soared into the second verse, Davrik couldn't help joining in. This was one of the songs he had often sung with her, harmonizing as she sang the melody.

"Is this a lasting treasure..."

Or just a moment's pleasure?" he sang with her.

Sonya's eyes opened wide and she stared at him uncertainly. But ever the consummate professional, she continued singing and Davrik kept singing the harmony.

"Tonight, the light of love is in your eyes.

Will you still love me tomorrow?" they finished together, as they so often had—or as he had with his own Sonya, Davrik

reminded himself.

It healed something in his soul to sing with her again. The way their voices melded together, entwining perfectly, had always been a pleasure for both of them. He hoped this Sonya would feel the same way.

When the song ended, she looked at him for a long moment.

“You’re the one—you were humming along with me in the Flower Lounge,” she said at last.

“Only because you seemed to be having trouble,” Davrik told her. “I just wanted to help.”

“I just got thrown off because of that horrible Trollox—the three headed thing that was sitting in the corner.” A visible shiver ran through her. “It...it’s a client of mine.” A look of revulsion crossed her face.

“Did he hurt you?” Davrik leaned forward anxiously. He could feel the Rage building inside him. If that big bastard had even touched her—

But Sonya only shook her head.

“I’d rather not talk about it, if you don’t mind. You, uh, have a beautiful baritone,” she added, clearly wanting to change the subject.

“Thank you.” He sighed and tried to let go of the idea of the Trollox touching her. There was nothing he could do about it now except keep it from ever happening again. “Your voice is ethereal,” he added softly. “From the first moment I heard it, I *had* to know you.”

This was the truth. He could still remember that first time he’d heard his own Sonya sing at The Speak Easy. He’d stopped in for a drink and had lost his heart. He hadn’t left the club that night until he’d gotten her number and a promise that she would go out with him.

And now, here he was all over again—the sound of her voice brought back so many memories—so much love and joy and pain and sorrow... Suddenly the longing to hold her was

so great, he was afraid he wouldn't be able to help himself if he just sat there looking at her and wanting her so much, it nearly made him sick.

He stood abruptly and went to stand at the floor-to-ceiling windows that covered two sides of the room. The view of downtown Opulex outside was fantastic—the many lighted spires rising high into the night sky. Hovercars and hovercoaches flitted by on lighted airways, marked out in neon on different levels far above the ground.

Davrik didn't see any of it. He was seeing his own Sonya, as she had been on that last day, right before she'd stepped into the shuttle that had crashed into the sea. He was hearing her musical laughter and tasting her sweet lips as she kissed him goodbye for what he hadn't known was going to be the very last time.

Oh, baby girl, he thought as emotions rose in him like waves that might drown him. Oh Gods, miss you so damn much! And here you are again, in another way, a different form. But so much the same it hurts my heart. Goddess, please...

“Hey...” There was a soft touch on his arm and he looked down to see Sonya standing there beside him. She was looking up at him with concern in her chocolate brown eyes. “Hey,” she said again. “What is it? I can tell something's bothering you.”

“It's nothing.” Davrik cleared his throat and swiped at his eyes. “Nothing at all. Forgive me. Your voice...it affected me deeply.”

He turned and went back to sit on the bed. If he stood too near her, he would want to hold her. He ached to cuddle her in his arms and kiss her forehead as he had with his own Sonya but he knew he couldn't do that. Not yet and maybe not ever. This Sonya had been trafficked and abused and sold to males who only wanted to use her body for their own selfish pleasure and didn't care if they hurt her. She wasn't going to trust some strange male—which was all he was to her right now.

I'm nothing to her, he thought, feeling hopeless. But she's everything to me.

TWENTY

SONYA

S onya couldn't figure the VIP client out.

First he protested that he hadn't bought her to hurt her—that he just wanted to get to know her. Then he somehow knew a tune from Earth which ought to have been impossible.

After all, before the Scourge had come five years before, nobody on Earth had any idea there were aliens out there. So how would he have access to music from Earth? Considering he was at least eight feet tall and had pearly gray skin, he wouldn't exactly blend in with a crowd of humans.

She'd also been floored by the way he harmonized with her. Sonya had perfect pitch and she could always tell if someone was sharp or flat. With the VIP client, every note had been exactly on point. Not only that but his voice blended with hers in the closest harmony she'd ever sung—he had anticipated every grace note and lilt that she threw into the song to make it her own and stayed with her effortlessly. It almost felt as though they had been singing together for years—but of course they hadn't. She'd never seen him before in her life!

Or had she? Sonya frowned to herself. It was so strange but it almost seemed like she'd seen him before...maybe in a dream. But that didn't make sense—she never remembered her dreams except for the night terrors that tormented her sometimes.

God, she hoped she didn't have another one like she'd had last night during the time she was entertaining the VIP client! She was pretty sure he wouldn't be happy about being woken up by screaming and crying in the middle of the night. Panic attacks were *not* sexy.

You haven't had any night terrors for ages before last night, she reminded herself. You only had one last night because of that horrible Sir Grox!

Thoughts of the hideous Trollox sent a shiver down her spine and she tried to push the evil creature out of her head by studying the VIP client again.

What had he said his name was? Davrik? He was actually handsome, in a giant alien kind of way, she decided. Now that she'd mostly gotten over the fact that he had the same skin tones as a Scourge, she couldn't help noticing his broad shoulders and thick, black hair. Not to mention those pale blue eyes that were so intense when he looked at her—almost as though he was staring into her soul.

Could he really just be a music connoisseur who liked her voice? Could that really be the entire reason he had bought and paid for her for an entire week?

Sonya wished she could believe that, but she had her doubts. She'd heard the other girls whisper about how much the Supreme Treatment package cost—it was hard to believe that anyone would pay a price equivalent to the cost of owning your own private jet just to hear her sing to him.

He must want something, she thought, looking at him from the corner of her eye. His jaw was clenched and there was a look of pain on his face, as though some inner anguish was tormenting him. What was going on with him? What—?

Suddenly the bracelet on her wrist—the one Oozle had given her to wear—made an ominous beeping sound.

Sonya looked down at it and realized that the clear, thumb-sized jewel in the center of the gold chain links had turned dark red. She shook it, trying to turn it off. Damn it—what the hell was wrong with it?

But the shaking had no effect. The bracelet beeped again and then a small, mechanical sounding voice said,

“Warning—continuous non-contact for the past fifteen solar minutes detected. Continued non-proximity and non-contact with VIP patron will result in immediate consequences.”

“Immediate consequences? What the hell does that mean?” Sonya muttered. She shook the bracelet again and

finally the beeping stopped.

She was just breathing a sigh of relief when she felt something warm against her wrist. Then the warmth became heat and the heat turned to burning.

With a little shriek, Sonya turned her hand over and saw that the clear gem was now red hot—it was glowing like a coal against her skin—burning her! And though she shook and tugged on the bracelet, it wouldn't unclasp.

It was stuck on her wrist, seemingly intent on burning a hole right through her skin and there was no way she could get it off!

TWENTY-ONE

NATE

“So this ‘Singing Wood’—why do they call it that?” Nate asked as casually as he could.

He had woken up incredibly refreshed and feeling better than he could remember in a long time. The knot of anxiety which had taken up permanent residence in his stomach for the past five years, seemed to have melted away—at least temporarily. And instead of bad dreams churning in the back of his brain, he’d had the most erotic dream he could remember having since he was a horny teenager.

Probably because my face was still pressed against her beautiful full breasts, he thought, casting a sidelong glance at Lan’ara. What he’d done to her that morning made his face hot.

To be fair, he’d been still half asleep and the dream had been playing over and over in his mind. In it, he’d been sitting on the bed and he had been straddling him with her soft little pussy pressed against his aching cock. She’d been wearing the same kind of white gown that all the women wore here, cut low in the front to show the swells of her full breasts.

“Are you thirsty, Nate?” she’d asked softly, looking down at him.

“God, yes!” he’d growled, feeling his cock surge.

“Then why don’t you drink?” And she had done something to her gown to make the top disappear completely.

Nate had found her full breasts were filling his hands and her ripe nipples, which were a darker shade than her pale lavender skin, thrusting in his face. He could see a drop of amber liquid clinging to one tight peak and he put out his tongue and tasted it.

Sweetness and warmth and pleasure and goodness—that was what it had tasted like. In the dream he had immediately

wanted more. He had sucked her ripe nipple into his mouth, drawing deep to get more of the honey-colored liquid.

Lan'ara had moaned softly and thrust her breasts forward, clearly offering him as much as he wanted. Nate had sucked hard, drinking of the endless flow while he felt his cock straining against her pussy as he kneaded and massaged her big, beautiful breasts...

She moaned again—louder this time—and that was the sound that had woken him up. His eyes had opened and Nate had realized that he had his head pillowed on one of her breasts and he was cupping the other through her thin, silky night dress. He was kneading it and teasing her tight nipple through the thin fabric while Lan'ara moaned and shifted restlessly under him.

“Fuck!” he'd exclaimed, sitting up quickly and releasing her breast. What must she think of him? She'd offered him comfort last night and he'd repaid her by grabbing her! He wasn't the kind of guy to reach under a woman's skirt or into her blouse without permission, but now she was going to think he was an asshole who took whatever he wanted without asking.

“Sorry,” he had muttered, shamefaced.

But Lan'ara hadn't gotten angry. At least, not as far as he could tell. She'd sat up in bed as well and smiled at him.

“You must have been having a good dream,” she'd murmured. “Do you remember what it was about?”

Unfortunately, he did. Nate had felt his face getting hot as he remembered his dream about drinking amber colored sweetness from her breasts. What was wrong with him, anyway? Sure, he'd always liked big, natural breasts and Lan'ara's were the most beautiful he'd ever seen. But he'd never been into lactation porn or milk play or anything like that.

It hadn't been milk coming from her nipples though—it had been something else. The amber liquid had been thick and

sweet and filled with something that made him feel amazing as he sucked it from her breast...

“The Singing Forest is filled with Fala trees which hum to each other,” Lan’ara said, breaking his train of thought.

“Huh?” Nate looked over at her.

They were walking together down a long path that led away from the Healing Grotto through gently rolling hills. Behind them was the vast purple sea and in the distance, like a white smudge along the horizon, was their destination. The sky was a pale greenish color and the grass on the hills around them looked like tall stalks of blue wheat which rippled like waves in the soft, sweetly scented breeze.

It was beautiful and so completely unlike the environment Nate had left back on Earth that so far nothing had triggered the panic and fury that lived inside him like a sleeping beast.

“You asked how the Singing Forest got its name,” she said patiently and Nate realized he’d been thinking so hard about the strange erotic dream he’d had—and the embarrassment of grabbing her breast uninvited—that he’d forgotten what they were talking about.

“Oh, right—right,” he said nodding. “Uh...and *why* are we going there again?”

“Because it’s beautiful and tranquil,” Lan’ara said simply. “Forgive me if I am wrong, but it seems to me you could use some beauty and tranquility in your life, Nate.”

“I could,” he admitted. After leaving the Seals, he’d heard a lot of guys say they missed the adrenaline rush that came with combat, but Nate never had. And since the past five years of his life had consisted of running and hiding and fighting and killing, a peaceful walk from the seaside resort where they were staying to a beautiful forest sounded just about right.

The only thing that marred the beauty and peace of their quiet walk was the fact that he couldn’t help wondering if Lan’ara was secretly mad at him for this morning. Some

women kept their irritation bottled up inside and let it out at a later date. Nate had dated a few like that and he didn't like it. He much preferred it if a woman *told* him when she was irritated so he could fix the situation right away.

Lan'ara didn't *act* mad, though. And she was wearing another white gown with a deep V neckline which clearly showed the swells of her breasts and the ripe peaks of her nipples poking through the thin fabric. So it wasn't like she was trying to cover up.

Nate himself was bare-chested and wearing another pair of loose white trousers. They both had on simple, comfortable sandals. These no-fuss, no-fills outfits seemed to be what all the people wore here on Careesa Prime, where fashion didn't seem to be a concern.

There didn't seem to be any underwear to be had, either. Not that he minded going Commando, but the women also didn't seem to wear bras. Not that Lan'ara needed one—her breasts were full and firm and beautiful, pushing against the white fabric of her dress as the nipples tented the thin material...

“Do you like looking at my breasts, Nate?” she asked abruptly, and he realized he'd been staring right at her chest like some kind of pervert. God, what was *wrong* with him?

“Oh, uh...I mean...I'm fucking sorry,” he began to apologize. “I don't know what's wrong with me lately. I don't —”

“Stop.” Lan'ara turned to face him and put a hand on his arm. “Don't apologize.”

“Don't apologize?” Nate repeated stupidly. “But I was staring right at your...uh, I mean, women don't like it when a man stares at them like that in my culture,” he added, trying to explain.

“But we are in *my* culture now—my home planet,” she reminded him gently. “And we are in our Claiming Period. It is perfectly all right for you to look at me if you like. Here...”

She tugged at the thin straps of her gown and the top of it slithered down to pool around her elbows, leaving her large breasts completely bare.

“God...” Nate muttered hoarsely. They were every bit as lovely as they had been in his dream—lovelier, even. They were so full and firm and her nipples were so ripe and tight. Fucking gorgeous!

“Ahh...I can feel your lust,” Lan’ara breathed. Her beautiful purple eyes were half-lidded and as Nate watched, her nipples seemed to get even tighter.

Nate could feel his lust too. His cock was rock hard and standing at attention against his belly inside the white trousers. Without thinking, he reached up to cup one full breast...only to have Lan’ara push his hand gently but firmly away.

“I’m sorry, Nate, but we are only in the Holding Time of our Claiming Period right now,” she told him. “You cannot yet touch my bare skin, nor I yours. We must wait until our Touching Time. Then you can caress my breasts as much as you like.”

“When can I suck them?” he asked hoarsely, unable to keep the growl of lust out of his voice.

“That would be during our Tasting Time.” She cupped her hands under her breasts and lifted them higher, as though offering them to him. “Then you can suck my nipples as much as you want...and I will be allowed to suck your shaft until you shoot your cream for me.”

“What?” Nate had thought he couldn’t get any hotter but those soft words spoken in her sweet, seductive voice made his cock surge in his trousers. “You want to, uh...”

“Suck you.” Her tongue slipped out and she licked her lips seductively, as though imagining how she would do it. “The females of my kind—of the Kindred—have a biological need to drink the cream of our males. It will be my pleasure to suck yours out of your hard shaft.”

Nate could barely believe what he was hearing. Lan’ara had such a sweet, innocent face but the words coming out of

her mouth were making him so hard he felt like he could fuck a hole in a brick wall.

“Uh...when you said we had to go through the Claiming Period, I didn't know all that was involved,” he said at last. “Do I get to taste you too? Do I get to lick your sweet little pussy?”

Lan'ara's breath seemed to come faster, her full breasts heaving as she looked up at him.

“I will, of course, be happy to spread my thighs for you and let you taste my honey,” she said softly. “Though for now, you may only look.”

She started walking again, leaving the top of her gown down around her elbows, her bare breasts swaying with every step.

“Er...aren't you afraid someone might see us?” Nate asked, falling into step beside her. “I mean, this is a public road—right?”

She shrugged.

“We'll see them coming—I'll have plenty of time to rearrange my gown. For now, I want you to be able to look at my breasts if you wish.”

Nate found that he could barely pull his eyes away from her full breasts and tight peaks. And now that she'd basically given him permission to look as much as he wanted, he didn't even have to try to stop staring.

“Is this the way it is in your culture? This...openness?” he asked, looking up for a moment to catch her expression.

“My culture—the culture of the Empaths of Careesa Prime—is all about healing and giving,” Lan'ara explained. “The other half of me—the Kindred part—is about finding the right male and Bonding with him. And then, once the Bond is formed, you know exactly what your mate desires and of course you desire to give it to him.”

Nate wasn't exactly sure what she was talking about when she mentioned Bonding, but he did like the idea of

knowing clearly what your significant other wanted. So many women he had dated in the past seemed indecisive or unwilling to admit what they wanted or needed, which forced him to guess all the time. The idea of doing away with the uncertainty and just *knowing* what your woman wanted was immensely appealing.

“Oh, we are coming to a wayside shrine,” Lan’ara murmured. To his disappointment, she pulled up her gown, covering her breasts again. “Don’t worry,” she said, clearly seeing the look on his face. “When we reach the Singing Woods, I’ll take off my gown completely if you want to look at me.”

“I’d love that, sweetheart,” Nate admitted hoarsely. He couldn’t help it—like most men, he was a visual creature. And the idea of seeing her full curves and bare breasts completely naked made him hard as a rock. “Er, what’s a wayside shrine?” he added, frowning.

“Oh, well the Kindred worship a Goddess—the Mother of All Life, who created us all,” Lan’ara explained. “But here on Careesa Prime, we also believe in giving praise to Nature in all of her bounty. So we set up these shrines at regular intervals along the road where people can stop and offer a sacrifice. You don’t have to, of course—but it’s considered very good luck if you do. Would you like to see?”

They had come to the little shrine as she talked. It appeared to be a small building made of bluish-gray stones with a simple wooden door that led to its interior. The exterior was decorated with long strings of dried flowers, all faded to pastel shades of blue and purple and green.

The cautious part of Nate held back a little.

Be careful—could be a trap, whispered the voice in the back of his head. But it didn’t *look* like a trap—they were light years away from Earth and the Scourge, he reminded himself. He was on a whole other planet—a peaceful planet where they were all about healing and calm.

“All right,” he said, nodding. “Er—do you want me to go first? In case someone else is inside it?”

“No need,” Lan’ara told him. “If there were worshipers within, they would have laid a string of flowers across the door. See?” And she plucked one of the long strands of dried flowers and hung it on a small metal hook on the outside of the door which Nate hadn’t seen earlier. “Now, if someone comes along the road, they’ll see that the shrine already contains worshipers,” she explained. “And they’ll move on. No one will bother us.”

“Well...okay.” Nate shrugged as she pushed open the door. “I’ll look inside but I don’t know about leaving a, uh, sacrifice. I mean, we didn’t bring anything with us, did we?” He held out his open hands. Lan’ara had assured him they would be able to get food when they got to the Singing Forest, so they hadn’t even packed a lunch.

“The sacrifice isn’t a material thing,” she explained as she pushed through the wooden door into the shrine. “It’s a sacrifice of pleasure.”

Inside the shrine was open to the sky and larger than it had looked, Nate thought. There were a few wooden benches along the wall and a metal spigot in the corner which was dripping slowly. There was a small wet patch on the dusty flagstones just under it.

In the center of the shrine was a stone pedestal with a vast, green vase filled with more dried flowers. It looked kind of like a centerpiece you might find at a fancy hotel, Nate thought. Then Lan’ara’s words sank in.

“A sacrifice of pleasure? What does that mean?” he asked, turning to her.

“It means you give yourself or your lover pleasure until you reach a release,” she explained. She had taken down her gown again and her bare breasts were on display. “This shows reverence to Nature and it’s believed that it will help the fertility of the planet.” She raised an eyebrow at him. “Would you like to pleasure yourself and leave a sacrifice, Nate?”

His heartbeat quickened and his cock—which had almost gone down when he had been debating entering the small, enclosed shrine—suddenly surged again.

“Are you asking if I want to look at your beautiful body and jerk off?”

“If that is what you call it. We simply call it pleasuring yourself here,” Lan’ara informed him. “Would you like participate in the tradition and make a sacrifice?”

“Are *you* going to do it?” Nate asked. God, his cock was throbbing!

“Would you like to watch me pleasure myself?” Lan’ara’s lovely eyes were half-lidded again as she went to sit on one of the wooden benches.

“Of course I would,” Nate growled. He settled on a bench across from her. They were only about four feet apart, so he had a very good view of her gorgeous tits.

“Then it would be my pleasure to make a sacrifice,” she murmured. The front of the gown was already cut high enough to show her thighs, so she simply lifted it higher to expose the most exquisite little pussy Nate had ever seen.

She was already wet and swollen, her inner folds glistening as she spread her legs to give him a better view. Her inner pussy was pink, like the swirls at her temples, he saw.

“I feel your lust again, Nate...” Lan’ara’s voice was breathless as she framed her pussy with her hands, as though inviting him to look as much as he wanted. “It pleases me that you enjoy looking at my body.”

“You’re fucking right about that,” he growled hoarsely. “Love looking at your beautiful body, sweetheart.” Reaching into his trousers, he pulled out his cock, which was aching hard.

Lan’ara’s eyes widened as she saw his equipment.

“So large!” she breathed. “I may need Bonding Fruit at the end of our Claiming Period—if you choose to Claim me, that is,” she added.

“How would I do that?” Nate cupped his big hand around his shaft and began to stroke up and down in a leisurely way.

He found that he liked her eyes on him, liked her looking at him almost as much as he liked looking at her.

“You would have to put your long, thick shaft inside me,” Lan’ara murmured. Her fingers were flying between her legs, spreading her outer lips open to caress the tight little button at the center of her slippery folds. It was clear she was enjoying herself, which Nate found incredibly hot.

“You mean I’d have to *fuck* you, sweetheart?” he growled softly, still stroking.

“Yes—exactly. But you might...might have trouble fitting your shaft in my pussy,” she confessed rather breathlessly. “Though I have pleased myself many times and many ways, I have never had a male inside me before.”

“Really?” Nate paused in his stroking for a moment. He’d never been with a virgin before and he found the thought intriguing. “Why not?” he asked her. “I mean, why haven’t you been with anyone?”

She shrugged.

“Because ‘fucking’ as you call it, means Claiming and Bonding to a Kindred female. I didn’t want just any male to spurt his seed inside me and fill my pussy with his cream to Bond me to him.”

“God...” Nate groaned, stroking harder. The way she talked—saying such dirty things with such a sweet, innocent expression on her face—was driving him crazy!

“Do *you* want to fill my pussy with your cream, Nate?” she asked, looking him in the eye as her fingers continued to dance between her thighs. “Do you want to put your long, thick shaft inside me and fuck me until you spurt deep in my pussy?”

“God, yes!” Suddenly he knew he couldn’t hold back anymore. With a growling gasp, he felt his balls tighten and then his cock jerked in his hand and he was coming, splattering the stone floor at the base of the pedestal that held the vase of dried flowers with rope after rope of hot cum.

His own orgasm seemed to bring on Lan'ara's as well, even though they weren't touching.

“Oh Goddess, I feel your pleasure surging! I feel your release, Nate!” she moaned. Throwing back her head, she rubbed harder between her thighs, her bare breasts heaving as she gave herself up to what appeared to be an extremely intense orgasm.

“That's right, sweetheart—come *hard*,” Nate heard himself growling. God, she was gorgeous when she came! He wished he could feel her pleasure the way she could apparently feel his. But just watching her let go like this was erotic enough to make his cock surge, even though he'd just come himself.

At last she gave a little moan of satisfaction and relaxed back against the stone wall of the shrine behind her.

“Ahh...that was a wonderful sacrifice,” she sighed contentedly.

“It sure as fuck was,” Nate agreed, putting his cock back in his trousers. “Uh, should we clean up some?” he asked, thinking it wasn't very fucking nice to just leave his cum all over the floor.

“No need. Look—your sacrifice of cream has been accepted.”

Lan'ara nodded at the vase of dried flowers on the stone pedestal.

But looking at them, Nate realized that they didn't look dried anymore. In fact, they seemed to have come back to life—their petals were lush and full and their stems were green with new leaves. And the place where he had shot his cum at the base of the stone pedestal was completely dry.

“What the fuck?” He got up to examine the flowers more closely. “How in the hell did that happen?”

“I told you—your sacrifice was accepted,” Lan'ara said simply.

She had straightened her gown and was crouching beside the metal spigot in the corner to rinse her hands. Nate wished he had caught her before she did that—he would have liked to suck the pussy honey from her slim fingers. But maybe that wasn't allowed—possibly washing up afterwards was part of her own sacrifice of pleasure.

“Should we go on?” she asked, straightening up and smiling at him. “We still have a little distance to go before we reach The Singing Forest.”

“Oh, uh—sure.” Nate nodded, feeling a bit dazed. Had they really just gotten off together like it was no big deal? He liked the sexual freedom of Lan'ara's culture, but it still felt a little strange to perform such an intimate act with a woman he hadn't even known a week ago.

Are you sure about that? whispered a little voice in his head. *Doesn't she seem more and more familiar—more and more **right**, Nate? Maybe she's right and the two of you have been dreaming of each other, only you never remember your dreams because of that fucking nightmare about Maddy.*

The thought of his little sister caused a surge of melancholy. God, he wished he knew where she was and if she was all right! He wished he could have saved her that night they got separated.

Lan'ara's light touch on his arm made him turn his head.

“You're sad now,” she said softly and it wasn't a question. “Why, Nate? What can I do to help ease your pain?”

“It's nothing,” he said gruffly. “Just...thinking about my little sister. I wish I knew where she was...and if she's safe.”

Her eyes filled with sympathy.

“I understand. I promise when we get to the Mother Ship we'll search for her.”

“Thank you. But when will that be?” Nate asked.

“When you're healed and whole,” Lan'ara said firmly. “Come, we need to go.”

Nate nodded, trying not to show his impatience. He was enjoying his time here with Lan'ara—she was a beautiful, mysterious woman who was surprisingly unfettered sexually and he was beginning to think there really was something between them.

But he couldn't stop the guilt he felt about Maddy from invading his day or stop worrying about his little sister.

TWENTY-TWO

LAN'ARA

Lan'ara could feel Nate's guilt and pain as clearly as she had felt his pleasure just a few moments ago. Since the deep pleasure of his orgasm had strengthened her, she was able to take his hand and help bear some of his heavy burden.

Nate didn't say anything, though he smiled down at her when she entwined their fingers. She felt his pleasure in their contact and used it to help bolster herself as she drew some of the pain and guilt away from him. He still had a heavy load to carry, but it was easier to help him bear his burden when he had positive emotions as well.

Still, by the time they reached the Singing Forest, Lan'ara was feeling rather drained. She was glad to step into the shelter of the Fala trees with their long, silvery-white branches hanging down to the ground. The quiet, musical humming the trees made was restful and relaxing.

"Wow," Nate murmured, looking around. "Like weeping willows but with silver and white leaves." He cocked his head to one side. "Is that them humming?"

"It's how they communicate with each other," Lan'ara told him. "They—"

Suddenly, there was a rustling in the underbrush—probably just a small animal making its way through the wood. But the effect of that one small sound on Nate was immediate and drastic. The calm and contentment she'd been feeling from him changed in an instant, becoming fear and fury.

"Get back!" He shoved her roughly behind him, his emotions spiraling to dizzying heights that nearly overwhelmed Lan'ara.

"Nate, what—"

"They're here—they're somewhere close!" he growled. "Be quiet!"

Lan'ara stared at him in disbelief as the negative emotions boiled inside him like lava. Even the blind rage he'd been feeling when he was locked into the stasis frame hadn't been as bad as this—possibly because they hadn't been physically close at that time. Now that they had touched each other—now that they'd slept in each others' arms and a tentative pre-Bond had started to grow between them—she could feel everything that her fated mate felt *much* more strongly. She could feel the terror and rage coursing through his big body as he crouched low, ready to confront the enemy he was sure was coming.

But there *was* no enemy! The Singing Trees were safe—there were no large predators here, no Scourge Soldiers to attack them. How could she explain that to him? How could she help him—save him from drowning in this sudden overwhelming flood of negative emotion?

“Nate? Nate, please!” she begged, putting a hand on his arm. The muscles in his big body were hard as rocks with tension. “It's nothing—we're safe here. We're *safe!*”

He didn't seem to be listening—perhaps he couldn't hear her past the panic that was filling his mind like deadly static. His heart was pumping as hard as though he was running for his life and his breathing was rapid and shallow. His eyes were narrowed and his mouth was turned down in a sneer of sheer fury and hatred. He looked ready to kill!

Desperately, Lan'ara gripped his arm harder, making sure her bare skin was touching his. Closing her eyes, she sucked in as much of his pain and fear as she could, deluging herself with negative emotions as she tried her best to pull Nate out of the deadly spiral.

Slowly, the tension left his muscles and his breathing became calmer. He looked down at her, an expression of wonder on his face.

“Did you...what did you do?”

“I helped to bear your burden,” Lan'ara tried to smile at him but she was suddenly tired...so *tired*.

“I was going into combat mode—getting ready to kill something,” Nate admitted in a low voice. “You pulled me back.”

The rustling in the underbrush came again and a moment later a *zeether* came out from behind the bushes and began nosing around the silvery trunk of one of the trees.

Nate frowned at it.

“What the fuck is that? It looks like a fox crossed with a cat but with silver fur.”

“It’s a *zeether*,” Lan’ara said, her voice shaking with weariness. Goddess, she was tired! Her muscles were trembling—it felt like she’d just pushed a heavy boulder up a steep hill. Still, she tried to project an image of calm and comfort. “He’s probably just sniffing around, looking for fruit dropped by the trees,” she said, trying to smile. “They’re perfectly harmless—look, I’ll show you.”

She took a step forward, meaning to hold out a hand to the little creature—maybe offer it a piece of the juicy silver fruit hanging from the trees. But when she put her foot down, her leg didn’t want to support her. It folded under her and Lan’ara found herself falling...falling...

“Hey!” she heard Nate shout, but his voice seemed to come from light years away.

And then the whole world went distant and gray and far away and she couldn’t hear or see anymore.

TWENTY-THREE

DAVRIK

What was happening? Davrik watched anxiously as Sonya yanked at the bracelet on her wrist. When she started screaming in pain, he jumped up and ran over to her.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” he demanded, grabbing her wrist.

“Burning! It’s burning me!” she gasped.

“The fuck it is!” Davrik growled, enraged that anyone or anything would hurt the woman he loved. He gripped the gold link bracelet and was about to break it off her wrist when she cried,

“Stop!” and put a hand on his arm.

“Stop? But it’s hurting you!” he exclaimed, looking down at her.

Sonya shook her head.

“Not now it’s not—not now that you’re touching me. It was only burning me because I wasn’t touching you—wasn’t close enough to you. And if you take it off, I’ll get in *so* much trouble.”

Her lovely brown eyes were filled with fear. Seeing that expression on her face made Davrik’s heart ache and burn at the same time. He wanted to protect her from anything that would hurt or frighten her so much. He wanted to rip the damn bracelet off her wrist and carry her out of here right now!

But he knew he wouldn’t even get out of the building—as discrete and luxurious as The House of a Thousand Flowers was, there were armed guards all over the place. If he tried to steal one of their “top tier flowers” he’d be shot at once and then Sonya would be worse off than before.

So instead of ripping off the bracelet that had burned her, he gathered her into his arms and lifted her.

“Oh...what...what are you doing?” Sonya’s eyes were wide and uncertain.

“Don’t worry, baby girl—not going to hurt you,” Davrik told her. “I’m just going to have a look at your arm and heal you, all right?”

“How are you going to heal me?” she protested as he settled on the bed with her cradled in his lap.

“With my Essence, of course,” Davrik said distractedly. He was already examining her burned wrist, holding her hand carefully in his own. Her hand was so small compared to his that if they pressed their palms together, the tips of her fingers would barely reach the base of his own long digits. But right now he was mostly concerned with healing the angry dark red marks the damn bracelet had left on her delicate skin.

“What’s ‘Essence’?” Sonya asked, sounding confused.

Davrik realized that she didn’t know what he was talking about. Of course she didn’t—no matter how protective of her he felt, this wasn’t *his* Sonya. So she didn’t know about his fangs or the Essence they could produce to heal his mate.

“It’s a pale blue liquid produced by my fangs,” he explained. “It’s mostly used for—”

“Fangs?” she interrupted, her eyes going wide.

“Yes. See?” Davrik opened his mouth so she could see the double set of fangs that all Blood Kindred had—they were located where humans had their canine teeth.

He could still remember the first time he’d showed his fangs to his own Sonya, back in his own universe. It was on their second date and he’d been explaining to her that while he had some Giant Kindred in his ancestry, he was mostly a Blood Kindred. When he’d showed her the double set of sharp points, she’d said,

“Oh, like a vampire!” and leaned closer to get a better look.

This Sonya, however, wasn’t nearly so calm when he showed her.

“Oh my God!” she gasped, drawing back from him. “So *that’s* why you paid so much for me—you want to bite me!”

She scrambled off his lap and skittered away to the other side of the room, her eyes wide and frightened.

“No!” Davrik exclaimed. “Wait—please!”

He rose from the bed and started towards her, but Sonya shrank back from him, terror filling her eyes.

“Please! I know Oozle told you that you can do whatever you want to me and you paid a lot to do it, but please don’t bite me! *Please!*”

Davrik felt as though his heart was breaking. To think that she feared him—that she thought he would hurt her—it broke something inside of him. His own Sonya had loved it when he bit her because when a Blood Kindred injected his Essence into his mate’s blood stream, it caused an instant orgasm. But this Sonya didn’t know that, he reminded himself. She didn’t know anything about him except that he had paid an exorbitant price to be with her and use her in any way he wanted to.

You’re frightening her, whispered a little voice in his head. *Remember your size difference—you’re like a giant to her. Sit down and speak calmly—getting upset will only scare her more.*

Davrik knew it was true. So though he wanted badly to scoop her into his arms and hold her in his lap again, he went back to the bed. She would have to be coaxed to come back to him—he couldn’t force it or he would only make her fear him even more—possibly even hate him.

“Look, I’m *not* going to bite you,” he told her. Slowly, he went back and sat on the bed again. He spread his hands in a gesture of peace and goodwill. “I would *never* hurt you, baby girl.”

“I’m *not* your baby girl,” she said, her voice trembling. “And if you don’t want to bite me, why did you show me your fangs?”

Davrik sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“I showed you to explain about my Essence—which is a pale blue liquid that my fangs secrete. It can help me heal that burn on your arm, if you’ll let me,” he said.

At that moment, the bracelet on her arm beeped again.

“Non-proximity and non-contact detected,” it said in that high, mechanical voice. “Immediate contact with VIP client is necessary to avoid negative consequences.”

Sonya gave a little gasp and looked down at her arm.

Davrik felt as though the muscles in his core were coiled like a spring. He wanted to jump up and grab her to keep the damn bracelet from burning her again! But he knew if he did that, she would get even more upset. She *had* to come to him.

“Sonya, listen to me,” he said in a low, commanding tone. “I want you to come here *right now*.”

His own Sonya had responded to that tone at once—she called it his “Dom voice.” And thank the Goddess, the new Sonya seemed to respond as well. Slowly, she took a step towards him.

“You...do you *promise* not to bite me?” she asked.

“I swear it by the Goddess,” Davrik told her. “Now get back over here before that damn thing burns you again!”

“I...I can feel it heating up,” she admitted.

Davrik clenched his hands into fists at his sides. Goddess damn it, not jumping up and grabbing her was so fucking difficult! He felt like she was standing in the path of an oncoming bus and he was trying not to jump up and snatch her away to safety.

“*Come here*,” he repeated in that same, commanding voice. “I don’t want to see you get hurt again, Sonya.”

Slowly, she approached him. Davrik could tell by the grimace of pain on her face that the bracelet was already beginning to heat up to painful levels but he didn’t reach out and grab her. Instead, he extended one big hand.

“Just touch me,” he said quietly. “As soon as we make contact it should stop burning you.”

Hesitantly, she put out a hand and laid it delicately in his palm. Davrik had to fight the urge to grab her and yank her towards him. He forced himself to hold still and keep his hand open, letting her barely touch him and not trying to bring her any closer until she was ready.

The look of pain on her lovely face cleared at once and she let out a sigh of relief.

“Better?” Davrik asked her.

Sonya nodded.

“It stopped burning me as soon as I touched you.”

“Good. I never want to see you hurt or in pain, baby girl,” he murmured.

This time she didn’t correct him. Instead, she bit her lip and looked into his eyes.

“Can...can you really heal me? Heal my arm, I mean?” She nodded at the angry burn scar on her delicate wrist.

“I can,” Davrik assured her gravely.

“But...how?” She shook her head. “I mean, if you’re not going to bite me—”

“I’m not,” he said quickly. “But I can spread my Essence on your wrist just by kissing your arm. I’ll be gentle—I promise.”

“You...want to kiss me?”

Actually, he wanted to lick her, but Davrik thought it was better not to do that. He was sure he could spread his Essence with an open-mouthed kiss too. The moment he had seen her, his fangs—which had been dull for five long years—had sharpened and the moment she’d been hurt, they had started producing copious amounts of the pale blue liquid.

If he’d had any question or doubt in his mind that this Sonya wasn’t right for him the way his own Sonya had been, that had dispelled it. The way his body reacted to hers—his

fangs sharpening and producing Essence—proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that she was meant to be his mate. Probably he was making his Bonding Scent too, which ought to attract her to him, if only she got close enough to smell him with her limited human senses.

But of course, he couldn't tell her all that—not yet.

“I want to heal you,” he told her again. “Please, Sonya—will you trust me enough to let me do that?”

He held her eyes with his as he spoke, willing her to understand what he was saying—to believe he only wanted to help her.

I just want to protect you, baby girl! To heal you and pleasure you and keep you safe always!

But it was too soon to say those words to her. All he could do was hold her gaze with his own and wait for her decision.

TWENTY-FOUR

SONYA

S onya looked at the big Kindred uncertainly. He was so huge she felt like a child beside him. Even with him sitting and her standing they were eye-to-eye because of his enormous height. She could see the sharp points of his fangs gleaming under his lush upper lip—was she really going to trust him to put his mouth on her when he had the equivalent of four razor blades hidden in his smile?

And yet...he hadn't grabbed her or forced her to do anything. Even now he was just sitting there, waiting patiently with one hand outstretched. Maybe he really did just want to help her...to kiss her.

The thought sent a surprising little tremble through her midsection. He really was extremely handsome, even though he was so big. And he smelled incredible—a warm, masculine scent like cedar wood and spice that filled her senses.

“All right,” she said at last. “You...you can kiss me. But if you bite me, I'm never trusting you again!” she added in a rush.

“Sonya...I will *never* hurt you.” His deep, rumbling voice seemed to caress her and his pale blue eyes were filled with sincerity. Then, slowly and never taking his eyes off her, he lifted her burned wrist to his mouth.

The burn was on the underside of her wrist, just under the bracelet of blue veins that were visible through her light brown skin. Sonya couldn't help thinking that it was exactly where a vampire would want to bite.

But the big Kindred didn't bite her. Instead, he licked his lips and then leaned down and pressed a hot, open-mouthed kiss to the burned part of her arm.

Sonya gasped and almost jerked away. But he wasn't biting her—wasn't hurting her. In fact, the moment his lips made contact with her skin, the awful burning pain the bracelet

had left began to dissipate and a soothing coolness took its place.

After a long moment, Davrik pulled away and looked at her arm critically.

“Hmm...still a little redness,” he murmured. Putting out his tongue—it was pink, even though his skin was gray, she noted—he lapped her gently, laving the hurt area until it was apparently healed to his satisfaction. Then he examined her again and nodded before releasing her arm and sitting back. “There—all healed.”

“Er...thank you.” Sonya looked down at her arm uncertainly. Sure enough, she was completely healed. It was like some kind of magic or something! “How did you do that?” she asked, looking up at him.

For a moment, Davrik hesitated, as though thinking how to explain to her.

“It has to do with my Kindred anatomy,” he said at last. “It...recognizes a female I may be compatible with and enables me to make the Essence which can heal or pleasure her.”

“Wait...*pleasure* her?” Sonya raised her eyebrows. “How?”

“We don’t have to speak about that now,” he said firmly. “For now, I just want to be sure you won’t get burned again. I still think you should let me break the links on the bracelet and take it off your arm. If the Sluggorn asks about it, I can always say that it was my decision and take complete responsibility.”

Sonya shook her head regretfully.

“I wish it was that easy. But even if he *told* you it was all right, he would still punish me after the week is up and you’re gone. He might...might even put me in The Box.”

The Box was a horrible punishment reserved for girls who refused to submit to the clients who came to see them. Sonya had never been put into it herself, but she’d heard horror stories from the other “flowers.”

“The Box? What’s that?” Davrik frowned.

“It’s this rectangular box-shaped prison that’s so narrow you have to stay standing up when they put you into it because you can’t move enough to even sit or crouch down. It heats up until it nearly burns you and then it cools down until you feel like you’re freezing to death. It does that over and over again for however long you’re trapped there,” Sonya explained with a shiver.

A look of outrage came over his handsome features.

“Has that fucking Sluggorn done that to you? Has he put you in ‘The Box’?”

“No, no!” Sonya said quickly—there was murder in his pale blue eyes. And though she could tell his anger wasn’t directed at her, it was still scary to see such a big, muscular guy get so furious. “I’ve just heard from other girls who have disobeyed him,” she told him. “I don’t want to go in The Box—I don’t think I could stand it!”

“Of course you couldn’t. I know how claustrophobic you are, baby girl,” he murmured, some of the anger clearing from his face.

Sonya stared at him.

“How could you possibly know that? I mean, yes I’m claustrophobic but you just met me!”

He frowned and looked uncomfortable.

“I just guessed. You, er, look like you’d be the claustrophobic type.”

Sonya didn’t have any idea how someone could “look” claustrophobic, but she decided to let it drop. He had healed her, after all and he seemed concerned about her well being—which was completely unlike her usual clients, who only wanted their own gratification.

Just because they weren’t forcing her to do something *she* considered sexual, didn’t mean that it wasn’t sexual for them. If her singing in their ear—or multiple ears—got them off, it

was no sweat off her brow, but it was still kind of nasty, when you thought about it.

Davrik, on the other hand, hadn't appeared aroused when they were singing together. At least, he hadn't been rubbing his crotch or actively jerking off, as some of her clients did when she sang. He seemed to just want to sing with her for the pure joy of it. Just as he only seemed to want to heal her without asking for anything in return.

Just as Sonya was considering all this and wondering what to think of it, the damn bracelet started beeping *again*.

"Oh no!" She glared down at it in exasperation. "Stupid-ass thing!"

"Here." Davrik put out one big hand again. "Touch me," he said simply. "And we'll talk about what to do about this problem, since you don't want to risk letting me take the bracelet off of you."

Sonya laid her hand in his again—marveling a little at the difference in their size. It was like putting her hand against the hand of an NBA player or a professional wrestler, she thought. She was very aware of the warmth of his skin and that warm, masculine cedar and spice scent that smelled so good. Was that some kind of cologne he was wearing? If so, it was the best thing she'd ever smelled.

"I don't know what to do," she admitted candidly. "I mean, I know what they *want* me to do. Oozle expects me to be having sex with you twenty-four/seven. Though to be honest, I don't see how we could, er, do that," she added, looking at him from the corner of her eye.

He might not have a roll of bologna in his pants the way the damn Trollox did, but from the bulge she could see under his black trousers, he was still big enough to split her in two. No, thank you!

"I don't expect that from you—I would never take what you weren't willing to give," he said at once. "But we *do* need to have physical contact."

“Not just physical contact...some kind of *sexual* contact,” Sonya said reluctantly. “Oozle has ways of knowing if the girls here don’t give the clients what they pay for.” She lifted her chin. “You’d better let me blow you after all.”

Actually, the idea wasn’t nearly as distasteful as it would have been with any other client. Davrik was so big and handsome and there was something about him—a gentle but commanding presence that something deep inside her responded to. The way his eyes had gotten so stern when he ordered her to come to him so he could heal her, had done something to her insides. Sonya almost thought she might not mind it if he ordered her to get between his legs and suck him...almost.

But he shook his head firmly.

“No, I won’t ask that of you. You don’t know me well enough for it to be a pleasure to you as well as to me—I don’t like that.”

“Well then...what are we going to do?” Sonya asked, shaking her head. “Please—I don’t want to be punished! I don’t want to go in The Box!” she added, tears stinging her eyes.

She didn’t like to cry in front of him but the idea of being shoved into that horrible torture device made her feel sick and trembly inside. She had avoided it so far, but if she failed to deliver on a VIP client, she could definitely see the inside of The Box in her future.

“Oh, baby girl...” His eyes filled with compassion and he tugged her to him.

He lifted her gently into his lap and Sonya was surprised to find she didn’t mind sitting on his knee, even if it did make her feel kind of like a little girl since he was so much bigger than her.

“I don’t want that either. I *never* want to see you get hurt,” he murmured, cuddling her close to him. His deep voice seemed to vibrate through her and Sonya had the strangest feeling that she’d done this before—that she’d been right here,

sitting on this man's knee as he held her. But that couldn't be, could it? Was it a dream she'd had once? She wished she could remember.

"Thank you," she whispered, sniffing and swiping at her eyes. "That's...very nice of you."

It should have been uncomfortable, sitting on a stranger's lap and letting him hold her and comfort her, but somehow it wasn't. Maybe it was because he smelled so good or the fact that he treated her gently. He seemed very aware that he was much bigger and stronger than her and could easily hurt her if he wasn't careful.

"We still have to think of what to do, though," she added, looking up at him. "I mean, we have to do *something* or Oozle will punish me—no question about it."

"Why don't you..." He paused, frowning.

"Why don't I what?" Sonya prodded. What was he going to suggest? Maybe he had decided he wanted a blow job after all? But what he said surprised her.

"Why don't you let me take care of you?" He stroked a lock of hair out of her eyes, tucking it behind her ear.

"Take care of me?" Sonya asked blankly. "What does that mean? Do you mean you, uh, want to go down on me instead of the other way around?"

She could feel her cheeks getting hot as she asked the question. She'd never been much for that act—frankly, she'd never been with a man who was any good at it. Mostly, she suspected, because many of them really didn't want to be doing it in the first place.

"Do you *want* me to taste you, Sonya?" he rumbled, looking down at her, his pale blue eyes half-lidded.

Suddenly her heart was racing and her pulse was pounding in her ears. It took Sonya a moment to realize what was happening to her, simply because it *hadn't* happened in so long. Was she getting...turned on? The way he was looking at her was so primal and he smelled so good and his big body was so hard and muscular...

No—no way, this is NOT turning you on! she lectured herself. *He paid to use your body however he wants to—that is NOT sexy, Sonya. It's not!*

But there was no denying that her body was responding to the big Kindred in a way it hadn't responded to anyone in a very, *very* long time. Years of running and hiding and being in constant fear for her life had nearly killed her sex drive completely—but now, somehow, sitting on this stranger's lap had brought it roaring back to life! How was that possible?

“No...I mean, not unless you *want* to,” she said quickly, realizing it was taking her too long to answer. “I mean, if that's what you *paid* for.”

He scowled and shook his head.

“I wouldn't do it because I paid for it—I would do it to bring both of us pleasure,” he rumbled. “But just like with the reverse situation, you don't know me well enough yet. No, when I said I want to take care of you, I meant things like bathing you and caring for your hair...dressing you and undressing you. And just...*holding* you, like I am now.”

“Uh...bathing me?” Sonya asked uncertainly.

“Not in a sexual way,” he said quickly. “I won't touch you in ways you don't want to be touched. I just want to care for you.”

Sonya bit her lip. Was this his particular kink? If so, it seemed like a fairly harmless one. And there was part of her that responded to it—responded strongly, if she was being honest.

Her father had died when she was just a little girl and her mother had been forced to work two jobs to support them. They had eventually moved to Tampa to live with her granny, so she could help out, but for a long time Sonya had been forced to be very self sufficient at a very young age. The idea of someone wanting to take care of her was strangely appealing.

“Well...I *guess* that might work,” she admitted in a low voice. “But...that's really what you want to do? Dress me and

undress me and brush my hair like a doll?”

“Not like a doll!” he protested quickly. “Like a cherished treasure.” Cupping her cheek, he looked down into her eyes earnestly. “I just want to take care of you, baby girl,” he rumbled. “Will you let me do that? I promise I won’t do anything you don’t like.”

Sonya felt herself melting...drowning in those pale blue eyes of his. Why did she keep having the feeling that she’d known him before somehow? Why did this all feel so familiar?

“All right,” she whispered. “You can...can take care of me. If that’s really what you want.”

“It is.” He nodded. “That’s exactly what I want—just to care for you and keep you safe, baby girl.”

Sonya thought about telling him she wasn’t his “baby girl” again, but actually, she kind of liked his little nickname for her. It made her feel small and safe in a way that she hadn’t felt since she was a very little girl. And certainly not since the Scourge had invaded Earth.

“All right,” she said and let herself relax against him, leaning her head against his shoulder. “Let’s do that, then. Hopefully it will keep Oozle happy.”

“*You’re* the one I want to make happy,” he rumbled. “The only one, baby girl.”

Sonya wondered if he really meant it. He barely knew her—why did he want to take care of her like this? Why did he care about her happiness?

She had no answers and she supposed that only time would tell if the sweet, protective attitude of her VIP client would last...

TWENTY-FIVE

NATE

“Hey, help! Can anyone hear me? I need some help!” Nate gathered Lan’ara’s limp form into his arms and stood, looking around the forest. Everything was quiet except for the humming of the white and silver trees and the rustling of the little silver fox-cat thing in the underbrush.

He wished desperately that he knew more about this planet. Did Careesa prime have the equivalent of 911 to call emergency services? For that matter, did they have emergency services at all? He had no idea—and no idea what to do for Lan’ara or even what had happened to her. One moment she’d seemed perfectly fine and then the next moment she was fainting at his feet. He’d barely caught her in time to keep her from hitting her head on the forest floor!

“Help!” he shouted again, taking a few more steps into the forest. “Hey—can anyone hear me? Is anyone there?”

“How can one help hearing you if you insist on trying to shout the entire forest down?”

The gruff voice came from behind him. Nate turned quickly, being careful to keep Lan’ara’s limp form protectively close to his chest.

Standing under one of the weeping-willow type trees was a short little man. He stepped out from under the trailing branches so Nate could see him more clearly. He had pale blue skin and a shiny bald head and he was wearing the same loose white trousers that all the men wore here.

“What’s all this shouting about?” he demanded, glaring up at Nate fearlessly. Then he seemed to notice Lan’ara for the first time. “Oh—a Freelon! What happened to her? Is she injured?”

“I don’t know—she just fainted,” Nate admitted. “And what’s a ‘Freelon?’ She told me she was an Empath Kindred.”

“She may have Kindred blood in her veins, but she also has the blood of our most honored caste—the Freelons,” the old man told him. “They are the ones with the purple skin and the strongest Empathic abilities among us. We revere them and they are so *rare*. If one is lost, it is a true tragedy!”

“I don’t want her to be lost!” Nate said, feeling a surge of fear. “Please—is there any kind of emergency room I can take her to around here?”

“A room filled with emergencies?” The old man frowned. “What would be the purpose of such a place?”

“To heal her, of course!” Nate felt a surge of irritation.

“Why, only a fated mate can heal a Freelon,” the old man said, frowning. “Are *you* her fated mate? I can tell you’re not from Careesa Prime,” he added.

“No, I’m from Earth. I don’t know about the fated mate thing, but we *are* in our Claiming Period,” Nate said, remembering what Lan’ara had told him. “I mean, we’re just in the beginning of it, but—”

“Ah, then you *are* her fated mate.” The old man nodded his shiny bald head knowingly. “Good—then you can heal her. Come with me.”

And he turned and walked off into the woods.

“Wait—who are you?” Nate called after him. “I don’t even know you!”

The old man turned back for a moment.

“I am Teetsook,” he said, making a little bow. “And you are the fated mate of a Freelon—you must come with me.”

Then he turned away and continued making his way between the trees.

Nate stood frozen with indecision for a moment. Should he follow a stranger into a forest he didn’t know? Part of him shouted that it was a bad idea. But on the other hand, what else could he do? He couldn’t just stand here holding Lan’ara, and the walk back to the seaside resort where they were staying was at least half a day. Also, the old man seemed to know

some way to help or heal Lan'ara, though he wasn't being very upfront about what it was. He seemed to think that *Nate* could heal her somehow. But how?

Well, you're never going to find out how unless you follow him, whispered a little voice in his head.

Which seemed to be true.

"All right—hope I won't regret this," he muttered and set off, following the little man deeper into the silvery white forest of softly humming trees.

They walked for what felt like hours until they finally reached a small but cozy-looking cabin. It was made of the same silvery-white wood as the singing trees but the sides of it were covered in pale purple moss and it was thatched with dark blue straw. Golden light spilled from the windows, offering a homely glow in the middle of the woods.

It was starting to get dark and Nate's stomach was growling—they hadn't eaten all day. He hoped that he could get some food as well as some help for Lan'ara. She had stirred several times in his arms as he carried her through the forest, but she hadn't ever woken completely. At least she was still breathing deeply and evenly, though.

"Here is my domicile," the little bald man said, turning to him. "As the fated mate of a Freelon, allow me to invite you inside and offer you the hospitality and healing of my humble home."

"Uh, thanks." Nate nodded gratefully. As strong as he was, his arms were getting tired. He wanted to lay Lan'ara down and examine her more thoroughly to see if he could get her to wake up.

He climbed up the two steps and the old man held the wooden door open wide so he could step inside without hitting Lan'ara's head. Nate had to duck his own head to get past the door's frame, but once inside, he found that the ceiling opened up a little—though it was still only around six inches from the top of his head.

Like stepping into a fucking hobbit hole, he thought. But he was used to being too tall to fit in a lot of spaces.

The hut was small and he appeared to have stepped right into the kitchen and dining area, if the stove-looking thing in the corner and the crude wooden table and chairs was any indication. There was a pot of blue liquid bubbling slowly on the stovetop that gave off a sweet, nutty scent which made Nate's stomach growl again.

But he didn't have much time to look around because Teetsook was already beckoning him through a curtained archway into the room beyond.

"Come...come—you can lay her here on the sleeping platform," he said impatiently.

Nate ducked through the doorway, being careful of Lan'ara's head, and found himself in a surprisingly airy bedroom. In the corner, on a raised platform about five feet off the ground, was a puffy looking mattress with a colorful quilt. The cheerful red and orange and blue pattern was the brightest thing Nate had seen so far, on this world of muted pastels.

"Lay her there!" Teetsook demanded, pointing at the raised mattress again. "She will be safe until you can begin the healing."

"Begin the healing? How?" Nate demanded.

But the little old man only shook his head and indicated that he should lay Lan'ara down again.

Carefully, Nate did as he said. She moaned softly as he laid her on the puffy mattress and her eyelids fluttered but again, she didn't wake up.

"There now, there now," the old man crooned. "Such a lovely Freelon, too! You are very lucky to be the fated mate of such a one," he said to Nate. "Though I do not think you know so—how could you let her get so low? Why have you not fed her?"

"Fed her what?" Nate demanded in exasperation. "You think she fainted because of low blood sugar or something?"

Which was entirely possible, since neither of them had eaten since breakfast, which had been a buttery roll stuffed with some kind of soft, spreadable purple cheese. It had been delicious, but they had eaten hours ago. If Lan'ara really did have a blood sugar problem like hypoglycemia, it made sense that she would faint.

But Teetsook was shaking his bald head again.

“No, no—she is an Empath! A highly sensitive one—her needs are greater than those of us who feel less strongly,” he told Nate. “You need to feed her with your emotions. Put your hand against her cheek and *feel* at her—but only positive feelings, mind!” he added, as Nate tentatively cupped Lan'ara's cheek in his hand. “Don't go giving her negative thoughts and emotions—that will only make her worse!”

Nate wasn't sure what to make of this—it sounded crazy to him. Still, he was willing to do whatever he could to help the alien girl he was beginning to feel for so strongly. So he closed his eyes and did his best to send her positive feelings.

Unfortunately, all he could seem to think about was how worried he was about her and how hungry he was. He was a big guy and it took a lot of fuel to keep him going. Next time he was definitely going to insist they at least pack a snack if they were going on a trip, he decided. But what if they never got to go on any more trips because something was really wrong with Lan'ara? What if she never woke up from this faint she'd fallen into? What if it was some kind of a coma? What if—

Lan'ara stirred under his hand, her brow creasing in a look of pain as a moan was dragged from her throat.

“Stop it—stop that! What are you doing!” Teetsook grabbed at Nate's arm, pulling his hand away from Lan'ara's face. “I told you, only *positive* feelings! Why are you giving her pain instead of pleasure?”

“I'm sorry—I didn't fucking mean to!” Nate muttered. “I'm just so fucking worried about her! And I just—”

His stomach growled again, loudly this time.

“Ah...” Teetsook nodded wisely. “I see—you’re hungry. Well, why didn’t you say so? I never knew any male who could feed his female positive emotions on an empty stomach. Come—we’ll eat and then you can try again.”

The warm, nutty aroma coming from the other room made his stomach growl again, but Nate was reluctant to go.

“I don’t like leaving her here,” he protested. “What if she wakes up and rolls off the bed? It’s pretty high up, you know—she could hurt herself.”

“Don’t worry about that. Here.” Teetsook reached up and grabbed the side of the mattress that wasn’t against the wall. He molded and rolled it until he had made a kind of bumper down the side of it.

Nate frowned as he watched—the puffy mattress must be made of some weird alien material, he thought. It certainly wasn’t like any mattress he’d ever seen before.

“There!” the old man said, turning to Nate and putting his hands on his hips. “She’s perfectly safe—I would never allow any Freelon to come to harm in my abode. *Now* will you come and eat?”

Nate still didn’t like the idea of leaving Lan’ara alone, but he had to admit she was now safe from rolling off the bed and they were just going into the other room. Plus, he felt like his stomach was gnawing his backbone, as his grandpa would have said. So he nodded and followed Teetsook back into the kitchen area of the cabin.

“Now then—let’s get you seen to,” the old man said. Getting a crude wooden bowl out of a cabinet, he began ladling out scoops of the thick blue goop from the pot on the stove. He handed the full bowl to Nate along with a carved wooden spoon.

“Uh, thank you. What is it?” Nate dipped the spoon into the gluey blue mixture. It was slightly lumpy and looked kind of like melted blue crayons that still had some chunks of unmelted wax swimming in the mixture.

“Why, it’s Singing Tree nut stew of course,” the old man said. He had ladled out a smaller bowl of the blue goo for himself and now he sat beside Nate at the table and began to dig in. “Mmm-mm! Delicious, if I do say so myself!”

Since his host was eating so eagerly, Nate felt like it would be rude not to at least try the strange stew. Besides, as weird as it looked, it smelled really good—kind of like oatmeal cookies with toasted pecans in them, he thought. Also, he was so hungry at this point, he would have eaten almost anything.

He put a spoonful in his mouth and was surprised at the complex flavor. There was a hint of oatmeal flavor but also a sweet, nutty note finished with a slightly salty aftertaste, almost like buttered toast.

“Fuck—this is really good!” he remarked and went back for another spoonful—and then another and another. Before he knew it, the wooden bowl was empty and he had to stop himself from licking it like a dog to get the last traces of the blue nutty stew.

“Ah, I’m so glad you enjoyed my humble cooking.” Teetsook nodded and smiled at him. “Would you like some more?”

“I’d rather go back and see if I can help Lan’ara,” Nate told him. He’d taken the edge off the worst of his hunger and he was still extremely worried about her.

“Of course. The care of your mate must come first.” The old man smiled approvingly and rose from the table. “Come with me. But remember—you must feed her only *positive* emotions! So do your best to think happy thoughts when you touch her.”

“I’ll *try*,” Nate said doubtfully, as he followed Teetsook back into the bedroom area. Honestly, he didn’t have many positive thoughts in his head.

“Think of a positive memory—the fresher the memory the better. That can help as well,” the old man counseled him,

when Nate was standing beside the sleeping platform, about to cup Lan'ara's cheek again.

"Uh...okay." Nate frowned. Because of the way he'd lived his life for the past five years, he didn't have many positive memories to draw on either. Not any recent ones, anyway.

That's not true, whispered a little voice in his head. *What about the way Lan'ara held you last night?*

Well, that was certainly a positive memory. Cupping her soft cheek, he remembered her reaching out her arms to him and saying, "Can I hold you?" And then the softness of her breasts and the sweet, soothing way she carded her fingers through his hair...

"Good...good! She is stirring, see?" Teetsook said, nodding at her. "She is taking the nourishment you offer her."

Nate opened his eyes and saw that Lan'ara was indeed blinking her eyes and beginning to stir on the bed.

"More—give her more!" the old man ordered. "Concentrate—feed your mate what she needs!"

Desperately, Nate reached for more good memories. He thought of the way Lan'ara had lowered her gown to let him look at her lovely, full breasts...and then he remembered how beautiful she'd been in the shrine, when she pulled up her dress and let him watch her petting her soft little pussy until she came so hard...

God, he didn't know if this was the kind of "positive" emotions he ought to be sending her, but the memories of that morning were the best ones he had to work with.

Lan'ara moaned again and then her eyes fluttered all the way open.

"Oh, Nate," she murmured, reaching up to cover his hand with her own. "I feel your need for me."

"Hey, sweetheart—how are you?" Nate stroked her cheek and looked down at her anxiously. "Are you feeling any

better? You fainted in the woods—scared the ever-living fuck out of me!”

She smiled weakly.

“I’m fine. I was just hungry, that’s all.”

“I didn’t know I was supposed to be feeding you,” Nate said remorsefully. “I mean, with positive emotions. Teetsook here explained it to me.” He nodded at the old man who was watching Lan’ara alertly.

Her eyes widened when she saw him.

“Oh—are you a Forest Dweller?”

“That I am. And you are a Freelon—you are very welcome to my domicile, Honored One.” He bowed, his bald head bobbing with the gesture.

“He heard me calling for help after you fainted,” Nate explained. “He’s also the one who told me how to bring you back. I’m so glad you’re okay, sweetheart!”

Impulsively, he leaned down and kissed her gently on the cheek. The longer he was with her, the more strongly he felt for her. And she looked so lovely and helpless lying there, he just couldn’t help himself for going in for a second kiss.

Lan’ara seemed to feel the same way because, to his surprise, she turned her head so that his lips fell on her mouth instead of her cheek. Then she reached up and put her arms around his neck to pull him closer.

Nate was surprised but not at all displeased. In fact, the soft press of her lips made his whole body light up with desire. Forgetting they weren’t alone, he gathered her into his arms and kissed her more passionately, loving the sweet taste of her mouth.

This exchange seemed to heal Lan’ara even more than the positive thoughts and emotions he’d been trying to send her. She moaned and moved restlessly in his arms, tugging at him eagerly and deepening the kiss.

“Well, it’s clear the two of you need to be healing each other.”

The low, gruff voice surprised Nate so much he broke the kiss.

“Oh, uh sorry—that was rude,” he said, nodding at Teetsook. “Don’t know what came over me.”

“Yes, please forgive us,” Lan’ara said softly. “We didn’t mean to exchange private emotions so close to you, Forest Dweller.”

“There is nothing to forgive, Honored One.” Teetsook bowed to her again. “In fact, please accept the use of my humble abode. For tonight, I will sleep with the trees.”

“Oh, but we don’t want to kick you out of your own place!” Nate objected.

“No, no—all is well. I spend many nights among the Singing Trees,” Teetsook told them. He looked at Lan’ara. “Your fated mate told me that the two of you were in your Claiming Period. May I ask what part you are in?”

She blushed, her pale lavender cheeks going a deeper shade of purple.

“We have only just begun and are still in our Holding Time.”

“May I suggest that the two of you move on to the Touching Time?” Teetsook said. “Please feel free to use my sleeping platform and my collection of healing oils to do so.”

“Uh...what?” Nate wasn’t sure what was going on.

Lan’ara was blushing harder than ever.

“You are very kind, but we would not wish to impose in such a way.”

Teetsook pointed a stubby finger at her.

“Your energy is low, Honored One. You should not wait to take what you need from your mate—let him feed you and give you what you need tonight. I would be honored if you would bless my humble sleeping platform with your bliss.”

“Well...” At last Lan’ara nodded. “All right. We would be honored to accept your offer.”

“Good. I will leave whatever you may need on the table. And please help yourself to any food you want as well.” Teetsook bowed low and backed respectfully out of the doorway, almost as if Lan’ara was royalty, Nate thought.

“Uh, what was that all about?” he asked, looking at her. “Is he *asking* us to get busy in his bed? Isn’t that kind of strange?”

“He’s offering to let us bless his abode and his sleeping platform with our love,” Lan’ara said. “It’s not strange in my culture. And we will only be moving on to the next phase of our Claiming Period—the Touching Time.”

Nate could feel his cock starting to harden in the loose white trousers he wore.

“Is that the time when I get to touch you?” he asked, his voice coming out in a low, hungry growl. “I mean, with no clothes between us?”

Lan’ara looked up at him, her lovely purple eyes half-lidded.

“Tonight we may bare ourselves and hold each other naked all night long,” she told him. “But first I must do as the Forest Dweller recommended and make use of the healing oils. Come—help me off the sleeping platform.”

She put her hands on Nate’s shoulders and he lifted her down off the high bed and set her gently on the floor. They walked into the next room together to find that Teetsook had already gone. On the table were an array of items, including a box filled with stone vials plugged with carved wooden stoppers.

Lan’ara picked one of the vials out of the box and pulled out the stopper. Bringing it to her nose, she inhaled deeply and let out a long sigh of delight.

“Ah, warming pleasure oil! This will make for an excellent massage.”

Nate leaned down to sniff the vial and had to admit it smelled good. Kind of like cinnamon and some other spice he couldn’t name.

Lan'ara sniffed the other vials too and chose one more to bring with them. Then she looked up at Nate.

“All right—are you ready to begin?”

“Sure.” He shrugged. “But don't you want to eat first? Look—Teetsook left you some of the blue nut stew he made. It looks weird but it tastes really good.”

“Not now.” She shook her head. “Right now I'm more hungry for positive emotions and pleasure.”

“If you're sure you're not going to faint again.” Nate frowned. “I was worried that maybe you have low blood sugar? Do you have hypoglycemia or something like that?”

She shook her head.

“No, my metabolism is fine.”

“Then why did you faint?” Nate persisted. “Was it because I wasn't giving you enough positive emotions to, uh feed on?”

Lan'ara bit her lip and for a moment he had a feeling she wanted to tell him something. But then she nodded and said,

“Yes—that's it. I need positive emotions. Can you give them to me, Nate?”

“I'll do my best,” he said honestly. “I'm afraid I don't have a whole lot of happy memories to draw on though. Well, except for the ones you and I made recently,” he added.

Lan'ara smiled.

“That's all right—we'll make some happy memories tonight, during our first Touching Time. Come on.”

They went back into the bedroom area and Nate drew the curtain and turned down the lantern in the corner until it gave off a faint golden glow. Meanwhile, Lan'ara put the two stone vials of oil on a high table beside the sleeping platform. Then she turned to Nate.

“Help me up?”

“Sure.” He lifted her easily by the waist, helping her into the raised bed with its puffy mattress.

Lan’ara wasted no time in taking off her long white gown and laying it to one side. Nate felt a low growl of pure lust form in his throat as he watched the sway of her heavy breasts and tight nipples.

“God, sweetheart—you’re fucking gorgeous. You know that?” he murmured.

Lan’ara blushed prettily.

“I’m so glad my body pleases you. Yours pleases me as well.” She nodded pointedly at his white trousers and Nate realized she wanted him to take them off.

“Oh, uh, okay.” He untied the drawstring and quickly slipped out of them. His cock was already at half mast and he couldn’t wait to get into bed with her. He started to climb in but Lan’ara stopped him with one raised hand.

“Before we begin, I must remind you that this is only our Touching Time,” she said. “As much as we may wish to, I may not put my mouth on you—except to kiss your mouth—and you may not put yours on me. Those pleasures must be saved for the Tasting Time.”

Nate wanted to ask when they were going to get to the Tasting Time, then. He couldn’t help looking at her ripe nipples and remembering his dream of sucking the sweet amber liquid from her full breasts. But he didn’t want to be greedy—it was enough just to be able to touch her tonight.

“All right—I understand.” He nodded.

“Good, then come into the sleeping platform and let us begin the Healing Massage.”

Oh, so she wanted him to massage her? Well Nate certainly didn’t mind. He would be more than happy to run his hands all over her beautiful, bare body.

He climbed in bed with her and reached for one of the vials.

“All right, lay on your stomach, sweetheart,” he told her. “I’m going to make you feel good.”

But to his surprise, Lan’ara shook her head.

“Oh, I’m afraid you misunderstood me,” she said. “When a Kindred finds her fated mate, *she* must do the touching—at least during the very first part of the Touching Time.”

“Really?” Nate was surprised. “So...you don’t want me to massage you?”

“Not right now.” Lan’ara gave him a seductive smile. “First *I’m* going to massage *you*. Now do me a favor—lie on your stomach and spread your legs for me.”

TWENTY-SIX

LAN'ARA

Lan'ara could feel the surprise coming from her human, but he didn't hesitate. He simply nodded and lay down on his stomach—which was clearly a bit difficult for him, since he was lying on his erect shaft. He managed, however, and as soon as he was settled with his head turned to one side, Lan'ara straddled him and picked up the bottle of healing pleasure oil.

She poured some into her hands, inhaling the fragrant, faintly spicy aroma of *burra* berries and *tsiom* bark. The two ingredients worked together to loosen tight muscles and heal any tension and pain. They warmed the body and gave soothing delight when massaged into the skin.

Bending over Nate, she began to work the oil into his broad shoulders. They were tight with knots and she frowned as she worked.

“Why are your muscles so tense? Are you worried or upset?”

“No, not at all,” Nate denied. “Your little hands feel wonderful, sweetheart.”

It wasn't just her hands that she was planning to use on him tonight, but she didn't tell him that. Another thought occurred to her.

“How long did you carry me after I fainted?”

He shrugged.

“Don't know. An hour or two?”

Well, that explained the tension in his shoulders, Lan'ara thought. She was an Elite—a woman the Goddess had blessed with extra curves. The fact that Nate was strong enough to lift her—let alone carry her for hours, spoke of how strong he was.

“Thank you for bringing me to a safe haven,” Lan’ara murmured in his ear, pressing harder to get the knots of tension out of his shoulders and back.

He groaned in response to her touch.

“God, sweetheart! Feels fucking *amazing*.”

“It’s about to feel better,” Lan’ara promised him. Slowly she worked her way down his long body until she was massaging his muscular buttocks. She paused for a moment to get the other vial of oil. When she opened it, a soft, sweet, musky scent drifted out. She poured a little in her palm and rubbed it into her fingertips. Then she reached between his legs.

Nate tensed in obvious surprise and she could feel the uncertainty coming from him. Leaning forward, she murmured in his ear.

“Are you nervous to let me touch you intimately?”

“No—of course not,” he denied, though she could feel his tension. “You just, uh, surprised me—that’s all.”

“Don’t worry, just relax and let me give you pleasure,” Lan’ara told him. Gently, she stroked his heavy testicles from behind, waiting until he loosened up some and she felt his tension ease and give way to pleasure. She got a little more oil and teased lightly around his rosebud, but Nate didn’t seem quite ready for that level of intimacy yet.

“Uh...look, sweetheart, I’m not sure about this,” he muttered, stiffening up again. “I’ve, uh, never had a girl touch me there before.”

“It’s all right if you don’t want me to penetrate you,” Lan’ara told him. “We can save that for another time if you wish. Tonight I just want to give you pleasure and feel all your good emotions. Do you want to turn over now?”

Nate seemed more than happy to do so and she noticed that even though he had said he wasn’t sure about the way she’d been touching him earlier, his shaft didn’t seem to have any doubts. It was long and hard and throbbing between his thighs and she was eager to touch it.

But she made herself wait—first she wanted to rub his broad, muscular chest. She liked the soft mat of curls between his pecs and had been wanting to touch him there for some time.

Nate groaned softly as she worked her fingers into the muscles of his chest. Now that he was on his back and could get a good view of her bare breasts swaying as she worked on him, Lan'ara could feel his pleasure and desire surging. The positive emotions fed her own lust, making her breasts feel full and her nipples tight with desire.

She was well aware that she was almost certainly making the Healing Nectar now—absorbing so much of Nate's pain and fear that she fainted earlier would definitely have given her body the signal to begin. But she still hoped that if she kept him from sucking her nipples and gave him enough pleasure tonight, she might reverse the cycle.

“God, sweetheart, you're so beautiful,” he murmured as Lan'ara continued to massage him. “Your little hands feel so good on me.”

“But it's not only my hands I want to massage you with,” Lan'ara purred. Reaching for the vial of sensual oil, she poured some over her bare breasts and watched Nate's eyes widen and then go lazy with lust as he saw the slippery substance coat her full globes and cling to her nipples like amber jewels.

“So damn gorgeous,” he murmured, his eyes fixed on her breasts. “Reminds me of that dream I had last night.”

“What dream?” Lan'ara asked him, frowning. “Not the bad dream that woke you up?”

“No, of course not. Normally that's the only dream I ever remember. But this morning, just as I was waking up, I had another—a really memorable one,” he told her.

“Tell me about it,” Lan'ara urged. Had they been Dream-sharing the night before? Usually when a Kindred finally found her fated mate, the Dream-sharing ended, since it was

no longer needed to draw the two of them together. But there were always exceptions.

“Well...” Nate shifted under her. “It was a *little* weird.”

“That’s all right. Tell me,” Lan’ara urged him. The fact that he remembered any dream at all was a good thing, she thought. It might mean that he would eventually remember all the times they had Dream-shared together before she had finally found him.

“Well...like I said, it’s weird, but I dreamed you were kind of in this same position—straddling me, you know?”

Lan’ara nodded.

“And what did I do?”

“Well...” He shifted uncomfortably again. “You asked me if...if I was thirsty.”

“I did? And what did you say?” she asked.

“I said I was.” Nate shrugged. “And then you wanted me to, uh, to suck your nipples. And there was this sweet, kind of honey-like liquid you were making. I mean, your breasts were making it. And it tasted really good and made me feel really good when I drank it.”

“Oh!” Lan’ara sat back, feeling stunned.

Nate clearly misinterpreted her reaction.

“Hey, I’m sorry,” he said quickly. “It was just a dream. I mean, I’m not into that kind of thing—like milk play or lactation porn or anything fucking weird like that. I just—”

“No, no,” Lan’ara interrupted him. “Please, Nate—don’t misunderstand me. I’m not upset—just surprised.”

“Because I had a perverted dream?” He frowned. “I have news for you, sweetheart—I’m a guy—a red-blooded human man. That kind of thing happens with us.”

“It wasn’t perverted,” Lan’ara told him. “I believe...” She cleared her throat. “I believe it was *prophetic*.”

“Prophetic? You mean you think I was dreaming about something that’s actually going to happen?” Nate shook his head. “But how?”

“It won’t happen tonight,” Lan’ara told him. “So please don’t worry about it.”

“Worry about it? It was one of the hottest dreams I’ve ever had in my life,” he admitted in a low voice. “And just now, watching you with the oil dripping off your ripe nipples...I guess that’s what brought it back.”

“I’m glad you shared your dream with me,” Lan’ara told him honestly. “Whether your dreams are good or bad, I always want you to share them with me, Nate.”

“But...you really think it’s going to happen? Er—do you make a special kind of milk or honey or something?” he asked, furrowing his brow.

Lan’ara shook her head.

“I may not speak of it until it happens,” she told him.

But now that she was certain it *would* happen—that she would make the Healing Nectar and give it to him to suck from her breasts—she felt a sense of calm inside her. She knew it would drain most of her strength and that her mentor wouldn’t approve. But who can argue with destiny? She and Nate were on a journey together and only the Goddess knew where the path they chose to travel might lead them.

“Lan’ara—” Nate began, but she shook her head.

“No more talking.” Pouring more of the oil over herself, she used her hands to spread it all over her breasts and then down her belly to her sex. The cool oil turned warm when it touched her sensitive inner folds, making her gasp and moan softly. Then she lowered herself onto Nate and began to rub her breasts against his broad, bare chest.

“God, sweetheart!” he groaned as she pressed her full mounds against him. “I know you said no more talking but that feels so damn good!”

Lan'ara didn't answer, but she did scoot down some until she felt the hard length of his shaft pressing against the slit of her outer pussy lips. Working her hips, she rubbed against him until she felt his thickness parting her and slipping partly into her wet folds.

Nate froze for a moment under her.

“Uh, sweetheart—this could get out of hand really fucking fast,” he growled and Lan'ara could feel his lust for her intensifying ten-fold. “I thought we weren't supposed to fuck yet?”

“We're not,” Lan'ara promised breathlessly. “I'm just massaging you. It's a very intimate massage but we won't go past the boundaries of the Touching Time—I won't actually let you penetrate me. I'm just going to rub against you.”

“Oh, well...in that case.” Nate's big body came to life under hers as he rocked his hips up, thrusting his long shaft against her inner pussy.

Lan'ara moaned and lifted to a sitting position so she could deepen the contact. Spreading her legs wider, she reached between her thighs and deliberately parted her outer pussy lips even more to allow his thickness to slip deeper into her folds. Then, bracing her hands on his hard abdomen, she began sliding up and down his thick length.

Nate watched her with half-lidded eyes.

“God, *yes*, sweetheart,” he growled hoarsely. “Work that sweet little pussy on my cock—ride me! Love to watch you slide up and down my shaft.”

Lan'ara moaned with pleasure. It wasn't just the intense feeling of rubbing her swollen clit against his hard cock that was fueling her desire—it was the extremely positive and possessive emotions she could feel coming from Nate. The Forest Dweller had been right—this was exactly what she needed!

She rubbed harder, her breasts swaying with the motion and she had the urge to lean down and let Nate suck her nipples—suck the nectar she could feel building inside.

But something stopped her. She needed to wait and try to fuel herself with as many positive emotions as she could before she gave him the Healing Nectar. And she had to save it for a time when he really needed it—another panic attack or bad dream, perhaps. For now, both of them were in a good emotional space and he didn't need the Healing Nectar—so no matter how tempted she was to offer him her nipples, Lan'ara forced herself to refrain. It was only their Touching Time, after all—she would stick to the rules.

Then Nate gripped her hips and suddenly flipped them, changing their positions so that he was on top. The move surprised Lan'ara so much it drove her desire to give him the nectar early out of her head entirely.

“Oh, Nate!” she gasped, looking up at him. “What—”

“Just relax, sweetheart,” he growled softly. “I know you're not ready to have me in you yet—I promise I won't go too far. But I need you to open up and let me rub against you some. I love having you on top of me, but I need room to *move*.”

Lan'ara felt frightened for a moment—the Claiming Period had a certain order which must be followed. If the laws were violated, she might lose her mate! But when she reached out with her sixth sense, she felt Nate's honest sincerity. He really wasn't going to go too far—he just needed to be on top for a while. She could feel his possessive lust, his desire to grind against her until she came under him—his primal need to possess her completely *melted* her.

“Yes, Nate,” she moaned, letting her thighs drift apart. “Yes, do it—take me—make me come!”

Her words seemed to set the big human on fire. With a low growl, he gripped her thighs in his big hands and thrust down with his hips, rubbing the hard ridge of his cock into her soft inner folds.

Lan'ara threw back her head and gasped as he thrust against her aching Goddess pearl. Oh Gods, that felt so *good*! And she found she liked being beneath him, opening herself to his pleasure and need.

“Nate!” she moaned as he did it again...and again and again. “Oh Goddess, please—I’m getting so close!”

“I’m getting close too, sweetheart,” he growled, still rubbing fiercely against her. “You want me to, uh—”

“Shoot your cream on my belly—and my open pussy,” Lan’ara moaned. “I want to feel it inside me, even if I can’t feel your shaft in me yet!”

Her words seemed to make him even hotter because he redoubled his efforts, gripping her hips and grinding against her until Lan’ara’s orgasm was almost *forced* out of her!

“Oh! Oh, Nate! Yes, *yes!*” she gasped, her back arching as the pleasure rolled through her. Her nipples were so tight they hurt and every muscle in her body was tense with the intense release. But she still needed more—she needed to feel Nate’s pleasure too. “Oh please—come for me now! Come *with* me—I need your cream all over me!” she moaned.

“God, sweetheart—can’t help it!” His deep voice was hoarse and she felt his intense pleasure as he finally began to come.

Lan’ara had heard that human males didn’t make much seed, but Nate must have been the exception. Rope after pearly rope of his cream coated her belly. And then he drew back and aimed the broad crown of his cock directly at her open pussy.

“Yes—come in me!” Lan’ara begged him. Spreading her outer lips wide with her fingers, she opened herself completely for the last few creamy spurts that landed on her aching clit and then directly in the mouth of her pussy.

The feeling of Nate’s orgasm rolling through him as he came on and in her caused her own body to reach the peak again. She moaned breathlessly, her back arching helplessly as her inner muscles clenched and contracted, doing their best to draw his cream deeper into her body.

Nate collapsed beside her, panting, his broad chest heaving for breath. Lan’ara was also trying to catch her breath—she’d never come so hard in her life! Even better, she was now full of positive emotions. Even if Nate had another

terrible dream again tonight, she was certain it wouldn't deplete her emotional reservoir.

For a long time they just lay there, catching their breath.

"That was the hottest non-sex sex I've ever fucking had," Nate growled at last. "But I don't know if I should have done that."

"Done what?" Lan'ara turned her head to meet his eyes.

"Shot inside you like that." He nodded down to where her pussy was still swimming in his cream. "I mean, I know we didn't actually, you know, fuck, but if my cum gets too far inside you, you could still get pregnant."

"No, I can't." Lan'ara shook her head confidently. "Until you Claim me completely and you and I form a Soul Bond, you can't get me pregnant."

"I can't?" He looked surprised. "Even though I shot so much cum in your soft little pussy?"

"Not even if I do *this*..." Lan'ara reached between her legs and pressed two fingers inside herself, deliberately pushing his cream deeper into her pussy.

Nate's eyes widened and then went half-lidded.

"God, sweetheart—fucking love to watch you touch yourself!"

"I'm just spreading your seed inside me," Lan'ara said innocently. "My pussy was thirsty for a drink of your cream. Perhaps you'd like to give her another drink soon?"

"I'd love to sweetheart, but you've got to give me a chance to recover," Nate told her. "I'm not a kid anymore, I'm afraid. I need a few minutes to—hey!"

His exclamation of surprise was due to the fact that Lan'ara had reached between his thighs and started stroking his shaft. Almost at once, it began to rise to her touch and came back to full, throbbing hardness.

Nate looked at her in wonder.

"How did you do that?"

“It is a gift the Goddess has given her Kindred daughters—we are able to bring our fated mates back to readiness with a touch in order to give each other more pleasure,” Lan’ara murmured. “Does it please you?”

“Fuck yes, it pleases me!”

Nate rolled over and pulled her closer for a long, searching kiss. When he pulled back, Lan’ara could see the desire in his eyes...and feel his renewed lust blazing through him like a wildfire.

“Let’s see if we can give that thirsty little pussy another drink of my cum, sweetheart,” he growled. “What do you say?”

“I say ‘yes,’” Lan’ara breathed.

She pulled him in for another kiss and they started again...

TWENTY-SEVEN

DAVRIK

“Go on, pick anything you want. Don’t be shy,” Davrik urged as Sonya perused the menu at the upscale restaurant which was located inside the same building that housed The House of a Thousand Flowers.

There were several such establishments as well as many different shops, a spa, an entertainment center, and a Zero-G swimming facility complete with an indoor beach, all located in the same skyscraper. That way the clients could take their favorite ‘flowers’ out on dates without ever having to leave the watchful eye of the security crew.

Davrik had always loved taking his baby girl out to dinner and afterwards they often went shopping. His Sonya had loved “retail therapy”—as she called it—and while he knew many human males despised shopping with their mates, he actually enjoyed it. He loved watching her try on different outfits and seeing the joy on her face when she found just the right one.

Likewise, he enjoyed watching her try new and different foods. But tonight, she seemed indecisive.

“Really—anything you want,” he urged her.

Sonya shook her head as she perused the holo menu hovering in front of her face.

“I just...can’t decide. I mean, I’ll be honest—I can’t read the menu.” She looked up at him with a shrug. “The slaver gave us all a shot of some nasty green stuff that made us able to understand alien languages, but it didn’t enable us to read them. So this menu is literally Greek to me.”

Davrik wished that he’d thought to bring a Translation Bacteria pill with him, but in his eagerness to see Sonya it had slipped his mind. He had some back in his ship of course—every Kindred long-range shuttle was equipped with them—but he didn’t want to leave her side long enough to go get one.

The damn proximity and intimacy bracelet might start going off and burn her again! Or another male might try to harm her.

Plus a part of him was afraid that if he even blinked his eyes, she might disappear. After years of being without her, having Sonya in his life again—even if she wasn't "his" Sonya—was the best feeling in the world. It was like he'd been holding his breath for the past five years and finally he could *breathe* again.

"Do you trust me?" he asked, waving away the menu, which immediately disappeared when his fingers passed through its light display.

Sonya looked up at him shyly and he knew the answer. She didn't completely trust him—not yet—but she was learning to. Last night—their first night together—had been a huge stepping stone on that journey.

Davrik had known she would expect him to touch her sexually when he got her ready for bed. But he also knew she wasn't ready for that—she might not be ready for a long, *long* time. He didn't know what kind of trauma she'd endured and until he did—until she felt safe enough to tell him—he wasn't going to rush things.

So he had taken things slowly. Sonya had told him that she'd already had a shower earlier that day, so he didn't insist on bathing her. Instead, he simply helped her out of her dress and put her quickly into a lovely but modest nightgown which he had chosen from among her clothes.

Choosing his baby girl's outfits both for bed and everyday wear, had always been one of Davrik's joys. Sonya had always claimed that he had a fashion sense better than any designer and she trusted him to dress her every day. She was always getting compliments from colleagues at work about her good taste in clothing.

With his own Sonya, Davrik had often chosen daring or revealing clothing for her to sleep in because she loved showing her body off to him and he loved taking the clothes off her, kissing and tasting her thoroughly, and making love to her slowly afterwards. However, the choice of a modest

nightgown that covered this new Sonya from her neck to her toes had been deliberate on his part.

She wasn't ready to show him herself yet—wasn't ready to let him take her or taste her. And that was all right—she was worth waiting for. After all, he'd been waiting five long years to see her again—he could take some time to make her comfortable now, Davrik thought.

So he had chosen a modest nightgown and slipped it on her quickly. And though he had spent the night in her bed, he hadn't yet touched her sexually. In fact, the two of them had slept back-to-back. In that way she could maintain a close proximity to him, which kept the damn bracelet from burning her, without feeling like she had to service him or have any kind of sexual contact with a male she barely knew.

It also gave his Bonding Scent time to work on her. Davrik well remembered that his own Sonya had been hesitant with him at first until his scent had broken down her defenses. She'd been especially uncertain about their extreme height and size difference.

“I feel like a little kid around you!” she'd complained on one of their first dates.

“Is that so bad?” Davrik had swept her into his arms and swung her around, surprising a laugh out of her.

“Put me down! I'm a grown-ass woman!” she'd protested, still laughing. “I have a job...a life...responsibilities...”

“Haven't you ever wanted to put those aside for a little while?” he'd asked her. “And just let someone else take care of you? Someone who knows you, who cares about you and wants your happiness more than his own?”

She'd looked up at him quizzically.

“Do I know someone like that?”

“You do now.” Davrik had leaned in to kiss her possessively and after a moment she had given a little moan and kissed him back.

It had been the start of their D/s relationship—though neither of them had known it at the time. A relationship where Davrik took care of his mate in every aspect of her life. Not in a controlling way, but with gentle dominance and occasional punishment like spankings which—to be honest—turned then both on. From the moment he'd met Sonya, he had just wanted to take care of her. To love her and protect her and make her feel good in any and every way he could.

He felt the same way for this Sonya, so when she tentatively nodded to indicate she was willing to trust him with her choice for Last Meal, his heart soared.

Calling over a waiter, he dictated a complicated list of demands, telling exactly what ingredients to use and exactly how to prepare them. Then, when he was certain the waiter had gotten everything exactly right, he sent him away and sat back with a smile.

“Whew...you certainly seem to know how to order,” Sonya remarked, giving him a look of surprised respect.

“I know the cuisine and ingredients and how to make them into something familiar—I hope,” he told her.

“Well, now I'm *really* intrigued.” She smiled across the table at him—a genuine smile, that actually reached her beautiful brown eyes. “I've really enjoyed today, you know,” she added. “I've never had a, uh, client take me out like this.” She made a face. “They mostly just want to hear me sing while they suck my toes.”

“While they *what*?” Davrik frowned.

“Oh, sorry.” She looked abashed. “I shouldn't have said that.”

“Why not?” he asked.

“Well...because the number one rule around here is never talk about another client in front of your current client,” she explained. “So I shouldn't have said anything at all.”

“No, please...” Davrik reached across the table and put a hand over hers. “Please, I want to hear anything you want to tell me. And if some other male has hurt or abused you, just

point him out to me,” he added, a low protective growl creeping into his voice.

“No, no—you don’t have to do that—you don’t have to try and avenge me or anything,” she protested quickly. “Honestly, I haven’t been here that long—the toe sucking is the worst thing I’ve had to put up with so far.”

“Really?” Davrik felt a tiny, hopeful spark of relief. “I was afraid...I mean, considering the kind of place this is—”

“If you really want to know about my other clients, I’ll tell you,” she said candidly. “Most of them just want me to sing or hum to them. I mean, some of the requests are pretty bizarre, but I haven’t had to do anything really, er, *sexual* yet.”

Davrik felt a full-fledged burst of relief this time, which he couldn’t keep off his face.

“Goddess be praised!” he muttered. “I’m so fucking thankful you were spared, baby girl.”

Sonya frowned.

“Why do you care so much? If you’re hoping I’m a virgin, I’m sorry to tell you I’m *not*.”

“No, no—it has nothing to do with wanting to be ‘first’ to stake a claim on your body or anything ridiculous like that,” Davrik tried to explain. “I’m just grateful you haven’t been abused or molested or hurt.”

“Well, give it time,” she said dryly. “After all, look where we are.” She nodded around the opulent dining room with its thick carpets, immaculate white linen, and shimmering chandeliers. “Not a single girl here is free to leave at the end of the night. And I’m not free either,” she added. “I’m stuck here until the clients get tired of me or I lose my voice or get too old to look good singing in the lounge, I guess.”

She sounded so unhappy that Davrik’s heart ached for her. He wished he could promise her freedom—he wanted to swear that he would take her away from all this and she would never have to service another client again. But he hadn’t yet worked out how to go about that.

He could ask the Sluggorn manager about buying her again, but last time the male had been extremely resistant to the idea. Perhaps he could be talked into it, for the right amount of money. In the meantime, Davrik just wanted to enjoy spending time with this new Sonya, who he was already having protective and possessive feelings for.

“I’m just glad none of the males you’ve been forced to spend time yet have hurt you,” he told her.

“There was *one* guy...” she began, and then trailed off.

Davrik felt a possessive growl rise in his throat.

“Who was it? Did he hurt you?” he demanded.

“No. He just...watched me. Just looked at me. But it was the *way* he looked at me—like he couldn’t decide if he wanted to eat me or...or fuck me. Pardon my language,” she added but Davrik could tell whoever she was talking about had really shaken her up.

“Who was it?” he asked again, frowning. “Who made you so uncomfortable, baby girl?”

“That awful Trollox who was staring at me in the lounge yesterday,” Sonya admitted. “‘Sir Grox’ is what we’re supposed to call him. He...he made me take off all my clothes and...and show myself to him.” Her voice had dropped almost to a whisper and there was a haunted, hunted look in her lovely brown eyes that squeezed his heart and made his protective instincts rage at the same time.

“That bastard is never getting anywhere near you again, baby girl,” he promised. “*Never!*”

But Sonya shook her head sadly.

“You can’t say that. You’ve only got me for a week and after that, I’m afraid *he’s* going to want me again. And there’s nothing I can do about it.”

“I’m not going to let anyone hurt you—least of all that fucking Trollox,” Davrik insisted. He could feel the Rage building in him—the protective fury all Kindred males feel

when their female is threatened. “You have to trust me, Sonya. I’m never going to let anyone hurt you again. I *swear* it.”

She seemed taken aback at the intensity of his oath.

“I believe you really mean that,” she said, giving him a look of wide-eyed wonder. “Tell me something, Sir Davrik—why do you care about me so much? Why do you give a damn what happens to me?”

“Because you’re *special*.” Davrik leaned across the table, holding her gaze with his. “Because from the first moment I saw you and heard your voice, I knew I *had* to have you, baby girl. You’re *mine* and I’m never going to let another male touch you again!”

“But...you just met me yesterday,” she protested, sounding rather breathless.

“And yet I feel like I’ve known you for years,” Davrik told her softly, trying to moderate his tone. “I know you don’t feel anything for me—not yet. But I hope to change that. I want to show you that I can protect you and provide for you and take care of you, baby girl.”

Sonya looked at him, wide-eyed, and he could tell she didn’t know what to say. But just then, the waiter came back carrying a platter with a golden dome over it. He sat it down in front of Sonya and drew off the dome with a flourish. When the steam cleared, she gave a little gasp and clapped her hands in delight.

“Oh my God! A cheeseburger! I haven’t had one of these for *years*—not since the Scourge invaded! How in the world did you get them to make something like this?”

“It’s all in giving precise instructions,” Davrik told her. “Try it—see if it’s anything like what you remember.”

Sonya picked up the steaming burger and took a tentative nibble. A moment later her eyes rolled up in pleasure and she took a larger bite.

Davrik felt a glow of satisfaction. Clearly the cheeseburger was a success. This had always been one of his

Sonya's favorite foods and it was clear that this new Sonya felt the same way.

"Oh, that was *so* good," she sighed after eating most of the burger. "It tasted like a little piece of home." Suddenly her eyes were glistening with tears.

Davrik looked at her with concern.

"Are you all right, baby girl?" he murmured.

"Sorry." She sniffed and blotted her eyes with her gold linen napkin. "I didn't mean to get emotional. It just reminded me of home and I miss it *so much*. Not the way it is now, you know—the Scourge have completely spoiled and ruined and polluted just about everything. But the way it *was*. Back before they came. Back when my Mom and my Granny and the rest of my family were still alive." She sniffed again.

"How did you lose them?" Davrik asked gently. His own Sonya's family were all still alive—except for her father who had died when she was very young. He still kept in touch with them, though he didn't go to see them often. It was too painful to watch them together and remember how Sonya's face used to light up when she was with her cousins and aunts and uncles with the younger generation of children running and playing and laughing.

"They died in the first invasion," Sonya said quietly. "The one nobody saw coming. Billions and billions spent on our defense department and not a single satellite detected those bastards before they started bombing the shit out of us with their disintegration detonators." She sighed and rubbed her temples tiredly. "I was out of the house that day—teaching at USF, you know? When the bombing started, we all ran to the lower levels and hid. When it was finally safe, I made my way home. It took me nearly three days because by that time all the roads were blocked. So I had to walk all the way and hide at night."

"You must have been terrified," Davrik said softly.

"I was." She nodded. "But I was sure if I could just get home, everything would be okay. Everyone had been gathered

at my Mom's house for a barbecue. I was the only one who had to miss it because I was teaching that damn class. But when I finally got there..." She paused and shook her head. "Never mind."

"What happened when you got home? Tell me," Davrik urged gently. He had a feeling that she needed to talk about this—that it had been festering inside her for a long, *long* time and she just needed someone to listen.

Sonya took a deep breath.

"When I finally got home, I found...nothing. Just a big hole in the ground where my Mom's house had been. The Scourge must have dropped a bomb right on it—vaporized everything and everyone inside instantly." She shook her head. "I try to tell myself at least they didn't suffer—probably didn't even feel a thing. But that's cold comfort when I miss them all so much and I'm all alone."

"Oh, baby girl—I'm so damn sorry." Davrik had the urge to gather her into his arms and cradle her and just let her cry as he had sometimes with his own Sonya. But they were in a public restaurant and he didn't know how this new Sonya would react. His mate had always been a private person when it came to sadness or grieving—she wasn't one to break down in public.

"No, I'm the one who should be sorry." Sonya sniffed and blotted her eyes again. Then she straightened her shoulders determinedly. "You're my client—I'm supposed to be entertaining you. And I'm sure hearing about my tragic past is *not* very entertaining at all."

"You're more than just 'entertainment'," Davrik told her fiercely. "You're more than just your beautiful voice or your gorgeous looks or your witty jokes." Reaching across the table, he squeezed her hand and looked into her eyes. "I want *all* of you, Sonya. The pain as well as the pleasure. The bad as well as the good. All of it—all of you. *Forever.*"

He hadn't meant to declare himself so soon and even as he said the words, Davrik knew he might be making a mistake. But he'd never been good about holding back his emotions—

not when it came to the only woman in the universe—no, the *multiverse*—that he wanted for his mate. Sonya was more than just the woman he loved—she was his reason for being. And he couldn't stop himself from letting her know how he felt.

“Oh...” Sonya looked up at him uncertainly. She didn't seem to know what to say but she didn't pull her hand away. They stared into each other's eyes for a long moment that seemed to stretch like a thread of warm honey between them.

Just as Davrik was about to get up and sweep her into his arms to take her back to her room where he could have her all to himself, the waiter came back with the dessert cart.

It was a welcome interruption for a situation that had gotten extremely intense. He urged Sonya to order anything she liked—he knew his baby girl had a sweet tooth and he wanted her to get what she wanted. After all, she had to eat enough to keep those luscious full curves of hers and remain an Elite.

But even as Sonya nibbled her *Prandian* cream pavlova, he couldn't help imagining holding her in his arms and making her completely his by Claiming her all over again.

TWENTY-EIGHT

SONYA

Was it weird that she was starting to have feelings for her VIP client?

Sonya wasn't sure exactly *what* she was feeling but it was definitely something. The words, "swept off her feet" came to mind. And not just because Davrik was so passionate and possessive either—it was the way he treated her that made Sonya weak in the knees.

For instance, the night before, instead of using her for his own pleasure as she had expected, the big Kindred had been a perfect gentleman. He had chosen her nightdress and put it on her, but then he had suggested sleeping back-to-back so that the proximity sensors in the damn bracelet she wore wouldn't go off and cause it to burn her.

They had started out back-to-back, anyway. But when she woke, Sonya found she had turned in the night and was draped against his broad, muscular back with one leg thrown over his thigh.

Her first panicked impulse had been to get away from him quickly—so he didn't get the wrong idea—but then she'd realized from his slow, steady breathing that he was still sleeping. Since that was the case, she'd decided to stay where she was—just for a little while. He smelled so good—that warm cedar and spice scent again—and besides, it was nice to be close to someone.

Sonya was an extremely affectionate person—she loved hugs and kisses and backrubs and having someone play with her hair or hold her hand. Ever since the Scourge had invaded, killing her whole family in one fell swoop, she'd been alone with no one to hug or comfort her. Sometimes she felt like a part of her was starving for simple physical affection.

But the longer she lay there, draped across the big Kindred and breathing in his warm scent, the less she thought

about simply physical affection and the more she thought about, well...something more.

First of all, she started wondering what it would be like to get busy with such a big guy—Davrik was nearly twice her size. How would something like that even work?

That thought led to her trying to picture the act...but what she mainly ended up picturing was the big Kindred going down on her or “tasting” her as he put it. She’d never been with a man who was any good at that, but somehow she thought Davrik would be excellent at it. She could just imagine his broad shoulders splitting her thighs as he dipped his head to lap her pussy. His tongue would be warm and wet and he would probably put those long fingers inside her while he did it...

Stop it, Sonya—what’s wrong with you, thinking like that? she’d scolded herself. He’s a client—he bought and paid for you. You have no say in any of this and there’s nothing sexy about it!

But despite lecturing herself about how she shouldn’t fantasize about her VIP client, Sonya couldn’t seem to stop it. And she hadn’t been able to make herself move away from the big Kindred until at last, some time later, she felt him stirring.

Davrik hadn’t said anything about her being draped all over him, so she assumed he didn’t know. But that hour she’d spent pressed against his broad back and breathing in his warm, addictive scent had somehow affected her, and made her want to know him better and get closer to him.

Which was just as well, since the moment he woke up, Davrik immediately took charge of everything. He had ordered them breakfast and though he hadn’t asked what Sonya wanted, he somehow seemed to know all of her favorites. Then, after they ate, he had chosen her outfit and gotten her dressed—sliding the dress over her head and fastening the back without being asked. He had even done her hair—which was something no man had ever even *attempted* before.

Because Sonya’s dad had been white and her mom had been black, she had “mixed girl hair” which could be delicate

and difficult to deal with. If it was conditioned properly and treated with the right products, it fell in long, natural ringlets down to the small of her back.

Back home, before the invasion, she'd used a product called *Miss Jessie's Coily Custard*. But finding the right hair care millions of light years from home was difficult—if not downright impossible. Sonya had been trying different things since she had been sold to The House of a Thousand Flowers, but she still hadn't found the exact right combination of ingredients yet.

Davrik, however, had somehow known about her difficulty and also just how to treat her hair. He had remarked that he understood how hard it must be for her to get what she needed and promised to find her products that would work with her hair type. Then he had coaxed her curls into a fashionable chignon at the back of her neck which had both surprised and pleased her.

Afterwards, he had taken her on a “date” to the Zero G swimming area which was basically just a huge vertical space where you could float around for fun. They had held hands and pushed off the walls, doing slow-motion flips and somersaults and laughing when they got turned around or upside down.

After that, Davrik had insisted on taking her shopping.

“Anything your heart desires, baby girl,” he'd told her generously. “Whatever you want—it's yours.”

Sonya had always loved to shop and once she realized he wasn't kidding, she'd allowed herself to indulge a bit. She hadn't really been shopping for over five years since the invasion—not if you didn't count scrounging for food in abandoned grocery stores while keeping one eye out for the Scourge patrols who were always trying to round up more humans to sell to the slavers.

So once more indulging in retail therapy made her incredibly happy. She didn't even care that she was shopping on an alien world and most of the clothes weren't meant for humans—she'd found a few nice dresses in her size and then

Davrik had insisted on buying her some beautiful jewelry and hair ornaments to go with them.

“I want you to wear this when you’re singing in the Lounge tonight,” he’d murmured, fixing a gorgeous blue and gold ornament into her hair that matched one of the gowns. “You’re going to look so beautiful I won’t be able to take my eyes off you for the whole set.”

“Oh...you’re going to come hear me sing again?” Sonya had asked, slightly surprised.

“Of course.” He had cupped her cheek in one big, warm hand and looked down into her eyes. “I never want to miss a chance to hear your beautiful voice again, baby girl.”

True to his word, he had come to listen, sitting right up front where Sonya could reach down and touch his hand every once in a while, which kept the bracelet she wore from burning her. He had even requested some very specific songs which no one who didn’t have a thorough knowledge of Earth jazz and blues music would know. Sonya sang them, putting on a show that was mainly just for him. In fact, she barely even noticed the Trollox, Sir Grox, sitting at a table in the corner of the room and scowling at her through her entire act.

Better be careful, Sonya, whispered a little voice in her head when she glanced up once and saw the Trollox shooting her a glare that would certainly have been deadly if looks could kill. There was an ugly mixture of jealousy and fury on the lumpy features of all three heads and all seven yellow eyes were narrowed in fury. *You’d better watch out. This week Sir Davrik has you but next week he’ll be gone and Sir Grox might be your VIP client!*

Somehow, she was sure that if the huge Trollox paid for the Supreme Treatment package, he would use it to the fullest. But there was nothing she could do about it, Sonya told herself. Nothing but keep singing and finish her set. Besides, she had to concentrate on one client at a time and right now, the big Kindred was the one who, for all intents and purposes, owned her, body and soul. Also, he was much more pleasant to

be with than the horrible Grox, who reminded her of her childhood nightmare.

So Sonya just kept singing and after her set, Davrik had swept her off the stage and carried her away in his arms, which left her quite breathless.

“Oh!” she had gasped, as he lifted her as easily as if she weighed nothing at all—which was definitely *not* the case. “What are you doing?”

“Taking you to Last Meal—what you humans call ‘dinner’ or ‘supper’,” he’d rumbled, smiling at her. “I made reservations at La Travola—the most high-end restaurant in this place.”

“La Travola? But that’s so expensive!” Sonya had exclaimed. She’d expected that he would put her down once they were out of the lounge, but the big Kindred kept on striding along, holding her in his arms bridal style.

“Well, I thought such a beautiful performance deserved a celebration,” Davrik told her. “And I think they have something you might like to eat there.”

And then he had surprised her by somehow getting the chefs to make her a cheeseburger. He’d listened to her story of how she lost her family and expressed real grief for her—not only that, he’d told her that he wanted *all* of her—the pleasure *and* the pain. And he seemed to actually mean it. Sonya felt like she’d died and gone to heaven...that is until Oozle slimed his way up to their table.

“Hello there,” he burred, his antennae directed at Davrik. “I thought I’d check and see how your Supreme Treatment experience is going so far?”

“It’s excellent—I have no complaints where Sonya is concerned,” the big Kindred said. “But I *do* object to that damn bracelet you’re making her wear.” He nodded at the proximity bracelet still around Sonya’s wrist. “It burns her if I don’t touch her every fifteen minutes or so! It’s completely inhumane and I want it removed at once!”

“Ahh, I am afraid that the proximity bracelet is part of the VIP package you paid for, Mr. Davrik,” Oozle protested. “However, I will be taking it off of her—at least for several hours tonight.”

“You will? Good!” Sonya felt a burst of relief. Not that she minded being close to Davrik—she was actually coming to really like the big Kindred, though she was a little wary about the intensity of the emotion he expressed for her. But it would be nice not to worry whenever she was away from him for any length of time because she was afraid of getting burned again.

But Oozle’s next words erased her relief and filled her with dread.

“I’ll be taking it off only because you have another client.”

“What?” Davrik exclaimed. “What are you talking about?”

“Now, Mr. Davrik—we spoke about this when you paid for your week with our lovely Sonya,” Oozle burred. “I told you that some of her time was already spoken for and you agreed to release her to the client who had already paid for her time.”

“I didn’t realize you were going to come interrupt our meal!” Davrik growled. “This is outrageous! I refuse to release Sonya until she’s finished eating!”

“Actually, I’m finished now,” Sonya said in a small voice. There were still a few bites of her rich dessert left, but she found that she’d completely lost her appetite. “It’s all right,” she told Davrik, trying to make herself believe her own words. “It’s probably just a client who wants me to sing to him.”

“Your client is a Xeba-shla gentleman—they have three large ears which they enjoy having aurally stimulated through song,” Oozle agreed. He looked at Davrik. “I’ll just take her along with me, shall I? You can return to her room in two solar hours and have the rest of your week with our lovely flower uninterrupted.”

Davrik was clearly still fuming—his eyes were narrowed and his lips were a thin line. Sonya remembered the way he had claimed her, telling her that she was his. Clearly he wasn't a man who liked sharing. Not that she *wanted* to be shared—she would much rather spend all of her time with the big Kindred who seemed to care for her so deeply, though she couldn't understand why. But it wouldn't kill her to give a private solo concert for a three-eared alien for a couple of hours.

"It'll be all right," she told Davrik. "I'll see you soon, I promise."

"You shouldn't have to do this," he growled, his pale eyes flashing.

Sonya shrugged uneasily.

"This is my life." She couldn't really say much more in front of Oozle unless she wanted to be sent to The Box—which she definitely did *not*.

She rose from her seat and, to her surprise, Davrik rose as well. He came around the table and knelt down on one knee so that they were eye-to-eye. Then he enfolded Sonya in an embrace, drawing her close to his broad chest.

"Mr. Davrik, I really must insist—" Oozle began.

"A moment—give me a moment," Davrik told him. Then he pulled Sonya closer and murmured in her ear, "It won't always be like this, baby girl. I'm going to get you out of here and away from this life as soon as I can—I swear it."

For a moment, Sonya allowed herself to hug him back. Pressing her face to the side of his neck, she breathed in his warm, spicy scent and felt her entire body respond to him. Her nipples tightened into hard little points and her pussy was suddenly wet and hot and ready.

Davrik seemed to smell her desire because he inhaled deeply and then pulled back to give her a half-lidded gaze.

"I'll see you soon, baby girl," he rumbled. Then he glared at Oozle. "You'd better be sure this other client treats her right. And don't forget to take off her bracelet!"

“Of course—I shall remove it right now.” Oozle reached for Sonya’s wrist and did something to the bracelet which made it unclasp. He slipped it into a fold of his slimy body and then nodded for Sonya to follow him. “This way, my dear—your client awaits.”

Sonya cast one last look over her shoulder at the big Kindred. Davrik had risen to his feet and he was currently looming over the whole dining room again. His big hands were clenched into fists the size of boulders at his sides and the look on his face was one of barely repressed fury. Clearly he didn’t like sharing her—not even with a client that only wanted her to sing to him.

She didn’t like leaving him either, Sonya found. And she couldn’t forget the promise he had whispered in her ear—that she wouldn’t always have to live like this, that he would take her away from The House of a Thousand Flowers. Could he really do it? Would Oozle consent to sell her? Sonya didn’t know—but she could hope.

She followed Oozle to the golden lift and back up to the penthouse and her room. But when he opened the door, Sonya didn’t see anyone at first. Then something moved in the corner and a horrifyingly familiar sight met her eyes.

“Sir Grox?” she gasped, putting a hand to her chest and taking an involuntary step backwards. In response, she felt a cold, slimy hand on her back.

“Go on in, my dear—your client is waiting for you,” Oozle burred in he ear.

“But...but you said my client was a Xeba-shla! A being with three ears” Sonya protested.

“So it was to have been—I suppose Sir Grox must have paid to take his place.”

“Paid a fuckin’ lot!” the middle head snarled as the huge creature lumbered up to her, glaring down from its great height. Since the Trollox was at least two feet taller than Davrik, Sonya felt like a mouse compared to it. Or maybe a tiny, frightened kitten about to be torn apart by a Pitt Bull.

“But...but this wasn’t the agreement!” Sonya protested as Oozle pushed her further into the room. “Sir Davrik is going to be very upset!”

“Sir Davrik isn’t your client right now—Sir Grox is,” Oozle snarled in her ear. “Now get in there and do your job! Or I swear you’ll spend every night in The Box for a week!”

That got Sonya moving. She stepped away from the slimy hand of her manager and took a hesitant step towards the huge Trollox, who had all seven, yellow eyes trained on her in a greedy stare.

“Sir Grox,” she said hesitantly as Oozle left, shutting the door firmly behind him. “Would...would you like me to sing to you?”

“You know that isn’t that I fuckin’ want,” the middle head snarled at her. “Strip, girl! Then lay in the middle of the bed with your legs spread.”

As he spoke, he was fumbling with the fastening of his trousers.

Sonya felt her gorge rise in nauseated horror but what could she do? She was locked into her room with a monster—the nightmare from her childhood—and she was helpless to get away.

TWENTY-NINE

NATE

Nate couldn't believe how lucky he was. Spending the night holding and touching Lan'ara and making each other come had definitely brought him a deeper understanding of what it meant to be with a Kindred female.

They had cleaned up and eaten some more of the nut porridge—it was as good cold as it had been hot—for breakfast or First Meal, as Lan'ara called it, before leaving the cabin in the Singing Woods. But the whole time, they had been hugging and touching each other and Lan'ara kept teasing him with her body.

Somehow the top of her dress kept coming down, exposing one or both of her full, luscious breasts and ripe nipples. When she saw Nate watching her, she didn't try to hide herself the way a human woman might have. Instead, she took his hand and placed it on her breast.

“Do you wish to touch me, Nate?” she asked.

“Hell yes, sweetheart,” he'd told her. “But...don't you mind?”

Lan'ara gave him a serene smile.

“It brings me pleasure when you take pleasure in my body,” she had explained. “So no, I do not mind.”

This had led to Nate kneading her full breasts and teasing her nipples several times before they had even gotten out of the cabin. And now that they were back on the road, he still had an arm looped around her waist. Lan'ara seemed to want to be as close to him as possible and he was beginning to feel the same way about her. He had never been with such a beautiful, sexually uninhibited woman before—he found her very presence intoxicating.

And there was one thing he found especially interesting—the last time he had been kneading and massaging her bare breasts, he had seen a small bead of amber liquid appear on the

tip of one tight nipple. It reminded Nate of his erotic dream and he'd had a sudden urge to bend down and take her tight peak in his mouth to taste it.

But he was mindful that Lan'ara wasn't ready to go there yet. She seemed to have some kind of schedule of when and how they could touch each other—it all had to do with their Claiming Period—and Nate was determined to abide by it. Still, he couldn't help wanting more.

“Tell me,” he murmured, as they walked back the way they had come, towards the seaside resort where they were staying, “When exactly does the next part of our Claiming Period start?”

Lan'ara turned her luminous purple eyes up to his, a little smile playing around the corner of her mouth.

“Why? Are you longing to feel my lips wrapped around your shaft as I suck your cream out of your cock?” she murmured.

God! Nate's cock went from half-mast to full attention in an instant. He loved the way she talked dirty to him in that sweet, soft voice of hers!

“Actually, I was wondering when I get to suck your beautiful breasts?” he growled softly, reaching around to cup one of her full globes in his right hand.

Lan'ara allowed this even though they were out in the open walking on a public road. Though to be fair, they were the only ones on it that Nate could see. She even shifted some so that her dress fell down and he could cup her bare breast without the fabric in the way.

“Soon, Nate,” she promised, moaning softly as he tugged gently at her nipple. “Soon we will put our mouths on each other and taste each other's bodies—but the time is not yet here. We will know it when it comes.”

Nate wasn't sure how they would know it, but he hoped he didn't have to wait very long.

When they reached the wayside shrine, he was so horny it felt like his cock was wearing a hole in the loose white

trousers he wore. Lan'ara led him inside and put a garland of dried flowers over the door just as she had previously, to let anyone walking by know the shrine was occupied. Then she pushed him down on one of the wooden benches and lifted the hem of her dress.

“Come—let us pay homage to the Goddess together,” she murmured as her sweet pussy came into view. Nate nearly groaned—she was already so wet and hot! Her soft little pussy lips were swollen with need and parting to show the ripe berry of her clit.

“With pleasure, sweetheart,” he growled, opening his trousers and releasing his stiff cock eagerly.

Lan'ara straddled him and pressed her wet, open pussy to his shaft just as she had the night before. Then, once she'd gotten his thickness settled between her pussy lips, she gripped his shoulders and proceeded to ride him like he was a fucking stallion.

Of course, his cock never slipped all the way into her, though Nate wished it could. But they weren't there yet, he told himself—he had to be patient. They couldn't really make love until the Bonding part of their Claiming Period. In the meantime, though, feeling her sweet, slick pussy sliding up and down his throbbing shaft was pretty fucking amazing, as far as he was concerned.

They came together, Lan'ara moaning his name and Nate gripping her hips as he painted both their bellies with his cream. The orgasm was so intense, he felt lightheaded afterwards. He let Lan'ara wash both of them with a clean rag she wet at the little faucet in the corner. When she was finished, she squeezed the liquid out over the shrine and once again the dried flowers bloomed into life.

Nate couldn't help feeling like the flowers were a metaphor for himself. Before Lan'ara had come for him, his life had consisted of running and hiding and fighting—he'd been reduced to little more than an animal, clawing for its very existence. But the beautiful Kindred woman had brought sanity and peace and happiness back into his life.

More and more, he was beginning to see himself with her long term. They hadn't known each other for long, but Nate couldn't help feeling like their relationship was deeper and richer than it had any right to be. Maybe it had to do with the dreams she claimed they'd shared—dreams that he still couldn't quite remember, though he wished he could. Dreams or no dreams, though, he was beginning to feel like he wanted Lan'ara in his life forever—and thinking that she felt the same way.

But all that was before the incident in the caverns...

THIRTY

LAN'ARA

The walk back to their hut in the Healing Grotto was extremely pleasant. Lan'ara was glad she had moved up their Claiming Period to the Touching Time the night before. The Forest Dweller had been right—she and Nate needed to be closer so that she could draw nourishment from his positive emotions, which would help to bolster her when she had to deal with his dark and tortured past.

Right now, she felt nothing but positive thoughts and feelings coming from him. He enjoyed their walk—stretching his muscles and the warm sun on his bare back. Nothing in the environment of her home world was triggering him or making him remember his past and nothing was upsetting him. In fact, he was feeling extremely peaceful and pleasantly horny as he kept casting sidelong-looks at her breasts, which were swaying as they walked.

Lan'ara gave a little shrug with one shoulder and let the top of her dress slip down, giving him a good view of her bare breasts. This was a little game they had been playing—one she greatly enjoyed since every time Nate caught a glimpse of her breasts, his pleasure surged, which gave her pleasure as well.

Her mentor, Tante Na'lla, had once told her to think of her positive emotional reserves as a kind of reservoir.

“You need to store up as many good feelings and memories as you can, child,” she'd told Lan'ara. “That way when you come to a time in your life where good feelings are hard to come by, the ones you've stored can carry you through the drought.”

Lan'ara had found this to be excellent advice, though she was well aware that she had never been so vulnerable to an emotional drought before.

Until an Empath Kindred found her mate, she was able to sustain herself with her own positive experiences and

memories. But once she started the Claiming Period with her fated mate, she became more open to him and more reliant on and affected by his emotions and memories. The closer they got to Bonding, the more she needed his positive feelings to fill her reservoir—but he could easily empty it as well with negative emotions.

Lan'ara knew there was a deep, dark well of turmoil and horror buried in Nate's psyche and that if he became triggered, all that negative energy would impact her intensely and drain her reservoir of good feelings quickly. But she couldn't help herself—she was already in love with the big human. And she still felt that if only she was given the time, she could heal him.

Slowly, she could replace the bad feelings with good ones and help him work through and move past the horrible memories of his personal hell—fighting against the Scourge and being fed on by the AllFather. It would take love and a lot of patience but it *could* be done—he *could* be healed—and she wanted desperately to be the one to heal him.

And I will be, she swore to herself. I'll be there for him every step of the way—we'll get through the darkness together, as the Goddess is my witness!

They finally reached the hut they were staying in and had a delicious Midday meal of fresh seafood with herbed *brio* butter and *ting'gy* fruit for dessert. After a short nap in the darkened hut, they decided to go for a swim in the caverns where the waters flowed out to feed the Outermost Lake.

Lan'ara loved the caverns. With their rocky ceilings covered in glow blossom vines which cast a soft golden light on the milky blue waters, they seemed full of mystery and peace at the same time. She showed Nate her favorite areas—especially the short waterfall where the turbulent water churned the pale blue water into bubbles below.

“If you stand under it, it massages your shoulders for you,” she explained, going to show him. “The pounding of the water feels amazing on tired muscles!”

Nate came to stand with her under the pouring water and at first she felt only pleasure from him. But then, suddenly, something happened. Lan'ara couldn't tell what it was—a sight or a sound or maybe even a smell that triggered him and brought back some dark horror from his past. But suddenly panic and pain were rushing through him even faster than the water coming down on their heads.

“Nate? What is it? What’s wrong?” she shouted, but they were right under the fall and she couldn't make herself heard over the pounding water.

Quickly, she made her way out from under the waterfall, but then she couldn't find him. The big human had disappeared somewhere and though she looked everywhere, Lan'ara couldn't see him.

“Oh Goddess, help me find him!” she whispered to herself as she began wading through the complex of caverns, looking for her fated mate. He might be anywhere—and from the emotions she could still feel—he was completely trapped in his past. Something had set him off and now he was caught in a negative vortex.

Lan'ara knew she had to find him quickly—just feeling his negative emotions was depleting her. She needed to get to him and try to heal him by sharing his burden before he completely drained her reservoir. But how could she do that if she couldn't find him? How—

Suddenly a muscular arm slid around her throat.

“Got you now, you Scourge fucker!” a familiar voice rasped in her ear.

And then the arm began to squeeze.

THIRTY-ONE

SONYA

“Please...please don’t hurt me!” Sonya begged, backing away from the huge Trollox.

“Who said anything about hurting you, girly?” the middle head snarled. “Just want you to get naked and spread your legs. Then old Grox will give you a surprise.” It grinned, showing stained yellow and brown teeth in a lipless mouth that wafted the disgusting odor of decay.

“You...you can’t do that to me!” Sonya protested. “You’re too big! You’ll rip me in half!” Her eyes were glued to the enormous bulge in his brown trousers. The one that looked as big as a good-sized baby. There was no way that was going inside her—not without literally splitting her in two!

“Who said Grox was going to breed you tonight?” the Trollox snarled. “We knows you’re not stretched yet. But tonight you starts your stretching.”

Reaching into a pocket of the brown trousers, the creature pulled out something that looked like the most enormous dildo Sonya had ever seen. It was made of some kind of metal—stainless steel maybe? Anyway, it was a dull silver and it was definitely larger than anything she’d ever had inside her before.

“What’s that?” she demanded. “You can’t put that inside me!”

“Oh yes, we can! Got approval from your owner, Oozle,” Grox claimed. “He said it was all right to start your stretching now, on account of how you’re going to be ours at the end of the week. That way it won’t take too long before you can take our shaft and we can plant our heir in you!”

“What?” Sonya felt like she might be sick. “Are you talking about me having your baby? That’s crazy! Oozle will never allow it!”

“He already agreed to our price, girly.” The Trollox smirked at her, all three heads giving her smug looks. “You’re with that fuckin’ Kindred for the rest of the week, but after that you belongs to Grox and we’re going to plant our heir in your belly.” He held up the enormous dull silver dildo again. “Now are you going to put your first stretcher in yourself or should Grox do it for you?” He leered at her. “*Or* would you rather spend the night in *The Box*?”

Sonya felt sick. To think that this horrible monster—this nightmare come to life—would try to impregnate her with its spawn was worse than any night terror she’d ever had. But was he telling the truth? Had Oozle really already sold her? Was there no way out of this horrible situation?

Well, for the next two hours, it seemed there wasn’t. She was stuck in her room with the enormous Trollox and there was nowhere she could run. If she tried to escape, the guards would catch her and send her right back to her room and then report her attempted escape to Oozle. Then she’d have to deal with whatever Grox dished out *and* spend the night being tortured in The Box.

Just do it, she told herself, feeling sick. *There’s no way out of this—you have to go through it to get to the other side, Sonya.*

“All right,” she whispered, feeling her gorge rise. “All right, give it to me—I’ll...I’ll put it in myself. Just don’t touch me.”

“Good.” Grox handed the enormous, heavy metal thing over to her. It was cold as ice and Sonya winced as she took it from his dirty paw of a hand. But as big as it was, it was still nothing compared to the flesh cannon she saw distending his dirty brown trousers.

She started to take the metal dildo—or “stretcher” as Grox had called it—into the bathroom but the Trollox stepped in front of her, blocking her way.

“Don’t think so, girly,” the middle head growled. “Strip and lay on the bed. Then push it up inside yourself—Grox wants to see your tight little cunny hole stretch!”

Nothing that any of her clients had asked her to do previously had made Sonya feel so thoroughly disgusting and dirty—so utterly soul sick. But she realized there was no way out of it.

With trembling fingers, she slipped off the beautiful dress that Davrik had chosen for her and put on her hours ago. She pulled down the lacy underwear he had bought for her to go with it as well. Then she stood there, naked and shivering, in the middle of the room as Grox stared at her.

“Good, good!” The Trollox nodded all three heads eagerly. “Now lay on the bed and shove the spreader in your cunny! Grox wants to watch.”

Sonya honestly felt like she might puke. But there was nothing she could do but comply. Lying in the middle of the bed, she spread her legs and tried to fit the metal spreader inside herself. But the damn thing was so big, she could barely get it in. She winced as she shoved harder, trying to force the metal dildo inside herself. It was freezing cold—like getting fucked by an enormous icicle— and the only thing that kept her going was the knowledge that if she didn’t get it in herself, the enormous Trollox was likely to take over the operation and shove it in himself.

She didn’t think she could bear that—it would break something inside her. So she pushed harder, forcing the heavy, ice-cold thing up inside herself until it finally filled her channel.

“Good, good!” Grox’s heads were drooling now—all three of them. “Now hold still and let Grox see you, girly!”

Sonya lay on the bed, every muscle tensed, feeling sick and dirty and disgusting with the long metal thing sticking out of her obscenely. But there was worse to come—*so* much worse.

The next thing she knew, Grox had taken the bologna roll sized dick out of his pants and was stroking its fat length with both hands. It wasn’t the first time she’d had a client jerk off to her—though they usually jerked off to her singing. But it was definitely the worst.

Sonya wanted to close her eyes and take herself away—to hide in her own mind, as she had sometimes done during the years she spent running from the Scourge. But somehow she couldn't do it. She felt helpless to do anything but watch as Grox shuffled up to the end of the bed and leered down at her naked body as he stroked his massive, disgusting member.

It was a dirty pink color and there was no head that she could see—just a blunt tip, like a Vienna Sausage grown to enormous size. Yes, that was what it looked like, she thought. It—

Before she could finish the thought, Grox gave a low, strangled groan and his hips began jerking. A rope of black ooze that looked like tar shot from the blunt end of his cock and landed on Sonya's belly.

With a gasp, she realized it didn't just look like tar—it *burned* like hot tar too! There must be some kind of acid in it—at least, that was how it felt!

She screamed and started to wipe it away but before she could move her hand, another rope of the black ichor that passed for Trollox cum splashed over her body—hitting her breasts this time. Another shot her in the face—barely missing her eyes but getting partly into her mouth. The taste was vile—like acid mixed with wet, rotting garbage and spoiled fish.

It was too much for Sonya. Oozle could send her to The Box if he wanted to—even a night of alternately burning and freezing and fighting claustrophobia was better than this. *Anything* was better than this!

Gagging, she rolled off the bed and ran to the bathroom, hobbling because the damn spreader-dildo was still inside her. She barely made it to the toilet before the contents of her stomach came up in a loose rush, the chunks of cheeseburger mocking her as they floated in the pale blue water.

Tears stung her eyes as she grabbed for a swath of cleansing paper and scrubbed at her face and breasts and belly, trying to rid herself of the disgusting Trollox cum. She gagged again and puked some more and then started rubbing again, trying to get the burning tarry stuff off her—*out* of her.

Suddenly, she became aware of an enormous presence looming in the doorway of the bathroom. Grox was glaring at her, all three heads shooting furious glances like poison darts when she turned her head to look.

“You dare to disrespect the gift we gave you?” the middle head growled.

“What gift?” Sonya cried, too upset and sickened to think of the future and the possible consequences of her words. “You’re disgusting! You make me sick, you ugly, stinking, nasty-ass, fucking *troll!* Get away from me!”

She had never talked to a client like this and it was clear her words were hitting home. The glares on all three heads turned from fury to hate.

“That’s right, have your say now, girly,” Grox’s middle head snarled. “But at the end of the week, you belong to *us!* And the next time we come it will be *inside* your cunny, not just on it.”

Then the monster from her nightmares turned and stomped away, leaving Sonya slumped in front of the toilet bowl, feeling used and dirty and lower than she’d ever been in her life.

To her relief, the door of her room slammed and she heard his heavy footsteps tromping off down the hallway. With a shaky hand, she flushed the toilet and closed the lid. Then she rested her head on her arms and took deep breaths, willing her stomach to stop rolling. The sour, rotten taste was still in her mouth and it motivated her to get moving.

Somehow she got to her feet and shuffled to the sink. After rinsing her mouth and brushing her teeth with the mouth cleaner—a kind of oval toothbrush you chewed on, with foaming bristles all over its surface—she finally got most of the taste off her tongue.

After she brushed, she leaned against the sink. The face that stared back at her from the viewer was haggard and her eyes were red from crying and puking. Her hair was a mess too and there were markings on her skin where the black tar-

like sludge had hit her—almost like it had given her some kind of rash. Which was totally unsurprising—of course she would have an allergic reaction to something so vile and obviously poisonous.

*And he wants to shoot that stuff **inside** me,* she thought and shivered, trying to repress her gag reflex. In the viewer, her face twisted into a grimace of disgust.

“I’m a fucking *mess*,” she croaked at her image. “God, what am I going to do?”

It was at that moment when she heard a knocking on the outer door of her room and Davrik’s deep voice called,

“Sonya? Baby girl, I’m coming in.”

Sonya felt panic spike inside her.

Had it already been two hours? How long had the encounter with the Trollox taken? And how long had she spent, slumped over the toilet bowl crying and puking?

Apparently long enough that she was now out of time.

Getting painfully to her feet, she hobbled to the bathroom door—the damn spreader was still stuck up inside her—and locked the door firmly. Just as she did, she heard the outer door open.

“Sonya?” Davrik called. “Are you in here? Are you all right?”

“I...I’m fine!” Sonya called back, trying to make her voice sound normal—bright and cheerful, even. “Just freshening up. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“All right, baby girl. I’ll be waiting.”

His voice was muffled through the door so Sonya couldn’t tell if she’d fooled him or not. What she *did* know was that she was running out of time to make herself look presentable.

She still had some hope that the big Kindred might make an offer for her and buy her before Grox could convince Oozle to let him impregnate her with his spawn—but there was no

way the big Kindred was going to want used goods. She had to hide the signs of what the Trollox had done to her—and quickly!

Hobbling to the shower, she turned on the water as hot as it would go. Then she stepped under the steaming spray and grabbed blindly for the scrub brush—the one with bristles so harsh she had never used it before. But she felt the need to use it now.

She scrubbed ruthlessly at all the places the disgusting black ooze had hit her, including her face and breasts and belly. To her horror, she found that some of it had even leaked into the slit of her pussy. She scrubbed the area ruthlessly until her skin was raw and stinging. Then she turned her attention to getting the metal spreader out of herself.

For some reason, it was even harder to get the damn thing out than it had been to put it in! Sonya tried gripping it by the base, but the metal was slick with the water pouring down on her from the showerhead and she couldn't get it out.

At last, she had to turn off the water and use a towel to grab the base. Just at that moment, there was a knock on the bathroom door.

“Sonya?” Davrik’s deep voice asked. “Are you all right? You’ve been in there at least an hour.”

Had it been that long? What was wrong with her? Time seemed to be telescoping somehow—moving in and out in a strange way. Sonya felt another spike of panic—the damn spreader was still inside her! Was it coated in some kind of glue or what? She had to get it *out!*

“Just a minute!” she called, trying to make her voice cheerful and unconcerned. “I think maybe something I ate for dinner disagreed with me, but I promise I’ll be out soon.”

Of course, it wasn't optimal to hint to her client that she was having stomach trouble, but it was a hell of a lot better than letting him see her like this! Gritting her teeth, she gripped the spreader by the base and yanked with all her might.

Pulling the damn thing out was incredibly painful—it felt like she was pulling out her guts with it! Sonya winced and panted in agony as she tugged the metal dildo out one slow, agonizing inch at a time.

Please! she prayed as she twisted and tugged. *Oh, please let me get it out! Don't let Davrik see me like this! Don't let him know what that horrible Trollox did to me! Please, please, please!*

She didn't know if anyone had heard her prayer, but finally the enormous metal dildo came loose and fell to the floor with a loud *thunk!*

Immensely glad to be rid of it, Sonya wrapped it up in a towel and pushed it as far down into the trash disposal unit as she could. Then she hopped back in the shower for a moment and rinsed between her legs. The water that ran down the drain was pink and bloody but the situation could have been worse.

Yes, she was raw inside, but at least she'd managed to get the damn thing out—something she was now almost certain the Trollox had intended to be impossible. There must have been some kind of chemical on the spreader that made it stick inside her so tenaciously. Whatever happened, she never intended to put anything like that inside herself again!

But how can you help it if Grox buys you? whispered a worried little voice in her head. *If he tells you to put another spreader inside yourself, how can you refuse if he owns you?*

Sonya didn't have an answer for that particular question.

I won't think about that right now, she told herself desperately. *I just have to go out there and please Davrik—I have to convince him to buy me before the sale with Grox is final.*

If it wasn't final already. But again, Sonya couldn't let herself think about that.

Pasting a smile on her face, she wrapped a long white bathrobe around her body and stepped out into the bedroom. Whatever happened, she must *not* let Davrik know what the Trollox had done to her. The big Kindred wouldn't want her if

he knew about the disgusting scenario that had taken place and he was her only chance of getting out of here.

THIRTY-TWO

DAVRIK

There was something wrong with Sonya. Davrik didn't know what it was, but she was different somehow. Her laughter had a brittle edge to it and the wide smile she gave him didn't reach her eyes. She laughed too hard at his jokes and she kept her arms wrapped tightly around herself, as though she was trying to hold herself together through sheer force of will alone.

There were marks on her face and the top of her chest as though she'd scrubbed herself raw in the extra-long shower he'd heard her taking. But when he asked about them, Sonya quickly changed the subject.

"What's wrong?" he wanted to ask her. "What did that fucking Xeba-shla do to you?" but he didn't want to make her even more upset. He wanted her to tell him what had happened on her own without having to pry it out of her. But so far, that didn't seem likely, since she kept on smiling and laughing and putting on an act, pretending everything was fine when it clearly wasn't.

It was obvious to Davrik she'd been traumatized somehow, but unless she told him the details, he felt unable to help her.

He blamed himself. He knew he shouldn't have let her be taken from him. He should have fought harder, refused to let her go. But he'd been afraid that the fucking Sluggorn would take her away entirely and refuse to let him have her back. And while he would fight to the death to keep her, he couldn't overcome the entire security staff of The House of a Thousand Flowers.

So he had let her go for what he thought was a harmless couple of hours...but something or someone had clearly harmed her. The very thought made him curl his fists in impotent rage.

All through the evening, Sonya kept up a light, casual banter, which was clearly meant to mask her turbulent emotions. Davrik knew exactly what she was doing—his own Sonya had acted the same way before she trusted him enough to tell him what was bothering her. He also knew there was nothing he could do until she finally broke down and told him. So he hung on to his patience as they got ready for bed.

“Should I pick you a nightgown and help you put it on, baby girl?” he asked, nodding at her closet unit.

Sonya jumped up quickly.

“Oh, not tonight,” she chirped, giving him that smile that didn’t reach her eyes again. “If you don’t mind, I’ll get my own. Thank you, Sir Davrik!”

Davrik said nothing as she walked quickly towards the closet. She moved as though something was hurting her—she had a slight limp that she hadn’t had before. It was all he could do to keep from asking her about it—but he didn’t want to make her lie and it was clear she was afraid to tell him the truth.

Sonya changed quickly into a long blue gown that hid much of her body. Then she hobbled back to bed and slipped under the covers beside him—keeping to her own side of the bed, Davrik noticed. He turned over to face her, propping his head in one hand as he looked down at her. The strain she was under was apparent in her big, brown eyes.

“Do you want to talk?” he asked softly. “About anything? Anything at all?”

“Oh, uh, no—not really,” she said quickly. “I’m actually really tired. Do you mind if we just get some sleep? Or did you want me to...to service you in some way? Maybe give you a blow job?”

Davrik frowned.

“Baby girl, you know I don’t want you doing anything like that until you know me better and you actually *want* to do it. I just thought you might want to tell me something.”

Her eyes widened and her breath hitched in obvious fear.

“No, uh—there’s really nothing to tell,” she said, forcing a laugh.

“So nothing happened to you on your ‘date’ with the other client?” Davrik pressed.

She shook her head rapidly.

“No—unless you count me singing myself almost hoarse.”

“Singing yourself hoarse? So that’s all that happened? He didn’t hurt you in any way? He just wanted you to sing to him?” Davrik asked skeptically.

She shrugged and looked away, her eyes not meeting his.

“What can I say? He really liked my voice.”

“You have a beautiful voice, baby girl,” Davrik acknowledged. “But you can tell me if he hurt you. I won’t be mad—nothing that happens here is your fault. You’re here against your will.”

For a moment, he almost thought she would talk to him. Her eyes widened again and she opened her mouth...and then closed it again.

“I’m just really tired,” she said in a low voice. “Please, Sir Davrik, if you don’t want a blow job or a hand job or anything else like that, could we please just go to sleep?”

“Of course we can, baby girl.” Davrik sighed. This Sonya still didn’t know him well enough to trust him. His heart ached with that knowledge. His own Sonya would have been in his arms in a heartbeat, pouring out her fears and sorrows so he could comfort her. But he reminded himself that he still had a long way to go with this new version of his fated mate—he needed to be patient with her, as he had been when he was wooing his own Sonya so many years ago.

He turned out the overhead glows with a word and settled onto his side of the bed. Sonya settled on her own side, curled in a tight little ball. Davrik ached to gather her into his arms and hold her. He wanted to heal whatever was hurting her—to make her feel better somehow. But he couldn’t do that—not

yet. Not until she trusted him. With a sigh, he closed his eyes and tried to get to sleep...

Only to wake up a few hours later with Sonya's terrified screams ringing in his ears.

THIRTY-THREE

LAN'ARA

“Filthy Scourge scum! You die tonight, you fucker!” Nate’s deep voice growled in her ears.

Lan’ara tried to draw in a breath and found that the arm around her throat was too tight—Nate had her in a chokehold and she couldn’t breathe! Clearly he was out of his head. Something had triggered him and sent him back to the hell of his past and now he thought she was the enemy. If she didn’t do something to change his mind quickly, he was going to choke her to death!

Frantically, she scrabbled at the thick, muscular arm around her throat. Clamping her fingers around his forearm, she drew as much of the pain and hurt away as she could. As she shared Nate’s burden, she caught a glimpse into the darkness of his mind.

In the forest at night...the Scourge are coming! Hiding in the river, hoping the bastards passed us by. Water everywhere. Feels like I’m going to drown if I can’t get a breath but if I break the surface they’ll see me! Fuckers are everywhere! I’m trapped...TRAPPED!

The panicked inner monologue rang in her mind as Lan’ara drew the misery and fear into herself, taking away the hurt and pain as well as she could.

Just as she thought she was going to pass out, the arm around her neck loosened and she heard Nate say,

“Lan’ara? Sweetheart? What...what’s going on?”

Lan’ara drew a deep, gasping breath and sagged against the broad chest behind her. Oh Goddess, that had been close! She could have died if she hadn’t been able to bring him back to himself!

“Lan’ara?” he asked again. “God, was I...choking you?”

“You thought I was...was the enemy,” she got out in a choked voice. “Something...triggered you. Just like...in the Singing Trees.”

“Shit!” Nate let go of her completely and stepped back.

But after absorbing so much negative emotion, Lan’ara was too weak to stand on her own. Without the support of his big body to lean against, she slumped down, her head going under the water.

Muscular arms scooped her up at once and Nate held her close to his broad chest.

“Christ, sweetheart! What’s wrong? Did I hurt you? I’m so fucking sorry!”

“I’m all right,” Lan’ara said quickly. Which was true—the waters of the cavern that fed into the Outermost Lake had already healed her throat. “I’m just...feeling really weak,” she said.

Nate looked down at her anxiously.

“Are you low on good emotions again? Do you need me to, uh, ‘feed’ you some good feelings?”

Lan’ara didn’t want to tell him that bringing him back from his past had nearly depleted her reservoir, so she nodded weakly.

“Yes, I...I could use some positive emotions. Could...could you bring me back to our hut and give them to me there?”

“Of course, baby. I’m so sorry.” Nate cradled her protectively close as he waded through the swirling blue waters of the caverns.

Lan’ara drew some strength from the protective tenderness she felt coming from her big human. Nate really cared for her and would be horrified if he knew how close he’d come to killing her—for a second time.

They couldn’t go on like this, she told herself. Never knowing what might trigger him or what he might do when he

was triggered—it was a terrible way to live. For both of them. But what could she do to end the cycle?

You know what you have to do, whispered a little voice in her head. *You know the only way to give him lasting peace.*

Yes, Lan'ara knew. Her breasts were heavy with the Healing Nectar—this last attack of darkness and her own efforts to bring Nate out of his past had pushed her body past the point of no return. Her entire being was urging her to heal him—to give him what he needed—what only she could give.

She must let him suck the nectar from her breasts—even if it depleted her severely, it was the only way to give him lasting healing.

The knowledge brought her a kind of calm despair. She might not survive the night—her reservoir was almost dry. But if she had to give her life to heal her fated mate, so be it.

“Nate,” she whispered as he brought her into the hut and laid her gently on the low mattress beside the crackling blue and green and gold flames of the fire. “I need your help—can you get me something to dry off?”

“Of course, sweetheart. No—don't try to move. Let me.”

She could feel his concern for her as he towed her off gently, stroking the soft fabric of the dry-all over her bare skin. They had gone swimming naked this time, which made the drying much easier.

Nate dried himself off too and then lay down beside her and gathered her into his arms.

“I'm so fucking sorry I hurt you, baby,” he murmured and she felt his remorse clearly. “I don't know what set me off—I thought I was back on Earth with those fucking Scourge surrounding our camp!”

“Don't talk about it and please don't think about it,” Lan'ara begged him. “I need positive emotions from you right now, Nate. Please—be here in the present with me. Hold me... *touch* me.” Reaching for him, she put one of his big hands on her bare breast.

Nate looked down at her uncertainly.

“Is that what you really want? I mean, I’ve never been with any woman who wanted to be uh, *touched* that way when she didn’t feel good.”

“Nate, please...listen to me.”

Reaching up, she cupped his rough cheek. His eyes were shining in the firelight as he leaned over her with one arm under her neck and his other hand resting on her breast.

“I’m listening, sweetheart,” he rumbled. “Go on.”

“Your sexual feelings are some of the strongest positive emotions you have,” Lan’ara told him. “And that’s what I need now—intensely positive emotions. So *yes*, I want you to touch me. The better *you* feel, the better *I’ll* feel and we can’t get those feelings if you’re just laying there feeling guilty because you think you hurt me.”

“But I *did* hurt you,” he protested.

“And you can heal me, too,” Lan’ara told him. She *desperately* needed some positive emotions to refill her reservoir before she asked him to suck her breasts and take the Healing Nectar! Lacing her fingers around his neck, she tugged him down for a kiss.

At first Nate didn’t kiss back. But then it seemed as though the fire of her desire jumped to him. Wrapping both arms around her, he devoured her mouth hungrily.

Lan’ara moaned as the possessive lust and deep tenderness she felt from him replenished her. Goddess, this was what she needed! She wished she could feel love from him as well, but they were still a little way from that since Nate still didn’t remember the dreams they had shared. But the other positive emotions he was feeling for her almost made up for it.

“More!” she begged softly, breaking the kiss. “Touch me, Nate! Put your hands and mouth all over me!”

A low growl of desire rose in his throat as he looked down at her.

“Thought we had to wait for our ‘Tasting time’ to use our mouths?”

“It’s the Tasting Time now,” Lan’ara told him recklessly. “You can kiss me...or taste me...anywhere you want to.”

“Mmm...you don’t have to ask me twice, baby.” He gave her a lazy smile and pressed his face to the side of her throat.

Lan’ara moaned as she felt his tongue tracing her pulse, kissing and sucking the sensitive skin at the side of her neck.

Nate sucked and nipped lightly, then moved down to catch her shoulder in his teeth. He bit down—not hard enough to draw blood but firmly enough to leave a mark.

The primal act sent a bolt of desire straight through her—he was marking her, claiming her as his! Lan’ara gasped and wove her fingers through his thick hair, urging him on.

The big human didn’t need much urging. He moved lower, kissing the soft skin of her chest and then nuzzling between her breasts.

Lan’ara’s breath caught in her throat. Was he going to do it? Her breasts were so full of the Healing Nectar they were aching—she needed him to suck it out. And yet, if he did, he would be draining her deeply.

But it will heal him, she thought. I don’t care if it drains me—I want him to be well. I love him.

Her fingers still buried in his hair, she urged Nate’s mouth gently towards one tight nipple.

“God, baby—been wanting to do this for so damn long,” he growled softly. And then he drew the tight peak into his hot mouth. He sucked deeply for a moment and then he drew back, his eyes wide with surprise.

“What is it?” she asked softly, already knowing the answer.

“You...your breasts...it’s like in my dream.” Nate licked his lips experimentally. “Just like my dream,” he repeated.

“You’re tasting my nectar for the first time, that’s all,” Lan’ara assured him. “My body makes it just for you. Do you like it?”

Nate licked his lips again.

“Tastes kind of like honey—sweet and delicious.” He frowned. “Uh, do you *want* me to suck it out of you?”

“It brings me intense pleasure to have your mouth on my breasts,” Lan’ara told him truthfully. It was true—she loved the feeling of his lips wrapped around the tight point of her nipple and the hot way he sucked her. She stroked his hair. “My nectar is just for you, Nate. If you want it, please take it.”

“God, baby—I *do* want it. I want *you*,” he admitted hoarsely.

“Then suck me,” Lan’ara said simply. Arching her back, she offered her bare breasts enticingly. “Take what you want, my human...my mate. Take what you *need*.”

With a low growl, Nate took her at her word. Leaning down, he sucked her nipple back into his hot mouth and drew hard on it, drawing the sticky nectar from her breast.

Lan’ara threw back her head and moaned with the deep sensation. With each suck and swallow of the Healing Nectar, she felt her reservoir being depleted. But at the same time, his lust filled her and she could feel the suction of his mouth all the way down in her pussy, which was wetter than she could ever remember.

“Nate!” she moaned, carding her fingers through his hair again. “Oh Goddess, yes! Drink of me! Take what you need! That feels so *good*!”

Nate’s lust redoubled at her words and he finished with her first breast and latched on to the other. Big, warm hands cupped her full mounds and he kneaded restlessly as he sucked. Each deep pull was like a bolt of pure desire deep inside her and Lan’ara had to press her thighs together to control the pleasure that was building there.

But even the lust raging between them wasn’t enough to counteract the draining of her energy as he sucked the Healing

Nectar from her breasts. She could feel herself getting weaker and weaker, but she didn't want to tell him to stop. With each swallow of the nectar, more of the painful fracture in his mind was healed. She could feel her life-force pouring into him, mending the pain and erasing the hurt...filling in the cracks.

“Nate,” she whispered, arching her back to offer him more. “Don't stop...don't stop. Take more...as much as you need.”

THIRTY-FOUR

NATE

Nate's cock was so hard it ached. He sucked her tight nipple as deeply into his mouth as he could and the sweet nectar poured down his throat. It tasted like warmth and honey and sunshine. With every swallow he felt more whole, more complete. It was almost as though years of pain and trauma were being erased—as though Lan'ara was healing him by offering her body in this deeply intimate way.

She moaned softly and carded her fingers through his hair, which only made him harder. God, he loved the taste of her—the feel of her sweet, curvy body pressed against his own much larger frame.

I'm getting fucking addicted to her, he thought, but it didn't seem like a bad thing. The beautiful Kindred woman wanted him—even with all his scars and his painful past, she cared for him...maybe even *loved* him. How could that be wrong?

It took him a few moments to realize that her fingers had stopped moving in his hair. A moment after that, he registered the fact that she had stopped moaning encouragement.

Letting her nipple slip from his lips, he rose up a little to look down into her face.

“Lan'ara? Baby, are you okay?” he murmured. He cupped her cheek but she didn't answer him.

Concerned, Nate turned her face towards the firelight. To his horror, it looked like she had fainted...or maybe she was having some kind of a seizure. Her eyes were rolled up and her breathing was light and shallow.

“Lan'ara?” He patted her cheek, panic creeping into his chest. “Lan'ara? *Please*, baby—are you okay? Come back to me!”

But she remained unresponsive. What should he do? Nate remembered how Teetsook, the Forest Dweller as Lan'ara had

called him, had told him he had to feed her positive emotions.

For a moment he cupped her cheek again and tried to think happy thoughts. But hadn't he just been filled with lust and desire only a moment ago? Lan'ara herself had told him that his sexual desires were some of the most intensely positive emotions he had. If giving her those deep feelings didn't help her, how were thoughts of baby rabbits and rainbows and shit like that supposed to do anything?

I have to get her help—something is wrong here. Really fucking wrong!

“Just hang on, sweetheart—going to find someone for you,” Nate told her. Though who he could call for help, he had no idea. After all, he was on an alien planet and he knew hardly anything about their social structure here. Still, he had to try.

Quickly he pulled on a pair of the loose white trousers and stepped outside the hut. It was nighttime and the area around the hut was deserted, the stars winking overhead like silent jewels. But then he saw a glow down on the beach—someone was there and had built a fire. Maybe they could help—or at least tell him who to call for help.

With no other option, Nate ran for the beach. A few long strides brought him to an old woman with wrinkled, pale green skin sitting beside a driftwood fire.

“Hey—excuse me! Can you help me or tell me who to call for a medical emergency?”

She looked up at him, frowning disapprovingly.

“So...the human makes an appearance.”

Nate was taken aback.

“You know me? I mean, you know I'm a human?”

“I know all about you—Lan'ara told me.” The old woman's mouth was pursed, as though she'd tasted something sour. “Spewing uncontrolled emotions all over the place!”

“Well, I'm fucking sorry about that, but it's Lan'ara I'm worried about!” Nate exclaimed. “She fainted or she's having

a seizure or something! Please—can you help? Or tell me where to take her or who to call?”

The old woman rose at once. She was surprisingly spry for someone who looked like a wrinkled green raisin, Nate thought distractedly.

“Lead the way,” she snapped at him. “And be quick about it! But first we must stop by my hut.”

Nate followed her anxiously to a rickety hut built of driftwood that wasn't nearly as nice as the one he and Lan'ara were staying in. The old woman grabbed a bag—he hoped it had medicine in it—and then followed him back over the sandy beach.

The minute she stepped inside their hut, she knelt by Lan'ara's side and put a hand on her forehead.

“Oh, child,” she murmured mournfully. “This is what I was afraid of—exactly what I warned you about!”

“What? What did you warn her about? Does she have some kind of medical condition?” Nate demanded, kneeling on the mattress on the other side of Lan'ara.

“Yes, she has a condition—*you!*” snapped the old woman. She glared at him, her sunken eyes blazing. “She has chosen a mate who is *broken* inside and she poured herself out to heal you!”

“What?” Nate gave her an uneasy look. “I don't...don't understand.” He shook his head.

“Tell me—what were you doing before she collapsed?” the old woman demanded. As she spoke, she was pulling things out of her bag—boxes of herbs and a vial of some strange dark blue liquid.

“I...I mean...” Nate didn't know how to answer. But as it turned out, he didn't need to.

“Look at this!” The old woman pointed down to one of Lan'ara's bare breasts. On the tip of her nipple was a golden droplet of nectar. “Were you sucking the Healing Nectar from her breasts?” she demanded, glaring up at Nate. “*Were* you?”

“Yes, all right.” he growled. “But she *told* me to—she told me she made it just for me.”

“Of course she did. Any Empath woman will make the Nectar to heal her mate if his body or his mind is broken,” the old woman snapped. “I told her that she should try to keep from it! I told her you weren’t worth trading her life for yours! You...you *human*.” She spat the word like a curse.

“I still don’t fucking understand,” Nate said. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about how you drained her life-force when you drained her nectar!” The old woman was adding several powders into the vial of blue liquid, stirring the mixture furiously as she spoke. “You literally sucked her life away!”

“What?” Nate was horrified. “That can’t be right! How is that even possible?”

“It’s possible all right. When a female has a broken mate—one who’s dark on the inside. One like *you*.” The old woman lifted Lan’ara’s head gently and placed the vial of blue liquid to her lips. “I just hope I can bring her back. If not, you just remember that *you’re* the one who killed her by taking all she had to give and giving nothing in return!”

Nate watched numbly as she coaxed the liquid down Lan’ara’s throat. The beautiful Kindred woman looked so helpless and still. Like a broken doll, lying on the bed they had shared together.

And I’m the one who broke her, he thought, feeling sick. I hurt her with my darkness, with my pain. My fucking past. I drained her like some kind of a fucking vampire, just being near her!

Now he understood why she had fainted in the Singing Woods—he’d been triggered by the sounds in the underbrush and she had managed to bring him back. She’d done the same thing in the caverns as they swam together. It had weakened her so much she had almost drowned afterwards.

And then I bring her back to the hut and drain her even more—sucking the life out of her and getting off on it the

whole time!

In that moment, Nate hated himself with a dark, all-consuming hatred that filled him like black, polluted water.

Lan'ara stirred weakly and cried out—a sound of pain and distress.

“What are you doing, you great idiot?” the wrinkled old woman demanded, slapping his arm angrily. “Here I am trying to heal her and you’re spewing your negative emotions all over her! Go—get away from her! You’re *hurting her!*”

Horrified at the idea of making things worse, Nate rose hastily.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he muttered, looking down at Lan'ara. “So fucking sorry.”

Then he turned and ran from the hut, trying to put enough distance between them that his pain wouldn't hurt her. He saw clearly now what had been going on—Lan'ara was like a beautiful bright light—a fragile flame—and he had been smothering her with the darkness inside him.

Just recently he had been thinking of building a life with her...of Claiming her as his wife and his mate, which was what she seemed to want so desperately. But now Nate saw that it couldn't be.

I'm like poison for her, he thought grimly. I can't let myself get close to her again...not even a little.

He would have to leave Lan'ara strictly alone from now on.

As difficult as that would be, he could never touch her again.

THIRTY-FIVE

SONYA

The monster was coming for her—the troll out of the fairytale book. Somehow he had come to life and escaped the bounds of the book and now he was reaching for her, a hungry grin on his hideous face...

“No! No, please! Leave me alone!” Sonya screamed breathlessly. She was trying to run but she felt frozen in place—her feet were stuck to the floor and the troll was getting closer and closer.

Suddenly he changed—growing two more heads, both of them drooling with hungry greed. A huge metal object appeared in his hand—a cold, hard phallus that Sonya knew he wanted to put inside her.

“Shove it up inside yourself, girly!” the middle head demanded, leering at her. “Grox wants to see it stretch your little cunny! Just like we’ll stretch you when we breed you later!”

“No!” Sonya moaned. Between her legs she ached fiercely—it felt like someone had shoved a thick icicle inside her and she couldn’t get it out and the troll was coming for her...

“Sonya? Baby girl?” a deep voice said in her ear. Then large, warm hands were shaking her gently. “It’s a dream—a night terror,” the voice told her. “It’s not real. Whatever it is, it’s *not real*.”

Sonya jerked awake with a gasp. Above her in the darkness she could see eyes—pale blue eyes that glowed faintly in the dim room, lit only by the glowing lights of the city outside the window. At first she couldn’t think who might be in bed with her. Whoever he was, he was *huge*.

“Please...don’t hurt me!” she whispered, looking up at the eyes. “And don’t...don’t let *him* get me.”

“I told you, baby girl—it was just a bad dream,” the owner of the eyes murmured soothingly. “He’s not here—he’s not real.”

Suddenly everything flooded back to her—her wonderful date with Davrik and then the horrible time that had followed with the disgusting Trollox. Just thinking of what he had done to her made her skin burn all over again. Just as it had when he had shot the black ichor that passed for his seed all over her breasts and belly and face.

With the burning, came the thought that she had been trying so hard to suppress—the knowledge that soon she might belong to Grox forever.

“Yes, he is!” she said. “He *is* real—and he’s going to own me!”

Then she burst into tears, unable to hold back the horror any longer.

Most men get uncomfortable when a woman weeps but Davrik wasn’t one of them. He didn’t pat her shoulder awkwardly or beg her to stop crying. Instead, he sat up and gathered her into his lap. Cradling her close to his broad chest, he stroked her trembling back and murmured soothing nothings into her ear.

Finally, when Sonya’s sobs trailed off to sniffles, he tilted her chin up so that their eyes met.

“All right,” he said softly but firmly. “Tell me what happened.”

Sonya bit her lip.

“You...you mean in my dream?”

The big Kindred gave her a stern look.

“No, baby girl. What happened with your other client? With the Xeba-shla. What did he do to you?”

The tone of his voice brooked no dissent and Sonya didn’t dare to lie to him.

“It...it’s wasn’t a Xeba-shla—it was a Trollox. It was that awful Grox,” she admitted in a low, trembling voice.

Davrik took a deep, startled breath but then let it out slowly.

“All right,” he said in a low, measured voice. And what did he do? Don’t be afraid to tell me, baby girl—I need to know it—*all* of it,” he added.

Feeling like she was drowning, Sonya did.

“He...he told me to take off my clothes,” she began. “And then he wanted...wanted me to lay naked on the bed with...with my legs spread.”

She could feel the big Kindred’s large frame clench tight but he only said,

“Go on,” in that same low, measured voice.

Feeling helpless to disobey, Sonya told about the huge metal dildo and how the Trollox had insisted she shove it inside herself.

“Is that why you’re walking like something is hurting you?” Davrik asked her.

Biting her lip, Sonya nodded.

“That and...other reasons.”

“*Other* reasons?” Davrik demanded, his voice filled with fury. “What else did he do to you? Don’t worry, baby girl—I’m not mad at you,” he added when she froze. “I’m mad at myself for believing that fucking Sluggorn and letting you go with him. And I’m *beyond* furious at that fucking Trollox, daring to touch you!” he added.

In short, clipped sentences, Sonya explained how the monstrous Trollox had basically jerked off on her.

“And when it hit my skin, it was black and oozy—like some kind of tar. And it *burned* like hot tar too,” she explained. “Some of it even got in my mouth!” She swallowed hard, remembering the acidic, nauseating, rotten taste. “It...it made me gag. I ran to the bathroom and threw up and he—

Grox—got mad. He said I had refused his ‘gift.’” She gave a little laugh that was more than half sob. “As if he’d offered me a diamond necklace instead of shooting that disgusting nasty mess all over me!”

“That bastard!” Davrik abruptly pushed her off his lap and rose from the bed. As the lights came on automatically to their low setting, Sonya watched him pacing back and forth in front of the bed, his big hands clenched into fists at his sides.

Her insides were clenched too as she realized that she had sealed her fate.

Why did you tell him all that? What’s wrong with you? demanded a little voice inside her head. *Now he’ll never want to buy you—you’re used goods to him! What man would ever want you after knowing that you were covered in that horrible troll’s cum?*

She huddled into herself and pulled the covers up to her chin. Davrik would never want her now—would never try to save her. She had ruined everything...*everything*.

THIRTY-SIX

DAVRIK

Davrik was so busy trying to control the Rage that wanted to take over his mind that it took him some time to notice what was going on with Sonya. He wanted to go kill that fucking Trollox for hurting the woman he loved! His instinct as a Kindred warrior was to go find the bastard and punch all three of the huge, lumpish heads until they were reduced to a pulpy red mess!

But he couldn't give into those impulses now. As much as he wanted to, he couldn't avenge Sonya in that way. He would get kicked out of The House of a Thousand Flowers and never be able to see her again. He would lose any chance he might have of buying her and taking her away from this fucking place. He had to calm down—he had to control the Rage and not let it take over his mind!

He took deep breaths, willing himself to be cool and composed—willing the Rage to leave, to dissipate. Calm...he had to be calm and think rationally about how to deal with this situation.

When the crimson curtain that had dropped over his vision finally cleared, he turned to see that Sonya had withdrawn completely. She was curled on her side of the bed with the covers pulled up to her chin. Her face was hidden in her hands and her shoulders were shaking.

Davrik felt a stab of guilt. Here he was, nearly going into a useless Rage that wouldn't help anyone, while the woman he loved was sobbing her heart out! He ought to be comforting her, not pacing around in a hyper-masculine fit of fury.

“Sonya...baby girl,” he murmured, getting into bed beside her again and turning her to face him. Her hands were still over her eyes but he slowly coaxed them away from her face.

“I’m sorry...so *sorry*,” she whispered. Her lovely brown eyes were red with crying and her whole face was a mask of misery.

Davrik felt like she had reached into his chest and squeezed his heart in her soft little hand.

“You have nothing to be sorry for, baby girl. None of this is your fault,” he murmured, swiping one thumb over her cheek to wipe away the tears that had collected there. “I’m not angry with you—I’m just so sorry I didn’t save you from that bastard! I never should have let you go—never! But I swear I’ll never let it happen again.”

She looked at him, her eyes wide and uncertain.

“Then...you still want me? Even after he...what he did to me? You don’t think I’m dirty or disgusting?”

“Dirty or disgusting? What are you talking about?” Davrik frowned. “Why would I think that?”

“I guess because...because that’s how I feel.” She shook her head and looked down, not meeting his eyes. “My skin still burns where he...where he shot his stuff on me. I scrubbed and scrubbed but it still hurts and I feel like I’ll never be clean again!”

“Oh, baby girl...” Davrik felt like his heart was breaking. Poor little female! She’d been through so much that his own Sonya had never had to endure. “Come here,” he murmured, putting an arm around her and pulling her close to him. His fangs were producing Essence—he could taste the faintly sweet flavor on his tongue and he knew what he needed to do.

“I’m so sorry,” she whispered again, pressing her face to his chest. “I didn’t *want* to let him do any of that and I sure as hell didn’t want to put that nasty metal thing inside me! But I was so afraid I’d be sent to The Box if I didn’t do what he said...”

“Shhh...” Davrik stroked her hair. “None of it was your fault. You’re stuck in this horrible fucking place and you had to do what he told you to do. But you won’t be stuck here for

long—I'm going to get you out of here, baby girl. I *swear* I will."

She looked up at him and he saw hope warring with fear on her tearstained face.

"I *hope* you can, but it might already be too late."

"Too late?" Davrik demanded. "What do you mean?"

"I mean Grox told me that Oozle had already agreed to sell me to him. He said..." She swallowed hard. "He said that after my week with you was up, he was taking me away and he was...was going to impregnate me with his 'heir'." She shivered with apparent disgust. "I don't know if it's a lie or not, but just the thought of that..."

"Gods!" Davrik clenched his jaw. It was clear she was frightened of belonging to the Trollox—as well she should be! But he didn't think she knew the whole story, or she would be Goddess-damned terrified.

When a Trollox took a humanoid mate to "bear his heir", it meant the end of her life. Because as soon as the monstrous fetus he implanted in her grew to full term, it chewed its way out of the mother, inevitably killing her in the process.

Of course, he couldn't tell Sonya that. It would upset her even more than she was already. But he knew now that he *had* to get her away from this place—even if it meant stealing her instead of buying her.

But he would try the legitimate way first—it would be much simpler.

"He's *not* going to get you," he told Sonya, who was still looking up at him anxiously. "I'll speak to that fucking Sluggorn again tomorrow—I'll offer him everything I have, which is a considerable sum. I'm going to get you out of here, baby girl, and take you far away from here."

The hope began to grow in her eyes, edging out the fear.

"Where will we go?"

"Someplace you can live and love and thrive," Davrik promised her. He didn't want to talk about taking her back to

his own universe yet—the universe where all of her family was still alive because the Kindred had come in time to stop the Scourge invasion. He didn't want to get her hopes up or explain about the other Sonya yet. First things first—he had to get her out of here.

But even before that, he had to heal her.

“I want to go with you—I really do,” Sonya told him. “I'm just afraid that Oozle has already made some kind of deal with that horrible, nasty Grox!”

“Don't worry about that—leave it to me,” Davrik told her. “We can't do anything about it until morning, anyway. But there *is* something we *can* do tonight.”

“We can?” She looked puzzled. “What?”

“I can tend to your wounds, baby girl—the places where you scrubbed yourself raw, trying to feel clean again,” Davrik told her. He could taste the Essence on his tongue as he spoke. “So tell me...where does it hurt?”

THIRTY-SEVEN

SONYA

S onya looked up at him uncertainly.

“You mean you...you want to, uh, lick me everywhere he...everywhere I scrubbed myself?” she asked.

“Of course.” Davrik spoke as though it was the most natural thing in the world. “Come on, baby girl—don’t be shy. Show me where it hurts so I can heal you. And I do mean *everywhere*,” he added, giving her a stern look.

“But...are you sure you want to put your tongue where he...where his...” Sonya couldn’t make herself finish the words.

“I want to heal the places that are burning and stinging—I want to ease your pain,” Davrik told her. “You’re *mine*, baby girl and I need to look after you.”

Sonya didn’t argue about the idea of belonging to the big Kindred. She would much rather belong to him than to the horrible Grox. Besides, she liked the idea of being healed—the places where she had scrubbed herself really were sore and stinging and *extremely* painful.

“All right,” she whispered, deciding to take him at his word.

“Good.” He nodded. “Then I need you to take off your nightgown, baby.”

Sonya bit her lip. He’d seen her naked before—not for very long, though—just when he was getting her dressed in the morning. Still, he couldn’t heal her unless she was as naked as she had been when she was hurt.

Davrik seemed to follow her line of thought.

“This isn’t sexual, baby girl,” he told her. “I just want to heal you and this is the only way. Can you trust me and take off your nightgown?”

Sonya made her choice—she would trust the big Kindred. Despite his great size and immense strength, he had been nothing but kind and gentle to her and she would trust him to continue in the same vein.

“All right,” she whispered. Reaching down, she lifted her nightgown over her head, baring herself for him completely.

Davrik’s pale blue eyes flicked up and down her naked form.

“So beautiful,” he murmured, stroking her cheek, which was hot with a blush. “Gods, you’re lovely baby girl!”

“Thank you,” Sonya whispered. She fought the urge to cover her breasts or hide her sex with her hands. After all, he might as well see the areas he was going to be licking.

“Tell me where it hurts,” Davrik murmured. “Show me where you need to be healed, baby girl.”

Sonya bit her lip again. So they were *really* going to do this. He was really going to lick her everywhere she was hurting. It was embarrassing and incredibly hot at the same time.

But it’s not sexual, she reminded herself sternly. *Davrik says it’s not. He’s just going to heal me—that’s all.*

“Here.”

She pointed to the soft skin right above her breasts.

Without a word, Davrik ducked his head and lapped the stinging area gently, bathing the wounded spot with his tongue.

His tenderness made Sonya’s breath catch in her throat. Though she had been miserable and crying just a few minutes ago, she felt her heart flutter in her chest. It occurred to her that his warm, cedar and spice scent was even stronger than usual. It seemed to draw her to him and make her want to be close to him in every way. But she was already sitting naked on his lap—how much closer could she get?

“Also *here*,” she murmured, pointing to her left breast.

“Let’s get you in a better position so I can reach you,” Davrik rumbled. He lifted her as though she weighed no more than a doll and got her to straddle his lap. Then he ducked his head again and lapped gently at her breast, though he avoided her nipple.

But Sonya found she didn’t *want* him to avoid it. Clearly he was trying to be a gentleman and just heal her without the sexual component and she appreciated that. After what Grox had done to her, she shouldn’t want anything to do with men for a long time and Davrik must know it. But his warm scent and the feeling of his tongue bathing her skin seemed to wake something up inside her—a hunger that had long been dormant.

“Please...I hurt here too,” she whispered breathlessly and pointed at her nipple.

“You’re sure, baby girl?” Davrik murmured, raising his eyebrows.

“Yes—I’m sure.” Sonya nodded and thrust out her chest, offering her breast to him again.

“All right,” he rumbled and, putting out his tongue, he gave her nipple a long, slow lick.

“Oh!” Sonya gave a little gasp and pressed forward, wanting to get closer, wanting *more*. “You...you can suck it if...if you want to,” she told him, her voice coming out breathless and soft.

Davrik looked into her eyes for a moment, as though being certain she wanted this. Then, never breaking her gaze, he took her tight nipple into his mouth and sucked long and hard.

Sonya moaned and wiggled in his lap. She could feel the sharp points of his fangs bracketing her tight point and she loved the way his cooling Essence immediately erased the stinging pain she’d been having in this sensitive area. But even more, she could feel the deep suction of his hot mouth—the sparks of pleasure as he drew on her nipple, seemed to travel

straight down to her pussy, which was already getting extremely wet.

“Oh...oh, *yes*,” she moaned as he continued to lick and suck her tight point. “Yes, Davrik—that feels so good!”

He let her nipple slip from his lips, much to her disappointment.

“Call me ‘Sir’ or ‘Master’ when I taste you this way,” he rumbled. “Does it feel better, baby girl? Do you feel healed?”

“Yes, Sir—I think so.” Sonya nodded. “But...the other breast hurts too.”

“Show me where,” Davrik directed.

“All of it,” Sonya told him. “But...especially the, uh, the nipple.”

“Then I’ll heal all of it, *especially* the nipple,” he rumbled. And ducking his head, he began licking her right breast as well.

Sonya didn’t know how long they spent with her straddling his lap and the big Kindred licking and sucking her breasts but it was long enough for her to get extremely hot and wet. She squirmed impatiently in his lap, feeling the hard ridge of his cock brushing against her open pussy through the thin black sleep trousers he wore. It felt so good she couldn’t stop herself from grinding on him—scooting down to rub her aching clit hard against his long, thick shaft.

If Davrik noticed this, he didn’t say anything about it. He simply kept licking and sucking her breasts and nipples until at last he seemed to finish. He looked at her, his pale blue eyes blazing.

“Where else are you hurt, baby girl?” His deep voice was a soft growl. “Show me so I can heal you.”

Sonya bit her lip.

“Lower,” she admitted. “On...on my stomach.”

“Going to have to lay you down so I can reach you,” Davrik told her. “Is that all right?”

She nodded.

“Yes—I trust you.”

His gaze softened and he cupped her cheek for a moment.

“Thank you, Sonya—that means a lot to me.”

Then he repositioned her on the bed and leaned over her.

Sonya showed him where the burning was and he bathed her torso with long sweeps of his tongue. She sighed in relief as she felt the tingling coolness of his Essence healing her. But before she knew it, he was finished and looking at her expectantly.

“Where else, baby girl?” he asked. “Where else do you need to be healed?”

Sonya looked at him uncertainly. She wasn’t sure if he would want to heal her *everywhere*. After all, some of the horrible black ichor had gotten into her pussy slit. Davrik had talked about “tasting” her in the past, but had he really meant it? She’d never been with a man who actually *wanted* to go down on a woman, no matter what they said, so she was hesitant to tell him about this last place.

“This is about healing,” he reminded her, almost as though he was reading her thoughts. “Don’t be shy, baby girl—tell me where it hurts.”

“Well...” Sonya took a deep breath and pointed to the top of her slit. “Here,” she admitted. “But if you don’t want to—”

“Of course I want to!” Davrik interrupted. “Here—time to reposition again.”

He pulled her down so that she was lying with her legs hanging over the side of the bed. Then he knelt on the floor in front of her and looked up.

“Can you be a good girl and open your legs for me, Sonya?” he murmured in that deep, rumbling voice of his. “Can you let me heal your soft little pussy?”

God! Sonya felt her breath catch in her throat as a bolt of pure desire shot through her. How could he make her so hot

just by talking that way? But something in his commanding tone spoke to something deep inside her and made her want to melt.

“Yes, Sir,” she whispered, parting her legs. “Please...heal me.”

“With pleasure, baby girl,” he rumbled. “Now just relax for me.”

Sonya tried to do what he said as he ran his big, warm hands up and down her inner thighs, coaxing her to open even more. As he did, she could feel her pussy lips opening as well, showing off her aching clit which throbbed for attention.

“Good girl,” Davrik murmured, framing her pussy with his long fingers. “Gods, look how wet you’re getting for me.”

Sonya shifted her hips, feeling embarrassed.

“I...I can’t help it. When you, uh, sucked my nipples...”

“It’s not a bad thing,” Davrik told her. “It’s a natural reaction to being healed in such a sensitive place. In fact, my people have a special name for a female who makes a lot of pussy honey—a *numala*.”

“And...it’s good to be a *numala*?” Sonya asked.

He gave her a lazy grin.

“A *very* good thing. But again, I’m just trying to heal you, not turn you on, baby girl. And to heal you properly, I need to spread you open. Can you let me do that? Can you let me spread your sweet little pussy and lick you nice and deep?”

“Yes, I...I think so.” Sonya felt her stomach fluttering and her clit throbbing.

“Good girl,” he rumbled again. “Just relax and let me heal you, baby girl.”

Then, delicately, he parted her outer pussy lips with his thumbs and bent to lap her again.

Sonya moaned and arched her back as she felt his warm tongue bathing her inner folds. Oh God, that felt so *good!* And it erased the burning too—which was wonderful.

Over and over, Davrik licked her, dragging his tongue from the entrance of her pussy all the way up her slit as though she was an ice cream cone in danger of melting and he didn't want to miss a drop of her sweetness.

“Oh...*oh!*” Sonya gasped. She found she was bucking her hips to meet him and somehow her fingers had found their way into his thick, black hair. Was she actually riding his face? If not, she was doing something very close—she knew the big Kindred was just licking her to heal her, but she couldn't ignore the sparks of pleasure his hot tongue caused as he lapped her aching clit.

Then, just as she felt like she was reaching the edge, he looked up, his mouth and chin shiny with her juices.

“There's one more place I need to heal you, baby girl,” he rasped, his deep voice slightly ragged. “And that's deep inside.”

Sonya's hips stopped rocking. Oh God, *yes*—she had to admit she was raw inside from where the enormous metal dildo had pierced her. But she hadn't thought about having his tongue in there.

“Can you? I mean, can you reach?” she asked, panting.

“I think so. But if not, I might have to use my fingers to spread my Essence inside you,” Davrik told her. “Can you let me do that, baby girl? Can you let me put my tongue and fingers deep in your little pussy?”

Sonya had to bite back a moan.

“If...if you're gentle,” she whispered. “I'm still really raw inside. That thing—it didn't want to come out of me. And when it finally did, it felt like it was...was tearing me up inside.”

Davrik's brows came together in a frown.

“Probably had some kind of molecular adhesive on it to try and keep you from removing it,” he growled. “Don't worry, baby girl—my Essence can heal you and I promise I'll be gentle.”

“I know you will.” Sonya had complete faith in him now. He was big and strong enough to break her in half with one hand. But despite their size and strength difference, he was being so tender with her—bathing her wounded areas so gently with his tongue even as he brought her the most exquisite pleasure.

“Good. Thank you for your trust.” He started to lick her again but Sonya stopped him with a touch on his cheek. “What is it, baby girl?” he asked, looking up.

“Davrik...Sir...I know you’re just trying to heal me but, well, it feels...really good,” she admitted. “So good I thought for a minute I might...”

“Come?” He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Well...yes.” Sonya nodded, feeling her cheeks get hot with a blush. She didn’t know why she felt the need to confess this, but the big Kindred was being so careful with her that she wanted to be totally honest with him.

His gaze softened and he turned his head to press a soft kiss into her palm.

“It’s all right if you come while I’m healing you, baby girl,” he murmured. “And if you need me to taste you more in any one spot, just guide me there. I’ll know what to do.”

“Th-thank you,” Sonya stuttered. “Then...I guess I’m ready for you to, uh, heal me inside.”

“Good girl. Just relax then,” he murmured. “Lay back and let me heal you.”

Then he ducked his head again and began lapping slowly and teasingly between her thighs.

THIRTY-EIGHT

DAVRIK

Gods, she tasted so damn good! Davrik took his time—first slipping his tongue as deeply into her sweet little honeypot as he could and then drawing it up and over her inner folds, paying special attention to the ripe little berry of her Goddess pearl—what humans called a “clit.”

He loved the taste of her honey—so sweet and salty and so utterly Sonya. It was a flavor he’d been longing for the last five years and he couldn’t get enough of it—enough of *her*.

Inside his black sleep trousers, his shaft was aching. He’d tasted his own Sonya nearly every night of their mated life. In fact, it was a kind of bedtime ritual with them—something he did for her each night before she cuddled in his arms to sleep, and he had missed it fiercely.

He had sworn to himself that he would only heal this new Sonya but her body was responding to his touch and his tongue just like his own Sonya’s had. And now he couldn’t help himself—he *needed* to make her come.

But gently, he reminded himself. She was still raw inside and he needed to heal her with his Essence before anything else.

He dipped his tongue into her entrance again, sliding as deeply as he could into her inner pussy but he couldn’t quite reach the end of her channel. Well, he had expected that. Drawing back for a moment, he sucked his index and middle fingers into his mouth, making sure to coat them with his Essence. Then, carefully, he slid them into her soft little slit.

Sonya moaned and bucked her hips, but didn’t show any signs of pain. Encouraged, Davrik did it again, sucking her sweet honey from his fingers and once more coating them in his Essence before sliding back inside her.

When he had done it three or four times, she began to buck her hips again.

“Davrik...Sir!” she moaned, arching her back. “Please, I need...need *more*.”

Davrik felt his cock surge in his trousers. Gods, he wished he could give her more! Wished he could bond her to him fully and Claim her as his own. But she wasn't ready for that—she wouldn't be until he'd told her about the other Sonya and why he had come looking for her.

“Do you need me to make you come, baby girl?” he growled softly, looking up at her. “Is that what you need?”

“Yes!” she moaned and bucked her hips restlessly. “God, *yes!*”

“All right—then show me where you need me,” Davrik told her. “Guide me, baby girl.”

He didn't have to ask her twice. As he bent his head again, small but strong fingers wove their way into his hair again and she tugged his mouth up until his tongue landed on the ripe berry of her clit.

Obligingly, Davrik sucked it into his mouth and began swirling his tongue around and around the little button, just the way his own Sonya had loved. At the same time, he slipped his fingers deep in her channel again and began to fuck her with a slow, steady rhythm he knew would drive her wild.

“Oh...*oh, God!*” she gasped and her hips bucked again, twice, and then she was shaking all over, crying and moaning as her orgasm overtook her at last.

As her pleasure surged, so did Davrik's own. Slipping one hand between his legs, he yanked down his trousers, fisted his cock and jerked it twice before he started coming. He normally lasted a lot longer than that, but he couldn't help letting Sonya's release trigger his own. It was too much for him—tasting her again and feeling her come for him—he had to come himself or he felt he would explode!

She moaned and cried her pleasure for a long time, because Davrik knew *exactly* how to stroke her with his tongue to prolong her orgasm and give her little mini “aftershocks”, as his own Sonya had called them. At last,

however, he felt her tugging on his hair which meant she wanted him to join her on the bed.

Pulling his sleep trousers back up, he did just that. Climbing in beside her, he gathered her into his arms and ducked his head to take her mouth in a deep kiss.

His own Sonya had always loved the taste of her own secret juices on his lips and this Sonya did too. She purred happily and lapped at his mouth hungrily, as though trying to get every last bit of her honey.

Davrik growled in response and kissed her back, loving the feeling of the small, curvy, willing body pressed against his own. But after a long, delicious moment of tasting her mouth, he finally pulled back. If he kept this up, they would go too far.

Sonya made a little sound of disappointment as he stopped kissing her.

“Hey, what’s wrong? Why did you stop?” she demanded, frowning up at him.

“Just don’t want to do anything you’re not ready to do yet,” Davrik told her.

“Well maybe I *am* ready,” she protested. “Look, I know you’re a lot bigger than me but I think if we went slow and careful you could, you know, fit inside me.”

Davrik’s shaft throbbed eagerly at her invitation—like all Kindred males, he was multi orgasmic, so his cock was still rock hard and ready to go again. But he knew he couldn’t do that.

“No, baby girl,” he said firmly. “You think you’re ready, but you aren’t—not yet. There are things I need to tell you before we go any further.”

“What things?” she asked, looking puzzled.

“Never mind.” Davrik shook his head. “I’ll tell you once we’re on my ship and headed away from Yonnie Six—I promise. Until then, can you just trust me?”

Sonya still looked disappointed, but she nodded.

“All right—I trust you. As long as you don’t have a crazy wife locked in the attic or something.”

Davrik stifled a laugh.

“*Jane Eyre* always was one of your favorite books,” he remarked, without thinking. He only realized his mistake when Sonya froze against him.

“What did you say? How did you know that?” she demanded, looking up at him.

“Oh, um...” He cleared his throat. “I meant to say it’s one of *my* favorite books. One of the works of Earth literature I really enjoy.”

“Oh...okay.” She shifted against him. “You seem to know a lot about Earth culture.”

“I’ve made a special study of it,” Davrik said—which was true. When he had fallen in love with his own Sonya, he had wanted to know everything there was to know about her. He had immersed himself in her world and culture to know her better.

Sonya seemed about to say something else, but then she yawned. Davrik breathed an inner sigh of relief. Having a really good orgasm had always made his own Sonya tired too. If she would just drift off to sleep and not ask any more questions, that would be wonderful.

It seemed as though someone heard his wish because Sonya repositioned herself again, resting her head against his chest, sighing contentedly.

“Davrik, will you hold me the rest of the night?” she asked. “So I don’t have any more nightmares?”

He felt his heart fist in his chest. The fact that she was willing to trust him enough to open her body for him was one thing...the fact that she trusted him even when she was sleeping was something else—another step in gaining her complete confidence so he could Claim her.

“Yes, baby girl,” he murmured. Leaning down, he dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “You sleep—I won’t let

the night terrors come back. I'll wake you if you start to have a bad dream."

"Thank..." She yawned again. "Thank you." She looked up at him with sleepy eyes. "I don't know why you're so good to me when you hardly know me."

But I do know you—I know everything about you and I love all of you. I never want to let you go!

The words hovered on his lips and for a moment he considered telling her everything. But now wasn't the time. She was drifting off to sleep—for the first time in five years, he would hold the woman he loved in his arms and guard her slumber. Davrik didn't want to ruin it—he just wanted her to rest as he cradled her close. So he only said,

"You deserve it, baby girl," and left it at that.

Sonya seemed about to answer, but then her eyes closed and he felt her precious, curvy body relax into sleep.

Soon, he promised himself. I'll tell her about my Sonya soon. But first I have to get her out of here!

He just hoped that damn Sluggorn would be willing to talk about selling her. If not, he would have to find a way to steal her, and that was bound to get complicated.

THIRTY-NINE

LAN'ARA

A gentle hand was stroking her forehead and someone was pouring positive emotions into her. Lan'ara opened her eyes, hoping to see Nate. But again, it was the sight of her mentor, Tante Na'lla, that greeted her.

"There you are, child," she said, smiling at Lan'ara. "How was your sleep? Restful, I hope?"

"Yes, very restful," Lan'ara said politely. Though to be honest, she couldn't rest completely without Nate and she hadn't seen him in almost a week! Not since the night he'd sucked the Healing Nectar from her breasts. From what her mentor said, she gathered it had drained her almost to the point of death.

Tante Na'lla had been at her side ever since, restoring her with healing medicine and positive emotions, but she missed her fated mate. Where was he and why hadn't he come to her?

It was time to go find out, Lan'ara told herself firmly. She still felt weak, but she was sure she could manage to get up out of bed and take a short walk. If Nate wouldn't come to her, she would go to him.

She started to sit up but Tante Na'lla tried to stop her.

"Where do you think you're going?" she demanded, pushing Lan'ara back down with a stern frown.

"Out," Lan'ara said, sitting up again. "I can't stay in bed forever, Tante. And I feel so much better now," she added. "Thanks to your nursing."

But her thanks and praise did nothing to lessen her mentor's disapproval.

"If you're going to go find that useless human that nearly sucked you dry, you can save yourself the trouble," she snapped. "He hasn't even put his nose in the door once, the whole time you were at death's gate!"

Lan'ara felt the words like a stab in the heart, but she couldn't give up. She *needed* to find Nate and see what was going on. What if he'd been triggered again somehow and was wandering around in a combat-fueled rage?

She didn't think it was probable—she had felt his psyche mending as he sucked the Healing Nectar from her breasts—but there was always the possibility that he hadn't healed completely. She wanted to check on him and make sure he was all right.

Besides, I miss him—I love him, she thought desperately, as she sat on the side of the bed and drew on a loose white gown. *I need to know that he's well and safe.*

The fact that he hadn't come to visit her hurt, but not knowing if her fated mate was all right was worse.

“I tell you, child—he's no good for you!” Tante Na'lla lectured as Lan'ara rose on unsteady feet and swayed for a moment, waiting to see if her legs would hold her.

“Nate is the one the Goddess set apart for me,” she said quietly, trying to remain calm. “He is the one I dreamed of—the one I must heal.”

“You already healed him as much as you can!” Tante Na'lla cried. “He drained you to the point of death when you made the Healing Nectar for him! And what thanks do you get for it? None! He abandoned you in your hour of need—leaving me to nurse you alone. What kind of faithless male acts in such a way?”

Lan'ara had no answers for her.

“I only know I need to speak to him and make certain he's all right,” she said. She took a few steps towards the door and the world spun so that she had to catch the doorframe of the hut.

“Look at you! You're weak as a baby—come back to bed!” Tante Na'lla caught her by the arm and tried to steer her back to the low sleeping platform and the soft mattress but Lan'ara pulled away.

“No! I can’t spend any more time in bed.” She sighed and looked at the wrinkled face that was peering anxiously into hers. “I’m sorry, Tante Na’lla, but you know that as many good feelings as you poured into me, what I mainly need are the positive emotions of my fated mate. Please—let me go seek him.”

“That one has *no* positive emotions to give,” her mentor said, frowning. “I’m afraid he’ll only weaken you further, child!”

“Nate has *many* strong positive emotions,” Lan’ara protested. In fact, if he hadn’t been feeling such intense desire for her the night he’d sucked the Healing Nectar from her breasts, she probably would have died. The positive emotions he had been exuding had been just enough to keep her head above the waves, even as she was being depleted.

“I see I can’t stop you from going, but I must say I think this is a bad idea,” her mentor said. “He’s no good for you, child. Please be careful!”

“Nate *is* good for me—and I’ll be fine,” Lan’ara said with more certainty than she felt. She opened the door of the hut and drew in a deep breath of fresh air. It smelled of the inland sea and the sweet glow blossoms that grew in the caverns.

The warm, comforting, familiar scents seemed to bring her new strength and she straightened her back and lifted her chin. She didn’t care what her mentor said—she loved Nate and she needed to find him and make certain he was all right.

And she wasn’t going to let anyone or anything stop her from going to him.

FORTY

NATE

Nate saw her coming long before she reached him. He was sitting on a rock at the mouth of the cavern that led to the Outermost Lake, eating his fourth pw'alla fruit of the day. Since moving out of the hut they'd been staying in together, he'd been camping rough on the beach and eating whatever he could find growing in the nearby tropical vegetation.

Luckily, he had plenty of experience roughing it—that was basically how he'd been living for the past five years as he and his squad waged a never-ending campaign of guerilla warfare against the invading Scourge. At least he didn't have to fight here—Lan'ara's home world was a peaceful planet and the natives were friendly.

He'd asked a few of them what was poisonous and which plants and fruits to avoid and had found, to his surprise, that *none* of them were toxic. Apparently the whole planet was “in harmony” as several of the natives had told him, which meant that any kind of fruits or vegetables he could find could be eaten—either raw or cooked.

Nate had supplemented his vegetarian diet by catching and roasting fish—the inland sea was full of them. So sleeping on the beach and foraging for food hadn't been difficult at all—what *had* been difficult was never seeing Lan'ara. At least twice a day—once in the morning and once in the evening—he'd gone to the hut and knocked on the door to check on her.

But it was always the wrinkled old woman who answered with a scowl on her wizened green face. And she always shooed Nate away, saying that his “toxic negative emotions” would hurt Lan'ara. So he wasn't allowed to see her—not even for a moment.

Nate wanted to protest that he had a lot of positive emotions to give too. He cared deeply for the Kindred woman who had claimed he was her “fated mate.”

But the night of her collapse he had come to a harsh realization—he might be falling in love with Lan’ara, but he was no damn good for her. The old woman kept talking about his negative emotions and after the past five years and his time before that in the Seals, there was no doubt he had plenty of them.

Plus, there was no guarantee that he might not have another break with reality. It was true that he was feeling better and more clear-headed than he had at any time since before the Scourge had invaded the Earth and also true that nothing had triggered him in the past week, but that didn’t mean it would never happen again. And next time...

Next time I might kill her, Nate thought warily, as he watched her approach. She was walking slowly, as though she was still weak. He wanted desperately to run over and sweep her into his arms and carry her as he had in the forest of the Singing Trees. But he didn’t dare—what if his negative emotions hurt her when he got close? So instead of running to her, he cleaned his hands of the sticky pw’alla fruit juice in the little stream at his feet and then stood and waited for her to get to him.

“Nate...” She looked tired, he thought, and thinner than she had been, which made his heart ache—he loved her curves and hated to see her lose them.

“Hello, Lan’ara,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady. God, he wanted to hug her! Wanted to hold her close and feel her beautiful body pressed against his own again! But he couldn’t—he didn’t dare touch her. Didn’t dare to even get too close to her.

“I wanted to be sure you were well,” she said.

Nate let out a bark of unhappy laughter.

“Shouldn’t that be my line?”

She shrugged her slim shoulders.

“Not necessarily. You were ill as well.”

“I didn’t almost die though,” Nate pointed out. “I was just out of my fucking head several times.”

She looked up at him anxiously.

“Has that happened again? Has anything, er, triggered you and sent you back into your past?”

Nate shook his head.

“No. I’ve been fine ever since...” He cleared his throat, feeling guilty. “Since the night when you collapsed. Are you okay? You look tired,” he added, unable to hide his concern for her.

“I am well. A little weak, but I’ve been recovering.” She hesitated, as though she wanted to say something else but then shook her head. “It’s good to hear you haven’t had another... episode,” she said at last. “It must mean that the Healing Nectar helped you.”

“Yeah, it helped all right,” Nate growled, feeling a surge of fury directed at himself. “It helped so much I nearly killed you—drained you like a fucking vampire!”

“What? Nate, that’s not true!” she protested.

“Come on—we both know it is,” he said roughly. “You nearly died the night I took your nectar and I didn’t know what the fuck to do for you. Scared the shit out of me—I almost lost you and it was all my fault!”

“It *wasn’t* your fault!” Lan’ara said quickly. “My body made the nectar for you because it sensed you needed healing. You had nothing to do with it.”

“How can you say that when I nearly killed you?” Nate demanded. He was getting more and more upset. “I’m not just talking about draining you when I sucked the nectar, either. What about how I nearly choked you?”

“You didn’t know what you were doing.” Lan’ara put a hand to her head and winced. “Please—try not to hate yourself. It’s such a difficult emotion to feel!”

“See? I’m *still* hurting you—even when I’m not even touching you!” Nate took a big step back from her, feeling worse than ever. “We have to face the truth, baby—I’m no

fucking good for you. I nearly killed you and I hurt you just by being around you.”

“But you *help* me too,” she protested. “Your positive emotions—”

“Aren’t nearly strong enough to outweigh my negative ones,” Nate said darkly. “I’m sorry, Lan’ara—I know we said we’d try the Claiming period, but I just don’t think it’s a good idea. I think...” He shook his head. “I think maybe it’s better if we just go back to Earth—or to the Kindred Mother Ship. But I can’t stay here with you anymore—not knowing that I might hurt you at any time, just by being near you. Not to mention if something triggers me...” He shook his head, unable to go on.

Lan’ara’s beautiful purple eyes filled with tears but she didn’t shout or argue or try to change his mind. She simply nodded her head in acquiescence.

“All right, Nate, if that’s the way you want it.”

“That’s *not* the way I want it,” he said roughly. “But it’s the way things have to be. I’m so fucking sorry, Lan’ara. We just can’t be together.”

“Very well.” She nodded and two fat teardrops rolled down her cheeks. “Because you haven’t had any triggering incidents since drinking the Healing Nectar, I believe you must be safe to go to the Mother Ship. I know...” She stopped for a moment and pressed a hand to her eyes. “I know how much you want to see your human friends again. I hope...hope it will make you happy.”

At that moment, Nate didn’t think anything could ever make him happy again. He felt like the biggest asshole in the world, making her cry like this! He hated himself but even that emotion was bad for her—*every* negative feeling he had hurt her and it seemed like all he had to offer were negative feelings.

“I’m so fucking *sorry*,” he said again awkwardly.

“Don’t be.” She shook her head. “You must follow your heart, Nate.” She swiped at her eyes. “I will see that a long-

range shuttle is ready for us. There is at least one craft available for Kindred emergencies. We can leave tomorrow.”

As she turned to go, Nate felt an ache deep in his chest—it was like someone was tearing his heart out and with every step she took away from him the pain got worse. But there was nothing he could do about it.

I'm toxic for her—I hurt her just by being near her, he thought unhappily. God, baby—I'm so fucking sorry!

But his pain and sorrow didn't help—all he could do was watch her walk away.

FORTY-ONE

DAVRIK

“No, I’m sorry Sir Davrik but I am afraid it is quite out of the question. You cannot buy our lovely Songbird Sonya for *any* price.” The Sluggorn shook his bulbous head, the slime on his body moving in waves with the gesture.

Davrik felt a surge of impatience and anger.

“Is that because you’ve already agreed to sell her to that fucking Trollox?” he demanded. “To Grox?”

Oozle straightened up, his antennae twitching.

“As a matter of fact, that is correct.”

“What? But why? I offered you a fortune for her and you said she wasn’t for sale!” Davrik growled. “What could he possibly offer you that I can’t?”

The Sluggorn pointed both antennae at him.

“Influence...*power*. He offered me a seat on the Sacred Eight—the ruling body of Opulex and all of Yonnie Six,” he burred importantly. “Only the most important and influential males are asked to join. Can you offer the same? Do you hold the same influence as Sir Grox?”

Davrik clenched his jaw. Under the table, his fists were clenched as well but somehow he managed to keep his tone even.

“No, I cannot do that. But I *can* ask you to have mercy on Sonya. Do you know what happens to humanoid women who are taken by Trollox males? Once impregnated by their spawn, they are as good as dead! The Trollox fetus chews its way out, killing the female who carried it to term in the process! It’s an *agonizing* death.”

The thought of that horrible fate happening to Sonya was more than he could bear! Surely the fucking Sluggorn must see reason!

But Oozle only shrugged his slimy shoulders again.

“What happens to a female once she leaves my ownership is of no consequence to me. I am sorry, Sir Davrik, but I cannot help you. My best advice to you is to enjoy your remaining time with the lovely Sonya, since you will never be able to see her again once the week you have paid for is up.”

“But she’ll fucking *die!*” The cry was torn from his throat. To come all this way—to come to an entirely different universe to find the other part of his soul only to lose her again—it was unthinkable. Monstrous!

Oozle stood abruptly from the table they’d been sitting at to negotiate.

“Sir Davrik, I advise you to put a rein on your emotions. After all, you wouldn’t want your week with our lovely Sonya to be cut short, would you?”

As he spoke, several of the ever-present security guards—all of them huge Thorians with spiked tails and glowing green eyes—converged around the table. None of them was under nine feet tall and all were armed with pin-point blasters capable of taking a male’s eye out at forty clicks.

Davrik knew he couldn’t fight them all. He had no weapons on him, since they were forbidden at The House of a Thousand Flowers and while he might take out two or three of them with hand-to-hand combat, there were at least ten in the immediate area. The damn Sluggorn must have sensed trouble and assigned them to be there during their negotiations.

There was nothing he could do but pretend to capitulate, he realized.

Taking a deep breath to calm the Rage that threatened to rise inside him, he nodded reluctantly.

“Very well. I suppose I will just endeavor to make this the best week of Sonya’s life—since it is to be one of her last.”

“If you’re attempting to make me feel guilty, you can save your breath,” Oozle said blandly. “We Sluggorns are a cold-blooded race—we do not feel emotions in the same way you hot-blooded humanoids do. Truly, I do not care for any of

the females under my care except that they make me money and treat the customers respectfully.” He gestured to the security guards and then nodded at Davrik. “Keep a watchful eye on Sir Davrik for the remainder of his week with us, please. Just to make sure he doesn’t get any *wild ideas*.”

Then he oozed away, leaving Davrik sitting at the table with his hands and jaw clenched in helpless anger. Very well, if he couldn’t buy Sonya, he would steal her from this place. But how? The guards were going to be watching them carefully for the rest of their time together. How could he get past them?

Several plans appeared in his head and Davrik examined each one carefully. No matter what happened, he had to have a plan B, in case plan A failed. And a plan C in case plan B didn’t work. And so on.

Whatever happened, he wasn’t going to let Sonya go with that fucking Trollox, he swore to himself. He had crossed oceans of time and space to find her and be with her again—he wasn’t going to let her die.

Sonya was his—he was *never* going to let her go.

FORTY-TWO

SONYA

“So what did he say? Did he agree that you could buy me?” Sonya asked eagerly, as the big Kindred walked into her room.

But her excitement faded as the grim look on Davrik’s face told her everything she needed to know.

“He didn’t, did he? Oh, no!” She sank down on the side of the bed, her face in her hands.

Oh God, what was she going to do? She couldn’t go with that horrible Trollox—she just *couldn’t*! He wanted to stretch her out until he could put his cock inside her. Then he would fill her full of his burning seed so he could get her pregnant with his hideous baby! The very thought was enough to make her feel like puking and screaming and crying all at the same time. She would go crazy if he touched her again—she was *sure* she would!

“Sonya...baby girl...” Davrik sat beside her and put a big, warm hand on her back.

Instinctively, Sonya leaned towards him and he cuddled her close to his broad chest. Even with the bad news hanging over her head, the big Kindred still felt like shelter to her—like the only safe port in a storm. She didn’t know why she trusted him so instinctively—maybe it was his warm cedar and spice scent that drew her in and made her crave him and feel safe in his muscular arms. But to her, he felt like home in a way she could barely describe, even to herself. It was like they were *meant* to be together.

For a long moment, she let herself take comfort in just being held. But she couldn’t stay safe in his arms forever.

“What are we going to do?” she asked at last, looking up at him.

“I’ll tell you what I’m *not* going to do,” he said grimly. “I’m not going to let you be taken away by that fucking

Trollox, baby girl. I don't care how much he paid for you, you're *mine* and I'm never letting you go!"

The light in his pale blue eyes was so fierce it nearly took Sonya's breath away.

"I believe you," she said. "But...how can you stop Grox from taking me?"

He sighed and raked a hand through his thick, black hair.

"I have several ideas—several plans but we're going to have to be careful. I'm afraid that things got heated on my side during the negotiations and we're going to be watched carefully by the guards from now until the end of our week together."

"They're *always* watching," Sonya said grimly. "They patrol the halls constantly."

"But they *do* change shifts occasionally." Davrik sounded thoughtful. "I know Thorians—they're big and extremely strong, but they need a great deal of sleep because they burn energy so quickly. We need to find a time when they're changing over and everyone is thinking of something else."

"They change shifts early in the morning—around two or three o'clock—and then again during dinnertime," Sonya said. She'd made a study of the guards too, back when she'd first come to The House of a Thousand Flowers—before she'd decided trying to escape on her own was a non-starter.

"Good—all right, that's useful," Davrik rumbled. "There would probably be less people around in the early hours, but that's when they'd expect us to try and get away."

"It's more crowded at the dinner hour when everyone is going back and forth to the restaurants," Sonya offered. "Lots of people come into The House of a Thousand flowers just to eat—you know, for a night out on the town."

"That should be our best bet then," Davrik said thoughtfully. "We'll act like we're going to Last Meal and see if we can slip out the front door while the crowds are coming and going." He tilted her chin up to look at her. "But I want you to know something, baby girl—even if the plan fails, I'll

still come for you. I'm not leaving you here in this place—I swear I won't."

"I believe you," Sonya whispered, looking up at him. "But I don't understand—why do you care so much about me? I mean, we haven't known each other that long."

"I've known you for *years*, baby girl," he murmured, stroking her cheek. "I know you don't understand that now, but I promise I'll explain everything once we're safely away from this place."

Sonya didn't understand, but she *did* trust him. For some reason, the big Kindred cared deeply for her—maybe even loved her. Though she found it hard to understand how he could become attached to her in such a short period of time, she believed that he would save her.

She had no idea, though, how wrong their plan would go when the time came...

FORTY-THREE

LAN'ARA

“Kindred Mother Ship, this is Commander Lan'ara calling. Mother Ship, please come in.”

Lan'ara waited impatiently for the answer. Beside her, in the passenger seat, Nate was sitting. His broad shoulders were slumped and he was looking out of the viewscreen, not seeing the swirl of stars against the velvety blackness of space. Instead, all his attention was turned inward.

Lan'ara could feel his self-loathing clearly—it came through the Bond they had started forming from the moment they began Dream-sharing so many solar weeks ago. Most people thought that the only way to achieve a Soul Bond with a Kindred was through Bonding Sex, but what they didn't understand was that the Bond began forming from the earliest moment of their relationship. Bonding Sex sealed and solidified it, but it was perfectly possible to form a partial Soul Bond which was strengthened with every look, every touch, every act of intimacy or tenderness.

Right now Nate's negative emotions were coming through their own partial Bond like poisonous gas, making her feel like she was suffocating. All his feelings were so intense—so *strong*. She could feel his negativity draining her reservoir even though all he was doing was sitting there, hating himself. She needed to get away from him—away from those toxic feelings of self-hatred because he felt bad for hurting her.

At last, to her vast relief, the Com-link crackled to life and a female voice replied.

“Commander Lan'ara, this is the Kindred Mother Ship. We regret to inform you that our Spatial folding equipment is down for routine maintenance and won't be back up again for several hours. Recommend you wait in place—we have your coordinates and we will send you a signal letting you know when we are able to fold space to bring you back.”

Lan'ara clenched her fists. Several hours? She didn't know if she could survive Nate's relentlessly negative emotions until then! But what else could she do?

"Understood," she said in a strangled voice. "We'll be waiting for your signal. Commander Lan'ara out."

The Com-link clicked off and Nate stirred in his chair.

"Well, I guess we're fucking waiting," he rumbled.

Lan'ara wanted to answer but all she could do was put her head in her hands. His bad feelings were beating at her like waves and she didn't even have any of his positive emotions like lust or desire to counter them—it felt like she was drowning!

"Hey, baby—what's wrong?" Nate looked at her and she felt his anxiety for her coming through loud and clear. It was slightly better than his self-hatred, but it was still a negative emotion, laced with worry.

"Please!" she got out at last. "Your feelings—they're so strong!"

"I'm sorry!" He unfastened his harness and rose quickly. "I'll go to the other end of the shuttle."

"No good," Lan'ara got out. "Not...far enough."

She'd always been sensitive to his emotions, even before they'd met in person and started building the Bond between them. But now that they had technically reached the Tasting stage of their Claiming period, the connection was so strong that she would have to go to another planet—hell, another *galaxy*—to get away from his feelings. Putting him at the other end of the shuttle wasn't going to help a bit.

"Then go back to your home world," Nate said quickly. "Please, sweetheart—I don't want to hurt you anymore!" he added, sounding desperate.

But Lan'ara shook her head.

"Not... enough fuel for another landing and take off," she tried to explain. "We'll just have to wait."

“But my feelings are *hurting* you!” He raked a hand through his long brown hair. “What the fuck can we do?”

“Once we reach the Mother Ship we can have a priest of the Goddess sever our Bond,” Lan’ara said. It was something she’d been dreading, but it was clearly necessary if she was going to be able to function in the same galaxy as the big human.

“But that’s *hours* from now,” Nate pointed out. “Is there anything we can do until then?”

If he had been born on Careesa Prime into a world of Empaths, as Lan’ara had been, he would have been able to control his emotions—to shut them off or at least mute them. Unfortunately, humans had no such abilities, so she knew it was useless to ask him not to feel so loudly.

Then an idea came to her—it was unorthodox and it would temporarily strengthen their Bond which was the opposite of what they ought to be doing—but it was the only thing Lan’ara could think of.

She just prayed to the Goddess that it would work—otherwise it felt like her head was going to explode!

FORTY-FOUR

NATE

Nate felt like shit—he was overwhelming Lan’ara with his negative emotions but he couldn’t seem to stop. The worse she looked, the worse he felt because he *knew* he was making her feel bad and that made him feel even *worse*. It was a vicious cycle and one he seemed helpless to break.

“I’m so fucking sorry, sweetheart,” he said again. “Is there anything I can do? Anything at all?”

“There might be a way...” Lan’ara was rubbing the raised circular ridges at her temples lightly with her fingertips, as though trying to ward off a migraine. “I don’t know how you’ll feel about it, though.”

“Whatever it is, I’m in,” Nate said quickly. Anything to keep from hurting her anymore than he already had. “Do you want to knock me out? Give me some kind of drug until we can get to the Mother Ship?” he offered.

She frowned.

“I don’t believe the ship’s medical supplies have anything that could render you unconscious. Besides, if you fell into a nightmare, I would still be able to feel it and be unable to wake you up,” she added.

“Then what do you want to do?” Nate asked, mystified. He couldn’t think of any other way to keep his emotions from affecting her negatively.

“We must turn negative emotions into positive ones,” Lan’ara said firmly.

“Um, I’ll *try*,” Nate told her, but he didn’t have high hopes. Every time he tried to concentrate on something positive, his thoughts kept turning back to the fact that he couldn’t be with Lan’ara because he hurt her. It was like his mind was stuck in a rut and every thought he had turned back to their breakup and the reason for it.

But Lan'ara seemed to have an idea. She rose from the pilot's chair and looked at Nate with clear eyes.

"How do you feel about being restrained?" she asked.

"About *what*?" Nate frowned. "You mean...you want to tie me up? But why?"

"I need to bring out your positive emotions," she told him. "I need to be able to touch you without you touching me. Can you let me do that, Nate? Do you trust me enough?"

Nate nodded.

"Of course I trust you, baby. I'm just not sure how this will help."

"When we touch, the emotions I feel from you become even stronger," she told him. "I need to be in control—to say *when* we'll make physical contact. If I can touch you when you're having intensely positive emotions, it will fill up my inner reservoir rather than depleting it."

Nate didn't really understand her, but he *did* understand that this was something Lan'ara needed to do. And he was willing to let her do it, he realized—no matter what it was. Even if it involved some discomfort or pain, he wanted her health and happiness more than he wanted his own pleasure and comfort.

"All right, let's do it." He rose from his seat. "Where are we going?"

"To the sleeping compartment," Lan'ara told him. "Come this way."

She turned and led him to the back of the ship, through the living area and food prep area and into a back room.

Nate followed her and, when she opened the door, he saw a large bed which took up most of the available space. There was no headboard but there were plenty of thick pillows and cushions and a hook on the wall above the bed which might be meant for hanging clothing or a robe, he supposed.

Lan'ara was already busy, arranging some of the cushions against the wall at the head of the bed.

“Please, come have a seat and lean against these,” she said to Nate, when she had them how she liked them.

Nate did as she asked, going to sit on the bed and lean back against the cushions. It was pretty comfortable, but her next idea wasn't.

She was pulling something that looked like a long silk scarf out of a drawer and came to where Nate was seated.

“I need to tie your hands above your head so you can't touch me,” she said. “Will you let me?”

Wordlessly, Nate held out his hands, wrists together.

A look of gratitude filled her lovely purple eyes.

“Thank you, Nate,” she said softly. Then she looped the red silk scarf around his wrists several times and pulled his arms over his head. She tied the scarf to the hook on the wall that he had noticed earlier. “Are you comfortable?” she asked, looking down at him.

He nodded.

“I'm fine, sweetheart. Though I still don't understand what you're going to do to me.”

“You'll see. I'm going to attempt to bring out your positive emotions,” Lan'ara told him. “Just wait a moment and things will become clear.”

She slipped into a small door that must be either a bathroom or a closet, Nate thought. For a moment, he had nothing to do but sit there with his hands tied over his head and wonder what the hell was going on. He wouldn't have trusted anyone else in the world to tie him up like this and leave him helpless and vulnerable. But he knew Lan'ara had good intentions—he just had no idea what they might be.

At least the bindings he was in weren't uncomfortable. The silk scarf was just tight enough to hold him without cutting off circulation. He *did* feel vulnerable—he was still bare-chested and wearing only the loose white trousers he'd had on during his stay on Lan'ara's home world. Something had happened to the clothing he'd been wearing when she

brought him in, so the trousers were his only option, though she had promised he would get new clothes once they reached the Mother Ship. He—

His thoughts cut off abruptly when the small door opened again and Lan'ara emerged.

Nate's jaw dropped when he saw what she was wearing. Previously she'd had on a kind of military uniform consisting of black boots, tight black trousers, and a long-sleeved, conservative, button-down blouse. Nothing could be further from the outfit she had on now.

It was a flowing gown that seemed to be made entirely of sheer white lace, so light that it practically floated around her curvy body. The front of it was wrapped and tied to one side with a flimsy string. It was obvious that she had nothing on under it because Nate could see the full curves of her breasts and the ripe points of her nipples clearly through the sheer material. There was a high slit up the front which barely hid her soft sex—he could see it peeking at him when she moved her legs.

Nate's cock began getting hard at once—he couldn't help it! She was so fucking beautiful and he loved her body. He was only human, after all.

Then he reminded himself that their relationship was over—he had no right to lust after Lan'ara's gorgeous curves anymore. He shouldn't even look at her—she wasn't his to look at now.

“No—stop!” Lan'ara said, when he started to turn his face away. “Don't look away from me, Nate—I need your eyes on me.”

“But looking at you makes me fucking *want* you,” he growled, unable to hide his frustration. “And I shouldn't—we're not together anymore.”

She winced as though in pain but shook her head.

“No, you can't think like that, Nate. I need *positive* emotions from you—I need your lust and desire. They're the

only feelings strong enough to drown out your guilt and self-loathing.”

Her words surprised him—did he really hate himself that much? He supposed he did, after what he’d put her through. But if this was what she needed to feel better—to survive until the Mother Ship could fold space for them—then he was willing to do it. It wasn’t like a hardship, after all, to admire her beautiful body.

“Look at me, Nate,” she said again and as he watched, she cupped her full breasts and lightly teased the nipples through the sheer lace of her gown.

“God, baby—that’s fucking hot,” he growled as she moaned softly at the pleasure she was giving herself. He understood now why she’d wanted to tie him up—his hands itched to cup those beautiful breasts and tease them himself—both with his fingers and his tongue. It was better that he was restrained because he wanted her so badly it would be hard to keep his hands off her otherwise.

“Good...that’s good,” Lan’ara breathed. She had her hair up in a bun at the back of her neck but now she reached up and pulled it free. The long, dark waves came cascading down around her shoulders making her even more bewitchingly lovely.

“You’re so fucking gorgeous,” Nate told her. “Are you going to touch yourself for me, baby? Are you going to tease those tight nipples and pet that soft little pussy?”

“That’s *exactly* what I’m going to do.” As she spoke, Lan’ara loosened the tie at the side of the dress, which caused the deep V neck to open, revealing her breasts completely. Then she reached down and opened the bottom of the gown, showing him the plump lips of her soft little pussy.

“God!” Nate groaned, shifting on the bed restlessly. Damn, he wanted to get his hands on her! In the short time they’d been together he had gotten addicted to touching her sweet, curvy body. He felt like a man in withdrawal being shown the drug that he craved desperately without being able to take it.

“Good, Nate. Now, your positive emotions are flowing,” Lan’ara murmured. “Let’s see what we can do to keep that up.”

She climbed on the bed with him and straddled him, her bare pussy just inches above his straining shaft, which was tenting the material of his trousers. Nate could smell her sweet, feminine scent—the aroma of her desire—and it drew him to her and made his mouth water to taste her soft little cunt.

“God, sweetheart—want you so much!” he growled, unable to help himself.

“I know...I can feel your lust,” Lan’ara murmured. She ran her hands over her breasts and down between her legs. Parting her pussy lips with two fingers, she let Nate get a glimpse of her wet inner folds, glistening with her juices.

As he watched, she dipped two fingers into her pussy and swirled them around the ripe little bud of her clit. Nate swore he could almost feel her pleasure as she threw back her head and moaned, bucking her hips as she continued to stroke her soft inner cunt.

“God!” he groaned, shifting again. His cock was so hard it *ached*. He couldn’t help remembering the way she’d rubbed herself against him when they were still in the Touching phase of their Claiming period. Was she going to do that again?

But for now, Lan’ara seemed content to simply touch herself while he watched. She thrust her fingers deep inside her pussy, fucking herself and making Nate wish it was *his* hand between her legs instead. He wanted to touch her—wanted to *taste* her, damn it! He’d always loved going down on a woman, but Lan’ara’s scent drew him in ways he’d never been drawn before. He felt like he might die if he didn’t get to taste her!

As though reading his mind, she withdrew her fingers, glistening with her juices, and pressed them to his lips.

Nate sucked them eagerly into his mouth. At once the sweet and salty flavor of her honey flooded his tongue, making

him groan raggedly.

“Do you like that, Nate?” Lan’ara’s voice was a low, sensual purr. “Do you like the taste of my juices?”

“Fucking *delicious*, baby,” he growled, looking up at her. “Give me more!”

“I’ll give you more,” she promised. “But how would you like it right from the source?”

Nate licked his lips hungrily.

“Yes, baby—give it to me,” he urged. “Feed me that sweet little pussy—I want to lick you raw!”

His words seemed to fire her up to the same fever pitch of lust he was feeling himself. Without hesitation, she rose to stand over him and parted the white lace dress even wider. Because of their height difference, she really only had to lean forward to give his tongue access to her bare pussy.

Nate leaned forward as well, to meet her, and lapped eagerly, his tongue sliding easily between her swollen outer lips. Lan’ara moaned and wove her fingers through his hair as she offered herself, giving him what he’d been wanting almost from the moment he’d first seen her.

He tongued the tight little button of her clit, circling it over and over, feeling her tremble against him as he lapped her. Above his head, his hands were clenched into fists of tension—God, he wanted so much to grab her hips and swing her around and down so that he could spread her out on the bed and feast on her properly! But for now, bound as he was, he could only take what she offered him.

“Oh, Nate...*Nate!*” she cried above him, bucking against his invading tongue. Her juices were so sweet and hot and her pussy was so wet and so fucking delicious—he loved the feeling of her quivering and the sound of her moaning his name as he tasted her—loved it so fucking much!

He lapped harder, circling her clit, wishing he could slip his tongue inside her to taste her honey right from her well. He wanted to put his fingers in her too—to fuck her deeply as he

tasted her—wanted to feel her inner walls trembling around him as she came just for him...

“Oh Nate, yes—*yes!*”

Her moans of pleasure nearly made him come himself—if he’d had any stimulation at all, Nate was sure he would have gone off like a fucking rocket. Hands clenched, he strained against his bonds, wanting more—wanting *her* so fucking badly!

And then a loud sound came from the front of the ship—a kind of chiming noise that cut through the moaning and gasping.

“Oh!” Lan’ara jumped back from him at once. “That’s a call from the Mother Ship!”

Before Nate could answer, she had closed her dress and jumped off the bed. She ran out of the room, literally leaving him hanging. A few moments later she was back, however, a serious look in her eyes.

“That was the Mother Ship—they’re up and ready to fold space now—the maintenance took less time than they thought.”

“Oh, uh...” Nate wasn’t sure what to say. He was still achingly hard—his cock straining against the fabric of his trousers and his mouth covered in her sweet, salty honey.

“I’m sorry we didn’t have more time.” Lan’ara was untying him. “But we need to get into position before they fold space.”

“Did it help?” he asked, his voice hoarse as he rubbed his wrists and sat up on the bed.

“Yes, it did,” Lan’ara assured him. She looked down for a moment, a delicate blush coloring her high cheekbones. “I... didn’t know you wanted to taste me so badly. Your pleasure in giving me pleasure filled my reservoir almost to the brim.”

Nate wanted to ask more about this internal reservoir and if it was possible he could just keep filling it by going down on

her or watching her touch herself. But before he could speak, there was another alert from the front of the ship.

“Oh—we have to hurry!” Lan’ara exclaimed. She looked down at herself. “I don’t know if I have time to change or not!”

“Would it help if I told them to wait a minute?” Nate asked, getting off the bed. He would much rather see her in the barely there white lace dress of course, but he understood that it might not look good for her to show up to her place of work in such an outfit.

“Would you? Just touch the Com-link button and tell them we’ll be ready in a few minutes.”

She disappeared into the small room again to change and Nate made his way to the front of the ship. He wished they had more time to talk about what had happened between them and if it might present some kind of solution to their problem. He didn’t want to break up with Lan’ara—he was fucking falling in love with her! But could he give her enough positive emotions to offset his negative ones?

Even if he could, he didn’t know if he could be trusted not to get triggered and try to hurt her again, he thought darkly. When he went to that dark place in his past, he couldn’t see or hear anyone—he was just lost in the terrible memories.

No, he decided, as he sat down in the and buckled himself in, no matter how badly he wished otherwise, Lan’ara was probably better off without him.

FORTY-FIVE

DAVRIK

“All right—just follow my lead and act casual,” Davrik murmured, looking down at Sonya. She was holding his arm in a death-grip and not looking at all casual or relaxed at the moment.

He supposed he couldn't blame her—after all, they were about to attempt to steal her from The House of a Thousand Flowers and any number of things could go wrong. But they had waited nearly the whole week, hoping to throw off suspicion and they were out of time—now it was time to act.

After a lot of deliberation, they had decided that their best bet for a clean getaway was to stroll casually out the front door during the time when crowds of other people were coming in to eat Last Meal. At the same time the guards would be switching shifts, which would hopefully add to the confusion.

They were standing in the lobby now, pretending to admire the M'orphian art exhibit that was on display. The display consisted of ten or twelve large holo-platforms scattered around the lobby.

On each platform, pink skinned M'orphians were doing cooking demonstrations, showing their skills as all six of their tentacles whipped around, adding ingredients, mixing, stirring, slicing, dicing, and flash-frying all at the same time.

At the conclusion of each demonstration, the hologram of the M'orphian chef would lean forward and offer a “taste” of the dish he, she, or ze—(the M'orphians had three sexes)—had prepared. If you opened your mouth, a small fan would blow scent and taste molecules into your face, allowing you to experience the M'orphian dish the holo-chef was holding out to you.

Davrik would have been much more interested in the display if he hadn't been focused on getting Sonya out of the building without being caught. As it was, however, it offered

an excellent distraction. Dozens of couples were scattered around the lobby all watching the dazzling knife work and cooking skills and opening their mouths to “taste” the cuisine.

“If you enjoy our culinary creations, please visit The Frosted Nutsac, located right here in The House of a Thousand Flowers,” one of the holo-chefs was saying with a broad, toothy grin. Since all M’orphians had teeth like the Earth animal called a shark, this part of the demonstration was more than a little startling.

“Oh!” a woman gasped as the holo-chef bared his mouth full of razor-sharp fangs in a toothy grin. At the same time, a new rush of people came into the lobby—it appeared to be a big group of Yonnite Masters, all talking and laughing with the females they owned on their arms. To Davrik, this looked like the perfect opportunity.

“Now!” he murmured and began walking briskly with Sonya hurrying to keep up at his side.

They made it all the way outside and were in sight of the broad alley where Davrik had his ship hovering in readiness when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

“I don’t think so, friend,” a rough voice grated in his ear.

Davrik let go of Sonya as someone spun him around and he found himself faced with two scaly Thorian guards, both glaring down at him. Behind them was Oozle, his antennae twitching angrily.

“Run, baby girl!” he shouted over his shoulder. But Sonya seemed stuck to the spot. She tried to take a step and then leaned down to grab at her ankle with an exclamation of pain.

“Did you really think you could get away with one of our most prized Flowers, Sir Davrik?” the Sluggorn demanded, oozing forward. “We implant a pain chip in each and every one of our girls the first night they’re with us which begins to hurt the moment they wander even a few steps from the building’s perimeter! But of course our lovely Songbird couldn’t tell you that, since we knock them out first.”

“You bastard!” Davrik growled. “Sonya is *mine!* I’ll never give her up!”

“I’m afraid you *must*, because your time with us here at The House of a Thousand Flowers is now ended,” Oozle burred. He nodded at one of the guards. “You—take our lovely Sonya back up to her room. Her new owner will be coming to collect her shortly. And you—” He nodded at the other guard. “Make sure that Sir Davrik remains outside. He is no longer welcome on the premises.”

“No! Let me go!” Sonya gasped as the first Thorian grabbed her none-too-gently by the arm.

“I’d advise you to behave yourself and go quietly, my dear,” Oozle snapped at her. “You’re already in a great deal of trouble. If Sir Grox didn’t wish to collect you at once, you’d be spending the next several nights in The Box.”

Davrik moved to take Sonya away from the guard but suddenly the Thorian guard in front of him was pointing a blaster at his chest.

“Don’t think so,” the guard snarled. “Move along, just like the boss told you to.”

“Davrik!” Sonya was looking over her shoulder as the other guard dragged her away, back up the steps into The House of a Thousand Flowers.

“Don’t worry, baby girl—I’ll come for you!” he shouted. “Be watching for me!”

“Yeah right,” sneered the guard. “Don’t you know every fucking entrance and exit is guarded and monitored constantly?”

“He is correct—how do you think we saw you attempting to leave with our property in the first place?” Oozle sounded exceedingly smug—it made Davrik want to ram his fist right through the Sluggorn’s slimy face.

“You fucker,” he said thickly. “You don’t care if she dies as long as you get your position on the Sacred Eight. Do you really think the rest of the Council is going to let a spineless bag of pus like *you* make any of the decisions? They’re

throwing you a bone because Grox paid them off. You're just going to sit in the corner gathering dust like the useless invertebrate asshole you are!"

"That is *enough!*" The Sluggorn's antennae waved angrily. "You're lucky I don't press charges against you for attempted theft! Get out of here before I change my mind and call the Peace Keepers!"

The guard put one scaly hand in the center of Davrik's chest and shoved him—hard. He stumbled backwards, losing his balance, and fell to the ground with a bone-jarring *thump*.

"You heard the boss—get the fuck out of here while you still can!" The Thorian snarled.

"You'll be sorry for this!" Davrik growled. "You're going to pay!"

Oozle made a slimy sound like someone blowing their nose which served as his version of laughter.

"I don't think so, Sir Davrik. Goodbye and have a nice life. Oh, and next time you choose to fall in love, perhaps you ought to think about bestowing your affections on a female who is free to accept them—not one already sold to another male."

Then the guard and the Sluggorn both turned and went back into The House of a Thousand Flowers, where Sonya had already been taken.

Davrik glared after them until the doors closed behind them. Then he rose and brushed himself off. He wasn't hurt but he'd put on a convincing show of a male who was defeated and out of options—which he most certainly was *not*.

It was time for plan B.

FORTY-SIX

SONYA

S onya felt despair fill her as she was dragged back up to her room by the hulking Thorian guard. There really was no getting out of here—that was, until that horrible Grox came to collect her. She was being sold to him—the Trollox was going to own her and then he would put his disgusting baby inside her!

Just the thought made her feel both nauseated and right on the edge of madness. Also, her ankle was itching terribly. Sonya supposed that was an after-effect of the pain chip that had apparently been implanted there.

She hadn't known anything about it and finding out had been a nasty surprise—the moment she'd gotten a little way away from the perimeter of the building, she'd felt bolts of debilitating, fiery pain shooting up and down her leg. It had caused her right leg to buckle and she had been frozen in place, making her an easy target for the guards.

Speaking of guards, the Thorian who had her by the arm was taking her right back up to her room on the penthouse floor at the top of the building. She knew that Davrik had promised to come for her, but how could he possibly do that when she was stuck at the tip-top of the alien skyscraper?

As she was thinking this, the guard opened the door to her room and thrust her inside.

“Stay there,” he growled, his slitted eyes narrowing. “Sir Grox will be coming to get you—then you'll know the meaning of pain!”

And with an ugly laugh, he slammed the door shut behind her.

Feeling completely dejected, Sonya lay down on the bed and gave in to misery. Sobs shook her as she curled into a ball. She'd rather be dead than owned by that horrible Trollox! She

Suddenly a noise penetrated her consciousness. Looking up with wet eyes, she saw a sleek silver ship hovering just outside the floor-to-ceiling windows that made up two of the walls of her room.

“What in the world?” she whispered, sitting up and swiping at her eyes. “Who—?”

Just then, a burning beam of red light came from the front of the ship. It traced the frame of one of the windows with exact precision as Sonya followed it with her eyes. The next thing she knew, an enormous rectangular pane of glass had fallen inward to shatter on the floor of her room.

“Oh!” she gasped, putting up an arm to shield her eyes. What was going on? The wind from outside suddenly swirled in, whipping her hair around her face and sending a cold chill through her.

The silver ship turned so that it was presenting its side to her. Then a hatchway opened and Sonya saw a familiar figure standing there.

“Davrik!” she breathed. The big Kindred hadn’t been kidding—he really had come for her!

Even as she thought that, a metal rod shot from the side of the ship and buried itself in the building, right below where the window had been cut out. The rod began to expand and flatten out rapidly until it had formed a narrow silver bridge between The House of a Thousand Flowers and Davrik’s ship.

Davrik took a step onto the bridge and she saw that he had a kind of harness strapped around his waist that tethered him to the ship. He held out a hand to her and shouted, but the wind whipped his words away.

That didn’t matter though, Sonya was already at the sill of the broken window, the glass crunching under her shoes. She could see Davrik reaching for her—about fifteen feet away. She was about to run across to him...but then she made the mistake of looking down.

The drop was hundreds of feet to a busy street below. Even the hovercars that were on several different light tracks

looked like ants and they were flying far *above* the pavement.

“Oh God!” Sonya muttered, feeling her stomach lurch. She’d always had a fear of heights—it was one reason she couldn’t be on the swim team in high school—she simply couldn’t make herself go off the high dive. And that was a short distance compared to being on the top of a skyscraper!

“Baby girl, come to me!” she heard Davrik shouting.

Sonya bit her lip and clutched at the empty window frame. The silver bridge looked so *narrow*.

And then, behind her, she heard the door to her room open.

“...think you’ll find that Sonya is safe and sound and waiting for you, Sir Grox,” Oozle’s voice burbled.

Turning her head, she saw the Sluggorn slime his way into her room, followed by the huge, hulking form of the Trollox. It took them a moment to see what was going on but when they did, all seven of Grox’s yellow eyes widened in angry surprise.

“She’s escaping!” squealed the middle head and then the other two heads began making loud, whooping sounds almost like a police siren, Sonya thought. “*Whoo—whoo—whoo!*”

“Baby girl, come—*hurry!*”

She looked away from them and saw Davrik reaching for her. He was out on the metal bridge himself, halfway to her with his hand outstretched. There was a look of anxiety on his strong features.

“Grab her!” Oozle snarled and she saw the Sluggorn was sliding as fast as he could, though he had to pick his way around the shattered glass. The Trollox had no such hindrance—Grox was wearing huge, hobnailed boots so he simply came crunching over the broken window glass, reaching for her with both meaty paws.

For a moment, Sonya felt frozen. Then a low, feminine voice whispered in her ear,

“Go now, daughter! You will not be given another chance to escape!”

Sonya had no idea who was speaking to her, but as the voice spoke, a sudden rush of courage flooded her. Hadn't she been thinking she'd rather be dead than owned by Grox? Well, here was her chance to prove it! Keeping her eyes on Davrik instead of the horrible drop below, she stepped out onto the silver bridge.

“That's right, baby girl—come here! Come on!” Davrik reached for her and Sonya took another step and another and another. The wind whipped all around her like an invisible hand, blowing her curls around her face and plastering her gown to her body. Still, she kept moving, keeping her eyes on Davrik's outstretched hand.

But just as she was only a few feet from the big Kindred, the pain chip in her ankle sent a stabbing bolt of burning pain up her right leg.

Sonya screamed breathlessly as her knee buckled. A searing, stabbing agony that made it impossible to think of taking another step had enveloped her. It felt like someone had set all the bones in her right leg on fire!

Then the bridge under her feet shook and the metal groaned, as though something extremely heavy had been placed on it. Turning her head she saw that Grox was right behind her. He was climbing out the window and one enormous foot was already planted on the bridge which was clearly struggling to hold the weight of the ten-foot tall Trollox.

“Be careful, Sir Grox!” Oozle exclaimed behind him. “Do be careful! We have other flowers you may have, you know!”

“No! We want Songbird Sonya!” the middle head shouted. Meanwhile, the other two heads were still keeping up their whooping siren wail. “She is the female who will bear our heir. We only want her!”

“Well, you can’t have me!” Sonya shouted. Somehow, she found the strength to take another step, despite the horrible burning agony in her leg.

It’s just the chip sending you pain signals—your legs are fine, she lectured herself as the pain hit her again and her knees wobbled alarmingly. *You’re going to be fine!*

“That’s right, baby girl!” Davrik shouted, reaching for her. “Come on—you’re almost there!”

And that was when the bridge shook again. Sonya gasped and pinwheeled her arms, trying to keep her already shaky balance. Turning her head, she saw that Grox had both feet on the bridge now—but it was clear the thin silver structure hadn’t been meant to hold such immense weight. Nevertheless, the enormous Trollox came towards her, his heavy feet making the bridge bounce and sway with each step. Looking down, Sonya could see the metal beginning to buckle, right in the middle, halfway between the building and Dravik’s ship.

“Oh no!” she gasped. “It’s going to—”

With a shriek of metal tearing like paper, the middle of the bridge suddenly gave way. As the Trollox fell—all three heads howling—towards the street far below, Sonya slipped backwards. She reached for Davrik, who was still standing on the end of the bridge that was connected to the ship. It had remained stable somehow, though the other side was gone, falling into the void along with the howling Trollox.

“Sonya!” he shouted, reaching for her.

Sonya grabbed for the big Kindred’s hand...and missed.

She let out a breathless scream and then she was plummeting downward with the pavement rushing up to meet her.

FORTY-SEVEN

LAN'ARA

“Lan'ara! It's so good to see you again!” Throwing protocol to the winds, Commander Sylvania enveloped Lan'ara in a big hug.

Lan'ara hugged her back, feeling the other woman's genuine happiness to have her back aboard the Mother Ship. It felt wonderful to know she'd been missed but the joy of seeing her friends and coworkers again was considerably muted by the sorrow of knowing she would soon be parted from Nate forever.

Speaking of Nate, she could feel a complex mixture of emotions coming from her big human. Uppermost in his mind at the moment, was excitement to see his old friends. Simon and Oliver had come to meet them in the Docking Bay along with Commander Sylvania and now the three men were pounding each other on the back and shouting, which seemed to be the human male way of showing affection.

“You old son of a bitch! Never thought we'd see you again!” Oliver was saying as he hugged Nate.

“We thought you were gone for good,” Simon added, joining the hug.

“You boys oughta know you can't get rid of me that easily,” Nate answered, grinning at them both.

But under his excitement at being reunited with his friends, Lan'ara could feel his concern for her and his worry about what would happen between them in the future. Even his mildly negative emotions made her feel drained—though not *quite* as much as before. Still, the fact was that being near him drained her, despite the time they'd spent filling her emotional reservoir when he tasted her.

Lan'ara wanted to hold onto that memory tightly—it had been incredibly hot and intimate. And it was doubtless going

to be the last such encounter they would share, since they were headed to the Sacred Grove to get their partial Bond severed.

Shouldn't have let him taste me, she thought ruefully. It only strengthened the Bond—which means it's going to be that much more painful when the priest breaks it!

She'd wanted to go even further, though. Her throat was dry and aching and her tongue craved the taste of his seed. She hadn't been lying when she'd told Nate that female Kindred had a biological need to drink the cream of their men.

But if I had done that, I never would have been able to let him go, she thought to herself. Even if being near him killed me.

The call from the Mother Ship had come at just the right time—keeping her from taking Nate's long, hard shaft in her mouth and sucking his cream right out of him.

Just the thought of that—of leaning over him and taking his shaft in her mouth as he moaned her name and stroked her hair made Lan'ara feel wet and hot all over again. She couldn't help thinking how cruelly unfair it was that the two of them had turned out to be incompatible. She simply couldn't withstand Nate's negative emotions—they were too intense now that the Soul Bond had started to form between them. Lan'ara couldn't imagine what they would be like if the Bond was complete. They would probably kill her.

Which meant there was no other option than to take Nate straight to the Sacred Grove and get their partial Bond severed as soon as possible.

“Will you excuse us?” she asked Commander Sylvania as she beckoned for Nate. “I'm afraid we have some urgent business in the Sacred Grove.”

“Oh? Is everything all right?” Commander Sylvania raised one eyebrow but didn't try to stop her from going.

“I'll tell you later...if I can,” Lan'ara promised.

“Very well.” Sylvania nodded. “I do have some news for you—about the human girl you asked me to look for earlier,” she added.

“Really?” Lan’ara’s heart jumped. “Is she well?”

“We’re not sure—but we *are* tracking her. I don’t have anything definite yet,” Sylvania admitted.

“Then let me know when you do, please.” Lan’ara sighed. “For now, we have to go.”

“Of course.” Sylvania squeezed her shoulder comfortingly. “I can tell you have a lot on your mind.”

“I do,” Lan’ara admitted. Then, with a heavy heart, she nodded at Nate. “Come—we need to go find a priest.”

“Coming, sweetheart.” Nate nodded at his two old friends and followed her towards the lifts.

Lan’ara kept her chin high as they walked, but inside she was in turmoil. She just hoped they could get this over quickly because she was afraid she was going to break down completely.

The thought of losing Nate was so awful she couldn’t bear to contemplate it—all she could do was forge ahead and try not to cry.

FORTY-EIGHT

NATE

“I see no need for the two of you to be parted—or for me to sever your Bond.”

“What?” Nate looked up, feeling a mixture of surprise and hope. The Kindred priest was a tall male with green streaks in his dark brown hair. He also had the strange green-within-green eyes which Lan’ara had told him was a sign that the priest had been serving the Kindred Goddess for a long time. A long white robe swathed his tall form and fell to his feet, which were bare.

Nate and Lan’ara were kneeling in the Sacred Grove—a place in the middle of the Mother Ship that looked like an enchanted forest out of a Disney Movie—at least to Nate’s eyes. There was lush green and purple grass underfoot and all the trees had green and purple leaves.

After landing in the Docking Bay of the huge ship, Nate had scarcely had time to greet his old friends, Oliver and Simon, before Lan’ara had taken him to the Sacred Grove.

“I can’t bear to put this off any longer,” she’d said and Nate had thought she looked like she might cry. “We must go and get our Bond severed.”

Nate had wanted to ask her why and beg her not to, but he understood where she was coming from. He was a danger to her—both emotionally and physically. So though they were incredibly attracted to each other, he would have to give her up. Though God knew he didn’t want to.

But now the Kindred priest, who was the only male Kindred Nate had seen on the whole huge ship so far, was saying that wasn’t true. He was saying...what was he saying?

“Wait a minute!” Nate exclaimed. “Are you saying we should stay together?”

“Do you *want* to stay together?” The priest cocked an eyebrow at him.

“Hell yes, I want to stay together with Lan’ara—I’m fucking in *love* with her!”

The minute the words left his lips, Nate knew they were true. He’d started falling for Lan’ara from that first moment he’d opened his eyes and found himself floating in the milky blue waters of the Outermost Lake with her lovely face looking down into his. And his feelings had grown exponentially in the days to follow. But still, he was wary of being with her.

“I *hurt* her though,” he admitted, looking at Lan’ara, whose eyes were also filled with hope. “I mean, not just with my emotions—though those are hard for her to stand too. But also, I, uh, blacked out several times and choked her!”

It was hard to admit and he saw the grave look on the priest’s face when he finally got it out.

“He didn’t mean to do it, though!” Lan’ara said quickly. “He was triggered by different noises or situations and it drew him back to his violent past. He thought I was the enemy—the Scourge!”

“I will look into you again—more deeply this time,” the priest said to Nate. “Brace yourself.”

It was good advice and Nate clenched his jaw as he felt the Kindred priest place a hand on his head...and then enter his mind for the second time since they’d knelt before him. The feeling was like having someone wander through your mind like it was a library and they were looking for just the right book to check out. He felt the priest pulling out various volumes, searching for the truth.

And then the wandering fingers found an especially sensitive area.

“*Hmm,*” came a voice in his brain. “*I believe I see the problem—there is a wound here which is almost but not quite fully healed.*”

“What...what can you do about it?” Nate asked through gritted teeth. Having the Kindred priest in his mind wasn’t nearly as bad as having the AllFather there, back when he’d

been captured, but it was still damned uncomfortable! It made him feel incredibly vulnerable and exposed.

“Yes, the AllFather—he is the source of the wound. Without his interference you would not have experienced the breaks in your consciousness,” the priest informed him. *“Your experiences with him have given you what the humans call PTSD—Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. But what is broken, may be healed with the help of the Goddess,”* he added.

Nate realized that the last words had been spoken aloud and that he no longer felt an alien presence in his head. Opening his eyes, he looked up at the priest who towered above them both, since he and Lan’ara were still kneeling in the grass.

“I saw the break in his mind and I also noted that you made a good start in healing him,” the priest said, speaking to Lan’ara.

“I gave him my Healing Nectar,” she admitted in a low voice. “But though it helped some, I am still drained by Nate’s negative emotions.”

“That is because his healing is incomplete,” the priest told her. “But if the two of you wish it, you *can* complete the healing—at a cost.”

“Of course we wish it!” Lan’ara said quickly.

“But what’s the cost?” Nate demanded. “I don’t want Lan’ara to have to make the nectar for me again—giving it to me last time damn near killed her!”

“No more Healing Nectar is required,” the priest assured him. “The two of you must simply go on with your Claiming period—but you must move *slowly*. The more good feelings you generate through physical intimacy, the more Lan’ara will be able to build a barrier that can protect her from your negative emotions.” He looked at Lan’ara. “I saw the beginning of such a barrier when I looked into your minds—can you not feel it?”

Lan’ara frowned.

“You know, I *do* remember thinking that Nate’s negative emotions weren’t *quite* as draining as they had been before we uh...before we were intimate this last time.”

She blushed as she spoke but the priest was matter-of-fact.

“There is no shame in intimacy with the one the Goddess has set aside just for you,” he told her. “I can sense your thirst for your mate-to-be’s seed. You must drink your fill.”

“Uh...what?” Nate looked back and forth between them uncertainly.

“I’m simply saying that the two of you must worship each other’s bodies,” the priest said. “In this way, Lan’ara can slowly build the barrier that she can raise or lower at will. That way, if you are having painfully negative emotions that might drain her, she can protect herself. That should allow the two of you to stay together and eventually to Bond.”

“How long must we wait?” Lan’ara asked. She cast a shy, sidelong glance at Nate. “I hunger for my human in more than one way, Your Holiness.”

Nate felt a surge of desire.

“I’m hungry for you too, sweetheart,” he growled hoarsely.

But the priest frowned and shook his head.

“Let me caution you to take things *slowly*. If you Bond too fast, there will be a price.”

“What price?” Nate demanded. “I don’t want to hurt Lan’ara!”

“Actually, it is *you* who would be hurt—or rather, weakened—nearly to the point of death,” the priest warned them. “It’s a matter of restoring balance. For the entire time the two of you have been together, you have been taking from Lan’ara and she has been giving of herself in order to heal you. The emotional energy balance between the two of you is vastly unequal.” He raised both hands, one held high above his

head and the other down low, by his waist to show the inequality.

“I understand that,” Nate said humbly. “But are you saying that if we Bonded now, the balance would be restored—things would be even again?”

“Yes, it would, but in the process, all of the healing and energy you drained from Lan’ara would be sucked out of you and restored to her,” the priest cautioned. “She would feel fine. But you would be drained—maybe for just a few days but possibly for much longer.”

“Drained how? I don’t want to hurt Nate anymore than he wants to hurt me!” Lan’ara exclaimed.

“It wouldn’t affect his physical or mental health—just his energy levels,” the priest explained. “He would feel extremely weak and tired and be unable to move or do things for himself—such helplessness can be difficult for a large, healthy male. As I said before, it’s better for the two of you to take things slowly—restore some of the balance between you through physical pleasure before you attempt Bonding.”

“We understand,” Lan’ara said, bowing her head.

“Yeah, we get it.” Nate nodded.

He was disappointed because he *wanted* to be Bonded with Lan’ara—to have the Soul-deep connection that she had told him so much about. But on the other hand, he was relieved—they didn’t have to be parted! They could stay together—they just had to take things slow.

“Take your time, my children,” the priest said to them. “When you are eventually ready, your Bonding will complete the barrier in Lan’ara’s mind and also completely cure your PTSD, Nate. It will heal both of you, but it cannot be rushed.”

“Truly?” Lan’ara’s eyes were shining as she looked up at the priest. “All we have to do to heal both of us is Bond?”

The priest nodded firmly.

“Exactly so.” His voice softened. “I know the two of you do not wish to be parted and I am here to tell you, you *don’t*

have to be. The Goddess made the two of you for each other, so yes—all you have to do is Bond...in the fullness of time, though. Not right away.”

Nate felt like his heart might burst. Turning to Lan’ara, he took her hands in his.

“Sweetheart, you’re what I want—all I want,” he said hoarsely. “You’ve saved me so many times and I’m so in love with you. But this has to be your decision. If you want the two of us to Bond—”

“Of course I want to Bond with you!” Lan’ara threw her arms around his neck and pressed herself against him. “That’s all I’ve ever wanted, from the moment we started Dream-sharing!”

Nate crushed her to him and buried his face in her hair, breathing in her warm, feminine fragrance. Gods, he loved her so damn much! He couldn’t wait to make her his completely. He knew they had to take things slowly, but right now, he just wanted to feel close to her.

“Come on,” Lan’ara whispered in his ear. “Let’s go to my suite so we can be alone together.”

Nate rose to his feet, pulling her up with him.

“Lead the way.”

“Thank you so much, Your Holiness,” Lan’ara said to the priest, who nodded gravely and smiled.

“May the Goddess shine her light upon your relationship,” he murmured.

Unable to wait any longer, Nate swung his bride-to-be, (because he fully intended to marry her too, as well as Bonding with her,) up into his arms.

“Oh!” Lan’ara gave a little gasp. “Nate, what are you doing?”

“Taking you to the suite,” he growled softly. “Just tell me where to go, baby. I can’t wait to have you all to myself.”

FORTY-NINE

DAVRIK

T here was no time to think—Davrik dove off the bridge. He *had* to catch Sonya. And if he couldn't, well then, he'd rather die with her than lose her again.

Pressing the button at the center of the harness which connected him to the ship, he played out all the extra line and prayed it would be enough. Putting his arms flat to his sides and keeping his legs straight, he streamlined his body as much as he could. He could see her below him, screaming as she fell, but would he be able to catch her before the line in his harness ran out?

Please Goddess, he prayed fiercely as he fell. Please let me catch her! And if I can't, let me die with her. I don't want to live without the female you set aside for me—Sonya is the other half of my soul! Please!

The Goddess made no answer but she must have heard him, because he was rapidly gaining on Sonya. And then—oh, praise The Mother of All Life—he had her in his arms!

Sonya was still screaming as he curled his arms around her tightly and braced for the inevitable jerk when the line went taut. Barely half a second later, it did—the force almost pulled her from his arms, but Davrik tightened his grip grimly and held on.

“Oh my God!” she gasped against his chest as they swayed together. “Oh God, what—”

“It's all right—I've got you, baby girl,” Davrik told her. His voice was hoarse with emotion as he held her close. “Hold on to me,” he told her. “I have to press the button to bring us back up to the ship.”

Sonya wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tightly. Keeping one arm around her, Davrik reached down and pressed the recall button on the harness around his waist.

For a moment, nothing happened. And then, slowly, they began to be pulled upwards towards the waiting ship which was still hovering far above them.

“I can’t believe it,” Sonya whispered in his ear. “You came for me...and you caught me! I thought I was going to die!”

“Never!” Davrik said fiercely. “You’re never dying again, baby girl! You’re mine now and I’m never letting you go.”

“Never dying *again?*” she asked, a look of confusion on her lovely face.

“Don’t worry about it,” Davrik told her. “Just hold on tight—we’re almost to the ship.”

As he spoke, they reached the broken metal bridge and he was able to clamber back onto the side that still held. It was a precarious business but he kept one arm looped securely around Sonya’s waist the whole time, making sure she was in no danger of falling.

At last they made their way back inside the ship and he was able to shut the door and seal both of them inside, away from the howling wind.

“All right, baby girl?” he asked Sonya, who was sitting on the floor shaking and panting. At first he thought she was still in shock from nearly plummeting to her death, but then he realized something else was wrong. “What is it—what’s wrong?” he asked anxiously.

“Can...can we do something about the pain chip in my ankle?” she asked, her voice tight and her face twisted in agony. “It feels like my bones are on fire and it hurts so *much!*”

“Of course, baby,” Davrik said quickly. “But first I need to get us away from Yonnie Six before that fucking Sluggorn sends anyone after us. Can you hang on just a minute?”

“I...I’ll try.” She nodded shortly and he could see she was doing her best to bear the pain the chip was giving her.

“I’ll make it fast,” he promised. “Here. Let’s get you settled.”

He scooped her up off the floor and deposited her carefully on the large loveseat that his own Sonya had picked out while decorating the inside of the long-range shuttle. She’d said that it needed “a woman’s touch” and had proceeded to redo the whole thing, much to his bemusement, Davrik remembered. He couldn’t help thinking how he had come within a hairsbreadth of losing her *again*. Thank the Goddess that hadn’t happened!

With a final look over his shoulder, he ran to the cockpit and slipped into the pilot’s chair. Gripping the steering yoke tightly, he piloted the ship up and out of the atmosphere of Yonnie Six. He checked the scanners and saw to his relief that no one was following him. Sending another prayer of thanks to the Goddess, he set a course for the general direction of the Kindred Mother Ship. Later he would call them and ask if they could fold space to bring him and Sonya back more quickly.

But first he had to tend to the pain chip in her ankle.

FIFTY

SONYA

S onya felt the ship moving upward and it seemed that the further it went, the worse the pain in her leg got. In fact, the burning sensation was spreading through her whole body now—it felt like her whole skeleton was on fire inside her! She writhed in agony, nearly falling off the couch where Davrik had left her. It hurt—hurt so *much!*

Then, abruptly, it stopped.

She collapsed back on the cushions, panting and gasping and blinked tears out of her eyes. The pain had gotten so bad that for a moment she was sure she might throw up and she had to breathe deeply to control the nausea it had caused.

Slowly, the feeling that she was going to lose her lunch subsided and Sonya was able to relax. Experimentally, she wiggled her right ankle from side to side. To her relief, there was still no pain.

“Thank God!” she breathed. She didn’t know why the pain chip had stopped working but she was incredibly grateful that it had. And now that the horrible pain was gone, she had a moment to consider her incredibly narrow escape.

He caught me—he actually dove off the bridge and caught me, she thought as she remembered the horrible sensation of falling through the air. And just moments later the line had gone taut and they had jerked to a stop. Which meant that if Davrik had hesitated, even for a split second, he wouldn’t have had enough cable to catch her in time.

But what if the cable had snapped, sending them both to their death? They both might have ended up splattered on the ground like that horrible Trollox! Davrik had risked himself to save her without hesitation.

“He *must* really love me,” Sonya murmured to herself. But why? They had only known each other a few days—why was the big Kindred so devoted to her?

Her mind flashed back to his strange turn of phrase —“*You’re not going to die again,*” —wasn’t that what he had said? What had he meant by that? How could she die *again* when she’d never died in the first place?

Sonya frowned. There was some mystery here and she wanted to know what it was. She’d always had an inquiring mind and loved reading thrillers and mysteries—something told her there was more going on in this situation than Davrik was telling her.

But for right now, she was just incredibly grateful to be safe and pain free. With a sigh, she relaxed fully for the first time in ages and let herself drift.

FIFTY-ONE

NATE

“This is my suite—I hope you’ll feel at home here,” Lan’ara said, smiling shyly as Nate stepped through the metal door still holding her in his arms.

“I’m sure I will, baby—but right now, all I want to see is your bedroom. Or maybe here will do.”

Nate brought her into the living area which was furnished with a large couch sitting in front of a fireplace. The moment he got near it, blue and gold flames leapt up from a bed of crystalline rocks and pebbles heaped at the bottom of the grate. The fire didn’t give much heat but it sent a magical glow through the suite as the overhead lights dimmed to give a romantic vibe.

“Mmm—nice.” Nate smiled approvingly. “So the fire comes on automatically?”

“I have it set this way because I love the light,” she admitted and shifted restlessly in his arms. “Nate, please—now that we’re alone, I’m longing to taste you!”

Nate felt his cock surge in the loose white trousers he still wore.

“Wouldn’t mind tasting you again either, baby,” he growled. Carrying her to the couch, he set her gently down on one of the cushions. But before he could sit down beside her, Lan’ara had leaned forward and was tugging at the drawstring of his trousers.

“Please,” she murmured, freeing his cock and sliding one soft little hand around his aching shaft. “Let me go first, Nate—my throat is parched with thirst for your cream.”

Nate felt a surge of pure lust go through him at her soft words and the way she was looking up at him with such longing.

“Well, sure sweetheart,” he said hoarsely. “Help yourself.”

This was all the invitation that Lan’ara needed. Leaning forward, she rubbed her cheek against his hard shaft like a cat marking its territory. She seemed to like his scent...and possibly to be marking him with her scent as well because she rubbed both cheeks against him and pressed close to breathe him in. Then she put out her little pink tongue and began swirling it around his swollen crown.

“*God!*” Nate groaned. He couldn’t stop watching as she “tasted” him for the first time. Her soft warm hands and her wet mouth felt incredible. He also loved the way her long, silky hair felt tickling his thighs as she leaned forward to take him deep into her mouth.

“Careful, sweetheart,” he warned hoarsely. His cock was on the larger side and he didn’t want her to choke. But Lan’ara surprised him by taking him even deeper.

Nate stroked her long, silky hair, being careful not to thrust or force her in any way. He didn’t want to hurt her—he already couldn’t believe how deep she was taking him.

“God, baby!” he growled softly, his eyes glued to the erotic sight of Lan’ara sucking him. Already he could feel his balls tightening and his shaft getting even harder. He’d been left with a bad case of blue balls after licking her sweet little pussy and being unable to jerk off afterwards. Now it seemed he was already going to come.

He wasn’t sure if he should warn her or what. She’d spoken about wanting to “swallow his cream” but did she really? In Nate’s experience, that wasn’t something most women wanted to do. Still, her hot wet mouth, the sight of her sucking him, and the light scratch of her nails against his thighs was driving him right over the edge.

“Baby, be careful!” he groaned. “I’m about to come—if you want to pull off, you’d better do it now!”

To his disappointment—but not his surprise—Lan’ara did pull off—but only for a moment.

“Nate, I *need* to drink your cream,” she murmured huskily, looking up at him. “I want to feel you coming in my mouth—shooting your seed down my throat. Please don’t ask me to pull off—I *need* to taste you.”

“God, baby...” Nate stroked her hair as he looked down at her. “Go on then—I’ll do my best to make a lot of cream for you,” he told her.

“Thank you, my love,” she murmured. Then she took him in her mouth again, her soft little fingers slipping between his thighs to stroke and fondle his aching balls as she swirled her tongue around his rock-hard shaft.

It was all too much for Nate. With a low groan, he finally let go. As the first jet shot from the tip of his cock, he heard Lan’ara hum in satisfaction and then she was swallowing—taking all he had to give and even sucking him for more.

Nate felt the pleasure arcing through his body like lightning as he watched her swallow every spurt. It felt like his orgasm went on and on—he didn’t know when he’d ever come so much! But Lan’ara never seemed satisfied, no matter how much he gave her.

At last he was finished—he’d come so hard that he actually felt light-headed!

“God, baby—think I need to sit down,” he murmured.

“Come sit by me on the couch,” Lan’ara invited.

Nate was glad to sink into the overstuffed cushions. The couch seemed to be made for someone his size, which wasn’t usual on Earth. The Mother Ship would certainly be a comfortable place to live, he thought.

But before he could vocalize that idea to Lan’ara, she was already curled up with her head in his lap. Since his cock was still out, she was able to take him in her hand.

Nate muffled a groan as she did her little “magic trick” as he thought of it, and made him hard all over again. Just moments before he would have sworn that he would need at least a day to recover from the extremely intense orgasm she’d

just given him, but now his cock was standing at attention all over again and begging for more.

And Lan'ara seemed eager to give it to him. With a hungry little moan, she sucked his shaft into her mouth again and began swirling her tongue around and around his length.

Nate groaned softly and stroked her hair. She was so beautiful and so intent on giving him pleasure and drinking even more of his cream and who was he to stop her?

Getting more comfortable on the couch, he leaned back and let her work on him. He had a feeling they weren't going to be leaving her suite for a long, *long* time.

FIFTY-TWO

LAN'ARA

Lan'ara couldn't help herself—no matter how much of Nate's cream she drank, she still felt thirsty for more. And with each salty spurt she swallowed, she felt the barrier the priest had talked about growing in her mind.

It also helped that Nate was giving her only positive emotions right now—lust and desire and love—which filled her inner reservoir to the brim. But still she needed *more*. It wasn't just the thirst for his cream growing inside her, she finally realized—she also felt achingly empty inside, between her legs.

Of course, this made sense. Since she had finally tasted Nate's seed, her body had probably decided that this meant they were about to Bond. So her pussy was begging to be filled with his long, hard shaft.

But we can't do that, Lan'ara reminded herself. The Priest told us to take things slowly!

Her body didn't know that, however and soon the need to be filled was like a deep, endless ache that gnawed at her with sharp teeth.

"Goddess!" she moaned, pulling away from Nate's shaft after drinking his cream for the fourth or fifth time—she had lost count by then.

"What is it baby? Did I hurt you somehow?" Nate's deep voice was anxious and she could feel his worry about injuring her or causing her pain. But the negative emotions drained her much less than they had earlier. In fact, the barrier that the priest had talked about seemed much stronger—like a flood wall in her mind that was halfway built and so was able to keep out some of the negative feelings that would otherwise rush in and drain her.

"No, no—you didn't hurt me," Lan'ara assured him quickly. "Please don't worry—it's nothing you did. It's just

that, well...tasting you has made me ache.”

“Made you ache?” Nate frowned and shook his head. “I don’t understand.”

“I need to be filled,” Lan’ara explained. “Here.” She pointed between her thighs. Her pussy felt swollen and hot under the fabric of her black uniform trousers and her nipples were aching to be sucked and played with. It almost felt like she was going into some kind of heat!

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?” Nate murmured. “Does your little pussy feel empty?”

Lan’ara was relieved that he understood her.

“Yes.” She nodded. “It’s because now that I’ve finally tasted your seed, my body thinks it’s time for us to Bond. But I know we can’t yet,” she added quickly. “The priest told us to take it slowly.”

“Just because we can’t Bond yet doesn’t mean I can’t help you out,” Nate growled softly. “Why don’t you straddle me—but take off your clothes first.”

Lan’ara did as he asked, quickly shedding her uniform trousers and blouse as well as her under garments and her black boots. When she was completely naked, she climbed into Nick’s lap and straddled him.

“God, baby—look at how hot and wet you’re getting for me,” he murmured, cupping her = mound in one big hand and one of her breasts in the other.

Lan’ara moaned and lowered herself more to rub against his thick fingers as he stroked and tugged her tight nipple.

“Nate, please! I need you!” she gasped as sparks of pleasure shot through her body.

“I know you do, sweetheart. Tell me, does this help?”

As he spoke, he slid two long fingers deep into her wet inner folds. He paused to caress the aching bud of her clit for a moment, then slid lower to thrust deep into her pussy mouth, filling her channel.

Lan'ara moaned breathlessly and threw back her head as he pierced her. It felt so *good!*

“You like this, baby?” Nick murmured. He was keeping his eyes fixed on her face as he thrust deep inside her. “You need me to finger-fuck your sweet little cunt for you?”

“Goddess, yes!” Lan'ara moaned, grinding against him. His fingers deep inside her really did feel amazing...But somehow she still needed *more*.

Nate seemed to sense her need because he stopped thrusting and looked into her face intently.

“This isn't quite doing it for you, is it baby?”

Lan'ara bit her lip.

“It *almost* is,” she murmured. “It's just...I still feel so *empty* inside—like I need something really *thick* to fill me. Something that will stretch my inner walls and press hard against the mouth of my womb.”

“You need a cock in you, don't you, baby?” Nate asked.

Hanging her head, Lan'ara nodded.

“But I know that isn't possible—we don't want to accidentally Bond too soon.”

“What exactly does Bonding entail, anyway?” he asked. As he spoke, he kept his fingers inside her and he was slowly circling the little pearl of her clit with his thumb. The intense sensations made Lan'ara moan softly and shift on his lap as her body begged for more.

“Bonding would be making love to completion—having you come deep inside me—inside my pussy.” Lan'ara blushed as she said it but at the same time she was so filled with desire she couldn't keep the need out of her voice. “That will form a Soul-Bond between us when you Claim me completely.”

“So as long as I don't come in you, we should be fine? I mean, we won't form a bond by accident?” he asked, still teasing her clit.

“Y-yes!” Lan’ara moaned. “I mean, no, we won’t Bond as long as...as you don’t fill me with your cream.” It was hard to think when he was teasing her clit and still tugging at her nipples at the same time.

“Well then, why don’t we try just having me slide inside you for a little while to fill you up?” Nate murmured.

Lan’ara looked at him hopefully.

“Do you think you could do that without coming inside me and accidentally Bonding us together?”

He gave a low chuckle.

“Sweetheart, you’ve sucked so much cream out of me, I doubt there’s a drop left! Yeah, I think I can handle it.”

“Oh, good!” Lan’ara couldn’t disguise her relief. She needed to be filled so badly she was nearly shaking by now. With trembling fingers, she reached between them and found his thick shaft. She guided it into her pussy, feeling the broad crown slip into her wet slit.

Nate was really big—as big as a Kindred male, she was sure—but she was so slippery from finally getting to taste his cream that she didn’t need Bonding Fruit.

“Take it easy, sweetheart—God, you’re so tight!” he groaned as she slowly lowered herself onto him, impaling herself on his thickness.

“It’s all right—you’re not hurting me,” Lan’ara panted, trying to reassure him. She could feel her inner walls stretching to accommodate him as he gave her exactly what she needed—she couldn’t stop now, even if it *had* been hurting—she needed to be filled too badly.

At last she felt him bottom out inside her, the head of his cock pressing hard against the hungry mouth of her womb.

“Ohhh!” she moaned, throwing back her head as her spine arched in pure ecstasy. *This* was what she needed! To be filled almost to the breaking point—her pussy stuffed full of a long, thick cock that was rock hard.

Nate groaned too.

“God, baby! So tight and wet and hot! Your little pussy is *heaven*.”

“You feel so good inside me,” Lan’ara told him. Cupping her breasts in both hands, she held them up to his mouth. “Suck me, Nate—suck my nipples while you fill my pussy.”

His eyes went half-lidded and a growl of pure desire and pleasure rose in his chest. Lan’ara felt the incredibly positive emotions like a hot wave washing over her skin—they increased her own need exponentially.

“My pleasure, baby,” he murmured and then sucked one of her tight nipples into his hot mouth as he kneaded her other breast in his big hand.

Lan’ara gasped as hot sparks flew between her pussy and her breasts, making her whole body feel warm with desire. Without really meaning to, she raised up a little bit so that a few inches of his thickness slid out of her, then sat down again so that she could feel the broad crown of his cock give the mouth of her womb a kiss.

That felt so good that she did it again...and then again and again. Soon Nate was moving with her, catching her rhythm and thrusting deep in her pussy.

“Ah...*ah!*” Lan’ara gasped as the head of his cock continued to give her womb rough, delicious kisses. Part of her thought they shouldn’t be doing this—they were risking a lot. But the need inside her wouldn’t let her stop—her entire body was crying out for him and she couldn’t stop herself from riding his thickness.

Nate let her nipple slip from his lips, and his big hands drifted from her breasts to her hips. She felt his long fingers grip her tightly as he pounded up into her.

“God, baby—so tight and wet!” he groaned. “Want you so much—need you so much!”

“I want you too! I need you too!” Lan’ara panted. She was gripping his broad shoulders and rolling her hips, arching her back as she rode him as hard as she could.

You have to stop—you need to stop! You're going to make him come and then you'll Bond too quickly! a little voice was shouting somewhere far back in her head. But it was easy to ignore when she felt her own pleasure growing and Nate's growing as well.

She still might have pulled back and stopped herself, but that was when one of his hands left her hips and slid between them. The pad of his thumb found the aching bud of her clit and began to rub as she rode him.

It was too much for Lan'ara—she'd been aching for his touch the whole time she was sucking him and drinking his cream. Now feeling him stroking her most sensitive area as he fucked her so deeply drove her completely over the edge.

“Oh, Nate!” she gasped, tightening her grip on his shoulders until her nails bit into his skin. “Oh Goddess—I can't help myself! I'm going to come!”

“Come for me, baby—come on my cock!” he growled. “Want to feel you coming all around me while I fill your sweet little pussy with my cream!”

“We...we shouldn't!” Lan'ara managed to pant. “We—oh, *Goddess!*”

And then she was coming, her inner walls quaking and trembling as they tightened around his invading shaft. It was almost as though she was trying to milk his seed out of him.

And though Nate had shot load after load of his cream down her throat, he still had enough to fill her completely and give her a very creamy pussy. Lan'ara felt the hot spurts as he shot deep inside her and at the same time she felt his pleasure peaking.

Oh Goddess, feels so good to have his cream in me! she thought. And followed by that was the knowledge that they had gone too far. *Shouldn't have done this—shouldn't have Bonded!*

“*It's too late for that, sweetheart,*” a deep voice spoke in her mind.

Lan'ara's eyes went wide as she looked into Nate's and realized what had happened—they really had Bonded! They were one now and he still seemed just fine.

“I feel perfectly all right,” Nate assured her through their newly forged link. *“I think the priest in the Sacred Grove must have been wrong.”*

“Are you su—?” Lan'ara started to say.

But before she could get the words all the way out, Nate's eyes rolled up in his head and he slumped back against the couch as he lost consciousness completely.

FIFTY-THREE

SONYA

“Are you all right, baby girl?”

Davrik’s deep voice woke her from a light doze and Sonya looked up at him.

“Oh, yes—for some reason the chip stopped hurting me as soon as we got away from Yonnie Six.”

“Must have gotten out of range of the transmitter,” he remarked. Kneeling at the end of the couch, he examined her right ankle. “We’ll still want to take it out as soon as we get to the Mother Ship.”

Sonya bit her lip apprehensively.

“Will it hurt?”

“No, baby girl—not a bit. I’ll make sure it’s completely painless.” Davrik rose and came to lay a hand on her forehead. “How are you feeling besides the ankle?”

“Still a little shaky but I’m doing better,” Sonya admitted as he brushed her hair away from her face. “I can’t believe you came diving after me when I fell,” she added. “You could have been killed!”

A determined look came over his strong features.

“I don’t give a damn about living if I can’t have you with me—I wasn’t about to lose you again.”

“*Again?*” There was that turn of phrase again—as though he’d known her and lost her in some previous life—which made no sense at all.

Davrik frowned.

“It’s complicated. The main thing is that you’re safe and away from Yonnie Six.”

“And now we’re headed to the Kindred Mother Ship?” Sonya asked.

He nodded.

“Yes—in fact, I need to go set a course and then give them a call and ask if they can fold space for us.” He cupped her cheek and leaned down to give her a gentle kiss that sent a pleasant shiver through her whole body. “You just relax while I get that all taken care of...and then we can talk. All right?”

Sonya felt a warm rush of something like love fill her. It shouldn't be possible to fall in love with someone in such a short time, but she couldn't help it—Davrik felt so *right*—it was as though they belonged together. And he had saved her at the risk of his own life—how could she not feel for him?

“All right,” she whispered.

“Good girl.” Davrik kissed her again—this time on the forehead. Then he straightened up and headed back for the front of the ship.

With a happy sigh, Sonya relaxed back against the soft cushions of the couch—it was remarkably comfortable and also extremely stylish—like something she would pick out herself.

In fact, looking around the living area of the ship, it occurred to her that the whole thing was furnished and decorated exactly to her taste. There were a lot of bright, bold colors and tribal patterns which she loved. There was even a bookshelf and when she squinted, she saw it was full of her favorite books. Well, most of them, anyway...

Being careful of her ankle, she stood and took a few steps. There was no pain at all, however, so she made her way over to the bookcase.

“Hmm...*Beloved...How Stella got her Groove Back...Jane Eyre*,” she murmured, reading aloud. Then she frowned—most of the books were old favorites of hers but she saw a few she'd never read before. What in the world was *Pride and Prejudice*? And she'd never heard of the author—who could Jane Austen be? There were several more of her books in the bookcase as well as a few other authors Sonya had never heard of.

She plucked one of the books off the shelf and opened it, meaning to read the first page and see if she liked the writing style. But before she got past the first sentence...

“It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife...” a coin dropped out of the pages of the book.

Sonya frowned and picked it up. It wasn't a coin at all, she realized after a moment—it was just shaped like one. The little flat silver disk was about the size of a quarter and it had a tiny button on one rounded edge.

She pushed the button and nearly dropped the disk in surprise when it suddenly started projecting images.

“What the hell?” she muttered as she watched the small holo-images—all about as big as her hand—popping up. The first one showed her and Davrik laughing and smiling in front of a mountain range. Only, she'd never been to the mountains, having lived her whole life in flat-as-a-pancake Florida. She'd always wanted to go, though.

That holo image faded and another took its place. This time she saw Davrik holding her in his arms and standing in front of the iconic *Welcome to Las Vegas* sign. Then a holo of the two of them in a casino, playing slot machines together. And another one of them at the Grand Canyon. Then there was a holo of Davrik hugging her in front of a giant redwood tree—the kind that only grew in California.

Sonya shook her head in bewilderment. She had never been to *any* of those places! How could he have pictures of the two of them together that she didn't remember taking? What the Hell was going on here?

Then the strangest holo of all popped up on the little silver projector—it was a picture of Davrik wearing a tux while Sonya herself was dressed in an absolutely gorgeous, frothy white wedding gown. The two of them were staring into each other's eyes and smiling—the glow of true love on their faces.

But again, Sonya had never taken such a picture—she had never been married. She'd had a few failed relationships before the Scourge invasion, but mostly she buried herself in her work. So how was this possible? Not only was it confusing, it was deeply creepy to think that the big Kindred had somehow gotten pictures of her in all these situations she had never even been in. She—

“Sonya? What are you... *Shit.*”

Sonya looked away from the holo projector to see Davrik standing in the doorway, frowning unhappily.

“Davrik, what *is* this?” she asked, holding out her hand with the holo projector, which was still cycling through impossible pictures—there seemed to be hundreds of them. “How did you get these?” she demanded, when he didn't answer. “Is this some kind of photo-manipulation or what?”

“No, no—it's nothing like that.” He sighed and ran a hand through his thick black hair. “All those holos are genuine, baby girl. Where did you find the projector?”

“In this book, uh, *Pride and Prejudice*,” Sonya said, nodding at the book which she had laid on the top of the bookcase to examine the holo coin. “I'd never heard of it so I opened it up and this fell out.”

“You've never heard of *Pride and Prejudice*?” He frowned. “But that's your favorite book! Or one of them, anyway.”

“How could it be when I've never heard of it? Davrik, what is going on here?” Sonya demanded, feeling shaky.

“There must not have been a Jane Austen in this universe,” he muttered, shaking his head.

“In this *universe*?” Sonya exclaimed. He was beginning to sound like a crazy person and she was stuck alone in a spaceship with him! Not only that but he was almost twice as tall as she was and immensely muscular—if he turned out to be some freaky serial killer, she was done for! There was no way she could fight him off and she didn't know this ship well enough to be able to hide anywhere...

Davrik must have seen her growing panic because he quickly shook his head.

“No, no, baby girl—don’t get upset. I promise there’s a rational explanation for all of this.”

“Then you better whip it out quick,” Sonya said in a shaky voice. “Because this is some crazy sounding shit!”

“I know, I know...” He sighed and raked a hand through his hair again. “Look, I was going to explain all this once we got back to the Kindred Mother Ship, but I think we need to talk about it now. All right?”

Sonya nodded warily.

“I’m listening.”

“First I need to get something to show you. Wait just one minute.”

He went back to the front of the ship and Sonya wondered if she ought to try and hide. But before she could find a good place, he was back. In one large hand he had something that looked like an ancient black and white Rubik’s Cube.

“What’s that?” Sonya asked flatly. She was still holding the holo coin which kept showing her images of herself and Davrik in situations she’d never been in.

“This is the Far Box—a device that enables you to cross into different parallel universes in the Multiverse,” Davrik explained. He went and sat on the couch, still holding the black and white cube carefully in one large hand.

“Wait—you’re kidding, right?” Sonya took a wary step towards him. “Are you trying to tell me you came from a whole other *universe*?”

“Yes,” he said simply. “I came here to find *you*, baby girl. To find what I lost.”

“What you lost? So...*this* isn’t *me*?” She nodded at the pictures the holo coin was still showing.

“It is...and it isn’t,” Davrik said heavily. “That’s the Sonya from *my* universe—the woman I loved and married and Bonded with. Then, five years ago, there was a...a shuttle crash.” He swallowed hard and a look of pain came over his face. “My Sonya died in that crash—I felt her light go out here...” He clenched a fist to his heart. “But I couldn’t get to her, couldn’t save her.”

“So...the other me—the Sonya from your universe is...is dead?” Sonya asked faintly. This got stranger and stranger and yet she had no urge to disbelieve him. The sincerity and pain on his face were all too real.

“She died in every universe but this one,” Davrik told her. “Only in this one universe in all the myriad of parallel universes did she—*you*—survive. I think it’s because this is the only universe where the Scourge took over Earth and the Kindred only came later. In every other universe you Bonded with a version of me and were killed in that shuttle crash.”

“Wait—so there are more Davriks too?” Sonya’s head was beginning to hurt.

“One in every universe—except this one,” he informed her. “I have no doppelganger here. At least, not one I’ve been able to identify. But this isn’t about me—it’s about *you*, baby girl. I’ve crossed time and space to get to you again—I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you earlier but I thought you might think I was crazy.”

“It *does* sound crazy,” Sonya admitted. Her head was still spinning from everything he’d told her. Slowly, she sank down onto the couch cushions, the holo coin still gripped in her hand. She watched as it played image after image of the other Sonya—the one Davrik had loved—laughing happily and looking completely contented. “She’s dead,” she whispered, looking at the holo images of her doppelganger.

“They’re all dead,” he said soberly. “All except you, baby girl.”

“Don’t call me that,” Sonya said tightly. She had finally gotten her head around what he was telling her and emotions were beginning to surface—none of them happy. “You don’t

care about me—not really,” she said, looking up at Davrik. “You just wanted a substitute for *her*—for the Sonya you lost.” She nodded at the happy, smiling woman who wasn’t her—who would never *be* her.

He shook his head unhappily.

“I was afraid you might think that when you finally found out. But it’s not like that, baby girl. I wasn’t just looking for a substitute—I swear it!”

“Oh, really? Because that’s the way it seems to me,” she snapped. “Why else would you come all the way to another universe?”

“I came because I couldn’t *not* come,” Davrik said hoarsely. “I came because you’re the other half of my soul and I can’t live without you!”

His impassioned words might have stirred something in her but then the holo-coin in her palm produced yet another image—this one of the other Sonya with her head thrown back in laughter. Her eyes were fixed on Davrik who was looking at her with an expression of such love and devotion written on his strong features that it made Sonya’s heart ache.

They belonged together, she realized. The other Sonya was happy because she had Davrik—and because she never went through what I did. She didn’t have to live through the Scourge invasion, running and hiding and then being captured and sold as a sex slave! She was happier than me—better than me.

“I’m sorry, Davrik, but I think this is all a mistake,” she said slowly. “You coming here to get me, I mean. Don’t misunderstand me—I’m grateful that you saved me from The House of Flowers and from that awful Trollox, I truly am. But I don’t think I could ever be the person you need me to be. I can’t be *your* Sonya. And I don’t want to be just a substitute or a stand-in, anyway. I thought you wanted me for *me*—when actually you just want a copy of *her* and I can’t be that.”

A look of loneliness and grief filled his face but he only nodded.

“I can understand why you’d feel that way. If you’d prefer, I’ll leave you aboard the Kindred Mother Ship instead of taking you back to my own universe. The Kindred here are 95 percent female instead of being 95 percent male as they are in my own world. I’m sure they’ll welcome you with open arms.”

Sonya wasn’t sure about the idea of living with strangers, even if they were mostly female—but where else did she have to go? Her home on Earth had been vaporized and she certainly wasn’t going back to The House of a Thousand Flowers.

“All right,” she said at last. “Let’s just get to the ship and then we can go our separate ways.”

“Agreed,” Davrik said heavily. “Excuse me—I’ll go call and ask them to fold space for us now.”

He rose and left the room, leaving Sonya behind. She watched him go, wondering why she felt so bad when this was clearly *not* her fault. After all, she hadn’t asked him to come looking for a replacement for his dead wife! She hadn’t asked him to trick her into caring for him, thinking she was what he wanted when in actuality, he just wanted his own Sonya back. She—

But her thoughts broke down as hot tears stung her eyes. She gripped the holo coin tightly in her hand, stopping its endless flow of images.

I wish I could be her—I wish I had her life. But I can’t and I don’t. I’m just me and apparently that’s not enough. I’m not her and I never will be.

Desolation filled her and she broke down and sobbed.

FIFTY-FOUR

DAVRIK

Davrik felt like shit, as the humans said. Of all the times he'd pictured this in his mind, all the times he'd tried to plan it, he had never envisioned it going this badly. He'd never imagined letting her go.

I came so far to find her! I can't lose her again! I can't give her up! argued a little voice in his head.

But he loved Sonya too much to keep her against her will. He wanted her happiness more than his own—he always had.

Maybe I can find some way to change her mind—some way to make her see that she's not just a substitute. She's Sonya—the one that I want! The only one for me in this or any other universe!

But there was no way to make her see that now. At the moment, she was feeling hurt and betrayed and she was in no mood to listen to him reason with her. He knew her well enough to understand that pushing would only make things worse.

Davrik decided the best thing to do would be to just call the Kindred Mother Ship and ask them to fold space. Maybe once Sonya had a little time to cool down and think things through, she'd be willing to consider a relationship between the two of them again. Until then, he would give her some space.

He couldn't think of anything else to do.

FIFTY-FIVE

LAN'ARA

“Nate? Oh my Goddess, Nate? Are you okay? Please—wake up!”

Lan'ara patted his cheeks, which were as pale as paper and then took him by the shoulders and shook him—which wasn't easy since he was so much bigger than her.

I've killed him! Oh my Goddess, we ignored the priest's warning and now I've killed him! she thought as Nate remained limp and unresponsive.

But then, just as she was about to run for help—even though she was completely naked—she heard a faint voice in her head.

“Easy, sweetheart,” it murmured, so softly that Lan'ara could barely hear it.

“Nate?” She looked down again and saw that his eyelids were just barely cracked open. “Are you all right? Talk to me!” she demanded.

“Can't. At least, not with my mouth,” he sent through their new link. *“So weak I can't...can't even move my lips.”*

“Oh, Goddess—I'm so sorry!” Lan'ara felt her eyes sting with guilty tears. “I never should have asked you to fill me! We never should have ignored the priest's orders!”

“Not your fault, sweetheart—I wanted it too,” he sent. *“But right now, just want to rest.”*

“Oh, of course. Let's get you settled and then I'll call for Commander Sylvania—she's a doctor too, you know. The best on the ship!”

At first Lan'ara thought about trying to get him to the sleeping chamber so she could tuck him into bed, but she soon realized that was going to be impossible. If he was so weak he couldn't even move his lips, he would be complete dead weight and there was no way she could drag his muscular bulk

to the bed all on her own—he was simply too big for her to move.

The best she could do was to lower him down and raise his legs so that he was lying full length on the couch. She fastened his trousers and covered him with a blanket and put a pillow under his head. Then, panting from the effort of shifting him even that much, she looked down at him anxiously.

“Will you be all right while I go for help?”

“I’ll be fine,” he sent back to her. *“Just going to...take a nap.”*

“All right then—I’ll call for help.”

Lan’ara went quickly to her desk and pulled out a thin golden wire which she settled firmly around her temples. This was a device called a “Think-me” which the Kindred could use to communicate telepathically with each other even if they didn’t have a Bonding link, like the one she now had with Nate.

Lan’ara concentrated hard, sending out a call to her commanding officer and after a moment, she heard Sylvania’s thoughts in her head.

“Lan’ara? What is it? What’s wrong? You’ve never bespoken me before,” came the worried voice in her mind.

Rapidly, Lan’ara explained what had happened.

“And now Nate is in such bad shape he can’t even move his lips to talk to me!” she finished. *“I’m so worried about him! Please come, Sylvania!”*

“On my way,” came the reply. *“I’m just going to swing by the Med Center to grab some equipment and I’ll be right there. Just hold tight and call me if things get worse.”*

“Thank you!” Lan’ara sent and broke the connection.

As she waited for Sylvania, she got dressed and then paced anxiously around the living area. Nate was still lying perfectly still on the couch. He appeared to be resting peacefully and when she reached out carefully through their

new link, she didn't feel any anxiety—just a soul-deep weariness that seemed to have filled him completely.

Normally, such an intense tiredness would have affected her too but it wasn't, Lan'ara realized. She was surprised to discover that something else the priest in the Sacred Grove had predicted had come true—she now had a natural barrier in her mind which she could raise or lower, depending on if she wanted to let Nate's emotions in or not. It seemed that she had instinctively raised it when the extreme fatigue overtook him—possibly it was her mind protecting itself.

Well, *that* was good at least, but Nate's state of being so tired he couldn't even move, definitely *wasn't*. How long would it last? The priest had said it might go on for days or even longer—that was a terrible position for the man she loved to be in for so long!

At last Sylvania arrived carrying a bag of medical equipment and supplies. She examined Nate thoroughly, frowning and shaking her head when he was too weak to even raise a hand—or even one single finger—for her. Finally she took Lan'ara by the arm and towed her into the food prep area to speak privately.

“Is it bad?” Lan'ara asked anxiously, being sure to keep the barrier in her mind up between herself and Nate for privacy. “Is it...is it *permanent*?”

“Unfortunately, there's no way to tell for sure.” Sylvania shook her head, looking grave. “I've never seen a case like this. He's acting like someone with extreme anemia, though I can't find anything wrong with his iron levels—or *any* of his levels for that matter.”

“*I* did this to him.” Lan'ara hung her head. “The priest in the Sacred Grove said that if we Bonded too quickly, all the energy Nate had been taking from me when I tried to heal him would come rushing back to me all at once. We knew we shouldn't Bond right away—the priest told us to take things slowly. But we just...”

“You just got carried away, that's all.” Sylvania gave her a comforting hug. “Listen, please don't blame yourself—I'm

sure Nate will regain his strength eventually—it's just going to take some time.”

“How long, though?” Lan'ara bit her lip. “He's a warrior, Sylvania! Being flat on his back, unable to move is going to be hard on him! And if it goes on for days and days or even months or *years*...” But she couldn't finish her thought. A cold hand closed around her throat at the idea of what she had done to her new mate.

“I honestly don't know how long,” her CO said. “But I'd like to move him to the Med Center for observation—and for intravenous fluids and nutrition, since he's obviously too weak to eat or drink.”

“Oh, Goddess!” Lan'ara put her face in her hands as tears stung her eyes again. “I can't believe this!”

“You know we'll take good care of him and you can be with him as much as you want—though honestly what he needs right now is just to sleep, I think,” Sylvania said comfortingly. “Listen, if it will make you feel any better at all, I have more news about the human girl you asked me to track.”

“You do?” Lan'ara swiped at her eyes. She'd called the Mother Ship some time ago and asked them to start searching specifically for one human woman—Nate's little sister. But she hadn't told him because she didn't want to get his hopes up.

“Yes, we do.” Sylvania nodded firmly. “We have a lock on her—unfortunately, she was captured by Scourge invaders and from what we can tell, she's headed to the Father Ship.”

“Oh my Goddess! Oh, no!” Lan'ara gasped. “Nate will never forgive me if I let his little sister go through what he went through himself! We have to save her!”

“She's your mate's younger sibling then? I'd like to save her, but I'm not sure how.” Commander Sylvania frowned. “We've been developing a new weapon to use against the Scourge you know—one that works on the principles of emotional energy harmonics. But we haven't found anyone

who can wield it yet and besides, before we could use it, we'd have to get it aboard the Father Ship."

"Isn't there some way to do that?" Lan'ara asked desperately.

Sylvania shook her head.

"The Scourge aren't just going to welcome us in—we'd need to somehow infiltrate the Father Ship by stealth. Which is difficult since none of us looks anything like a Scourge."

Lan'ara's heart sank.

"What can we do then?"

"For right now, we're going to get your new mate tended to," Sylvania said firmly. "I'm going to call a transport unit to get him to the Med Center. After that, we'll meet again and make a plan."

"All right." Lan'ara sighed heavily but she knew there wasn't a lot that could be done at the moment. Unless they could find some way to infiltrate the Father Ship, there was no way to get Nate's little sister back from the Scourge.

Please, Goddess, she prayed silently. Please send us some help—send an answer. I can't leave Nate's little sister to be tortured and mind-raped—I have to save her somehow!

It was the least she could do after nearly killing the man she loved.

FIFTY-SIX

DAVRIK

“Commander Davrik! It’s so good to see you back with us,” Commander Sylvania said, coming up to him.

Davrik was surprised to see her in the Med Center, but then he remembered that her male counterpart in his own universe, Commander Sylvan, was also a physician.

“Hello, Commander,” he said, nodding at her. “It’s good to see you as well.”

“And this must be Sonya! The female you went searching through the Multiverse to find,” she said, smiling at Sonya, who was still looking around with wide eyes. His own Sonya had been used to the Mother Ship—they had lived there most of their married life. But this Sonya had never been aboard such a large starship and she was rather awed by the Mother Ship’s interior and the Kindred technology on display.

“Yes, this is Sonya.” Davrik tried to smile but it was difficult since his heart felt like it had been dipped in lead. Sonya was still keeping her emotional distance from him and it didn’t seem like anything he said could change her mind. “She has a pain chip implanted in her right ankle,” he added. “We were hoping you could remove it—I promised Sonya it would be a painless procedure,” he added.

“Yes, of course—we can manage that. A simple extraction should be no problem.” Commander Sylvania smiled reassuringly at Sonya, who smiled tentatively back—it was the first smile Davrik had seen from her since the revelation that she was the doppelganger of the mate he had lost.

“And...it really won’t hurt?” she asked Sylvania. “Because when this thing activates, it feels like my skeleton is melting—*literally*.”

“That sounds extremely unpleasant.” The Kindred Commander shook her head sympathetically. “But don’t worry

—we can remove it without activating it. We might need to give you some medication to make you sleepy and numb the area before we begin though. Is that all right?”

“As long as I don’t feel anything,” Sonya said. “That pain is *awful*.” She shivered.

“You won’t feel a thing,” Commander Sylvania said comfortingly, putting an arm around her shoulders. “Would you like your mate, to come with you?” she added, nodding at Davrik.

“Oh, he’s not my mate or my husband or anything,” Sonya said quickly, shooting him a glance that felt like a dagger in his heart.

“No?” Sylvania looked surprised. “Forgive me—I just assumed that since Commander Davrik was so anxious to find you, the two of you would be together by now.”

“Afraid not.” Sonya’s voice was tight and this time she wouldn’t meet Davrik’s eyes.

“I can come with you if you want, though—if you feel nervous?” he offered, hoping she would want him by her side.

But Sonya shook her head.

“That’s okay—I’ll be fine.”

“Very well.” Davrik shrugged as though he didn’t care, even though her rejection was cutting him up inside.

“Well...” Commander Sylvania was looking back and forth between them, an uncertain expression on her face. At last she seemed to decide that whatever was going on was none of her business. “Very well,” she said to Sonya. “Come with me and let’s get that chip taken out.”

“Thank you.” Sonya nodded and went with her without a single backwards glance.

She’s never going to forgive me—she fucking hates me now!

Davrik’s heart ached and despair filled him like liquid darkness. Alone—he needed to be alone! He couldn’t hold his

feelings inside for one more moment. He needed to shout or punch something or weep or all three and he couldn't do any of those things in the middle of the busy Med Center.

He took a left and strode down the corridor until he came to a dark and seemingly empty exam room. Ducking inside, he shut the door firmly, clenched his fists, and let out a long, growling cry that came from deep in his soul.

“Goddess!” gasped a familiar voice and Davrik realized, to his embarrassment, that he was not alone as he had thought.

“Lights!” he called and the exam room lit up to reveal Lan’ara, the Empath Kindred he had met on their mutual search for their human mates. “Lan’ara!” he exclaimed at the same time she said,

“Davrik!”

“What are you doing here?” he asked her. She was sitting on the edge of the exam bed and her purple eyes were bloodshot. She looked like she had been crying.

“I’m here because of Nate,” she said and sniffed. “And you? Why are you here and why did you shout just now? You nearly deafened me! I can feel your hurt and rage even though I’m not touching you.”

“Forgive me for that.” Davrik let out a long breath, trying to calm himself. “I just needed to ‘let off some steam’ as the humans say.”

“I understand.” She sniffed again and swiped at her eyes. Davrik reached into his inner pocket and pulled out a clean soothing cloth—he always kept one with him because of his tendency to get allergies in some alien habitats. “Here.” He held it out to Lan’ara.

“Thank you.” She took the cloth gratefully and blotted her eyes.

“I would ask if everything is all right with you and Nate, but I’m guessing it’s not,” Davrik said dryly.

“No, it’s not,” Lan’ara admitted. “Nate’s...well, not exactly *sick*. He’s in a state of extreme, persistent and possibly

incurable fatigue. And it's all my fault.”

“Now, how could it possibly be *your* fault?” Davrik asked reasonably.

In broken sentences she explained about her new mate and their Bonding and the way it had caused the energy she'd given to Nate to rush back to her all at once.

“So you see, it *is* my fault,” she said, blotting her eyes again. “I did this to him—I *broke* him by Bonding with him. I never should have done it—the priest in the Sacred Grove warned us not to. But I did it anyway and now he might never be able to move again!”

Davrik wanted to comfort her, but he didn't know what to do. He thought of putting his arm around her, but that didn't feel right. The scent of another male—of her human mate—was all over her. And besides, he didn't want to touch any female but Sonya, not even platonically.

“I'm so sorry,” he said helplessly. “If it's any consolation, at least you got to bond with your human. Mine is rejecting me entirely.”

“Really? Even though you came all this way to find her?” Lan'ara looked up at him with wide, wet eyes.

Davrik nodded shortly.

“Even though,” he said grimly. “She found out about the original Sonya—my Sonya from my universe—before I could think of a good way explain the situation. Now she thinks I just want her as a substitute or a copy of the wife I lost.”

“Don't you, though?” Lan'ara asked frankly. “I mean, I don't want to hurt you, but isn't that the heart of the matter?”

Davrik took a deep breath and forced himself to consider the idea.

“It was to begin with, I suppose, though I always told myself differently,” he admitted at last. “But to be honest, during the time I spent with Sonya—*this* Sonya—I've fallen in love with her all over again. And it's not just because she's the doppelganger of the mate I lost—this Sonya is *different*. She's

gone through things my Sonya never had to face and it's made her stronger and more resilient. I'm in awe of her will to survive and her persistence in the face of adversity." He shook his head. "She's amazing—even if I'd never known my own Sonya, I couldn't help falling in love with this one."

"Why don't you tell her all that, then?" Lan'ara asked reasonably.

Davrik shook his head.

"She won't listen to me. She didn't even want me to go with her to surgery to have the pain chip removed that the bastards at The House of a Thousand Flowers had implanted in her."

"I'm so sorry, Davrik," Lan'ara murmured, her eyes filled with sympathy. "It seems that both of us have lost the human mates we tried to save...though in different ways."

"Yes, I'm afraid you're right," Davrik said heavily. He sat down on the exam bed beside her, his shoulders slumping dejectedly. "I wish there was something—anything I could do—to prove to her what kind of male I really am."

"I've been wishing there was something I could do to make things up to Nate—to let him know how sorry I am for putting him in this state," Lan'ara admitted. "I had an idea of how I could do that, but it's not working out so far."

"I guess we both want to prove ourselves to our humans," Davrik remarked. "What is it about their species that brings out such intense emotions in us?"

"I don't know." Lan'ara sighed and shook her head. "They're a complicated people but it seems that the Kindred are drawn to them. The Goddess alone knows why."

"There must be a reason for it," Davrik said, frowning. "The Goddess must have a hand in this. She brought us together in the beginning to find our human mates and now we find ourselves together again." He looked at Lan'ara. "What was the idea you had? The one you said would help make things up to Nate?"

“Oh—his younger sibling, a human female named Madison, is being held by the Scourge in the Father Ship,” Lan’ara said, looking troubled.

“Really? I thought the Scourge were selling all the human females to the slavers for profit,” Davrik said. “Why would they take her to the Father Ship instead?”

“I don’t know but I’m afraid it’s because of the AllFather.” Lan’ara nearly whispered the name of the evil Scourge leader. “You know, he has a liking for a certain kind of mind—when he finds a human he likes, he feeds off their pain and mental anguish.” She looked upset. “I’m afraid that Madison has been taken because she has that kind of mind. Nate did, you know—the AllFather fed on him until he nearly broke him.”

“Yes, I remember how broken he was,” Davrik said grimly, remembering how the human male had attempted to choke Lan’ara when he was first removed from stasis.

“The experience gave him what the humans call ‘PTSD’—Post Traumatic Stress Disorder,” Lan’ara explained. “He’s healed of it now—not that it does him any good now that he can’t move,” she added bitterly. “But I’m afraid that since his little sister shares his DNA, she might have the same kind of mind he does. The AllFather will mind-rape her too—the same way he did to Nate.” She shook her head. “I don’t want that to happen! I want to get her out of there—off the Father Ship. But Commander Sylvania says there’s no way.”

“I’m sure they can’t risk a direct attack—the Father Ship and the Mother Ship are too evenly matched. They’d blow each other out of the sky,” Davrik said thoughtfully.

“Exactly. Commander Sylvania says the only way would be infiltrating the Father Ship by stealth. But none of the Kindred look anything like a Scourge and our ships don’t look like theirs either, so there’s no getting aboard.” Lan’ara sounded hopeless.

Davrik frowned.

“No, none of the Kindred here look like a Scourge, but *I* do,” he said slowly. “I’ve been mistaken for one of those bastards again and again ever since I got to this universe. And my ship has disguise tech—it can look like just about any kind of vessel I want it to.”

Lan’ara looked up at him with hope in her eyes.

“Davrik...what are you saying? You’re not offering to—”

“Infiltrate the Scourge ship? Yes, I am,” he said, nodding firmly.

“But...but you’d be risking your life! And for a human you don’t even *know*,” Lan’ara exclaimed.

“So what?” Davrik shrugged fatalistically. “If Sonya doesn’t want me, my life isn’t worth living anyway. And maybe if I do this—if I go to rescue a human I don’t even know, as you put it—she’ll see that I’m not some greedy bastard who only came here to find a replacement for the wife I lost.”

“I want to come with you,” Lan’ara said earnestly. “I feel the same way—if what I did to Nate kills him or incapacitates him for life, then my own life isn’t worth living either. And if I can at least get his little sister back for him, maybe he can someday, somehow forgive me.”

“Come on then!” Davrik surged to his feet, determination coursing through him. He had a purpose again—a reason for living. He would help Lan’ara to save this human girl. And if he lost his life trying to do that, so be it.

If Sonya didn’t want him, he didn’t care if he lived or died anyhow.

FIFTY-SEVEN

LAN'ARA

“All right, I have the two of you wired so that we can hear what happens and locate you if need be,” Commander Sylvania said. “Though I have to be honest—if you get captured, I’m not sure if we can rescue you.”

“We understand that,” Lan’ara said firmly. “We still want to go.”

“Very well.” Commander Sylvania nodded. “How are the ocular inserts working for you, Commander Davrik?”

“They feel all right.” He blinked rapidly as Lan’ara watched. “Did they move any?” he asked her.

Lan’ara shook her head. The ocular inserts were thin pieces of film which fit over the big warrior’s entire eyes and caused them to have the Red-on-black appearance of Scourge eyes. With the inserts in place and his great height and pearly gray skin and black hair, he really did look like one of the enemy. He was wearing an all-black uniform that had been taken off a fallen Scourge warrior, which completed his disguise.

“And how are your manacles?” Commander Sylvania asked Lan’ara. “Can you get out of them easily if you need to?”

“Yes, of course.” Lan’ara twisted her wrists in just the right way and the fake manacles popped open. The idea was for her to play Davrik’s prisoner—he would be pretending to be a scout who had gone out looking for new prey for the Scourge and he was bringing her back to the Father Ship for the approval of the AllFather.

Though hopefully we can just get Madison and get out, without ever having to see him, Lan’ara thought with a shiver. But she was committed to this venture now—she was going to save Nate’s little sister or die trying.

“You’re both really sure you want to do this?” Commander Sylvania asked for the sixth or seventh time. “If you wait just a little while, we might have our new weapon ready to go—the ESR—Emotion Sonic Resonator will be formidable against any enemy—if we can find the right one to wield it. One of our human scientists, Karl, is working on it with his mates, Loves Deeply and Locks Tightly.”

“We really can’t wait, Commander,” Davrik said firmly. “The human female might be mind-raped if we leave her in the clutches of the Scourge for too long.”

“Besides, we’ll just slip in and nab her and slip back out again,” Lan’ara said, hoping that what she said was right. “The Scourge won’t even know we’ve been there!”

“From your lips to the Goddess’s ears,” Sylvania said and sighed. “Very well then—go and may the Mother of All Life go with you and bring you success.”

“We pray it will be so,” Davrik said formally. He looked at Lan’ara. “Are you ready?”

“Ready,” she confirmed, fastening the fake manacles back around her wrists. She looked at Commander Sylvania. “Nate—” she began.

“Is resting quietly,” her CO assured her. “He’s in a sleep so deep it’s almost unconsciousness—he won’t even know you’re gone. As long as you get back here safely and quickly,” she added.

“We’ll do our very best,” Davrik told her. “The sooner we leave, the sooner we can return.” He cleared his throat. “Please look after Sonya, Commander Sylvania. I know she doesn’t want anything to do with me but she seems to trust you.”

A look of compassion crossed the Kindred Commander’s face.

“I’m sure that in time she’ll be willing to listen to you, Davrik. But in the meantime, I’ll keep an eye on her. She’s still resting quietly in the Med Center as well. The anesthesia from her surgery should wear off soon and I’ll be at her side when it does.”

“Thank you.” He nodded, a look of gratitude on his strong features. Then he shifted his gaze to Lan’ara. “Let’s go.”

“I’m right behind you,” she told him. “Let’s go save Nate’s little sister.”

They went.

FIFTY-EIGHT

DAVRIK

Davrik had never been more glad of the disguise tech-mods he'd made to his shuttle than he was during their round-about flight to the Father Ship. The mods enabled him to mask the true appearance of his shiny silver long-range shuttle and make it appear to be a dead black Scourge scouting ship instead.

He took a circuitous route that sent them past the small red planet the humans called "Mars," named after an ancient god of war, which allowed it to appear that he was coming back from a distant mission. When the com-link crackled to life as they approached the ominous black bulk of the Father Ship, he felt his gut clench.

"Scout ship, state your mission," a flat, emotionless voice said.

Sending a silent prayer to the Goddess, Davrik answered in the same, toneless voice.

"Returning from long range reconnaissance and transporting a prisoner for the AllFather's approval."

There was a pause in which Davrik was so tense he could count his own heartbeats. Beside him, he saw Lan'ara sitting bolt upright with her small fists clenched in her lap. If the operator in the Father Ship saw through their ruse, they could still get away at this point. But then they would have failed their mission to rescue Nate's little sister.

However, his tension turned out to be unwarranted because a moment later the flat, dull voice said,

"Access granted. You have clearance to dock immediately."

"Acknowledged," Davrik returned calmly. He swung the ship around and lowered it gracefully into the Father Ship's Docking Bay.

As the ship settled on the metal floor of the vast, dark ship, he turned to Lan'ara.

“Are you ready?”

She took a deep breath and he could tell how nervous she was. But she nodded her head with determination.

“Let's go.”

Davrik nodded back and opened the hatch of the ship.

“All right, you go first and I'll be right behind you with my blaster drawn.”

She nodded and preceded him out of the shuttle.

As Davrik stepped down into the Father Ship for the first time, he looked around himself in awe. He had come to the Kindred Mother Ship of his own universe long after the Scourge were effectively eradicated and he had never visited the hulking vessel they had left behind, though he had heard tales of it.

Inside it seemed like the exact opposite of the Mother Ship. Instead of being bright and clean, everything was dim and grimy. There was black grease in the corners and stains on the metal floor. His boots echoed dully as they walked down the long row of ships which looked almost exactly like his own disguised craft.

No one had come to greet them, so they were basically on their own. Davrik knew their best chance for success lay in getting in, grabbing Madison, and getting out again as soon as possible but the Father Ship was huge and he had no idea where the human prisoners the AllFather fed from were being held.

At least they knew what Madison looked like, he thought. He had a holo image of her that Commander Sylvania had taken via remote drone. It was slightly blurry but it showed a human female about Lan'ara's size with long brownish-blond hair and blue eyes, like her brother Nate's. She had an unhappy look on her face—unsurprising since the picture had been taken just after she was captured by the Scourge and she

was being herded into one of their shuttles for transport to the Father Ship.

So Davrik knew who he was looking for—he just didn't know where he might find her in the huge, dark vessel. Of course, that was where having Lan'ara as his "prisoner" came in handy—he hoped to find a Scourge warrior he could ask along the way, using her as the reason he needed to get to the holding cells.

But for a long time, they met no one. Lan'ara kept her head down, her hands manacled behind her back, looking for all the world like a dejected prisoner too demoralized to try and fight but her act was for nothing—unless they were being watched, which was certainly possible. For now, however, it seemed as though the ship was almost empty.

They passed through rooms with giant machines working, their gears grinding and clanking, and long dark hallways lit only by the occasional dim glow. But they didn't meet anyone until they came to a vast area filled with row after row of enormous tanks that appeared to contain murky green liquid.

Inside the liquid of most tanks, amorphous dark shadows floated. Davrik couldn't tell what they were, but they all looked huge and menacing. Lan'ara sucked in a breath and then coughed it out again—unsurprising since the air was heavy with the reek of chemicals.

"The Flesh Tanks—the Vats," she whispered to Davrik, her purple eyes wide.

"What?" He frowned.

"This is where most of the Scourge warriors come from. They're a dying race—they killed their planet with pollution and toxic chemicals—and now they have no choice but to reproduce through cloning and gene manipulation," she explained in a low voice. "They grow the clones in these tanks. That's why most of their warriors are basically mindless fighting machines. They have no emotion and no purpose other than to serve the All Father."

“Which is how it should be,” a new voice behind them said.

Davrik whirled around, his finger poised on the trigger of his blaster. He was surprised to see a female rather than the hulking male warrior he’d been expecting.

But though she wasn’t huge, she was clearly a Scourge. She had the definitive red-on-black eyes and gray skin tones like his own. Her long black hair was pulled up into a high ponytail at the crown of her head and hung halfway down her back. The severe hair style served to emphasize her sharp cheekbones and angular jaw.

“Who are you?” Lan’ara breathed, obviously startled enough to forget her status as a “prisoner.”

“I am Xairna—daughter of the AllFather,” the Scourge female snapped. She narrowed her red-on-black eyes at them. “And I could ask the same—who are you and why have you brought a strange female on board the Father Ship?”

She was talking to Davrik, who was still staring down at her in surprise. He had never seen a female Scourge before. Indeed, in his own universe all the Scourge females had been wiped out.

“I am bringing this prisoner to the AllFather so that he may feed on her negative emotions,” he said, trying to make his voice brusque and businesslike. “But they seem to have moved the holding cells since I was last aboard the Father Ship. I would appreciate it if you’d point me in the right direction.”

“Moved the holding cells, you say?” She narrowed her eyes even further. Watching her made Davrik’s own eyes itch. The thin lenses that covered his entire iris and sclera were extremely irritating—they made him feel like he had sand or grit in his eyes. Grimly, he ignored them and held the Scourge female’s gaze.

“I’m a long range scout,” he said. “I haven’t been aboard the Father Ship in some time.”

“Hmm...I see. So you come bringing a new prisoner and hoping that you will win favor with my father by presenting her to him?”

“My business is my own,” Davrik snapped. “Will you point me towards the holding cells or not?”

“I’ll do better than that—I’ll take you there.” She gave a decisive nod of her head which made her long sleek tail of black hair bounce. “Follow me.”

Davrik exchanged a quick look with Lan’ara behind the Scourge female’s back but what could they do?

Hoping that she was fooled by his disguise, he started off after the AllFather’s daughter with Lan’ara right beside him.

FIFTY-NINE

LAN'ARA

Lan'ara kept an eye on the Scourge female as they walked behind her. She had said her name was "Xairna" and had claimed to be the Allfather's daughter, and Lan'ara saw no reason to doubt her words. She carried herself with poise and confidence that seemed to back up her claim.

Also, she clearly knew her way around the Scourge ship. Without hesitating, she led them through several long corridors and down a lift and then around several corners. Lan'ara hoped that Davrik was keeping count of their twisting, turning route—they didn't want to get lost in the vast, shadowy Father Ship!

After walking what felt like a very long way, they at last reached a row of cells lined with bars made of some greenish metal. Inside were several humans that had clearly already been mind-raped—they sat with their hands hanging limply between their legs and their heads down. When Lan'ara was able to glimpse their faces, she saw their eyes were dull and uncaring.

The sight made her shiver when she thought of what Nate had endured. He had put up a fight though—the AllFather hadn't been able to completely break him. Unlike these poor souls who were clearly past the point of saving.

There was one exception, however—a human female with long, brownish-blond hair and bright blue eyes like Nate's. Lan'ara's heart jumped when she saw her—that was Madison! It had to be!

The girl was sitting in a corner of the far cell, crying but when she looked up, Lan'ara still saw light in her eyes. Clearly the AllFather hadn't gotten to her yet—the Goddess be praised!

Lan'ara kept her own expression blank though she wanted badly to run to Madison and hug her through the bars

and explain who she was. Still, she couldn't say any of that under the watchful eye of the AllFather's daughter.

"Well, I suppose you need me to open the cell door for you, too? Since you've been away so long?" Xairna inquired now, looking up at Davrik.

"That would be much appreciated," he said stiffly, inclining his head.

"Very well." She walked over to the cell door and casually swung it open. "We don't bother to keep our prisoners locked up," she said, in answer to Lan'ara's surprised look. "It's not like any of them can pilot a ship and get out of here. Besides, sometimes my father likes letting them run and hide for a time—it increases his enjoyment of their pain when they are finally caught and brought to him."

Her lips twisted as she spoke and a look of thinly veiled disgust crossed over her sharp but lovely features. The expression was gone almost before Lan'ara could register it, smoothing out into calm, and she wondered if she might have imagined it somehow.

"In you go," Davrik said, prodding Lan'ara roughly with the butt of his blaster. "You can wait in there until the AllFather decides he wants to taste your pain."

With a little cry that she hoped was convincingly terrified, Lan'ara stumbled forward, into the cell with Madison and the door clanged shut behind her.

"As a matter of fact, I'll go tell my father about this new prisoner immediately," Xairna remarked. "He's been complaining that he's hungry, so I'll be pleased to offer him something new. What species is she?"

"She's an Empath Kindred—she can feel the emotions of others and is very sensitive," Davrik said helpfully. "Which should make her an especially tasty snack for your father."

"Indeed, it should." Xairna nodded. "Very well—keep an eye on her for me and see that she doesn't escape. My father is too hungry to let her run loose before he feeds."

She turned and left, her boot heels clicking briskly on the metal floor until she disappeared around the corner.

The moment the AllFather's daughter was out of sight, Lan'ara went to the weeping human girl.

"Madison?" she asked, looking at her anxiously. "You're Nate's little sister—aren't you?"

The girl looked up, her red-rimmed eyes wide with shock.

"How do you know who I am?"

"Because my colleague and I are here to rescue you." Lan'ara nodded at Davrik, who nodded back on the other side of the bars.

"But Nate—how do you know Nate? Is he all right? Is he alive?"

"He's alive." Lan'ara thought it best not to tell Madison her brother's true condition until they were away from here. "I'm his mate," she added. "The two of us are Bonded. That's why Davrik and I came to get you. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes! Yes, of course. But..." She paused, looking up at Davrik uncertainly. "Isn't he, a, uh, Scourge?"

"He's a Kindred," Lan'ara said. "He's just disguised as a Scourge. He—"

"And a very good disguise it is, too." Suddenly Xairna was there again, to Lan'ara's dismay, though she hadn't heard the other woman coming at all. She must have been hiding just around the corner, listening to them talk! "The only problem is, he doesn't *smell* like a Scourge." Her dainty nose wrinkled as she looked up at Davrik again.

"Stand back," Davrik pointed his blaster at her. "I don't want to hurt a female, but I will do whatever it takes to complete my mission. We are simply here to get this one human prisoner and then we'll leave you alone."

"You're not going anywhere," Xairna said coolly. She took a deep breath. "Unless you take me with you."

SIXTY

DAVRIK

“**W**hat?” Davrik looked at the Scourge female blankly. He was certain he’d misunderstood her. “*What* did you say?”

“I said if you want to get out of here alive, you’ll have to take me with you,” Xairna repeated firmly. “I *hate* it here,” she added, her red-on-black eyes flashing.

“But...you’re the daughter of the AllFather,” Lan’ara said, staring at her in disbelief.

“Yes, I am. What difference does that make?” Xairna demanded. She looked up at Davrik. “I knew you were a fake the minute I saw you—you’re just lucky you didn’t run into one of the few sentient officers under my father’s command.”

“How do we know you’re not just trying to come with us to spy on the Kindred of the Mother Ship?” Davrik asked, frowning. He didn’t know about bringing a Scourge back with them—it wasn’t his place to grant her access. Commander Sylvania was the only one who could do that.

“How do you know? Because I’m *telling* you, I have to get free of this place or I’ll die! Or kill myself!” Xairna’s pretty features twisted into a rictus of disgust. “Who do you think my father ‘feeds’ on when he can’t get fresh human victims?”

“Oh, *no*,” Lan’ara breathed. The sympathy was clear on her face. But Davrik needed more definite proof before he trusted the Scourge female.

“Take Lan’ara’s hand,” he directed, nodding at the Empath Kindred, who stood and came to the door of the cell at once. “She’ll be able to tell us your true intentions.”

“Very well.” Xairna stepped forward and held out one slim gray hand, which Lan’ara took in her lavender one. For a moment the Empath stood rigid, then her features melted in a mixture of pity and sorrow.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she murmured to Xairna. “The things you’ve gone through...”

“Don’t worry about that—I can handle myself,” Xairna snapped, pulling her hand free. “Just let me leave with you, *please*.”

Davrik still wasn’t completely convinced but Lan’ara looked up at him.

“We need to take her with us,” she said firmly. “No one should have to endure what she has been subjected to. Mind-raped not once but over and *over* again and by her own *father*...” She shook her head and Davrik could see the horror in her eyes.

He was about to reluctantly agree when the sound of heavy tromping filled the air. Looking up, he saw what looked like a whole battalion of Scourge warriors marching around the corner. By their dull eyes and blank faces, he thought they must be the Vat-grown clones Lan’ara had talked about earlier. However, the male at the head of the group looked different.

He had the same black uniform and red-on-black eyes as the others, but there was animation in his gaze. When he saw Xairna, a cruel smile spread across his thin lips.

“Well, well—there you are my darling mate-to-be,” he remarked, grinning at her in a way that revealed white, even teeth that were sharply pointed. “I’m so glad I found you—your father has been calling for you, you know. He says he’s *hungry*.”

Xairna flinched and her small hands curled into fists at her sides.

“There are human prisoners for him to feed on, Krix,” she said tightly. “He doesn’t need me.”

“Yes, but he *wants* you,” the Scourge officer declared. “He likes the taste of your pain.” He cocked his head to one side, pretending to consider. “I suppose there’s something vaguely *incestuous* about a father feeding from his own daughter, but be that as it may, he’s been calling for you and none other will satisfy him.”

“I won’t go!” Xairna lifted her chin and took a step back. “I’m busy right now, anyway. I have to escort these prisoners to the laboratory to have trackers implanted. Take one of the others instead.” She nodded at the dull-eyed humans in the other cell as she backed away.

“No, I’m afraid that won’t do,” the Scourge officer called Krix said smoothly. “But please don’t worry, my darling Xairna—I promise that once you and I are Joined, I won’t let him feed on you *nearly* as much.” He smirked. “I’ll be too busy keeping you chained to my bed while I breed you.”

The look of disgust was back on Xairna’s face.

“I’ve told you before—I *won’t* Join with you! You only want me because you think if you have me, my father’s power will pass to you. But that’s not true because he won’t... fucking...*die*.”

“I’ll admit, our leader’s longevity is amazing,” Krix remarked dryly. “But I *will* have you, my dear. I’ll sink both my shafts to the hilt in your tight little pussy and asshole and fill you with my seed before this solar month is through!”

And reaching forward, he grabbed Xairna by the arm.

Just as quickly, she shook him off.

“Keep dreaming, Krix—you’ll never get near me. You turn my stomach!”

The Scourge officer turned his attention to Davrik.

“Ah, a feisty little one, isn’t she?” he said, grinning, as though he enjoyed the verbal sparring. “Little does she know that I’ve already gotten permission from the AllFather to Join with her.”

“You do not! You liar!” But the quiver in Xairna’s voice belied her disbelief.

“Oh yes, I do my sweet one,” Krix purred, smiling that cruel smile again. “In fact, after your father feeds from you, you’re going straight to the laboratory to get your piercings done. I can’t chain you to my bed until you’ve got your sweet nipples and the hood of your clit pierced for me.”

“Never!” Xairna crossed her arms over her breasts protectively and took a step back as Krix reached for her again. “Stay away from me!”

“Ha! She’s such a little tease. We have to keep our females in line, don’t we?” the Scourge officer remarked to Davrik, and pounded him on the back in a fraternal fashion.

Unfortunately, the rough motion dislodged one of the thin ocular films covering his eyes. Davrik made a muted grunt as it popped out of his right eye and fell to the floor.

He was hoping against hope that the Scourge officer hadn’t seen it, but when he looked up, the other male was staring right at him.

“Well, well,” he murmured, leveling his blaster at Davrik’s heart. “I *thought* you smelled a bit off. Drop that blaster right now.”

For a moment Davrik kept hold of his weapon which was aimed at the Scourge officer’s chest. But then the other male turned his own weapon on Lan’ara, whose purple eyes widened.

“Drop it or I shoot her—and the other one too, just for good measure,” he said coldly.

He would have to comply—there was nothing else he could do, Davrik realized. The Scourge clones all had their weapons leveled at him—he couldn’t fight them all off at once! Not without getting himself and probably Lan’ara and Madison killed as well.

Reluctantly, he dropped the blaster and it fell with a clatter to the metal floor. With a cruel grin, the Scourge officer named Krix kicked it away and it skittered out of reach, under the bars of the nearest empty cell.

“Come on, boys,” he remarked to the huge, emotionless clones. “It seems we have more than one prisoner to bring to the throne room. The AllFather will have a feast!”

Davrik felt his heart sink. Not only was their mission a failure, now he and Lan’ara were both the captives of the Scourge and there was no way of escape that he could see!

They were trapped with no way out.

SIXTY-ONE

NATE

“Warrior, wake! Your female is in danger! Wake—you must go to her at once!”

The warm, feminine voice roused Nate from the deepest slumber he'd ever experienced in his life. It felt like his consciousness was at the bottom of a long, dark well and someone was calling down to him from the top of it.

He tried to open his eyes to see who was calling him, but somehow his eyelids wouldn't open. It felt like someone had tied lead weights to them and made them too heavy for him to even blink. His mouth wouldn't work either—his lips were too tired to form any words.

“Who...what...?” he thought fuzzily.

“It is I—the Kindred Goddess. I am the one who placed you with Lan'ara in the first place. Now she is in danger—she is trapped on the Father Ship and you must go to her,” the feminine voice informed him.

“Lan'ara? She's in danger?” Sudden alarm rushed through him and he made a convulsive effort to get up, only to find that his body barely even quivered. *“I can't move—why can't I move?”* he thought frantically.

“You were severely weakened by the Bonding you and Lan'ara engaged in,” the Goddess told him. **“In a moment, I will give you the strength to go and rescue her, but first, listen to me.”**

“All right—I'm listening!” Nate sent to the voice in his head. He didn't question her words—her warm, tangible presence all around him filled him with certainty and urgency that she was real and he wasn't going crazy.

“Talk to Commander Sylvania,” the Goddess instructed him. **“She has been developing a new weapon—you will need it to defeat the AllFather and save your mate. Be sure you**

take it and accept any help you are offered in wielding it—you cannot do it alone.”

“Help? But who’s going to help me?” Nate demanded.

“That will be made clear in time. Now, rise and go to your mate!”

As the Goddess spoke these last words, strength and energy suddenly poured into Nate like an electrical current, making his entire body tingle. With a harsh gasp, his eyes popped open and he sat bolt upright in bed.

He moved so quickly that he barely avoided knocking heads with a blonde woman who was bending over him.

“Oh!” she gasped, taking a quick step backwards. “What in the name of the Goddess?”

“Sylvania!” Nate exclaimed—he was filled with urgency. “I have to talk to Commander Sylvania! Where is she?”

“I’m Commander Sylvania,” the woman said, staring at him. “We met just a little while ago when Lan’ara brought you to the Mother Ship. Don’t you remember?”

Focusing on her face, Nate saw she was right. He’d been so hyped up that he hadn’t even recognized her at first.

“Yes, I remember now,” he said. “Please, Commander—Lan’ara’s in danger!”

She gave him a worried look.

“Are you feeling her distress through your Bond?”

Nate concentrated a moment and realized that he did, indeed feel a muted kind of worry and anxiety coming from Lan’ara’s end of it. However, it was as though the emotions were being partially blocked—maybe by the barrier that the priest had predicted she would be able to form?

“I can feel that she’s upset,” he said to Commander Sylvania. “But that’s not how I know she’s in danger. This is going to sound crazy, but the Goddess—she spoke to me! She came to me and told me I had to go get my mate because she’s

trapped on the Father Ship.” He paused, frowning. “Though how Lan’ara got over there, I have no idea.”

“She went to try and rescue your younger sibling,” Commander Sylvania told him. “The plan was for her to slip in and slip out again unnoticed, but we’ve been listening on the com-link devices we wired them with, and I’m afraid that things have gone awry.”

“There’s no time to lose, then—I have to get to her!” Nate swung his legs over the side of the bed and saw that they were bare—someone had put him in a dark red hospital gown that opened in the back—he could feel a cool breeze on his backside. “I need some clothes,” he said. “And something else...” He wracked his brain, trying to remember. “A weapon—a special weapon!” he exclaimed, remembering. “The Goddess told me you were developing it—she says I have to take it. It’s the only way to defeat the AllFather!”

“Do you mean the Emotion Sonic Resonator?” Commander Sylvania frowned. “You’re *certain* you can wield it?”

“I haven’t met a weapon I can’t handle yet,” Nate said. He spoke with the confidence born of years in the Seals and then fighting the Scourge invasion. “Can you get me some clothes and the weapon? I need to get over there *now*.”

“I’ll call for some clothes but we’ll need to get the ESR from the lab,” Commander Sylvania remarked. She frowned again. “I’m still not sure you can handle it, though. You’re certainly strong enough to bear the weight of it, but can you sing?”

“Can I *what*?” Nate demanded, frowning at her.

“The ESR requires you to be able to sing. You see, we’ve recently learned that certain emotions have sounds associated with them—musical sounds. Those are what the ESR uses as ammunition. So you need to be able to sing to operate the weapon.”

Nate’s confidence suddenly deflated. To be honest, he *didn’t* have the greatest singing voice. He wasn’t tone deaf or

anything, but he wasn't particularly musical either. It just wasn't his forte.

"I can sing," a voice said from the doorway.

Nate looked up and saw a beautiful, curvy black girl standing there. She had troubled brown eyes and long, curly black ringlets. She was also wearing a dark red hospital gown that matched his own.

"Sonya, what are you doing up?" Commander Sylvania rushed over to her.

"I know this is going to sound strange, but a voice—a woman's voice—woke me up," the girl said. "She told me Davrik was in trouble and I needed to go get him. She...she said he might die if I don't!" Her voice choked on the last words and she looked at Commander Sylvania with wide, desperate eyes. "I know we're fighting right now, but I don't want him to *die!*"

"He's not going to die," the Kindred woman said quickly, taking her by the shoulders. "Come on—let's get the two of you dressed and then we'll meet with the scientists developing the ESR."

Nate just hoped they could make the meeting quick—he could still feel Lan'ara's distress through the link they had formed when they Bonded and though it was muted, it was getting stronger.

His new mate was in trouble and he *had* to get to her!

SIXTY-TWO

SONYA

“So as Commander Sylvania apparently already told you, certain emotions can be voiced through song.”

Karl, the scientist, was a tall guy—a human, not a Kindred—with dark red hair. He was pacing back and forth as he lectured. Behind him were his Twin Kindred mates, statuesque women with curving hips and large breasts. Sonya thought they must be fraternal twins since one of them had black hair and black eyes and the other had brown hair and green eyes. All three of them were wearing white lab coats.

Nate, who had told her briefly that he was an ex-Navy Seal who was mated to the other Kindred they were going to save on the Father Ship, was friends with Karl, who was also best friends with the husband of Commander Sylvania.

The two men had hugged when they saw each other, but now the scientist was all business. As he spoke, he gestured to a blood-red crystal about the size of a small fist which was lying on a reinforced metal table in the center of the lab they were standing in. It was wrapped intricately in slender wires made of some softly glowing metal that looked like rose gold to Sonya.

It didn't look much like a weapon to her—there was no muzzle or trigger like a gun. Instead, there were straps attached to it so that someone—presumably Nate—could wear it like a backpack.

“The ESR is capable of taking the emotion you're feeling and turning it into a kind of sonic bullet—the stronger your voice and the emotions behind it, the stronger and more deadly the ammunition it will produce,” he explained.

“That's where *you* come in,” one of the Twin Kindred—the one with black hair and eyes—said to Sonya. “I understand you're a singer?”

“Yes—I’ve sung professionally,” Sonya said, but didn’t elaborate. Nobody in the room needed to know that the last place she’d sung was in the lounge of an upscale brothel.

A brothel Davrik saved you from—and then you turned him away, even after he risked his life for you, a reproachful little voice whispered in her head.

Sonya tried to push it away and concentrate on the present. She was going to save the big Kindred—rescue him the way he had rescued her—that was all there was to it. She refused to even *think* of another outcome.

“Nate will be wearing the device and will have direct contact with it,” Karl said to her, drawing her back to the present. “All you need to do is put your hand on his arm and make skin-to-skin contact with him—then sing your emotions as loudly as you can. His body will act as a conduit between you and the ESR.”

“Um...I don’t mean to be rude, but why does Nate have to wear it?” Sonya asked, frowning. “Why can’t I just wear it myself?”

Karl frowned.

“Well, for one thing it’s made from solid Vibronexium—one of the densest and heaviest elements ever discovered—it’s not even on the Periodic Table,” he added.

“Try and lift it,” the light-haired Twin Kindred offered. “Then you’ll see.”

Sonya walked over to the table in the center of the room and looked down at the ESR. It was only a little bigger than her hand—aside from the straps that had been attached to it—and it didn’t *look* too heavy to lift.

Curling her fingers around the blood-red crystal encased in the rose-gold wires, she attempted to pick it up.

The ESR didn’t even budge. It was almost as though she’d tried to lift the Mother Ship itself just by pulling on a knob or a handle, Sonya thought. She tried one more time, but she already knew there was no way. She wasn’t a weakling, but she was no weightlifter either.

“Now you try, Nate,” Karl offered.

Nate walked over to the ESR with a frown on his face. He didn't try to lift it in his hand as Sonya had. Instead, he gathered the straps on either side in both hands and lifted.

For a moment nothing moved. Then, as a vein popped out in Nate's temple, he finally managed to lift the device.

“Be careful with that!” Karl said quickly. “If you drop it anywhere but back on the reinforced table, you could punch a hole right through the Mother Ship's hull!”

“I've got it.” Nate's deep voice was tight with effort. “Just need to get it on my back—it'll be easier to carry that way.”

With much careful maneuvering and the help of Karl and also Oliver and Simon—who were apparently married to Commander Sylvania and her sister, Commander Bairdida, the ESR was finally strapped to Nate's bare back.

“Is that all right? Are you sure you can take the weight?” Karl asked anxiously.

Nate shrugged his shoulders and gave a slight grunt of effort.

“I've got it. Feels like I'm carrying a backpack heavier than I am, but I can manage.”

“I believe the Goddess has given you strength to bear this burden,” Commander Sylvania said.

“Good, because I need to get over to the Father Ship!” Nate growled.

“Not without me!” Sonya stepped up. “I'm going with you—remember?”

“You need to practice before you go anywhere,” Karl remarked.

“They don't have time to practice, unfortunately.” Commander Sylvania had one hand to her temple, as though she was listening to someone speak. “I just got notice that the

Scourge have accepted our offer of a prisoner exchange—we need to get Nate and Sonya on a shuttle at once!”

“A prisoner exchange?” Nate frowned. “What the hell is that all about?”

“It’s the only way we can gain access to the Father Ship,” Commander Sylvania explained. “Commander Davrik and Commander Lan’ara already used stealth tech to enter earlier, so their defenses are up. Don’t worry,” she added. “We don’t expect them to abide by the terms they agreed to.”

“The Scourge have no honor,” her sister, Commander Bairdida said, speaking up for the first time. “Most likely they’ll bring the two of you before the AllFather at once without actually releasing Commander Davrik and Lan’ara. If they do, you have to take the chance to kill the AllFather if you can.”

“The ESR can do it if you can get close to him,” Karl said confidently. He looked at Sonya. “All you have to do is put your hand on Nate’s arm and sing at the target. The louder you sing and the more you feel, the stronger the ammunition.”

“Um...okay but where does this, uh, ‘ammunition’ come out?” Sonya asked doubtfully.

“From your mouth of course—it’s going to look a little like you’re shooting laser beams out of your mouth,” the Dark Twin Kindred said, smiling slightly.

“But don’t worry—it won’t hurt you,” the Light Twin hurriedly assured her. “It will only hurt the person your emotion is directed at.”

“Okay—got it,” Sonya said, with more confidence than she felt. She really wished they had time to practice—the idea of shooting lasers out of her mouth was really strange and kind of scary. But she understood that they were under a deadline here and they had to get going if they were going to save Davrik and Nate’s mate, Lan’ara.

Nate was given a sleeveless black T-shirt to wear which left his muscular arms bare while hiding the ESR strapped to his broad back.

“That way all you have to do is reach out and grab him and you don’t have to worry about pushing up a sleeve,” Karl explained to Sonya. He clapped Nate on the back. “Good luck, old friend. I’m afraid you’ll need it.”

“We’ll be fine,” Nate said shortly. He looked at Sonya. “You ready to go get our people?”

There was a flutter of nerves in her stomach—nevertheless, she held her head high. Davrik had come from a whole other universe to rescue her—the least she could do was return the favor.

“I’m ready,” she said nodding.

Sonya just prayed that the Goddess who had woken her from a sound sleep with the dire news that her man was in trouble would be with them. Because the thought of going alone into that big, dark ship and facing the evil AllFather with nothing but her voice as a weapon scared the life out of her.

SIXTY-THREE

NATE

“We’re here for the prisoner exchange,” Nate said, the minute the door to the shuttle slid open.

“You will come with us.” The Scourge guard was over nine feet tall and was surrounded by five other guards of the same size. He spoke in a flat monotone and his lifeless eyes let Nate know he must be one of the Vat-grown clones—the same kind he’d been fighting down on Earth for the past five years.

In the past, seeing a Scourge soldier in his face like this would have triggered him intensely. Thankfully, his Bonding with Lan’ara had cured his PTSD, just as the priest in the Sacred Grove had predicted it would. However, that didn’t mean Nate felt nothing at all when seeing the huge bastards looming over him.

A jolt of pure hatred ran down his spine at the sight of his enemy so near but he managed to keep his face blank. Beside him, he could feel Sonya shivering. She was keeping close to his side and Nate didn’t blame her. At any moment she might have to grab his arm and start singing.

The ESR device was an enormous weight between his shoulder blades—it was like he was carrying a full weight bench with all the weights still attached, Nate thought. But he could feel a steady stream of strength flowing into him from an outside source. Clearly the Kindred Goddess was with them, which gave him confidence.

“Where are Commander Davrik and Commander Lan’ara?” he demanded, as he stepped down from the shuttle, which his friend Oliver was flying. Apparently he’d picked up piloting while being married to Commander Bairdida.

“We are to take you to them,” the Vat-grown soldier told him. “First show us your hands—you are not to bring any weapons.”

“We’re unarmed,” Sonya said quickly, spreading her hands.

Nate did the same, hoping the soldiers would be too stupid to check him thoroughly. One of them did pat him down, making sure he didn’t have any blasters strapped to his legs or stuck into his boots, but none of them put a hand on his back, for which he was grateful.

“You are cleared. Come,” the soldier said.

Nate frowned.

“What about the prisoner exchange? Where are the Kindred we came for?”

“The ones you seek are this way. You must come if you wish to see them,” the clone soldier said in that same dull, lifeless voice.

It was just as Commander Sylvania had expected, Nate thought. The Scourge didn’t have any intention of honoring the agreement they had made.

He just hoped that wherever the soldiers took them, it would be close to the AllFather so he and Sonya could kill the son of a bitch!

SIXTY-FOUR

SONYA

S onya shivered as they walked down the long, dark corridors of the Father Ship, surrounded by the enormous Scourge soldiers. It was cold here and the clothing they'd given her to wear—simple black trousers and a short-sleeved shirt—wasn't thick enough to keep her warm. Though maybe she was just shivering from fear, because it was creepy as hell in the big, spooky ship and she did *not* want to be here!

Still, there was no other way to get to Davrik and she *had* to save him. Even if they weren't really together and he had only come after her because she was a copy of his dead wife, she owed him that much. He had come from a whole other universe to rescue her from The House of a Thousand Flowers and from that horrible Trollox—the least she could do was save him from the Scourge.

I just hope this song weapon is as powerful as they all seem to think it is, she thought to herself. She made certain to stay close to Nate so she could grab his arm and start belting out a melody if she needed to, but so far the Scourge soldiers hadn't tried to hurt them—they were just herding them along down the twisting, dark corridors. Sonya wondered what waited for them at the end...but then decided she really didn't want to know.

At last they came to a vast set of double doors right in the middle of the ship. They were four stories high at least—their tops disappeared into the gloom far above her head. They were made of some dark grey or black metal etched with glowing green lines. Sonya stared at them, wondering what was behind them. They looked like they led into some ominous version of a fairytale throne room...or else the lair of an unspeakable monster.

And then, the door creaked open and she saw that both her guesses had been right.

There before them was a vast, round, shadowy room. In its center was a set of broad, steep steps that led up to a kind of dais. And on the dais was a black throne, etched in the same glowing green lines as the doors.

Sonya didn't want to see what was sitting on that throne. The moment the doors had opened a blast of pain, fear, despair, and sorrow rushed out to greet her. It was like stepping into a walk-in freezer and being suddenly surrounded by icy cold—the negative emotions nearly drove her to her knees.

Beside her she heard Nate grunt with effort and then he muttered to her,

“Not real—the bad feelings—they're not ours! They're coming from *outside* us.”

Sonya realized the big ex-Seal was right—*she* wasn't the one feeling all the horrible, negative emotions—they were coming from outside her—from the being on the throne.

Knowing that gave her the strength to lift her head again and study what was happening on the dais. Sitting on the black throne with its glowing green markings was a creature that seemed to be wrapped in robes of shadow. Its face was hidden but the pale, white hands that protruded from its smoky sleeves were bony to the point of being skeletal.

The AllFather, she thought, feeling the pit of her stomach go cold. *That must be him!*

There had been stories on Earth ever since the Scourge invasion—nightmare retellings of the very few who had met the Scourge Overlord and lived to tell of it with their minds still intact. They spoke of his monstrous appearance and his endless hunger for pain and fear but now that she saw him in person, Sonya knew that none of the stories she'd heard had gone far enough—the reality of the AllFather was so much worse than she had ever pictured, even in her most vivid night terrors.

The black and green throne was surrounded by the same huge, Vat-grown soldiers but there was also another Scourge

who looked more animated than the dull, empty-eyed clones. He was motioning for another group of soldiers to herd a group of prisoners up the steps to the dais. Sonya tried to see who they were herding, but the Scourge warriors were all too tall.

And then, finally, the prisoners reached the dais and the guards fell back and she could see.

Sonya bit her lip as she recognized Davrik's tall form, standing straight and proud at the top step of the dais. Lined up beside him were three women she didn't recognize. One of them was clearly human, with long brownish-blond hair. The other two must be aliens—one had pearly gray skin like a Scourge and the other had light purple skin and long black hair.

She heard Nate take in a quick breath beside her. He was staring at the prisoners too, she saw.

"Which one is yours?" she murmured.

"There—the one with the purple skin and black hair. That's my Lan'ara—my mate," he muttered hoarsely. "God, I can feel how afraid she is! And *that* one is my little sister, Maddy." He pointed at the girl with long brownish blond hair. "We *have* to get to them!"

But the guards were still surrounding the two of them and anyway, Sonya didn't think they were close enough to get a good shot at the AllFather. Not like she knew much about the ESR strapped to the ex-Seal's back, but it seemed to her that the closer they could get, the better their chances of using it successfully were.

"Wait—they're saying something," she whispered back. "Let's see what's going on before we go charging up there."

"All right—but I can't wait much longer," he growled. There was a look in his eyes, Sonya saw—the look of a man who will do anything to protect the woman he loves. Her heart fisted in her chest when she saw it because she recognized it—hadn't she seen that same look on Davrik's face? A look that had been directed at *her*?

And then the AllFather spoke and his cold, evil voice drove everything else out of her mind.

“Sso, these are the prisoners you spoke of, Krix,” he said, the cold voice hissing rather than speaking the words.

“Indeed they are, AllFather.” The Scourge officer who looked like he wasn’t a clone nodded respectfully.

“But my daughter, Xairna, is also included in this group. Tell me, why is that, Krix?”

“Because she was trying to escape, AllFather,” the Scourge officer said. “She was offering the two Kindred and the human prisoner safe passage off the Father Ship if only they would agree to take her with them.”

“Dear me...” The AllFather rose from the throne, shaking loose his shadowy robes from its etched green surface. “My dear daughter, is this true?” he asked, taking a step towards the line of prisoners.

The girl with gray skin lifted her chin.

“It is. I cannot stand it here anymore—I would rather be *dead* that let you feed from me one more time!”

She spat the words and Sonya could almost feel her hatred—a burning fire of resentment that had all but consumed her heart. She wondered if there was something in this room that amplified negative emotions?

“I shall *never* let you die, dear daughter,” the AllFather hissed. “For the taste of your pain is too *ssweet*.” Then he reached out one skeletal scabrous hand, as though he was going to take the grey girl’s face in his fingers.

“Stop!” The loud shout came from Davrik. To Sonya’s dismay, he strode forward, putting himself between the AllFather and his daughter.

“And what might you want, *Kindred*?” the AllFather hissed.

“If you want to hurt someone, hurt *me*,” Davrik growled, his deep voice reverberating through the vast throne room.

Sonya felt her heart stop in her chest as the evil Scourge leader looked at Davrik thoughtfully.

“Do you have some sort of attachment to my daughter?” he asked in his high, hissing voice.

“I don’t even know her,” Davrik admitted. “But I cannot stand by as a Kindred warrior and allow a female to be terrorized or brutalized.”

“Very well...” The skeletal hand made a motion in the air. “Then I will taste your pain first. But know that you have only delayed the pain of the otherss—for I will taste them *all*—asss well as these two that have come to sssave you. Which was a fool’ss errand. For now I have *all* of you and I will never let you go!”

“What?” Davrik turned and Sonya saw his eyes go wide in surprise. “Sonya—baby girl, what are you *doing* here?”

Sonya lifted her head.

“I came for you—to rescue you, the way you rescued me,” she said, her voice carrying well in the large, round room.

“Bring them forward!” The AllFather gestured at the guards surrounding them. “Let them ssee the decimation of the onesss they love.”

At once, the huge Scourge guards began herding Sonya and Nate towards the dais. They prodded them up the broad stairs until they were standing side-by-side with the original four prisoners. Sonya grabbed for Davrik’s big hand but made sure to keep Nate on her other side.

The ex-Seal had drawn his mate—the girl with the purple skin—close to him. He had one long arm around her, but he had also managed to reach his little sister, who was standing huddled close to Lan’ara. Beside Nate’s sister was the still-defiant Xairna. The AllFather’s daughter was glaring at her father and Sonya could practically *feel* the hate radiating off her.

Apparently the AllFather could feel it too because he threw back his head and breathed deeply. This allowed Sonya

to see his burning red eyes—a sight which made her stomach twist with terror.

“Yesss, that’s right—I can feel all your pain...all your fear...all your hatred!” the Scourge Overlord hissed. “I do not even have to taste you individually to take it in—you fill me with your horror and your agony and antipathy!” He sounded like a man enjoying an exquisite and nourishing banquet that had been laid just for him.

Sonya had been all ready to clamp a hand onto Nate’s arm and start singing, but now she hesitated.

The negative emotions—they’re feeding him—making him stronger, she realized. She’d been prepared to sing a high, drilling note that was filled with her disgust and loathing for the horrible nightmare creature standing before her on the dais, but now she realized that wasn’t going to work. In fact, sending out her hate and fear would almost certainly make the AllFather even more powerful!

“Baby girl, you shouldn’t have come here.” Davrik’s deep, rumbling voice broke into her train of thought and Sonya looked up at him. She saw worry for her—concern and anxiety shining in his pale blue eyes. But most of all, she saw love—he still cared for her, even after she had rejected him, she realized. She remembered the words that he’d said to her after she’d found out about the other Sonya—her double from the other universe. The words he had spoken after she asked why he had come after her.

*“I came for you because I couldn’t **not** come. I came because you’re the other half of my soul and I can’t live without you!”*

And she knew what she needed to sing about—she knew what would take the AllFather’s power and crumble it to dust.

She grabbed for Nate’s wrist with her free hand and felt the ex-Seal’s muscles tighten under her grip. Then she opened her mouth and sang a line from a musical she’d always loved.

*“All I want is freedom,
A word with no more night!”*

*And you, always beside me—
to hold me and to hide me...”*

As she sang, Sonya felt as though the words were leaving her mouth like arrows and she could actually *see* them. They came from between her lips in streaks of dark pink light and struck the AllFather in the center of his shadowy robes.

“Ahh! What...what are you doing?” the evil creature hissed, taking a staggering step back.

But Davrik had already picked up on what was happening. Gripping Sonya’s hand more tightly in his, he sang the next lines back to her.

*“Let me be your shelter...
Let me be your light.
I’m here, with you, beside you...
To hold you and to guide you.”*

Dark blue streaks of light came from his lips and hit the AllFather right between his glowing red eyes. He staggered again, screeching in pain as he pinwheeled his arms, trying to stay on his feet.

“Stop—what are you doing? *Ssstop!*” he screeched. But by now Sonya and Davrik were singing the chorus together—their voices lifted and entwined in a harmony so close Sonya could feel it in her soul.

*“Say you’ll share with me each night, each morning...
Say the word and I will follow you.
Say you need me with you now and always...
Anywhere you go, let me go too...
Love me, that’s all I ask of you!”*

Bolt after bolt of emotion energy flew from their mouths and Sonya felt as though the song was swelling within her, making her bigger and stronger than she had ever been in her entire life. She poured everything she had into it—the warmth and safety that Davrik made her feel when he held her, the

desire she felt when he touched her, the pleasure he gave her when he tasted her...all the positive emotions she'd ever had when she touched the big Kindred came out.

And in the process, she felt Davrik's emotions too—they poured out in a song of love and longing for her so intense it nearly took her breath away.

He loves me, she thought. He really loves me despite everything!

The AllFather was screaming and writhing on the floor by now but the Scourge soldiers around him seemed confused. They milled dumbly around, looking uncertainly at the scene of their leader screeching and shouting. They might have understood if they had seen someone pointing a blaster at his head, Sonya thought distractedly, but they had no idea what she and Davrik were doing. They had probably never heard singing before in their dull, miserable lives.

There was one person who seemed to understand, though. That was the single Scourge officer the AllFather had called Krix. He was standing by uncertainly, looking down at the screeching Scourge Overlord as though he wasn't sure if he ought to help or not.

“Krix, ssstop them!” the AllFather screamed at him. “I will never pass my power to you if you let them kill me thiss way!”

This seemed to galvanize the Scourge officer into motion.

“Here—stop that sound!” he shouted, coming towards Sonya and Davrik with a hand on his blaster. But that was when Xairna sprang into action.

The minute that Krix was distracted, the Scourge girl pulled a long dagger from her boot. She ran at the Scourge officer and, just as he was turning to her, his red-on-black eyes wide with surprise, she made a swift, sideways motion.

Krix gasped...but the sound turned into a gurgle. Taking a stumbling step backwards, he clutched at his throat but streams of crimson were already flowing down his black uniform.

“I told you I’d never Join with you!” Xairna hissed at him.

Then, stepping around him, she knelt by the writhing, screeching AllFather.

“Stop—just for a moment,” she shouted at Sonya and Davrik.

Sonya did—taking a minute to breathe deeply. Beside her, Davrik stopped as well and for a moment the entire round throne room was filled with nothing but the sounds of the AllFather’s wheezing breath.

“Xairna...my daughter,” he hissed as she bent over him, the knife still gripped in one hand. “You have...ssaved me.”

“Only so I can kill you myself!” She glared down at him and Sonya felt her hatred again—the pain and sorrow of a child who had been abused and hurt instead of being loved and cared for. “You’ll *never* taste my pain again,” she whispered, her eyes flashing.

And then she plunged the bloody blade deep in the AllFather’s heart.

There was a final screech so loud Sonya thought it might burst her eardrums and the dark figure in front of them bowed its back at an impossible angle, the hilt of the knife protruding from its chest. Sonya saw the burning red eyes flicker...and then go out. And then the AllFather sank back to the dais and something strange happened.

The shadowy robes the Scourge Overlord wore slowly went flat and the skeletal body inside seemed to crumble away until the only thing left was a little pile of gray dust.

The AllFather was no more.

SIXTY-FIVE

NATE

Nate looked around in surprise as the enormous Scourge warriors began dropping to their knees...and then falling flat on their faces.

“What...what’s going on?” Lan’ara asked beside him in a trembling voice. She’d been holding herself rigid, trying to block out the waves of negative emotion the AllFather had been emitting like a poison cloud—Nate could still feel the tension in her.

“Don’t fucking know, sweetheart” he growled. “Maybe the AllFather was what kept them going. At least we won’t have to fight our way out.”

“I can’t believe you came for me!” Lan’ara said, looking up at him. “When I left the Mother Ship, you were nearly comatose!”

“The Kindred Goddess woke me up—she told me you were in danger. She told Sonya the same thing,” he added, nodding at Sonya, who had let go of his arm and was wrapped in Davrik’s embrace. The big Kindred was so much larger than her, he had gone to one knee to gather her into his arms. Sonya had her arms around his neck and the two of them were just breathing each other in.

“Nate? Big brother?” It was Madison’s voice and when he turned back, he saw his little sister looking at him with wide eyes.

“Maddy!” he exclaimed, gathering her close with his other arm, so that he was hugging both of his girls at once. “I’m so fucking glad to see you!”

“Not half as glad as I am to see you!” There were tears in her big blue eyes as she hugged him back. “Your, uh, wife came to rescue me but then we all got caught,” she added, looking at Lan’ara. “Um, you *are* his wife, right?”

“I am his mate because we are Bonded but we have not had a Joining ceremony,” Lan’ara told her.

“Not yet, anyway. But we’re going to have a wedding and get married. And you can be my best man,” he added, looking at Maddy.

“What? I don’t think so!” she scoffed, but there was laughter in her eyes. “*Maybe* I’ll be one of the bridesmaids—if Lan’ara wants me to, that is,” she added shyly.

“I would be pleased to have you stand with me during my Joining to your brother.” Lan’ara gave her a fond smile and Nate was glad to see there was already affection between the two of them.

“How did they *do* that, though?” Maddy asked, looking over at Davrik and Sonya, who were still wrapped in a tight embrace. “I mean...it was like they were singing *lasers* or something.”

“Has to do with this thing on my back.” Nate turned around and hitched up his shirt to show them. “It’s called an ESR—Emotion Sonic Resonator,” he explained. “It needed me and Sonya both to operate it because it was too heavy for her to carry and you have to sing in order to make it work.”

“But you can’t carry a tune in a bucket,” Maddy protested.

“Yeah, I *know* that, squirt.” Nate tweaked her nose playfully, just as he used to when they were kids. “That’s why Sonya came along to help. And also because she wanted to get Davrik back,” he added.

“All of you appear to be happy now.”

The new voice came from the gray girl—the one who had actually stabbed the AllFather and finished him off.

His daughter, Nate thought. He remembered her saying that the AllFather would never feed on her pain again and felt sick. Had that fucking bastard really mind-raped his own daughter? If so, he’d deserved every damn thing he got and more!

“I suppose you’ll all go back to the Kindred Mother Ship now,” Xairna said dully. There was a mute longing in her red-on-black eyes that hurt Nate’s heart.

“You can come with us, if you like.” Lan’ara detached herself from Nate’s side and put a tentative arm around the Scourge girl. “You’d be very welcome.”

“Even though I’m Scourge? Even though I’m your enemy?” the girl demanded.

Lan’ara smiled warmly.

“I’m an Empath Kindred and I can tell you don’t mean us any harm. I don’t see an enemy—I see someone I would like to call my friend. Will you come with us?”

Hope filled Xairna’s face and she looked at Lan’ara uncertainly.

“You really mean that?”

“With all my heart. I know Commander Sylvania will let you come aboard if I vouch for you—which I’ll be happy to do.”

Lan’ara drew her in for a hug. For a moment, Xairna was stiff in her arms. Then, slowly, her arms came up and she tentatively hugged Lan’ara back.

It occurred to Nate that this might be the very first hug the Scourge girl had ever gotten and he was surprised to feel that his eyes were stinging. He cleared his throat, trying to push back some of the emotion.

“It’s all right, my love,” Lan’ara sent to him through their link. *“It’s sad that she’s never been shown any kindness before, but now that she is coming home with us, she will have a chance to heal.”*

“I hope you’re right,” Nate sent back. *“But for right now, I just want to get out of this fucking haunted house of a ship and go home!”*

“Home to the Mother Ship or home to Earth?” Lan’ara’s mental voice sounded uncertain.

“Doesn’t matter, sweetheart,” Nate told her. *“Wherever you are is home to me.”*

“Good—then take me back to the Mother Ship and show me how much you’ve missed me!”

He could feel the hunger in her words and it ignited a fire inside him.

“Want to Bond with you all over again,” he sent to her. *“Can’t wait to get you back to the suite, baby!”*

“I want that too—I want you so much, my mate!”

As she spoke, Lan’ara let down the barrier between them completely and he felt a rush of love and lust and desire pouring out of her and into him. For a moment he felt like both his heart and his cock might burst—he couldn’t wait to get back!

“Come on, you guys,” he said, speaking to Sonya and Davrik too. “Let’s get the fuck out of here and go home!”

“I agree.” Davrik and Sonya pulled apart and the big Kindred rose to his full height, though he kept an arm around his woman’s shoulder. “Some of us have further to go to get home than others.”

Sonya looked up at him with a smile as Nate put his arms around Madison and Lan’ara.

“Let’s go,” he said again.

“You, too,” he heard Lan’ara say, nodding at Xairna. “You’re a friend now.”

“Thank you.” Xairna gave her a tentative smile and reached out to squeeze her hand.

Then all six of them descended the broad stairs, leaving the heaps of fallen Scourge warriors and the horrors of the Father Ship behind forever.

SIXTY-SIX

DAVRIK

“We’re so grateful for all you’ve done—we’ll be very sorry to see the two of you go,” Commander Sylvania said, speaking to Davrik and Sonya. “Are you sure you have to leave our universe?”

Davrik smiled and pressed the Kindred Commander’s hand gratefully. They were gathered in her office, having already said goodbye to Nate and Lan’ara. Davrik was glad to see that the human male was healed of his unchecked rage and was treating his mate with care and devotion, as a male should. The two of them were happily Bonded and he could tell they would be together for the rest of their lives.

Nate’s younger sister was also happily settled aboard the Mother Ship. She had struck up a friendship with a priest in the Sacred Grove—one of the few male Kindred in this universe. And though the priests usually remained single, it wasn’t mandated that they should never Join with a female, if the right one was sent by the Goddess. After seeing the two of them together, Davrik thought it very likely that a Bonding was in their future.

“We really do have to go,” he said now to Commander Sylvania. “Your universe is beautiful but in my own universe, Sonya’s family is still alive.”

“I can’t wait to see my mom again. Well, the *other* Sonya’s mom,” Sonya put in. She bit her lip. “I don’t know how we’ll explain things to her, but I *need* to see her. And the rest of my family, too!”

“Of course, you do.” Commander Sylvania gave her an understanding smile. “It’s selfish of me to want to keep the two of you here—it’s just that we’re so grateful for what you’ve done. The Earth is free now and the Father Ship is no more than a floating hulk.”

“That wasn’t all our doing, though,” Davrik protested. “It was the AllFather’s daughter—Xairna—who finished him off.”

“Yes, that poor girl.” Sonya shook her head sympathetically. “She’s going to need *all* the therapy to get over everything that was done to her.”

“She’s been going for healing sessions with the priests daily in the Sacred Grove,” Commander Sylvania said gravely. “And it might surprise you to know that my husband, Oliver, has introduced her to a cousin of his—a human called Lawrence.”

“Oh, really?” Sonya asked eagerly. “Are the two of them together?”

“They are still just friends for now, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they end up Bonded. It seems like the will of the Goddess.” Sylvania smiled. “Just as it was her will to bring the two of you to us in our hour of need. We were losing the war against the Scourge, you know—they were too firmly encamped and we had almost despaired of ever freeing the Earth of their evil presence.”

“We’re so glad we could help,” Sonya said smiling, but Davrik could hear the eagerness to be away in her voice.

“Though it’s difficult to part, we really must go home,” he said. “Could you please ask the transport controllers to fold space for us?”

“It will be my pleasure. Please come back and visit us anytime.” Commander Sylvania smiled. “Have a safe journey and may The Mother of All Life bless you both.”

“Thank you,” Davrik said. Putting an arm around Sonya, he looked down into her lovely face. “Come on, baby girl—let’s go home.”

SIXTY-SEVEN

SONYA

S onya wasn't sure what to think. She'd folded space once before with Davrik but this time it was different—instead of a horizontal red gash in space, there was a vertical green one. It seemed to glow ominously but Davrik piloted the ship into it without any apparent fear, so she forced herself to relax.

He wouldn't take me someplace it isn't safe, she reminded herself. He loves me—he wants to protect me.

She knew it was true—knew that Davrik loved her. But after the emotional scene following the death of the AllFather, the big Kindred had yet to lay a hand on her again. In the days and nights following the climax of their adventures, Davrik seemed to be keeping his distance. It had been almost a week now and he still hadn't touched her—a fact that was beginning to make her wonder if he still wanted her or not.

Sonya wasn't sure what was going on and she was too uncertain to ask him. Did he want to take things slowly after the fight between them? Had he decided she wasn't a good substitute for the wife he'd lost after all? Didn't he desire her anymore?

The thoughts were bubbling in her head day and night and at the same time, she couldn't help remembering the way he'd touched her and tasted her at The House of a Thousand Flowers. She *missed* having his big hands on her and feeling his hot tongue between her legs. She missed being held in his arms and breathing in his warm, spicy scent.

But what could she do to bring him back?

She still hadn't come up with an answer by the time they flew out of the fold in space and found themselves right back where they had started. Or so Sonya thought.

“Hey—that's the Mother Ship—we didn't go anywhere at all,” she protested, pointing to the vast, pearly white ship on the viewscreen.

“That *is* the Mother Ship, but it isn’t the one we just left,” Davrik told her. “This is the Mother Ship of my own universe. Let me call them for clearance to land and you’ll see.”

He made a call and was answered by a deep male voice, granting them docking privileges. They flew down into what looked like the exact same Docking Bay they had just left.

Waiting for them was a tall Kindred warrior with spiky blond hair and pale blue eyes. He smiled when he saw Davrik’s face and his smile got even wider when he saw Sonya coming out of the ship behind him. With a little shock, she realized that this must be the male version of Commander Sylvania. Davrik had told her that the Kindred of his universe were 95 percent male, but actually seeing the male counterpart of the Kindred Commander shook Sonya up a bit.

“So—it seems you’ve returned with what you were seeking,” the male Sylvania remarked, offering a forearm to Davrik, who took it and squeezed firmly.

“I did. By the grace of the Goddess, I was able to find Sonya and bring her back with me,” he said. Then he reached into an inner pocket and pulled out the black and white Rubik’s Cube thing. “Here—I am returning the Far Box. I no longer need it but I thank you for the use of it with my whole heart.”

“You’re very welcome, Davrik. I’m glad you found her—I know how important Sonya is to you,” the male Sylvania rumbled. He nodded at Sonya and smiled. “Hello—I’m Commander Sylvan, head of the High Council. You’re very welcome here aboard the Mother Ship.”

“Oh, er, thank you.” Sonya nodded and gave him a tentative smile. Seeing the male versions of the Kindred she’d gotten used to being female was going to take some time to get used to, she thought.

“Sonya is looking forward to seeing her family—they live on the peninsula of Florida,” Davrik told Commander Sylvan.

“Oh, well I’m afraid it’s nighttime in Florida and the rest of the continental US right now,” Sylvan said, frowning. “In fact it’s...” He consulted a complicated looking watch on his wrist. “It’s about two in the morning by human time.”

Davrik turned to Sonya.

“I know you want to go see your family, but I’m afraid we’d probably wake them up if we went right now.”

“That’s all right—we can wait until everyone is up. I’m tired anyway,” she said quickly. To tell the truth, she was still nervous about what she was going to say when she saw her mom—or the other Sonya’s mom—again. She couldn’t pretend to be the other Sonya—that wouldn’t be right. But would her mom still accept her, even if she wasn’t the exact daughter she had lost? And how would the rest of the family feel?

Try not to think about it, she told herself uneasily. You don’t have to worry about it this minute anyway—just let it go for now.

Trying to take her own advice, she nodded goodbye to Commander Sylvan and let Davrik lead her through the vast Mother Ship to the suite that he had shared with the other Sonya.

“I would say I hope you like the way it’s decorated, but I don’t think it will be a problem,” he remarked, when they reached their destination and the metal door slid open with a faint *hiss*.

Sonya stepped inside and took in a breath. Just like the long-range shuttle that Davrik flew, the luxurious suite was decorated exactly to her liking. Clearly she and her doppelganger had the same taste.

“It’s *beautiful*,” she admitted, looking around the living area which had gorgeous prints on the walls. A quilt that the other Sonya’s grandma must have made had been framed and had pride of place over the mantelpiece of the small fireplace.

“I’m glad you like it. Are you hungry or thirsty?” Davrik asked, striding from the living area to the kitchen—or food-

prep area as the Kindred called it. “I find that folding space makes me extremely thirsty sometimes.”

Sonya *was* feeling a bit parched. She followed him into the kitchen and watched as he opened a strange kind of Kindred fridge. There didn’t seem to be many shelves inside—instead, everything was in some kind of square or round container and all of them were hanging from hooks.

“Hmm, let’s see...” Davrik was rummaging around inside and he pulled several bottles off their hooks and set them on the counter. He opened a few of them and sniffed but it wasn’t until the last one—a clear bottle that seemed to be filled with a peach-colored liquid—that Sonya’s own nose perked up.

“Oh—what’s that one?” she exclaimed, pointing at it. “It smells like passion fruit and strawberries!”

“Oh, this?” Davrik frowned and recapped the bottle hastily. “This is nothing. It’s left over from...from before I lost my Sonya.”

The way he said “my Sonya” made Sonya’s heart ache. She wished the big Kindred would refer to *her* that way. But so far, he still hadn’t made a move to touch her.

“Oh...okay,” she said in a small voice. She could tell he still missed her doppelganger, who had been his wife, after all. Maybe there was no way she could ever fill her place.

“Sorry about that.” Davrik cleared his throat. “How about some *fer’litzian* thirst-quencher? It’s very hydrating and has a pleasant taste my Sonya always loved.”

“Sure—that sounds good.” Sonya nodded and watched as he poured her a cup of bright blue liquid. It *did* taste good—it had a faint hint of cinnamon and exotic alien spices—but she couldn’t forget the tantalizing aroma of the peach colored juice.

After they drank, Davrik announced that he was going to get ready for bed. He courteously offered Sonya the use of the bathroom or “fresher” as the Kindred called it first, and she took him up on the offer.

After a refreshing shower—she wanted a dip in the bathing pool but decided she would save it for another day—she came out and Davrik went in.

While the big Kindred was in the bathroom, it seemed like the perfect time to explore. Sonya wandered through the suite, which was roomy and spacious despite only having a few rooms and looked at everything her doppelganger had left behind.

She saw numerous pictures of the other Sonya and Davrik together—some from holo projectors and others that were more traditional photographs in frames. The two of them looked so *happy* together. It made Sonya wonder if she could ever live up to the level of devotion and tenderness she saw shining from their eyes when they looked at each other.

What can I do to make him feel that way about me? she wondered, looking at their engagement photo with Davrik on one knee, offering the other Sonya a gorgeous diamond ring.

The thought made her sad and she decided to do something to cheer herself up. All along the thought of the peach juice in the fridge had been in the back of her mind. Now she thought she would take just a sip of it and see what it was like.

Going back to the kitchen, she opened the fridge and took out the clear bottle. She uncapped the lid and took a deep sniff of the contents. It smelled even better than before! She didn't know where the cups were kept and she knew she ought to look for one, but the fragrance of the peach-colored juice was so tempting, she found herself tilting the bottle to her lips and drinking straight from it.

A sweet, fruity taste like passion fruit, peaches, and ripe strawberries filled her mouth and a tingle went through her entire body. Strangely, there was also a hint of something savory that somehow made the juice even more delicious. What was it? Sonya took another sip to see. Hmm...could that be buttered popcorn?

She took another drink to be sure and yes it was—that was definitely the savory flavor. Somehow it went extremely

well with the sweet fruity notes. Sonya sipped some more... and then realized that somehow the container, which had been almost full, was now half-empty.

“Oops,” she muttered, hastily recapping the tasty juice. She hoped that Davrik wouldn’t notice how much she’d taken. And if he did notice, she hoped he wouldn’t be mad.

Time to get back to the bedroom and see if I can find something to wear, she told herself as she replaced the bottle at the back of the fridge. She was wrapped in a thick, fluffy red towel but it was time to see if there was anything she could wear to bed.

Of course, she had some clothing that she’d gotten aboard the other Kindred Mother Ship in the Carry All Cube that Davrik had given her, but she wanted to see if the other Sonya had left any clothes behind. They were bound to be her size and taste and besides, she wanted something sexy to wear to bed. Maybe she could tempt Davrik into touching her again... or maybe doing more than touching...if she was dressed the right way.

But finding the other Sonya’s clothes was easier said than done. Sonya thought she’d looked everywhere when she finally found what appeared to be a closet door in the bedroom. Strangely, it was hidden behind a kind of carved, wooden screen—she never would have noticed it if the screen hadn’t been partially folded, allowing her a glimpse of the door. Opening it, she expected to see her predecessor’s clothes.

What she saw instead shocked her.

The space was bigger than she’d thought—about twice as big as a good-sized walk-in closet. And it most definitely *wasn’t* filled with clothes—though there *were* some skimpy-looking outfits hanging on a small rack at the entryway.

Sonya’s eyes went wide as she surveyed the small room. It had black walls and a white ceiling with some soft glow lights that gave off a warm reddish-gold illumination. The floor was carpeted in some thick red fur that felt amazingly soft against her bare feet. There was a padded bench in one

corner and when Sonya bent down, she saw that there were manacles attached to it.

Hanging on the wall beside the bench were a row of instruments—Sonya saw paddles and floggers with long leather tassels as well as a riding crop, all lined up neatly.

She had a brief, vivid mental image of the other Sonya bent over that bench with her hands and ankles manacled in place, so she couldn't move while Davrik used one of the paddles on her bare ass.

The thought made her catch her breath and put a hand to her throat, her heart pounding wildly. Was *this* why the two of them had been so close? Had they been into kinky sex together?

Sonya had never tried anything but vanilla sex but she'd always had secret fantasies of something more. However, she'd never had a lover she trusted enough to tell him what she really wanted. Now, looking around the small sex dungeon room, it seemed clear that her doppelganger had also had those same fantasies.

In the other far corner was a kind of rocking or gliding chair, she saw. It had no arms and there were footrests on either side of it. It didn't look like it was built for a human—it was Kindred sized. When she pushed it, the chair glided backwards and the seat sank down. But when it glided forwards, the seat came back up, tilting at an angle that made her frown.

“What kind of sex device *is* this thing anyway?” she muttered to herself.

“That's a Breeding Chair.”

Davrik's deep voice from the doorway startled her so much that she spun around too fast and her towel fell off.

Sonya gasped and tried to cover herself with her hands, feeling frozen to the spot as the big Kindred approached her. He was wearing nothing but a long pair of pajama bottoms made of some silky black material and there were beads of water on his broad, bare shoulders.

“Here, baby girl,” he rumbled. Picking up the towel, he draped it around her shoulders.

“Thanks. I didn’t mean to snoop—I was just looking for something to wear,” Sonya said quickly as she re-wrapped the towel. She was worried that he’d be upset she had discovered something so private.

But Davrik didn’t seem angry. In fact, the expression on his face was hard to read.

“You’re probably wondering about all this,” he remarked, sweeping out a hand to indicate the mini-sex dungeon. “Sonya and I used all of our storage space allotment to make it.”

“Uh...okay.” Sonya nodded uncertainly. “That’s...nice I guess. Did you...were you, uh, into this kind of thing?”

She could feel her face getting hot as she spoke. Clearly Davrik *was* into this kind of thing—otherwise the sex dungeon room wouldn’t exist. But he answered her anyway, even though it was obvious.

“My Sonya and I...we had a D/s relationship,” he rumbled. “Do you know what that means?”

Sonya felt her heart jump in her chest as a shiver of pure desire went through her. Suddenly her whole body felt hot and the tips of her breasts and the place between her legs were throbbing.

“Dominant and submissive,” she whispered.

“Yes.” Davrik nodded. Reaching down, he cupped Sonya’s cheek in his big hand and tilted her face up so that she had no choice but to meet his eyes. “*I* was the Dominant,” he rumbled. “Do you understand?”

“I...I think so.”

Sonya licked suddenly dry lips. She found she couldn’t hold his intense gaze—it was making her too hot and bothered. God, why was she feeling so swollen between her legs? And the towel, which had formerly felt soft, now seemed too rough against her sensitive nipples.

Davrik inhaled deeply and frowned.

“Are you all right, baby girl?”

Oh God—was he smelling how hot she was getting, just from having him touch her and talk to her in that deep, soft voice of his? Sonya squeezed her thighs together tightly, wishing she was wearing panties.

“Uh, what’s this thing again?” she asked, pointing at the black rocking chair in the corner to change the subject.

“A Breeding Chair,” Davrik told her. “It’s often used, along with Bonding Fruit, when a Kindred warrior is much larger than his mate. It’s a way to make sure he doesn’t hurt her—unless she *wants* to be hurt, that is,” he added darkly and she saw his pale blue eyes flicker to the wall where the floggers and paddles were hanging.

“Oh, um...” Sonya licked her lips, looking for something—*anything* else—to say. “What...what’s Bonding Fruit?” she asked at last, thinking it was the least loaded question she could ask.

“A special fruit that’s cultivated on Twin Moons—the Twin Kindred home world,” Davrik explained. “Because Twin Kindred warriors have to share a female between them, they developed a special fruit to help. It has chemical properties that enable a female to stretch and open to take a larger shaft inside her pussy than would normally be possible.”

“*Really?*” Sonya could feel her eyes getting wide. She’d wondered how in the world her doppelganger had managed to accommodate a guy as big as Davrik—now it seemed she had an explanation.

“Really. Otherwise making love with a much smaller female wouldn’t be possible,” Davrik explained. “In fact, the juice you were looking at in the kitchen—that’s Bonding Fruit juice. It has natural preservatives that keep it fresh and I couldn’t bear to throw it out,” he added, looking pensive. “I just uncap it once in a while and smell it—it reminds me of her. In fact...” He frowned and Sonya saw his nostrils flare again. “I could swear I smell it *now*.”

“Oh, um...” She licked her lips nervously. She could still taste traces of the sweet and savory juice on her mouth—the flavor didn’t seem to want to fade.

“Baby girl...” Davrik was looking down at her with one eyebrow raised and a disapproving frown on his face. “Tell me the truth—did you sneak back into the food-prep area and drink some of the Bonding Fruit juice?”

“I...I only meant to have a taste!” Sonya exclaimed. She took a step back from him, not sure where she was going. The back of her legs hit the padded black leather bench and she realized she could go no further...and Davrik was between her and the door.

“How much did you drink?” He was frowning like a thundercloud now and Sonya felt a flutter of nerves in her stomach.

“I...I don’t know,” she faltered. “I just meant to have a sip but it tasted so good I sort of...uh, drank half the container,” she ended in a small voice.

“*Half the container?*” His eyes widened, then narrowed. “Drop your towel.”

“*What?*” Sonya wasn’t sure she’d heard him right.

“Drop your towel, baby girl—*now*,” he rumbled, giving her a stern look. “I need to see how your body is reacting to that much Bonding Fruit juice.”

Sonya thought about saying no, but he was looking so stern and forbidding, she didn’t dare. Besides, it seemed to do something to her insides to have him order her around in that deep, commanding voice of his.

“Yes...Master,” she said, remembering that he’d told her to call him that before, when he was tasting her. With trembling fingers, she unfastened the red towel and let it drop for the second time—deliberately this time.

“Good girl,” Davrik rumbled. He went to one knee in front of her so the two of them were more or less eye-to-eye, just as he had when he’d hugged her in the Father Ship.

But this time, instead of gathering her into his arms, Davrik took her wrists and pulled her arms gently but firmly away from her body.

“Hmm...” Letting go of one wrist, he cupped her right breast in his big hand and gently thumbed the nipple.

“Oh!” Sonya moaned as the light touch sent shivers all through her. She couldn’t remember ever being so *sensitive* before!

“Hmm,” he rumbled again. “Extra sensitive, are you?”

“I...yes,” Sonya admitted, panting a little. Her heart was drumming in her chest, but she couldn’t help feeling *extremely* turned on. This whole scenario reminded her of some of her darkest fantasies—ones she had never dared to tell anyone before.

“How does *this* feel, then?” Davrik asked. Leaning forward, he sucked her other nipple deep into his hot mouth.

“*Ohhhh...*” Sonya moaned as he swirled the tip of his tongue around her tight peak. Her body seemed to move on its own and she could feel her thighs clenching even tighter as she thrust her chest forward, offering the big Kindred more. She could feel the sharp points of his fangs bracketing her sensitive point, but he never even scratched her—he probably had lots of practice licking and sucking a woman’s body without hurting her with his fangs, Sonya thought dazedly.

He switched nipples and sucked the other one as well, making her moan and squirm. His mouth on her breasts felt so good she thought she could almost come just from having him suck her nipples!

Davrik drew back at last when both her stiff peaks were swollen and shiny from his attention. He was still frowning sternly.

“You’re feeling very intensely right now, aren’t you baby girl?”

“Y-yes,” Sonya admitted. There was no denying it—her pussy was hot and wet and *throbbing* with need.

Which was what made his next order so hard to obey.

“Lean back against the spanking bench and spread your legs, baby girl,” he rumbled. “I need to see how wet you’re getting.”

“What?” Sonya bit her lip and shifted from foot to foot uncomfortably. Surely he hadn’t just ordered her to do that?

“I can gauge how strongly the Bonding Fruit is affecting you by seeing how wet and sensitive your soft little pussy is,” Davrik explained patiently. “So I need you to spread for me, baby girl—open up and let me see your pussy.”

Sonya couldn’t believe she was doing this, but he had touched and tasted her before. And besides, it felt *right* to submit to the big Kindred.

It feels right to submit to your Master, you mean, whispered a soft voice in her head. Yes, that was it, Sonya thought as she leaned back against the padded spanking bench and obediently spread her legs. That was it *exactly*.

“Good girl,” Davrik murmured in a voice that seemed to melt her from the inside out.

Sonya tried not to tremble as he leaned closer and put his big hands on her inner thighs, urging her to spread even wider. She looked down as she did and felt her stomach knot with embarrassment.

She had *never* been so wet in her whole life! Her juices had spread all over the place—they coated her inner thighs, making them shiny with moisture.

Even worse, her pussy was swollen with need, the outer lips pouting open to show the dark pearl of her clit which was throbbing for attention.

“Hmm—worse than I thought,” she heard Davrik remark. He looked up at her. “I’m not going to touch you with my fingers—I’m pretty sure you’re already too tender for that. But I still need to gauge your sensitivity. So I’m going to use my tongue.”

Sonya let out a little gasp. He had tasted her before, of course—when he was healing her in The House of a Thousand Flowers. But that seemed like a hundred years ago now. And though she had wanted him, she hadn't been throbbing with need like she was now.

The big Kindred seemed to sense both her apprehension and her need.

“Gently, baby girl,” he murmured. “You’re going to be right on the edge when I lick you—you might even come for me.” He held her eyes with his as he spoke. “And that’s all right. If you need to come on my tongue, just let yourself go and know that I’ve got you.”

“Yes, Sir,” Sonya whispered. Oh, God she was going to go *crazy* in a minute—her body was so sensitive, so *needy*!

And that was when he leaned forward and slid his hot tongue into her slippery inner folds.

“*Ahh!*” Sonya gasped, as a bolt of pure pleasure shot through her.

It was like every nerve in her body lit up at the gentle brush of his tongue. And just as Davrik had predicted, she was right on the edge.

“Master, *please!*” she begged and found that somehow her fingers had woven themselves into his thick, black hair.

Davrik pressed even closer, bathing her aching clit with his tongue, his fangs bracketing the sensitive little pearl but again, never piercing the flesh. Sonya could hear a hungry growl coming from deep in his throat as he licked her even harder.

The feeling was almost *too* intense—it was *frightening*. Instinctively, Sonya tried to pull away from the extreme pleasure. What stopped her was the feeling of Davrik’s big hands wrapping around her hips.

He looked up for a moment, his mouth shiny with her juices and his eyes stern.

“No, baby girl,” he growled hoarsely. “Don’t try to get away from me. The Bonding Fruit is affecting you too strongly—you *need* to come—need to take the edge off if you’re going to get over this. You drank an awful lot of that juice and your body needs stimulation.”

“But it feels almost *too* good!” Sonya panted. Her hips were still trying to buck, though Davrik was holding her still with what appeared to be little or no effort.

“I know that, but you need to have an orgasm—I can tell by how sensitive you are,” he countered. Then he gave her a stern look. “Do I need to cuff you to the spanking bench, baby girl? Is that the only way you can be a good girl and let me lick your pussy until you come for me?”

Sonya nibbled her lower hip. Her mind was a whirl of desperate fantasies—dreams in which a stern but loving Master took her in hand and made her feel good even if she told him she didn’t want him to.

“Yes,” she whispered at last, nodding. “I...I think you’ll have to...have to cuff me, Master. It feels too good—I can’t hold still any other way.”

“Very well, then.”

Davrik’s big hands went around her waist and she gasped again as he positioned her as easily as he might move a doll. Before she knew it, Sonya found herself lying on her back with her wrists cuffed above her head to the corners of the bench.

She thought she had never felt more naked or more vulnerable but Davrik’s eyes were half-lidded with lust as he surveyed her.

“There you go—now you can be a good girl for your Master,” he murmured softly. He laid one big hand between her breasts and then stroked downward until he reached her quivering pussy. “Good girl, Sonya. Spread nice and wide for me—going to taste you now. Taste you until you come all over my face.”

“All...all right!” she whispered, her voice trembling, as she parted her thighs again.

“That’s right.” Davrik nodded at her approvingly. “Open up for your Master’s tongue and watch me lick that sweet little pussy. Watch me lick you until you come nice and hard for me.”

Sonya couldn’t have stopped looking if the sight had made her go blind. Her gaze was fixed on the big Kindred kneeling between her thighs. He bent his head and, holding her eyes the whole time, licked her open pussy starting at her entrance and dragging his tongue up along her inner folds until he reached the very top of her slit.

“Oh...*oh!*” Sonya moaned as he did it again...and then *again*. As before, the pleasure got so intense that her thighs started trying to close as she involuntarily twitched away from him.

But Davrik gave her a stern look.

“No, baby girl—you need to come for me. Keep your thighs spread wide and let me lick you nice and deep.”

Then he gripped her hips in his big hands and bent down again, plundering her slippery slit with his hot, wet tongue until Sonya saw stars dancing in front of her eyes.

“Oh...oh, God—Davrik! Master!” she moaned. She could barely hold her body still, the feeling was so intense. But Davrik held her down, not letting her twitch away or shut her legs as he licked her relentlessly, swirling his tongue over the aching button of her clit until at last an orgasm so strong it took her breath away hit her like a bolt of lightning.

With a wordless cry, Sonya’s back arched and she yanked against the cuffs that held her wrists. She could feel the big Kindred’s tongue, lapping her deeper as he worked to draw out her orgasm, pushing her higher and higher as he teased her sensitive clit until she nearly screamed his name.

“Davrik! *Master!*” she gasped, writhing in his grip. But again, his big hands kept her from getting away. There was nothing she could do but lie there and take it until he was

finished licking her. Nothing she could do but lie there and submit to her Master's tongue in her pussy.

At last, still panting and moaning, Sonya began to come down from the intense pleasure. But now, though the throbbing need was muted, she felt a new sensation—an emptiness between her thighs that demanded to be filled.

“Master, please!” she moaned, looking up at the big Kindred who was kneeling over her, watching her with half-lidded eyes. “Please, I feel so *empty* inside.”

“I know, baby girl,” he rumbled. “Don't worry—I'm going to help you with that. Here.”

He unclasped the cuffs, freeing her arms for a moment. But Sonya scarcely had time to sit up before he was pushing her back down again, this time on her stomach.

“Up on your hands and knees, baby girl,” he ordered in that deep, commanding voice she didn't dare to disobey. “Spread your legs and tilt your hips back so I can see your pussy.”

Sonya bit her lips as she followed these instructions. Despite the Earth-shattering orgasm he'd just given her, she was still throbbing and aching between her thighs, almost like she was ready to go all over again!

“Are...are you going to fuck me now?” she asked, looking up at him apprehensively.

He raised an eyebrow at her.

“Do you *want* me to fuck you, baby girl?”

Sonya swallowed hard.

“I...I don't know,” she admitted. True, she had a burning, aching void inside her that needed to be filled, but she'd seen how big his cock was—Bonding Fruit or not, she didn't think there was any way that enormous thing could fit inside her.

“If you don't know, then you're not ready yet.” Davrik told her. “But I can help you get ready. And I need to see how the Bonding Fruit juice is working on your inner pussy anyway.”

“How...how are you going to tell that?” Sonya couldn’t keep the apprehension out of her voice.

“With these.” Getting to his feet, he went across the room and came back with a small chest she hadn’t noticed before. When he opened it, Sonya saw it was full of all kinds of sex toys—most notably a lot of dildos that ranged in size from what she would consider a normal human guy’s cock to thick phalluses that were almost as large as Davrik himself.

“Oh my *God*,” she breathed, staring at them. “Are...are you going to *use* those on me?”

“Yes—I’m going to see how much you’re ready to take,” Davrik told her, matter-of-factly. His voice dropped to a low growl and his eyes went half-lidded again. “Are you ready to be a good girl and let me see how much cock your sweet little pussy can open for?”

Sonya bit back a moan as his dirty words made her even hotter.

“Yes, Master,” she whispered. “I...I think I can do that.”

“Good. Slowly then—I’ll let you point to the one you want me to use on you.”

This made Sonya feel a lot less apprehensive.

“That one.” She pointed at the normal one—the one that was about the size of a regular human guy’s equipment.

“All right—we’ll start with the small one, then,” Davrik agreed. “But I’m afraid you’ll find it’s not nearly enough.”

As he spoke, he slid the head of the normal-sized phallus into her wet pussy and pressed it deep inside her.

Sonya moaned and tossed her head. He was right—this one *wasn’t* enough. She felt a deep need to have her inner walls stretched—to feel her pussy filled completely. And this little dick wasn’t doing a damn thing for her.

Davrik was watching her face intently—it was easy for him to do since there was a mirror on the wall across from the Spanking bench that she hadn’t noticed before.

“Not enough, is it, baby girl?” he asked, correctly judging her expression.

Sonya shook her head.

“No...it’s not,” she admitted.

“Then we’ll skip the next size and go right for this one.”

Davrik rummaged in the toy chest and pulled out a much larger phallus—the sight of it made Sonya’s eyes go wide.

“That’s...a lot bigger than anything I’m used to!” she protested when he showed it to her.

“I know, baby girl, but it’s still not quite as big as my cock,” he said patiently. “I need you to open your pussy and try to take it for me—can you do that?”

“I...I can try, I guess,” Sonya whispered, her eyes still wide as she stared at the massive dildo.

“Good girl.” Davrik stroked her back with one big, warm hand and she found that his soothing, gentle touch helped calm her nerves. “I know you’re nervous,” he told her. “But I think you’ll find that this one isn’t big enough to satisfy your pussy either.”

Sonya didn’t know about that. She’d once been with a guy who was bigger than average and it had *not* been a pleasant experience. Mainly because Mr. Man thought his porn-star sized dick made up for everything else and his idea of foreplay was tugging her nipples two or three times before climbing on top and trying to stick it in.

Just thinking of that rather painful experience had Sonya wincing as she felt the head of the second phallus find the mouth of her pussy. To her surprise, however, it slid in just as easily as the first one had. And though she could feel some stretching of her inner walls, it still wasn’t enough, just as Davrik had predicted.

“Davrik...Master!” she moaned and bucked her hips, looking for more.

“Easy, baby girl—I’m going to fuck you with it now,” he growled softly.

Pulling back, he thrust in hard with the thick phallus, making Sonya moan and twist her hips some more. But as good as it felt, it still wasn't *quite* what she needed.

"It's *almost* big enough but...but it's still not enough!" she complained breathlessly. "What's wrong with me?"

"Well, you basically overdosed on Bonding Fruit juice," Davrik rumbled, frowning. "The juice is very concentrated—you're only meant to drink a small glass at a time."

"Overdosed? What does that mean?" Sonya demanded. She was trying not to panic, but this didn't sound good!

"It means if you're going to get through the night after drinking so much Bonding Fruit juice, I'm going to have to fuck you, baby girl," Davrik said sternly. "You're going to need your Master's cock and his cum deep inside you to counteract the effects."

"You...you're going to fuck me?" Sonya bit her lip again as conflicting emotions twisted through her. On one hand she wanted this—wanted *him*—with all her heart. On the other hand, he was still so *big*.

"Yes, but I won't Bond you to me unless you want me to," Davrik promised. "I can fuck you and give you a creamy pussy without Bonding you—all I have to do is not bite you when I come."

"Bite me?" Sonya asked faintly, watching him in the mirror. His fangs were looking extremely long and sharp and the idea of them sinking into her neck or any other part of her anatomy was both frightening and fascinating.

"Yes—as a Blood Kindred I would have to inject my Essence into your bloodstream as I was shooting my seed into your womb in order to bond you to me," he explained. "But I can fuck you without Bonding. And I think you're ready for that now," he added, withdrawing the second phallus.

Sonya couldn't help feeling nervous and Davrik seemed to know that. He swung her into his arms and held her close to his chest for a long moment, cuddling her.

“It’s all right, baby girl,” he murmured in her ear as he carried her over to the black rocking chair he’d called a “Breeding Chair.” “I’m going to take good care of you. Your Master is going to fuck you nice and slow, so your little pussy has time to open up for my cock. All right?”

“All right.” Sonya looked up at him, letting her heart show in her face. “I...I trust you, Master,” she murmured.

“Good girl,” he rumbled approvingly. And then he settled into the Breeding Chair and arranged her so she was straddling his lap.

SIXTY-EIGHT

SONYA

S onya looked down between them and saw how big he was all over again. She felt a swell of apprehension but then she remembered that the Bonding Fruit would help her stretch and that Davrik had promised to be careful with her.

“Easy, baby girl,” he growled softly. “Just guide me inside you—your soft little pussy is nice and wet. You can take it.”

“Yes, Master,” Sonya murmured. Reaching between them, she grasped the thick pole of flesh between his legs and guided the broad head to the mouth of her pussy. There was already a clear bead of precum on its tip and she rubbed it into her open folds. The moment she felt the precum touch her pussy, a tingling started inside her and she knew what it was she was missing.

He’s right—I need his cum inside me, not just his cock, she thought. She just hoped she could fit him into her slick pussy channel.

“Just relax,” Davrik murmured as he pressed the wide crown against her pussy mouth. “Relax and let me slide inside you, baby girl.”

Taking a deep breath, Sonya tried to do as he said. For a moment she thought it wasn’t going to happen. But then, the broad head of his cock breached her entrance and she felt the rest following.

She moaned softly as his thickness filled her. God, he was so *big*—bigger than anything she’d ever had inside her before! She had a feeling that if she’d been skinny instead of a curvy girl, she could have looked down and traced the outline of his massive member on her abdomen as it slid deeper and deeper into her pussy.

At last, however, she felt him bottom out inside her. The wide head of his cock kissed the mouth of her womb and at the

same time, she sank all the way down into Davrik's lap.

"Gods!" he groaned as he gripped her hips tightly, holding her in place. "Do you feel that, baby girl? Do you feel your Master all the way inside you?"

"Yes, Sir," Sonya moaned. Looking down between them, she was captivated by the erotic sight of his long, thick shaft piercing her tightly stretched pussy. God, she couldn't believe he was so deep inside her! Physically, he was twice her size—it shouldn't have been possible. And yet, the Bonding Fruit juice had made it happen and Sonya couldn't have been happier.

"You're so tight around me, baby girl," Davrik growled hoarsely. "Need to fuck you now. Are you ready to let your Master fuck you and give you a creamy pussy?"

"Yes, Master!" Sonya wiggled in his lap, trying to get used to the enormous cock inside her. Her inner walls were stretched to the limit but it felt *good*—like she and Davrik were meant to be together. "Yes," she said again, looking up at him. Though she was sitting in his lap, he was still a head taller than her. "Yes, please—fuck me now!"

"All right—slowly at first," he rumbled. "I'll start the Breeding Chair going and we'll let it do the work. Just lean against me, baby girl, and let yourself get fucked."

Sonya put her arms around him and nestled her head against his shoulder as he pushed off with his feet. Her own feet were on the footrests on either side of the chair—now she understood the use of them. They were there to give her something to brace against as her much larger Kindred warrior made love to her.

As the Breeding Chair glided into motion, Davrik's long, thick shaft slid almost all the way out of her pussy. Then, when it glided back, the seat angled his pelvis so that his cock slid deep inside her again, the head giving the mouth of her womb a hard kiss.

"Oh!" Sonya moaned, throwing back her head. "Oh yes! Master, that feels so *good*!"

“Feels good to me too, baby girl,” Davrik growled hoarsely. “Look down—watch as the Chair does its work.”

Sonya looked down and watched as his thick cock slid in and out of her pussy while the Breeding Chair glided forward and back. It always seemed as though he might come all the way out of her but then the chair would glide back again and he would be thrust inside her to the hilt.

“Look at that, baby girl,” Davrik rumbled. “Look at what a good girl you are, taking all of your Master’s cock deep in your tight little pussy. Look at how wet and hot your pussy is—I’m so proud of you, being such a good girl and taking me so deep!”

“Oh, Master,” Sonya moaned softly, nestling against him again. He put his long, muscular arms around her and she thought that she had never felt so safe...so loved.

Or so hot! She was close to coming again—the gliding motion caused him to rub against her in just the right way. But she needed something else...something more to make her come.

“Master,” she panted, looking up at him. “I need...need something *else*. I’m so close but I can’t...quite...get there.”

“I know what can make you come, baby girl.” His pale blue eyes were glowing softly in the dim room.

“What?” Sonya wiggled on his cock, trying to get more stimulation. “Please—anything! I *need* to come again.” In fact, it felt like she’d never even had the amazing orgasm he’d given her earlier. She was hot and needy all over again!

“My Essence.” He bared his fangs, letting her see the drop of pale blue fluid leaking from one sharp point. “It causes an instant orgasm when it’s injected into my mate’s bloodstream.”

Sonya bit her lip.

“But...didn’t you say that biting me would...would Bond us together?”

“Yes, it would,” Davrik said simply. “But I want you, baby girl—in fact, I can’t live without you. I want to Bond you to me, but I won’t do it against your will.”

“It...it’s not against my will,” Sonya panted. The Breeding Chair was still doing its work, causing his thick shaft to glide in and out of her. The pleasure made it hard to think but she didn’t have to think about this—she wanted him—wanted Davrik forever.

“It’s not?” He raised his eyebrows and paused the gliding of the chair for a moment. “Look at me, baby girl,” he directed. “Look into my eyes and tell me that.”

Sonya looked up at him, letting him see how she really felt.

“I love you, Davrik,” she whispered, hoping he felt the same. “I know that now. I’ve known it since the Father Ship. But I don’t know if...if I can be enough for you.”

“Oh, baby girl...” He crushed her to him, stroking her hair and back as he tried to get her even closer. “You’re enough—you’re more than enough. You’re *perfect*.”

“I’m not *her*,” Sonya pointed out, looking up at him again. “And I never will be.”

“I’ll never ask you to be,” he promised softly. Stroking a strand of hair out of her eyes, he looked down at her with eyes filled with love. “I just want *you*, Sonya—you’re the other half of my soul. I want you *forever*.”

“I want you too,” Sonya told him. Putting her arms around his neck, she pulled him down for a long, delicious kiss. When it finally broke, she whispered in his ear, “Please, Davrik...Master, Bond me to you. Fill my pussy with your cum and bite me at the same time.”

Her words seemed to light a fire inside him.

“You asked for it, baby girl,” he growled and Sonya felt him start the gliding motion of the Breeding Chair again.

This time, however, it was moving faster. She moaned as the thick shaft slid in and out of her tightly stretched pussy and

the broad head of his cock thrust against the mouth of her womb, over and over. In no time she was right on the brink again, needing just one more thing to push her over.

“Please, Davrik!” she gasped. Brushing her hair to one side, she bared her throat for him. “Bite me!” she begged. “Bond me to you forever!”

With a low growl, the big Kindred dipped his head and did as she asked.

There was a bright moment of pain as the sharp tips of his fangs pierced the tender skin at the side of her neck. Then, a moment later the strongest orgasm she’d ever felt rocketed through her as his Essence hit her bloodstream.

“Oh! Oh, *God!*” Sonya cried. Her back bowed and only Davrik’s strong arms around her kept her from falling. The big Kindred locked her in place and kept his fangs buried in her neck as the Breeding Chair kept gliding his thickness in and out of her.

And then Sonya felt him swelling even bigger—if that was even possible—and the chair came to a halt with Davrik buried to the root all the way inside her.

She took a deep breath, hoping she wouldn’t faint from the pleasure, and then something hot and wet spurted inside her. She moaned, unable to move, as the next jet and then the next and the next saturated the mouth of her womb.

“Oh God, yes Davrik!” she moaned as he continued to spurt inside her. “Breed me! Bond me to you! Never let me go!”

“Never, baby girl! You’re mine now and I’m never letting you go!”

His deep voice was coming from *inside* her head, Sonya realized. Which made sense, because his fangs were still buried in her neck, shooting her full of his Essence.

“If I can hear his voice in my head, it must mean we’re Bonded,” she thought dizzily. Truly if the pleasure didn’t stop soon, she didn’t know if she could remain conscious. It simply felt *too good!*

“It’s all right, baby girl—you’re just not used to my Essence yet,” Davrik reassured her through their new bond. “But you will be soon—I intend to spend the next several days with my fangs buried in your neck and my cock buried in your pussy.”

“Yes, Master!” Sonya moaned, speaking the words aloud and through their link at the same time. She wanted nothing more than to be with Davrik forever.

The big Kindred had crossed oceans of time and space to rescue her and then she had rescued him as well, from the clutches of the AllFather. But there was more to it than that. Davrik had saved her from a life of loneliness and she had saved him from despair and loss.

And now they would be together for the rest of their lives, just as Nate and Lan’ara would be together for the rest of theirs. All because it was the will of the Goddess that the four of them should be...*Rescued.*

EPILOGUE

DAVRIK

“I ’m nervous—how do I look?” Sonya brushed at her modest black skirt and made sure that beautiful crimson blouse Davrik had gotten her was tucked in.

“You look gorgeous but it doesn’t matter *how* you look—your mother is eager to meet you,” Davrik reassured her.

“*Her* mother, you mean.” She fussed with her long black ringlets nervously.

“No, *your* mother,” Davrik corrected her.

They had talked long and hard about the best way to introduce Sonya to her predecessor’s mother and had decided that truth was the best option. So Davrik had placed a Think-me call to her, as he often had back when his first Sonya was still alive.

He had always been friendly with his Mother-in-law—she approved of the way he treated Sonya like a princess and gave her anything she wanted.

“I swear you’re going to spoil that girl rotten!” she often said, but the words were always spoken with a fond smile on her face.

It had been several months since he had contacted Sonya’s mother, however, and she was surprised to hear him be-speaking her. Her mental voice was tinged with sorrow, as always. Though it had been five long years since they had lost the first Sonya, her mother’s heart was permanently broken.

That note of sadness in his Mother-in-law’s voice made Davrik’s own heart ache fiercely. He hoped she would be able to hear and accept what he had to say.

“*Hello, Mother Maya,*” he began, keeping his mental voice soft. “*I know this is going to sound very strange, but what if I told you I can bring Sonya back to you?*”

It took some time to make her understand the details of what had happened and how he had brought a new Sonya from a whole other universe, but at last his Mother-in-law grasped what he was saying.

“Her whole family was killed over there—in that other universe, you say?” she asked.

“Yes—the Scourge dropped a bomb on their house—she was the only one in the entire family who didn’t die because she wasn’t there at the time,” Davrik told her. *“So now she’s all alone. Well, except for me. We’re together now, Mother Maya. I hope you can understand that and you don’t think I’m disrespecting Sonya’s memory.”*

“No, no—you have to do what’s right for you,” his Mother-in-law sent firmly. *“But this other Sonya—does she look like my baby?”*

“Exactly like her,” Davrik assured her. *“Right down to the golden flecks in her eyes. She’s not a copy of Sonya—she is Sonya—just from a different universe. She’s had to go through a lot that our Sonya didn’t have to because of the Scourge Invasion,”* he went on. *“It’s made her incredibly strong and resilient. But I know she still misses her mother,”* he added.

“Bring her to meet me,” his Mother-in-law told him. *“I want to see her. I promise I’ll treat her right.”*

And then she had broken the mental connection. Davrik still wasn’t sure what she would think when she met the new Sonya, but he had faith that she would be kind and cordial, even if it turned out she couldn’t accept her in place of her lost daughter. Mother Maya was a wise and beautiful older woman—he respected her wisdom and grace.

So that was how they wound up walking up the path to the first Sonya’s mother’s house with the second Sonya feeling nervous and uncertain.

“You’ll be fine—she’ll love you,” Davrik reassured her again.

“I hope you’re right. I hope she doesn’t think I’m trying to take her daughter’s place.” Sonya tugged at her skirt again.

“Oh my God—the house looks just the same!” she added, staring at the white house with green trim, which was located on the outskirts of Tampa’s urban sprawl. “Look—they even have a porch swing—just like my mom did in my universe!”

Just at that moment, the front door swung open and Mother Maya appeared, wearing a blue print floral dress and a tentative smile on her face.

“Sonya?” she asked and Davrik could hear the hope and uncertainty warring in her voice. Her faded brown eyes scanned Sonya up and down, as though looking for the daughter she’d lost.

“Mom? I mean, Mrs. Martin?” Sonya got out.

Something changed in the older woman’s face—it was like watching the sun break through the clouds, Davrik thought.

“Don’t you ‘Mrs. Martin’ me, young lady! Come here!” Mother Maya hurried out of the door and down the front steps with her arms held wide.

“Mom!” Sonya rushed into the waiting arms and both women started crying.

“You came back to me! My baby came back!” Mother Maya squeezed Sonya tight as tears poured from her eyes.

“I’m not really her—that is, I...I *am* her, but from...from another universe,” Sonya explained, through her own sobs.

“And in that universe, *I’m* the one who died—is that right?” Mother Maya pulled back and looked at her.

“My whole family died,” Sonya admitted in a low voice. “I...I miss them so much. I miss *you*...Mom.”

“Oh, child—I missed you too.” And then they were hugging and crying again. “You’re mine—my own baby. I don’t care what universe you came from!” Mother Maya declared. “You call me Mom and you come to see me every chance you get! Now, come in the house—I made your favorite.”

“Strawberry lemonade?” Sonya asked, pulling back from the hug and swiping at her streaming eyes.

“Of course! And peanut butter cookies to go with it.” Mother Maya looped an arm around her new daughter’s waist and urged her into the house. She threw a look over her shoulder at Davrik and nodded at him. “You come too—you brought my baby back to me. I knew there was a reason you’re my favorite Son-in-law.”

Davrik had to blink back tears of his own as he followed the woman he loved and her new mother into the neat little house. He had never felt so grateful to the Goddess before or more blessed.

The love of his life, the other half of his soul had been restored to him. And he never intended to let her go again.

THE END?

OF COURSE NOT!

You know there are always more Kindred books coming. I have an idea for a Grump and Sunshine plot for a Kindred Tales book next. And after that, I might write another book in my Forbidden Omegaverse series. If you have any ideas you'd like to see in a Kindred novel, you can contact me on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), [Instagram](#), or [TikTok](#). I love to hear from readers so drop by and say "hi!"

But first, if you've enjoyed *Brides of the Kindred 30, Rescued*, please take a moment to leave a review or a rating [HERE](#). In this crazy ebook marketplace where AI written books are taking up more and more space, it's hard for a human author to be seen and heard. Leaving a good review lets other readers know that my books are completely human produced, not some AI crap that scammers put out to make a quick buck. Plus, good reviews give me the warm fuzzies!

Thanks for being an awesome reader and for taking another trip with me to the Kindred Multiverse. I hope to see you again soon.

Hugs, Evangeline.

August, 2023

GIVE A HOT KINDRED WARRIOR TO A FRIEND!

Do you love the Kindred? Do you want to talk about wishing you could go live on the Mother Ship without your friends thinking you're crazy? Well, now it's super easy to get them into the Kindred universe.

Just share this link, <https://bookhip.com/HLNPTP>, with them to download *Claimed*, the first book in my Brides of the Kindred series for FREE.

No strings attached—I don't even want to collect their email for my newsletter. I just want you to be able to share the Kindred world with your besties and have fun doing it.

Hugs and Happy Reading!

Evangeline

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*.

Ancient Ones—beings which live in the *Deep Blue*—the darkest and most inaccessible part of the Rageron jungles. They are sentient but not related in any way to the Kindred. Each *Ancient One* has two forms—a bipedal form which resembles a human or Kindred and a beast form which can be deadly and they can change between forms at will. The Ancient Ones predate even the First Kindred and revere the *skrillix* plant, which they guard jealously.

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.

Blackness which Eats the Stars—another name for the *Hoard* or *Grimlax*, an ancient enemy of the Kindred. These beings have no souls and so are considered demonic by the Kindred.

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 sex during penetration. *Twin Kindred* bind a bride to themselves by entering her 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.

Convo-pillar—A half inch long insect which resembles a brightly colored caterpillar. *Convo-pillars* were genetically engineered by traders on the fringe colonies around Rageron to translate alien languages by communicating via thought waves to their wearer's brain. They have been outlawed by the Kindred High Council because their notoriously unreliable translations cause more conflicts than they solve.

Dark Kindred—also known as *Enhanced Ones*—this faction of the Kindred race broke off centuries ago when there was a shortage of viable females to call for brides. Vowing to overcome their sexual urges, the *Dark Kindred* made a genetic trade with the cyborg-like residents of Zeaga Four who are ruled by a group of sentient machines called the Collective. Since all emotion is prohibited on Zeaga Four, the organic inhabitants get emotion damper implants to keep them from committing Feel-crime. Anyone found guilty of Feel-crime without a special dispensation from the Collective may be summarily purged.

Deep Blue—the darkest and most inaccessible part of the Rageron jungles

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.

High Councilor—the rightful ruler and defender of the Kindred home planet, First World. Only the *High Councilor* may sit upon the throne of wisdom and see with the eye of foreknowledge. Without a *High Councilor* in place, First World and the rest of the Kindred race cannot be adequately protected against the evil machinations of the Hoard.

Hoard—an ancient enemy of the First Kindred also known as the *Grimlax* or the *Blackness between the Stars*, they are evil, demonic beings with ravenous appetites and a desire to conquer, devour, and destroy every living thing in the universe. They are divided into tribes with the lowest echelon being the most numerous and primitive. The elite or upper echelon tribes are more sophisticated and intelligent but also much more dangerous. They are notoriously manipulative and able to change their appearances using a technique called “shadowing” to look like anyone or anything they choose.

The 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.

Kusax—a special knife made from the tainted metal at the core of the *Scourge* home planet. One scratch can be deadly as it infects the wounded person with a soul poison which ensures a slow, agonizing death.

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.

Marks of Possession—the *Scourge* way of marking a female as their mate. The *Marks of Possession* include a close-fitting collar, piercings in the nipples and clitoral hood, and a brand on the inner hip or the top of the buttocks. *Scourge* with Kindred blood also desire to scent-mark their mates but they require the traditional marks of their kind to really feel bonded to the female of their choice.

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.

Psychic-Knife—a torture device developed by the *Scourge* that is able to break the mental and emotional bond between a Kindred and his bride.

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 test tubes and artificial wombs 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.

Skrillix Plant—also known as the *Pain Vine*. This plant is found only in the heart of the Rageron jungles called the *Deep Blue*. The brilliant crimson berries of the *skrillix* are said to cure many illnesses, including stasis sickness and can also dissolve an improperly placed or artificial soul bond. The thorns are said to be as poisonous as the berries are helpful. One prick from a *skrillix* thorn can give waking nightmares, forcing the victim to relive painful memories. When minds are linked by the juice of the berries, these visions can be shared with others who can witness them via a chemically induced neural link.

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.

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Contains *Surrendered, Vanished, and Imprisoned*

[BRIDES OF THE KINDRED VOLUME EIGHT](#)

Contains *Twisted, Deceived, and Stolen*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Evangeline Anderson is the *New York Times* and *USA Today* bestselling author of the *Brides of the Kindred*, *Alien Mate Index*, *Cougarville* and *Born to Darkness* series. She is forty-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

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