



Project Exorcism:
**FORCE OF
ATTRACTION**

Mandy M. Roth

**Project Exorcism Book Two:
FORCE OF ATTRACTION**

By

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Dedication:

Shane, here's to eleven years of ups, downs, laughs, tears, highs and lows. We should really charge admission, honey. Our roller coaster ride has been full of thrills, chills and everything I could ever hope for. Thank you for being you. Happy Anniversary!

Dear Readers,

Each book in the Project Exorcism series is written to stand alone, though the author recommends reading them in order to maximize reader pleasure. To aid any who have not, as of yet, read the other book(s), or any who simply wish for a refresher, the author has included a small summary for ease of readability.

Series background: Year 2206--Man has long since achieved space travel. Almost all planets in the known universe are part of the Commission, an intergalactic governing body that oversees the well-being of all within its quadrants.

Supernatural creatures were discovered among us in 2055 and immediately a witch-hunt began to rid Earth of them. A battle broke out and Earth's human population dropped. In the end, humans were victorious, but only because a few select figureheads in the supernatural world agreed to the terms of a peace treaty. The terms were simple. They (the supernaturals) were to be escorted off planet Earth and relocated on other planets, ones that were not part of the Commission's territory. Ones that were agreed upon ahead of time, and ones which the supernaturals would not be a threat.

Thus began Project Exorcism. Twenty vessels set out on this mission. Only one arrived at its chosen destination. The others were thought lost during the meteoroid shower that occurred shortly after take off. Man now faces a new threat, only they are unaware of it. By shipping the supernaturals off, they unknowingly gave them access to other planets' resources, including added magical abilities, the ability to breed with their natives, and so very much more.

Welcome to Project Exorcism.

Mandy

Chapter One

“Have a seat,” Doctor Marisa Langston said, hearing the door to her exam room slide shut. “Go ahead and gown up. I’ll be right with you. I just need to finish up with these logs.”

She ran her hand over the edges of the electronic access tab on the file, allowing a microchip embedded under the skin in her hand to access the information in them. A clear image appeared in her mind as she downloaded the day’s findings into the chart log. Visions of each patient she’d seen over the course of the day rushed through her mind. As quickly as it started, the painless procedure was over.

A husky laugh sounded, accompanied closely by the scent of cedar and musk. The smell drove her wild. The man attached to it drove her insane. “Ah, Doc, I’ve always known you wanted me out of my pants. Hearing you say it confirms my suspicions. I told you yesterday that all you had to do was say the word and I would show you what a real man could offer you.”

Marisa outwardly cringed but inwardly rejoiced at the sound of Lieutenant Commander Bradi Janelle’s deep voice. The man lived to make her life hell. He seemed to take great pleasure in embarrassing her whenever possible. There was something about him that made her blood boil and her body burn in ways it shouldn’t. It wasn’t something she wanted to think too hard about. She was positive she wouldn’t like what she discovered.

She focused on the medicine dispensing panel in front of her instead of sinful thoughts about the man behind her. “Lt. Commander Bradi, I thought you canceled your physical today. I put someone else in your spot.” She let her voice go hard, knowing full well why he was standing there. Giggling was an option she had to fight not to take. While it was childish, it seemed more than called for.

Bradi cleared his throat, the tension suddenly thick enough to choke on. “I did cancel, but since someone went straight to the big boy about my file not being complete, I got a call telling me to get my ass in here. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you, Doc? I mean, you don’t have any certain pull with the Commander, do you?”

Grinning, Marisa turned toward him, wanting to give him the impression that he didn’t get to her, but he did. Everything about the man got under her skin and she wasn’t entirely sure it was in a bad way either. The fact

that her pulse seemed to speed with the slightest mention of Bradi's name and that her body seemed to tighten of its own accord by his sheer nearness told her more than she wanted to know. She wanted him. She could never have him. Off limits didn't even begin to cover Lt. Commander Bradi Janelle. Dark. Dangerous. Delicious. Everything she needed to avoid.

Bradi seemed to take up so much room that he demanded attention. The dark gray backdrop of the infirmary walls provided a scene that if Marisa didn't know better, would have said made the brave and ballsy Lt. Commander look uncomfortable. Having an aversion to hospital like settings wasn't uncommon. Seeing Bradi appear anything but in control was. He squared his shoulders and stared down at her, a challenge in his eyes.

The man was pure muscle, at least from what Marisa could tell. He'd never allowed her to examine him in the two months she'd been the ship's assistant physician so she could only guess. As far as she knew, Bradi hadn't allowed anyone to examine him in well over a year. Judging from the way his tight regulation black T-shirt fit him, his upper body was sculpted to perfection. The lower half of him didn't look so bad either in a 'great ass, large muscular thighs and an even larger bulge between the legs' kind of way, but who was really looking at that anyway?

Who am I kidding? I can't keep my eyes off him.

Bradi pulled the leather tie out of his hair and she watched in silent wonder as waves of silky black spilled over his broad shoulders. His light blue eyes locked on her as his tongue darted out. The sight of his long tongue brushing over his full lips made her hands shake from the need to touch him. On more than one occasion, Marisa had wondered what it would feel like to have him above her, taking her in ways she shouldn't even think about.

Even while she should have been focused on her job, Marisa was focused on the idea of Bradi taking hold of her, tossing her onto an exam table and having his way with her. Her pussy dampened at the very thought of him sinking his cock into her.

Stop thinking about him like that. It's wrong. Besides, he's an asshole.

Lt. Commander Bradi was different from the men she knew. So wild. So free that the idea of not being close to him to see what it was he'd do next

wasn't an option. He was certainly an individual in a sea of the same. She wasn't used to men with facial hair, the Commission frowned upon it, so Bradi stood out even more than normal. His goatee was well maintained. It wasn't pointy, like some. No. His was cut close to his natural, squared jawline. It not only suited him, but added to the mysticism behind him going down on her. The very thought of his whiskers scraping over the tender flesh of her pussy left Marisa shifting awkwardly as cream continued to build.

Gods, I want him.

It'd be a cold day in hell before she admitted that to him though.

“As much as I love the fact that you felt the need to show off your non-regulation hair, I don't need that down. I need your pants down,” she said, sure that her sexual suggestion wasn't lost on him. “You need your shots updated. You're dangerously close to the expiration date on your old ones and gods help us all knowing the way you bed hop. The entire ship will be full of little Janelles. We can only hope they aren't as cocky as you are. Not only that, I'll be treating bizarre cases of whatever it is men like you spread around sexually for months. You're an epidemic waiting to happen, Janelle.”

“I do not have little Janelle's running around,” he said, sounding a bit annoyed. “I never will.”

That surprised Marisa. Bradi generally took everything in stride. He also was known to dish out way more than she liked to receive. Seeing him upset didn't sit well with her. Softening her expression, Marisa glanced up at him. “My apologies. That was uncalled for and unprofessional. I have nothing to base my assumptions on. Sorry, Lt. Commander.”

He arched a dark brow and ran his hand over his facial hair. “Want a basis? I'd be happy to give you one, Doctor,” he murmured, his blue gaze suddenly raking over her body slowly. Her breath quickened. “Give me one night, Doc. One night and then you can base all the assumptions you want off it, off me. But only if you promise to let me play doctor with you, too. No fair that you get all the fun. You see,” unabashed, he cupped his groin, “I have the perfect thing to take your temperature with.” Bradi took a step toward her, sliding his large hand up toward his belt.

Yes, have me at your mercy.

Need slammed through her, leaving Marisa no choice but to avert her gaze. Her cheeks flushed. Crawling away from him wasn't an option. Standing there while he dropped his pants before her was what her job demanded. Wanting to see all that he had to offer was something her body demanded.

You hate him. Remember?

"I've been meaning to ask you about your heritage, Lieutenant Commander," Marisa said, doing her best to stay focused. It was far from easy. Sneaking a peek at Bradi's perfect body would be so easy. She'd lain awake countless nights wondering about him when it was another her mind should have been focused on. Each time she pleased herself, was Bradi's face she saw in her mind, his body she imagined in her, not the man who was supposed to be there.

"My heritage?" he asked, taken aback.

"Yes, you don't look like other Corneusims I've met before."

Bradi laughed slightly. The very sound shook her to her core. "Why would I look like a horny toad warrior from the planet Corn??"

It was as she expected. The man had doctored his medical records. He certainly wasn't the first officer to do so, nor would he be the last. Whatever reason he had for hiding must have been a good one--to make him as desperate as he'd been. "Hmm, just wondering. After all, your last blood scans showed traces of Corneusim DNA in it."

Mumbling under his breath, Bradi rubbed his strong jaw. It seemed to be a habit he only had when he was dealing with her. "Doc Graves is ancient. I bet his equipment failed again, or more than likely he just mixed up the samples."

Bradi was right, Dr. Graves, the ship's head physician was old, but not careless. Mixing up samples wasn't something he would do. Marisa decided to fight this battle with him at a later date. Right now, she planned on immunizing him and drawing a sample of his blood in the process. Marisa wouldn't submit it to the officials. No. Bradi had his reasons for hiding. She just needed to set her own mind at ease. "Ready to bare it all, Lieutenant Commander?"

He released the slight hold he had on his pants, letting them fall to his ankles and grinned from ear to ear. The absence of underwear gave

Marisa a quick flash of his front side before he turned around and pulled his T-shirt up. Her breath caught and her inner thighs tightened. Hell, the man wasn't even erect and his cock was impressive. There was no way Bradi would ever fit in her.

Thank the gods I can't have him. He'd break me.

Staring at his rock hard ass did little in the way of alleviating the overwhelming need to touch Bradi. Would it be so wrong to just trace the edges of his tight body? She licked her lips imagining her fingers digging into each cheek as he fucked her. Marisa fought to maintain what little she still held of her composure. "All set?"

"I would much rather have you remove my pants next time, Doc," he said, his deep voice moving over her.

"I'm sure you would," she said wryly, trying to shake the visions from her head of Bradi fucking her. Grabbing her booster gun, Marisa moved up behind him. Placing one hand on his ass and confirming the fact that he was indeed rock hard, she released the Star Union's recommended dosage of immunizations and population control into him. He didn't seem the least bit phased by the injection.

Lt. Commander Bradi Janelle would now be disease free for at least another year and considering the stories she heard about his prowess that was a blessing. Unable to help herself, Marisa patted his bare cheek lightly and let out a soft laugh. Bradi flexed and temptation ran through her. She clutched her hands tight to avoid doing a full backside rub down.

"Have you talked to Peter today?" she asked, desperate to get her mind off his hind end.

Bradi stood quickly, pulling his pants up as he went. The second he turned to face her, he rolled his blue eyes. Running a large hand over his chin, Bradi shook his head, annoyance evident in his masculine features. "You always do that. You always toss Pete's name out whenever I make a comment that turns you on. Every time I make you wet, you throw him in my face, Doc. What? Do you think I forget that you are engaged to my best friend?"

Marisa's jaw dropped. "I do not toss Peter in your face every time you make me wet." Instantly, she cringed. As much as she'd wanted an intellectual debate, she didn't get one. No. Confirming Bradi's

assumption that he made her wet never factored into the equation. She wished she could take it back.

A smug smile tugged at the corners of Bradi's mouth and Marisa wasn't sure if she wanted to kiss or kick it away. "See, was it so hard to admit that I make you horny? Come on, Doc. Just own up to it. You want me."

Snorting, Marisa reached out and used Bradi's forearm to steady herself. He didn't seem to mind so she held tight to it. She laughed and leaned into him as he chuckled with her. "Yeah, must be the Corneusim blood in you. I've always wanted a toad. What can you do with your tongue, Lt. Commander?"

"Hold the communicator," he leaned down, putting his face so close to her that their lips would touch if she dared to move, "was that a joke coming out of your mouth? It was funny, Doc, and you look damn good when you smile. You should do it more."

Hearing the warm tone in Bradi's voice, Marisa found herself edging even closer to him as tiny giggles continued to erupt from her. "Do what more?" she asked, hiccupping. The question popped out even though no part of her had intended on asking it. Something about Bradi made rational thought leap right out the window. The man had a way about him.

Running the pad of his thumb over her cheek, Bradi caught her off guard. "You should smile more. You're getting married soon. You'd think you'd be in a better mood about it."

His words cut to the bone as they were no doubt intended to. Stiffening, Marisa collected her thoughts and hardened herself to his charms or at the moment, lack thereof. She jerked back from him, unable to hide the hurt on her face. Something moved over Bradi's handsome features. He reached for her but stopped just shy of actually touching her. "Doc, I-I just wanted you to...."

Doing her best to deal with the turmoil Bradi left her in, Marisa forced a blank expression to her face, donning what she liked to call her work face. "Lieutenant Commander Bradi, my time, as well is yours, is precious, so if you wouldn't mind...."

He sighed. "Shit, don't do this, Doc. Don't clam up and go all stick up the ass on me."

“Stick up the...?” Her jaw dropped. The ringing of her communicator cut her off. She narrowed her gaze on Bradi, daring him to continue with his juvenile behavior as she answered the call. “Dr. Langston here.”

“Hey sweetheart, are you done yet? I’m going crazy waiting for you,” Peter, her fiancé, said in his bedroom voice. “Did you miss me?”

Marisa turned to avoid Bradi’s penetrating gaze and nodded. It took her a moment to realize that Peter couldn’t see her. “Yes, I think I’m done here. My last patient was just leaving.” She heard the door to her exam room open and close. Relief should have flooded her. Lt. Commander Bradi Janelle had left. Oddly enough, no part of her was happy about that. Suddenly, she felt bad for her brashness. “Listen, I’ll see you in a bit. There’s something I need to take care of before I call it a day.”

“Very well,” Peter said. “See you soon.”

“Mmmhmm.” Marisa clicked the communicator off. Tension filled her neck and shoulders as the weight of her behavior toward Bradi weighed on her. In truth, he was no worse than the rest of the male crew on board. Being one of only a handful of females on a two month deep space journey had left her the target of many deprived males, but none rubbed on her nerves the way Bradi did. No one else made her dream of him, his touch, his cock buried deep within. No. No one else aboard the vessel did what Bradi did to her.

He’s driving me insane.

“What the hell is it about you, Janelle, that gets me all fired up? I have never wanted to punch a man as much as I wanted to kiss him. Why you?” She reached down to grab a file off her desk, shaking her head at the idea that she would give Peter up in an instant to be with a man who only wanted a free fuck.

Two strong hands touched her shoulders and she froze. “If I had to guess what it is you can’t resist about me, I would say it’s my charming personality, my devilish good looks, and the fact that I’ve got an eleven inch dick. Is that marked in my chart? It should be. Wanna verify that?”

Marisa spun around to find Bradi standing there with a wicked grin on his entirely too attractive face. He winked. “Want me to take my pants off again? Oh, better yet, take yours off and I’ll stick you with something special.” He wagged his brows. “Something that will surely give you a boost.”

“Of all the nerve,” she spat as she glared at him. The urge to hit him was great. She gave in to it. The second that her palm connected with his rugged cheek, Marisa hissed, wanting desperately to take the action back. “Oh gods, I’m ... Lt. Commander....”

A fire burned in Bradi’s blue eyes as he locked gazes with her. Marisa felt as though she were pinned by his predatory look. Every instinct in her screamed how very deadly the man before her could be but she didn’t care. She didn’t fear Bradi. She wanted him in ways she knew she shouldn’t.

His cheek reddened and before Marisa could stop herself, she kissed her fingertips and pressed them to hot skin, seeming to douse a bit of the fire that burned in his eyes. Tapping her ear with her free hand, Marisa pressed one of the activation points for her built-in medical chips. “Scan for damage.”

Bradi stiffened a second before a pain like Marisa had never experienced sliced through her head, instantly rendering her scan of Bradi’s cheek ineffective. Grabbing her head, Marisa cried out.

“Shit, sorry,” Bradi whispered, as though he had anything to do with her embedded chip acting up. The feel of his large arms wrapping around her instantly helped to chase the pain away, leaving only a tiny, dull ache in its place. “You okay?”

She nodded and stared down at her hand. “That’s so strange. It’s never hurt me before. Ever.”

“I didn’t mean to use so much ... umm,” he glanced away, “of my good pick up lines on you.”

What?

Growling, Marisa shoved him hard in the chest. Bradi didn’t budge. The man was an oaf. A certifiable space gigolo that ran through women like they were on special. Anger welled in her. The fact that he’d heard her confession, that he now knew she wanted him, drove her to the edge of reason. Afraid of becoming violent with Bradi, Marisa pointed at the door as she glared at him. “Get out now, or so help me gods....”

Instantly, his mouth covered hers. Stunned, she gasped, giving him the opportunity he needed to ease his tongue in. She lost all rational thought. Licking the inner edges of her mouth, he made her knees shake. Marisa’s

brain screamed at her to bite his tongue off, but her body reacted by reaching up to touch him, to pull him closer.

He tasted so good. So sweet. So divine. She couldn't get enough.

With his height advantage, Marisa had to stand on her tiptoes while he bent down to her, but it was worth it. The feel of his hot mouth pressed to hers and of his gifted tongue tracing circles around her own made her nipples harden to pebbled points. Liquid pooled at the apex of her thighs and it wasn't until she felt Bradi's hands moving up and under her shirt that she realized what she was doing--making out with a man that could own her heart if he decided he wanted it.

Yanking back from him, Marisa lost her balance and staggered. The sounds of her exam room doors sliding open sounded. She ignored them. Bradi grabbed for her and pulled her into his warm body. The need to kiss him again, to welcome his tongue in her mouth was great. As he leaned down, she thought for sure that he'd kiss her again. He smiled. "Careful now, Doc, wouldn't want you to hurt yourself."

"That's why I keep you around, Bradi. You know how to take care of what's important to me," Peter said, appearing in the doorway suddenly.

She stilled. Had Peter seen them kissing? She knew Peter well enough to know that he wasn't one to mix words or beat around the bush. He'd have said something.

Marisa's eyes met Bradi's and she saw a shadow pass over them. What they'd done was wrong. It was clear that both parties understood that. Bradi nodded and eased his grip on her. "Yeah, if nothing else, I make a good watchdog, Pete."

She wasn't sure if that was hurt she saw on Bradi's face, or if he was just toying with her so she glanced at Peter hoping he'd shed some light on it. He offered none. No surprise there. Peter rarely had much to offer in the way of insight into Bradi. He was such a sharp contrast to Bradi that she wondered how they'd even become friends.

"Hey, Commander, I thought I told you that I'd meet you in a little bit." Marisa winked at Peter, signifying she was only joking.

Walking toward her, Peter took hold of her arms a bit harder than needed and gave her a good jerk. "And I've told you before that I do not like to be kept waiting--ever."

Marisa gave Peter a questioning stare as she tried to wiggle free of his grasp. "Peter, you're hurting me," she whispered, hoping Bradi wouldn't overhear her.

He eased up a bit but gave her a hard stare in the process. Peter's normally warm personality seemed ice cold almost daily as of late. She'd noticed it more and more and wasn't sure what had prompted it. Sure, Peter was under a great deal of stress with his new position but he'd had that for two months now. The hard as nails persona had come on in the last three weeks.

Glancing down at her, Peter smiled. It was forced and void of emotion. "Excuse us Bradi, but I need to kiss my woman."

"Your woman?" Marisa shot back, not caring much for the reference and still upset about the rough handling. She tugged her arm free of his grasp. "I am no man's property."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you." Peter gave her a sheepish grin and leaned down to whisper in her ear. "I love you."

"On that note, I am leaving," Bradi said, sounding oddly even tempered considering how heated he'd been only moments earlier. "I have to check in on the command deck. We are heading into non-Commission territory and it looks like we'll have that damn meteoroid shower to contend with after all. Our scouts tell us that it's not bad, but I would advise going around it if at all possible. I think it might be safest."

Peter gave Bradi a sickeningly sweet smile and when he spoke, Marisa could almost hear the sarcasm dripping from his every word. "That is precisely why you aren't required to think--buddy. We aren't adding any additional time to our trip. We'll continue on course as planned. I'll catch up with you in a bit. Drinks and a round of cards sound good to you, too?"

"Yeah, sure." Bradi headed for the sliding doors, not once bothering to look back. It was as though he'd already forgotten what had passed between them.

How could she have allowed him to kiss her? What was she thinking? He was Peter's friend and a jerk.

Yeah, a jerk who could really kiss!

Chapter Two

Marisa laughed and put her hand between her soon-to-be husband's knees. Shifting on his lap, she wasn't about to let Peter slip through her fingers yet again. They'd been on the ship for close to two months now and in that time they'd had only a few scattered and all too brief moments together. His ever growing coldness had only served to hamper them as well.

"Mmm," Peter murmured as he snuggled his chin into her neck, covering her with kisses along the way. He pressed his body against hers and she shivered. "I want you so bad."

"We'll be landing in a few days. Once we're on solid ground, you are mine." Her body was starved for sex. Peter had earned another promotion within the Commission and although it was an opportunity of a lifetime, it meant galaxy relocation. Moving one galaxy over shouldn't have been that big a deal for Marisa, but she'd only been off Earth a few times in her life and was terrified of what else existed beyond it.

She'd heard horror stories and prayed they weren't true.

"Are you sorry that you came?" Peter asked, obviously sensing her change in attitude.

"Don't be silly. I agreed to marry you, didn't I?" It was the best answer she could come up with and it was the truth. She'd agreed to marry Peter with little to no engagement period. He received notice of his promotion and had asked her to be his wife instantly. It was the only way they could remain together, and they weren't quite ready to break up, but certainly weren't ready to commit to marriage. At least she wasn't. Only married officers were permitted to bring anyone along. They'd allowed her to come not only because they set a date to be married before they took off but because of her skills. The engagement contract she'd signed was proof enough for the Commission, so obtaining a boarding pass was easy. The only stipulation was that upon landing she and Peter would be required to wed one another immediately.

Her father had been less than pleased with her short warning and afraid that if she wasn't happy with Peter, she'd be stuck so many light years away that it'd take him months to retrieve his only daughter.

Marisa had no fears that she wouldn't be happy with Peter. No. She'd been with him for close to two years. The minute she'd laid eyes on him

she'd fallen for him. He'd been hurt during a droid attack and had been brought directly into her care. The Commission had found its medical resources spread thin after a multi-universe epidemic close to fifteen years ago, so healers of any kind were asked to come forth and be trained.

Her father, fearing that if she revealed her additional inborn gifts to anyone she would be killed, had forbidden her from joining in the call. It wasn't her fault that she possessed certain gifts from birth. Gifts that could aid in healing many. She'd had to wait until her eighteenth birthday before being allowed to join the Commission. Once in, she found out quickly that being alone in a predominately male barracks wasn't the best idea for her 'condition.' It tended to become unmanageable when her passions ran deep. Marisa knew that she needed to wait until she and Peter were alone and not in the middle of space before she allowed him to enter her body and make love to her--for the safety of all on board, it had to be that way.

She could only hope that Peter would understand that she was different, more than human and that he'd forgive her for keeping it from him.

Peter slid his hand under her gray T-shirt and gave her a sultry smile. "I can't wait until we can be alone."

Knowing that Peter's body was as hot with need as her own with no end to the torture in sight, Marisa decided to change the subject. "Tell me again of Margaidia."

Peter's eyes lit up. "Margaidia is beautiful--depending on what part of it you're in. It's as big as Earth. As I told you before, I spent the first three years of my training there. That's where I met Bradi. He's originally from there you know. You'll love it. I promise. I can't wait to see you in our new home, with little ones at your feet.

"Oh, and there are lots of shops filled with dresses and the most beautiful red flowers that will look stunning tucked into your silky brown hair." Peter took a piece of her long hair, twirled it around his fingers, and pulled her closer to him. "I love you, Marisa."

"You know how to woo a girl. That's for sure." She didn't comment on the fact that he'd brought up Bradi again. She'd mentioned her dislike of the man right after meeting him, but Peter swore that Bradi was a friend. She could concede that he could be Peter's friend, but it didn't take away from the fact that the man was an arrogant jerk.

An arrogant jerk who made her knees weak and her pulse race.

Without warning, the ship lurched forward and Marisa tumbled off Peter's lap. His hand was still wrapped around her hair and she screamed out as he was thrown in the other direction. Flying toward him, she put her arms out in an attempt to catch herself.

The ship leveled and Peter pulled her quickly to him. She tried to free her hair from his grip, but it only wrapped tighter around his arm. He yanked a knife from his belt and cut the long strand of hair free from his arm, only a moment before the ship jolted again.

Marisa screamed as the knife Peter held dug down into her arm accidentally. Peter yanked it out quickly. "Marisa!"

Glancing down, she saw the large gash and knew that it would require a good twenty minutes with the lancer to fix. Peter tried to pull her to him again, but she held her hand up. "Go, you're needed on the bridge. I'm fine."

"I love you," he yelled as he ran toward the bridge.

The radio on her hip vibrated and Marisa knew right away that she was being paged to help the injured. She tapped her ear to activate her built-in chip and closed her eyes.

"Show me the damage." The chip in her head immediately began to access the ship's main computers. Her mind was flooded with images of large holes in the sides of the ship. Her gut twisted in a knot as she realized that the ship was beyond repair.

Having no desire to continue to look upon her demise, she barked new orders out at the chip, "Not that damage! The damage to life forms." She had to be vague because several of the beings on board the ship were anything but humanoid.

The initial scans revealed that seventy-five percent of the crew had been killed. The picture that the ship showed her of the mess hall was enough to make her have to swallow down the bile in her throat. No one in the mess hall had survived. Startled by the horrific images that were now displayed before her, Marisa stumbled backwards and screamed out when something seized hold of her waist.

“Calm down woman, it’s me,” a deep, heavily accented voice said from behind her. “Your arm? What the hell happened to it?”

“Bradi?” she asked, shocked by his sudden British inflection. It sounded so natural, so right for him that she wondered if that too was part of what he hid from the Commission. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, come on. We need to get you to a release POD and treat that wound. Dr. Graves has ordered you off the ship. He wants you at the rendezvous point to care for the wounded.” He paused. “There are only a few survivors left.”

“I know.” Not wanting to think about the massive amount of fatalities that had flashed before her, she nodded and took Bradi’s hand in hers.

His brow furrowed as he looked down at their joined hands. “It will be okay, baby. I promise.”

Normally, Marisa would have snapped at Bradi, any man for that matter, angry that he’d called her a pet name. Now, it was music to her ears. Something deep within her wanted that to be true, wanted her to be his significant other. It was absurd but there nonetheless. Squeezing his hand tighter, she offered him a slight smile. “I trust you even if it turns out you really are part toad.”

He winked. “Come on.” Bradi pulled her down the hallway and past the medic chambers.

“Wait!” she cried out, digging her heels into the floor.

At six foot six, Bradi towered above her. When he looked down at her and shook his head, she had to take a tiny step back to fully appreciate how intimidating he could be. “We don’t have time for this, Doctor. The ship isn’t stable and life support is dropping as we speak. Give it another few minutes and we’ll all be frozen to death or sucked into space. That’s not really my idea of fun, so let’s go.”

“But my supplies. I need my bag! The injured will need my attention.”

Bradi growled and ran a hand through his long black hair. “Fine. But I’ll grab it.”

Marisa wanted to protest, but knew better. Bradi was the ship’s lieutenant commander and wasn’t used to taking orders from anyone but Peter or the

Captain himself. She still wasn't sure how he'd managed to get to his position. He stood in direct opposition of everything the Commission required an officer to look and act like. His hair hung just past his shoulders. He had a goatee, and he gave no regard to the number of times he was reprimanded for drunken brawls while on leave or layovers.

“Marisa!”

“Peter?” She spun around to find Peter racing down the corridor toward her. He put his hand out and seized hold of hers. “Where’s Bradi? I sent him to get you.”

Sparks flew over their heads as the ship’s life support systems began to systematically blow out. Peter slammed into her and took her to the ground. Rolling with her, he pinned her body beneath him, protecting her from debris. “Are you okay?”

She nodded. Another rumble started and Peter’s eyes widened. “We’ve got to get to the release PODs now. Where the hell is Bradi?”

The door to the med unit opened just as another explosion went off. Bradi glanced at them as an overhead beam swung down behind him. Time seemed to slow for Marisa as Peter rolled off her and tackled Bradi to the ground. The beam crashed down onto the men and Marisa pushed up hard and fast to get to them.

Fire shot up around them. “No!”

She kicked the beam with all her might. It moved slightly before wedging itself in the doorway. She covered her mouth as she saw the two men lying lifeless. Holding her hand out above Peter’s back, she closed her eyes and accessed her internal chip.

“Diagnostics.” Instantly, Peter’s vitals appeared to her. He was still alive, but something was wrong. Moving her hand to the left, she found the source of distress. His ribs were broken and his lung was punctured. Scanning further, she realized that part of the beam must have struck his head, rendering him unconscious.

A deep moan caught her attention right before another explosion went off, this one shaking the entire corridor. “Pete?”

“Bradi?” Marisa called out as she tried to roll Peter gently to the side.

Dark lines covered Bradi's face and at first, Marisa feared that he'd suffered burns from the fire. He brought his hand up and wiped his face, moving the soot with them. As Bradi opened his eyes, Marisa let out a small breath when she found them uninjured.

She put her hand out and went to access her built in chip again. Bradi shook his head no. "I'm fine, baby. Worry about Pete."

Marisa's jaw tightened. "You will shut-up and allow me to worry about you, too." She accessed her chip. "Diagnostics." Running a quick diagnostics test on Bradi, she discovered that aside from a nasty bump on his head and a few minor cuts and bruises, he was fine. The second she felt another headache coming on, Marisa stopped her scan of Bradi.

"Can you help me get Peter up?" The ship jerked and the beam creaked. Marisa yanked hard on Bradi's shirt and he rolled out of the way, taking Peter with him.

Gathering Peter up, Bradi tossed him over his shoulder. He glanced back at Marisa. "I dropped your medical bag."

"I'll get it."

"No! I will come back for it."

They couldn't wait and she knew it. "Get Peter to the POD. I'll be right behind you. Give me just two seconds, Janelle. That's all I need. Go!"

* * * *

"You are the hardest headed woman I've ever met!" Bradi let out an angry growl and ran toward the emergency exits with Peter in tow. He couldn't believe the woman would have the nerve to risk her life for a bag of goodies. He damned near died retrieving it and Pete was out cold from taking a beam to the back of the head. Had it not been for Pete, Bradi knew that the beam would have crushed him.

If he'd have thought he could have managed to carry a kicking and screaming Marisa over his other shoulder, he'd have grabbed her, too.

Bradi glanced back over his shoulder before entering the first emergency POD he found. A young man, shaking slightly, sat in the corner of it. Shockingly red hair hung in an otherwise too pale face, and the boy looked like he was about to pass out. His wide eyes stared up at Bradi.

Silently, Bradi cursed the Commission's decision to allow men as young as seventeen to join and laid Pete down.

"If I am not back in five minutes," he said to the boy, "push this green button here. It'll get you and the Commander to safety. Understand?"

The boy nodded.

Bradi glanced at the POD number and made a mental note that it was POD 281 before rushing back to get Dr. Marisa Langston--who had not held true to her promise to follow right behind him. She was quite possibly the most annoying woman he'd ever met and he'd met a lot of women.

A whole lot of women, he thought to himself as he ran down the corridor.

If she wasn't so damn sexy and his best friend's fiancée, he'd take her over his knee and teach her how to behave. She'd probably sear my sac off with a half-charged laser before she'd let me near her, but hey, a guy can dream.

The sound of a hatch locking shut caught his attention and he turned to see POD 281 disengaging from the ship. Bradi ran toward it and slammed the palms of his hands against the porthole as he watched the POD float off into space.

The little redheaded bastard panicked. I'll kill him when I get my hands on him.

The ship shook again, slamming him into the nearest wall. Something popped in his shoulder and he tried to ignore the pain as he ran for the med unit. The feeling in his arm went and he was sure it was for the best, considering.

Terror gripped his chest as he saw that flames had engulfed the doorway. "Doc!" She didn't answer. The sane part of his brain told him to turn around and evacuate the ship while he still had a chance. Unfortunately, the sane part had little control over his everyday actions or his heart. Leaving Marisa wasn't an option. The woman owned a piece of him that even he couldn't explain how she'd come to possess. But the fact was, she did and he'd be damned if he went anywhere without assuring her safety.

Jumping through the flames, Bradi rolled on the ground as he landed. Pain shot through his shoulder with each turn, but he knew it was necessary to douse any fire on him. He came to his feet quickly and drew in a sharp breath when he saw Marisa's petite frame sprawled out on the floor before him. He tried to lift her, but his arm wouldn't cooperate.

"Marisa! Get up!" He shook her but she didn't budge.

"Doc? Baby?"

Still nothing.

"Damn it, Doc, I told Pete not to bring you on this trip. I told him that no high class lady could survive the journey. I told him that you were only cut out for dinner parties and ballrooms, not life in the Commission." The need to provoke her, to rile her to the point she got up to argue with him was a necessary evil. If it worked, she'd hate him but be alive. If it didn't, Bradi was more than prepared to die with her.

She coughed and looked up at him. Every bit of Bradi wanted to shout with joy. He held back. Marisa's green eyes lit with a fury he hoped would fuel her enough to get off the ship before it exploded. She tried to stand, but was too shaky to get to her feet without his help. The minute he slid his good arm around her slender waist, she snarled at him. Wagging his eyebrow, impressed with her tenacity, he ignored her dislike of him and yanked her up anyway.

The door, now completely engulfed by flames, was out of the question. Turning them around, Bradi moved quickly toward the back exit. Marisa looked up at him, her eyes wide. She pulled free from his hold and shook her head. "We'll never make it back to Peter in time."

"We'll get to a POD, baby. Don't you worry. We'll meet up with him as soon as we are clear of the ship."

He punched the emergency release button and pulled Marisa back just to be sure it was safe. Seeing that the coast was clear, he stepped out into the hallway. Marisa didn't follow.

"Doc?"

"Peter, I have to get to Peter."

Bradi rolled his eyes and grabbed hold of her hand. “I promise not to touch you beyond this, once we are on the damn POD. You’ll see Pete soon enough. The guy’s probably just waking up now.”

Shaking her head, Marisa stared back at him with wide, haunted, eyes. “His lung’s punctured, Bradi. Without my help he will die.”

Bradi? She never called him by his name. This was bad.

He yanked her down the corridor, seeking the nearest escape POD. He couldn’t comment on what she’d told him. The thought of Pete dying was too much for him. The man had been closer to him than his own brothers had and he would not think of losing him now.

“I’m going to kill the little redheaded bastard that took off with him,” he mumbled, under his breath.

“Stop, please. We have to get to Peter!”

Bradi came to a grinding halt outside of escape POD 303. Glancing at their joined hands, he regretted what he had to do but did it all the same. Quickly, he thrust the uncooperative doctor in before him. She fell to the floor with a thud leaving his heart heavy knowing that he caused her pain.

“Why, you...” Marisa charged at him, slamming into his bad arm. He grabbed her around the waist, lifted her into the air, and pushed the green POD release button with the toe of his boot.

“Woman, do not make me knock you out, because I will!” The thought of hitting Marisa made him sick, but he wouldn’t give her the satisfaction of knowing that. She stilled in his arms allowing him to take a deep breath, knowing she was safe and with him. Had she gone with Pete he’d have worried to the point of death that something might have happened to her. Why this tiny spitfire of a woman seemed to rule his every emotion was beyond him, but she did.

Marisa grew quiet and that worried Bradi. She glanced up at him, her green eyes glistening with unshed tears. “Do you think Peter’s dead?”

Spitting, throwing a fit, hell, even biting were all things he could deal with, but crying wasn’t something he was prepared for. The fact that he was as concerned about Pete as she was didn’t help matters any. Carefully, Bradi placed his arm around her as he sank down to the floor, holding her close to him. “I don’t know, baby. I honestly don’t know.”

Chapter Three

Marisa woke with a start and barely held back a scream. The nightmare she'd had was too vivid for her to maintain her composure. She looked around the small pod, remembering what had happened and wondered if real life wasn't actually worse than her dream. Lieutenant Commander Janelle snored softly in his sleep, and his long body looked slightly cramped in the confined quarters.

The PODs were designed to maintain minimal life support requirements to allow for maximum amount of travel time. Marisa exhaled and swore that she could see her breath before her face. Freezing, she moved closer to Bradi for warmth.

“At least the brute's good for something,” she said as she snuggled in close to him. Still cold, she butted her body to his and almost jerked back when she felt a rush of heat go through her. Thinking that Bradi might be ill, she leaned up and touched his cheeks gently. As hard and as aloof as she wanted to appear when it came to Bradi, the idea of losing him terrified her.

Closing her eyes, Marisa activated her chip and requested a check of Bradi's vitals. His core temperature was a good ten degrees hotter than a normal person's and when she went to access his medical records, pain ripped through her head. The chip fizzled and left her with a migraine.

“Bradi?” She touched his face again, needing to know that he was okay.

He shifted slightly and mumbled something in his sleep. Leaning down, she listened closer as he repeated it. “I am horny and tired. Fix the first or let me sleep.”

“Oh, you ... you ... animal!”

The smirk that had spread over his features died quickly. He put his back to her and winced. She knew that his shoulder still hurt him, but until he let her examine it, she'd take what little satisfaction she could get from the fact that he was uncomfortable.

“How the hell did I get stuck with you?” She attempted to get comfortable again by putting her back to him as well and failed. “Brr ... it's freezing in here.”

Bradi shifted again behind her and let out a groan before wrapping his large body around hers. Everything in her mind told her to shove the big jerk off her, but her body sizzled under the weight of his touch.

* * * *

Marisa's body was tense and Bradi knew that she was thinking of tossing him off her. In truth, Bradi kind of hoped she would. He wasn't sure what made him turn to comfort her. His bad arm was vulnerable to her if she decided to inflict pain and he didn't think he could handle her calling him an animal again. If she only knew how close to the truth she was.

The feel of her curvy backside snuggled close to his body made his cock jerk. Even after narrowly escaping with their lives, Marisa still managed to smell wonderful to him and make his body hungry for hers. She always had. The first day he'd met her, he'd been drawn to her like no other female before. Something about her called to him on a primitive level and he didn't want to think too hard about it.

To his kind that type of attraction could only mean one thing. And that wasn't something Marisa would ever want to believe to be true. Bradi was having a hard enough time juggling the idea around in his head. Asking Marisa to believe she might very well be his mate, born to be his lover, his wife, the mother of his children, was insane.

* * * *

Bradi woke slowly, his joints aching and his body on fire. It was normal with his condition for his body to react to changes in the temperature automatically. It was also common for him to run several degrees hotter than a human. That was just one of the reasons why he refused to allow Dr. Marisa Langston to evaluate him. Hell, he hadn't ever allowed any Commission doctor to examine him. It'd cost him a pretty penny to pay others to forge his documents, but it was necessary all the same. Besides, he had no family so money wasn't really a concern for him.

Marisa was still sleeping and he didn't want to wake her. She looked like an angel lying there with her arms pulled up close to her chest and it took everything in him not to reach out and touch her. The cut on her arm had finally stopped bleeding but the slightest bump could easily break it open. Rolling on his side, Bradi winced when pain radiated through his shoulder.

Peeking out the POD window, his stomach dropped. There, in the distance, he saw the tell-tale aquamarine color of Margaidia, their original destination and the destination that had been programmed into all the escape PODs should there be trouble. The POD had overshot the planet and was headed on a direct path for Sargaidia, the uncharted sister planet to Margaidia, and the last place in the universe he wanted to go back to.

Bradi checked the computer and found it frozen over. Looking around the POD, he realized that the entire thing was covered with a thin frost.

Marisa.

Dropping down next to her, he touched her lightly. Her body was rigid and extremely cool to the touch.

“Doc?” he asked, shaking her gently. She didn’t respond and his gut twisted. The thought of her freezing to death before he was able to get the POD operational again was a very real possibility.

“Come on, babe,” he said, hoping to goad her into responding. The faint blue line around her lips told him that no amount of prodding would help. Acting quickly, Bradi pulled his shirt off and reached for her. Groaning softly from the pain shooting through him, he covered Marisa’s body with his own. “This isn’t enough.”

Bradi worked his boots and pants off before reaching for Marisa’s uniform. He’d been dying to get her out of her clothes from day one, but this wasn’t exactly what he had in mind. He worked her shirt over her head and did his best not to stare at the luscious pale globes before him. Her pink nipples looked good enough to eat and everything in him wanted to sample them. The faint light from the navigational controls reflected off her pale skin and he had to be closer to her.

The nasty cut on her upper arm seemed to be holding, but the fear of breaking it open left him moving slower than he should to warm her body. Working her boots and pants off, Bradi lingered a little too long near the top of her panty line. Thoughts of Pete kept him from peeking further.

Placing his body over hers, Bradi willed himself to be hotter. His body reacted to his command and he felt his core temperature rise even more. If he had to, he’d shift forms, but the last thing he wanted was for Marisa to wake and find herself under a partially changed man. Somehow, he didn’t think that would go over so well. Fully shifting wasn’t an option

either. It wouldn't make it any easier on her to find herself pinned beneath a black panther.

Marisa moaned and he looked down to see if she was awake yet. Her eyes remained closed, but she moved her hands slightly. Bradi tensed when he felt her fingers running over his back.

“Doc?”

“Mmm,” she whispered, grinding her hips upwards.

The sweet scent of her cream filled his head. The erection, which he seemed to permanently sport while around Marisa, ached to dive into her, sample her flesh and claim her for his own. The tiny silken barrier of her panties served as a reminder that he couldn't, or rather shouldn't, take her.

She shifted a bit. “Mmm, I want you in me.”

Bradi froze as she grabbed his ass. “Doc, wake up.”

Cool lips met his and he fought to keep his body from responding. The minute her tongue pushed through and found his, he lost all control.

If I'm going to die out here anyway, I might as well die making love to her. Marisa is the closest to heaven I'm ever going to be.

Marisa's hands pushed between their bodies. She wrapped her fingers around his cock and he nearly came on her bare stomach. Never before had a woman's touch brought him so much pleasure, so quickly. Reason fought its way through to him. “Doc, baby, wake up, now! You don't want to do this. It's not right.”

Her lips fastened onto his as she pushed her panties to the side and rubbed the head of his cock in her wet juices. “It's more than right. I want you. I've dreamed of touching you from the moment I boarded the ship.”

Bradi wanted to take the time to love her as she should be loved before entering her, but he was no longer in control. The beast within could smell her cream, her sex, and the desire to mate with her was overpowering. Easing his cock head into her opening, he gritted his teeth at how tight she was. Inching in a bit more, she cried out and grabbed hold of his arms. The pleasure of her tight channel wrapped around the tip

of his dick overshadowed the pain in his shoulder as he worked himself into her more.

“Oh ... yes,” she whispered, kissing his face feverishly.

He savored the feel of her. “You’re so fucking tight, Doc.” He briefly wondered how she could be this difficult to enter when she and Pete had been together for so long, but he pushed it to the back of his mind, not wanting to think about his betrayal. This was his moment to be in the woman who’d called to him on levels he couldn’t explain since the moment he’d laid eyes on her.

Marisa’s erect nipples rubbed against his chest as he pushed a bit further into her. Meeting with slight resistance, Bradi hesitated. Could it be? He stopped. She’d been with Pete for close to two years, they had to have had sex--right? There was no way she was a virgin. Not the sexually charged doctor who made him weak in the knees. No.

Marisa dug her nails into his arms and thrust her head back. “More!”

Any concerns he had flew away at the sound of her command. Thrusting into her, she cried out as he brought himself to the hilt. Somehow, she’d managed to accept all of him, her channel fisting his dick to the point he wanted to come and he’d only just started.

“Gods, baby. You’re perfect.”

Her body eased slightly as he worked his cock almost out of her. Her pussy clenched around him like a vice as he dove back in. Each swipe, each thrust, left him growling and fighting the beast within. It wanted him to shift. It wanted to mark her. Claim her. Keep her forever.

Bradi had never had the urge to claim anyone as his mate before and he wasn’t sure how to handle it. He fought to stay in control as he continued to slide in and out of her body. The beast within him pushed back with a vengeance and surfaced quickly. His incisors lengthened and his fingertips sprouted claws. Bradi was able to fight a full change, but unable to resist the lure of Marisa’s milky white skin, the pumping of her blood as it sped through her veins.

“Mine,” he growled out.

Bradi tried to fight it, but as he felt his teeth sinking into her shoulder and his cock begin to release his seed, he knew it was too late--he’d lost

himself in the paradise of her body and the beast within him had assured that they would never be apart again. She was his.

Marisa's body jerked beneath him and at first, he assumed her cries were from his teeth but when she fisted her hand his hair, holding him to her, he knew it was something else. Coppery, sweet liquid filled his mouth as he continued to deposit his come within her womb, filling her to brim and twitching with each new spurt. Bradi forced his mouth from her body when he felt the tremors pouring through her. Her already pale skin seemed to glow with an unnatural shimmer. Bradi stayed above her, still nestled deep in her body, watching in awe as the light seemed to encompass her.

The light moved over her body and covered his quickly. It didn't hurt so much as it felt like someone running a million fingers over his skin. His cock jerked to life and even though it should have been sated, it wanted more. Never one to not listen to his dick, Bradi moved his hips and began to ride Marisa's tight body once more.

She grabbed hold of his shoulders and it dawned on him that no pain followed. Glancing downward, he saw that the bite mark he'd given her was completely gone. The cut on her arm was gone as well. The light around them grew so bright that Bradi had to shut his eyes. Marisa screamed out and wrapped her legs around his waist. She bucked beneath him, driving herself up and his cock in deeper.

"Uh..."

The soft moan she let out left Bradi thrusting into her more, pummeling her glorious body and paying extra attention to his lower abdomen, making sure it rubbed her clit just right. Marisa cried out as another orgasm hit her. The feel of her pussy milking him was too much and he let his body release again.

"Mine," he whispered as he filled her with even more of his seed, his essence.

The light around them died down slowly. The tiny pinging noise from the system computer sounded, indicating it was at least on, if nothing else. Reluctantly, Bradi withdrew from his mate's now warm body.

Marisa's eyes fluttered open and she looked up at him. A smile appeared slowly on her face. "I love you ... Peter."

Peter?

Bradi froze and waited for her to take it back, to claim that it was a slip of the tongue, but she didn't. Her eyes closed slowly and he heard her breathing grow shallow. He rolled off her quickly and sat up. Running his hands through his hair, he tried to make sense of it all.

Marisa hadn't been awake at all. She'd been dreaming of Pete when it was his body pleasing her. Dreaming of another man when he'd taken her as his wife. Given her his seed. His essence. A kick to the solar plexus would have been less devastating than that.

Reaching for his pants, Bradi stopped when his gaze flickered over Marisa's legs. The smell of her blood filled his nostrils and he leaned down to find a faint line of it running down her inner thigh.

"You were a virgin?" Everything clicked then. Bradi fought to keep from vomiting as the enormity of the situation hit him tenfold. He'd made love to a woman who thought he was her fiancé, who just so happened to be his best friend, and now he'd taken her maidenhood from her on top of everything else.

Could it get any worse?

Chapter Four

Marisa opened her heavy eyelids slowly and looked up to find Bradi staring out the window. “Great, so it wasn’t a dream, was it?” Sitting up, she adjusted herself. Her clothes were wrinkled and she noticed that her boots were off. Glancing up at Bradi to ask him about it, she saw the look of shock on his face. “What’s the matter?”

“I’m so sorry, Doc. I thought you were awake. I did not know ... I wouldn’t have....”

Marisa blinked a few times in an attempt to clear her head. “Of course I was awake, you idiot. I don’t run around a ship that’s blowing up with my eyes closed. Geesh!”

“Right, you were talking about the ship exploding and being a smartass before. I knew that.” The tension in Bradi’s body seemed to leave him. It was a shame. She really enjoyed watching the muscles in his thick neck move. Surprised by her own lustful thoughts, Marisa stood quickly.

“Shouldn’t we have landed on Margaidia by now? We weren’t that far from it and the PODs were set to make....” She stopped talking when she noticed the forlorn look upon his face. “Lt. Commander?”

His blue eyes found her and she drew in a breath under the weight of them. “Buckle up, sweetie. We’re about to enter Sargaidia’s atmosphere. And you can call me Bradi, Doc, I think you’ve earned it.”

Earned it?

“You mean Margaidia, right?”

He grabbed hold of her waist and set her down in the POD seat. Ignoring her protests, he buckled her in anyway. “Janelle? What’s going on?”

He climbed into the control seat and buckled himself in as well. The POD thumped hard against an unseen force and she screamed out. Bradi’s eyebrows went up as if to say, ‘you ain’t seen nothing yet.’

Another scream caught in her throat as he lifted the protective visor, allowing her a full view of what was before them. Shades of red, green, and blue were everywhere. Although Marisa had only been off Earth a few times in her life, she knew enough about landings to know that something wasn’t right. “Bradi, aren’t we going a bit fast?”

“You can say that again.”

“W-What?”

“Nothing. Umm, the POD’s controls froze for a bit. I barely got them up and running before we got trapped in the planet’s atmosphere.” He pulled hard on the steering shift as the POD began its rapid descent.

Marisa’s stomach lurched as the bottom seemed to drop out from under them. The speed at which they were traveling would most definitely kill them upon landing. She said a silent prayer under her breath and reached out for comfort. Finding Bradi’s arm, she settled, grabbed hold and held tight. Something about the man made her feel safer.

* * * *

Bradi risked a quick glance at Marisa and saw her reaching out for him. He thought it was to punch him, and was surprised when she not only laid her hand on him, but gave him a gentle squeeze, too. His loins burned again to be buried in her and he shifted awkwardly in the seat.

You’re about to die here, buddy, he thought to himself, stealing a glance down toward his cock. Do you think you could get your head in the game and off her for a moment?

The red sea came into focus and Bradi cursed himself for not landing the POD sooner. He’d misjudged and thought that if he waited another hour they’d be closer to the inhabited compounds of the planet and closer to help. He’d been wrong.

“Janelle, tell me it’s going to be okay again,” Marisa said, squeezing his arm more and breaking his heart in the process. “Please tell me that. I need to hear you say it. I trust you and need to....”

Against his better judgment, Bradi gave into what she needed to hear, all the while wishing she’d call him by his first name. “It’ll be okay, baby. I promise.”

Marisa’s grip on him tightened and he looked into her green eyes just as the sea greeted them.

* * * *

Marisa lifted her head slowly unsure if she was alive or dead. By the nasty crick in her neck, she was guessing alive. A deep cough caught her attention and she looked over to find that she and Bradi were still strapped into the POD. Blood red water surrounded them.

“Janelle, how bad are you hurt?” He didn’t answer. She unfastened her seatbelt and willed her stiff body to move to him. Placing her hand on her head, she activated her embedded chip. “Diagnostics scan.”

Closing her eyes she assessed the damage to his body. For a split second she could have sworn that the chip indicated broken legs, but when she checked again there was no sign of injury.

“Doc?”

Instantly, Marisa’s chip scan fizzled out and pain shot through her head. Bradi touched her hand and she peeked out at him. “Hey,” she smiled, happy to see him alive and responsive, “are you okay?”

“What, would you miss me if something happened? Or are you just hoping I stay alive long enough to get you to safety?” The tone in his voice made her lip curl.

“Asshole.” She pushed up extra hard off him and smiled when she heard him grunt. He unlatched himself and rose to meet her. The POD creaked and the sound of cracking glass made them both turn around.

Bradi grabbed her and pulled her down to the floor. She began to protest and he kissed her lips, rendering her silent. As his tongue moved into her mouth, hers greeted it, shocking her and apparently him. He moaned and Marisa took the lead, sucking gently on his tongue.

Bradi pulled away, his blue gaze ran over her. “Take a deep breath now!”

Without thought, she did. Bradi slammed her down to the floor and his body flattened against hers. The window shattered. Blood red water poured into the POD and within seconds they were submerged. Lifting her quickly, Bradi pushed her toward the window and gave a good shove to get her through it. Shards of broken glass ripped at her legs and she had to fight to keep from screaming out in pain.

Once free of the POD, Marisa turned and waited for Bradi. He didn’t come. It was then that she realized the window wasn’t big enough for his six foot six inch, muscle-bound frame to get through.

The pressure in her lungs was excruciating as she attempted to climb back through the window. Bradi pushed her hard, shaking his head violently no. She had no intention on leaving him and was prepared to die with him. Something brushed past her back and she froze. Every gut instinct told her not to turn around and look, but she couldn't help herself. Turning slowly, she found herself face to face with a large yellowish eye. Upon further inspection she found it firmly attached to the largest eel she'd ever seen.

Not thinking, she punched out and caught it in the eye. It slammed against her, squishing her between the POD and its body. It pushed her hard and seemed to be trying to lift her to the surface. She fought against it, not wanting to leave Bradi behind.

Water rushed into her lungs and she felt as if someone had lit a fire in her chest. Being a doctor, she knew the process involved in drowning and she knew that it was one of the worst ways to go.

Better to be unconscious before the eel eats me, she thought to herself as the blackness swallowed her.

Bradi's senses picked up a predator near them and he could only guess what stalked them. The seas of Sargaidia were littered with creatures that even he feared. When he saw Marisa turning back for him, his heart melted. She cared whether he lived or died and that meant something to him.

Marisa's body slammed into the POD and Bradi let the beast within surface. Slamming into the side of the POD with his clawed hands, he tore his way through the metal as if it were nothing more than paper. Swimming out of the POD, he found Marisa descending slowly in the water. There was no sign of the predator he'd sensed and he wondered if his natural warning system was getting faulty. Something had hit Marisa. But what?

He snatched hold of her arm and headed for the surface. The minute their faces broke the surface, he drew in a deep breath of air and pulled Marisa to him. She gasped, coughing out water and he exhaled.

She would live. That was all that mattered.

Looking around, he found the shoreline and headed for it--cursing the fates for putting him with a hotheaded woman, who seemed determined to kill herself before the day was up.

* * * *

Marisa hissed as Bradi pulled the soaked material off her legs. The scraps that had once been called her pants seemed to go out of their way to cling to the large gashes in her legs. “Ouch!”

“Hold still and it won’t hurt so much,” Bradi said, scolding her like she was a child.

“Easy for you to say.”

“Baby.”

She growled at him. “I wouldn’t have these if you hadn’t shoved me through that broken window!”

“You’d be laying at the bottom the sea dead. Would you prefer that? I could throw you back in.”

Marisa reached into his utility belt and grabbed his knife. His eyes narrowed as if daring her to stick him with it. As much as she wanted to jab him in the gut, she wanted to check her wounds first. Grabbing hold of the material, she sliced it off just below her crotch line. Following suit on the other side, she smiled as she handed his knife back to him. “There, I’m now stuck in the universe’s shortest shorts, but at least they aren’t flapping pieces of nothing.”

“Doc.” Bradi exhaled deeply. He touched her inner thigh lightly and heat pooled between her legs. He didn’t seem to notice that she damned near creamed herself with just the touch of his fingers and she wasn’t about to point it out to him. “This one is bad. Can you heal it?”

“Heal it? What, I don’t know. Maybe. I’ll need to find something to act as a needle and....”

Bradi put his hand up, motioning for her to stop. “No, I mean heal it. Not mend it.”

Marisa’s heart beat furiously and she fought to maintain her composure. “Umm ... I don’t know ... umm ... stop looking at me like that.”

Bradi leaned down and put his face directly in hers. “Listen, lady. I don’t give a shit about whatever it is you don’t want people to know about you, but you see these cuts?” He ran his hands lightly over her thighs, sending

shockwaves of excitement through her body. “These will not only get infected, they will draw predators to us. Is that what you want? Do you want a pard of panthers or a pack of wolves to happen upon you overnight because they followed the scent of blood?”

Marisa looked around at the edge of the forest and swallowed back the lump in her throat. “How do you know that there are panthers and wolves here? A month ago you couldn’t even remember your name to board the ship after you spent the night living it up at the bars and now you’re suddenly a survival expert!” She eyed Bradi for a response, but he gave none. Instead, he turned to head into the woods, leaving her to sit on the edge of the shoreline--alone.

“Janelle?” He didn’t stop or answer her. “Janelle, please.” Marisa gulped as he stalked off into the forest. She’d only seen pictures of vegetation as strange as this and could only imagine how many plants and animals in there were deadly. The tall, black barked tree had yellow leaves that seem to sweep to the forest floors. They were massive and distinctively different from the trees in the Earth museums.

A soft splashing noise in the red sea behind her caught her attention and she turned around quickly. The head of the mammoth eel appeared a few feet off shore and Marisa found herself crab walking backwards to get away from it. The sand was softer than she was used to and she sank down into it slightly. The eel lunged forward and narrowly missed striking her as she rolled to her side.

Pushing upwards in the pinkish sand, she somehow managed to get to her feet. She ran forward, stumbling again and again because of the pain in her legs. The long jagged cuts opened more, leaving her bleeding at an alarming rate. Risking a glance over her shoulder, she hoped that she was far enough away from the water to prevent another attack. Much to her surprise the eel began to slither from the sea. It moved toward her with a speed and efficiency that terrified her.

“Janelle,” she whispered, as the need to panic beat at her.

Something growled in the bushes behind her and she didn’t dare turn to see what it was. From the events that had happened since crashing, she could only assume that it was bad. When she heard matching growls coming from there, too, she knew that her suspicions were correct. She was screwed.

* * * *

“That no good, insolent, ungrateful, bi...” Bradi stopped his verbal attack on Marisa as he looked for a safe place for them to camp. The suns were beginning to set and nightfall only meant that the evil things would come out and play. Depending on where they were, they might be able to make it to an inhabited village or compound within a few days walk.

He shuddered to think of what kind of reception he’d get. He hadn’t spoken to his family in nearly twelve years. The terms he’d left on had been anything but pleasant. The death of his mother had left him with a sharp tongue and a fogged sense of right and wrong. He didn’t think that his father would welcome him with open arms now, that much was for sure. Hopefully, he could get Marisa some medical attention and get them a ride off this gods forsaken planet.

There was no doubt in his mind that she was dying to get away from him. She seemed to hate the fact that she had to share air with him, let alone be stranded with him. It still blew Bradi’s mind that she’d refused to leave him after the POD had crashed. He’d have thought that she’d have relished the opportunity to rid herself of him. Of course, she’d be left all alone on an unfamiliar planet, but still.

He heard her call his name once more, this time in a whisper and he smiled. “Let her sweat. It’ll teach her not to speak to me like a dog. Now, if she wanted to bend over and let me fuck her like a...” Something wasn’t right. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end and he tipped his head to the side, smelling the air.

Panther.

Shedding his clothes quickly, he shifted into his panther form. It had been years since he was able to shift without worry and his inner beast was happy to be free. Bending down, he sniffed the ground and followed the scent of the pard. His heart hammered in his chest when he realized that the others had made a beeline straight for Marisa. No doubt, the smell of fresh blood and human was too much for them.

Bounding through the brush at the edge of the beach, he stopped when he saw Marisa stroking the top of one of the panther’s heads. Stunned, he could do nothing other than watch the spectacle before him unfolding.

How had she calmed the animal?

His senses told him that this was a group of werepanthers, not normal animals. They only respected humans if they were marked and even then

that didn't save them. They were also known to not attack if the victim carried the scent of a powerful warrior panther. Instantly he thought back to the pod and making love to Marisa.

Shit, I need to stop referring to it as love. Next thing I know I'll be standing on a hilltop confessing my undying devotion and.... He bit the words back in his mind before they came to be.

Focusing his mind and still in awe of the scene before him, Bradi tried to think of what would make the others yield to Marisa. Had she tapped into the power he'd seen her use? Had she managed to kill one with her bare hands, proving that she was a skilled warrior? He highly doubted it.

Coming to his senses, he walked toward Marisa slowly, in anticipation of a fight. When the other panthers only turned and snarled lightly he understood that they would not harm her. A large male panther moved in from behind Marisa and from the way it dropped its shoulders, Bradi could tell that it was thinking of exuding its power and attempting to claim her. There was no way in hell that he'd give Marisa up.

She's mine, he thought as he leapt down before her with a vicious snarl.

"Oh gods," Marisa whispered. Fear radiated off her and Bradi knew that it was him she was scared of. She looked around nervously as tears glistened in her eyes. "Bradi? Bradi, please help me. I didn't mean to upset you. Please."

Each time she called out to him, using his name, he wanted to shift back into his human form and wrap his arms around her. That would no doubt scare her more, and if the Commission ever found out that he was part supernatural then he'd be let go and possibly brought up on charges. Project Exorcism had rid the Commission of most of its supernatural problem, or so they thought. Bradi knew better, but he wasn't about to start talking.

Bradi swiped his claws out at the large male in a show of dominance and it heeded his warning. It turned and ran toward the woods, followed closely by the rest of its pack. A piece of him longed to run with them. He missed the days when he and his siblings, well, all the ones that could fully shift that was, ran together.

He looked up at Marisa and took another step toward her. She tensed and the smell of her fear excited the beast. "Bradi, please, I'm sorry. Please, don't leave me here. Bradi, please...."

The soft plea in her voice brought the man within him back to the surface. He was ashamed of how close he'd let his beast get to attacking her. He spun quickly around and ran off into the forest to find his clothes.

* * * *

Bradi stood silently in the shadows, watching Marisa. She sat on the beach with a large stick clutched tightly to her, wiping tears from her cheeks. He wanted to run to her, hold her, and tell her that everything would be all right, but he didn't. Instead, he took the coward's approach and rustled the bush next to him with his hand to alert her to his presence.

She wiped her cheeks and righted herself. "Bradi, is that you?"

"Yeah," he said, unsure if he could offer anymore without breaking down and confessing all his secrets to her.

She sprang to her feet and ran toward him. Throwing her arms around his neck, she sighed. Bradi froze. "This huge eel came out of the water, and then all kinds of big leopards ran out at me. One knocked me down and I threw sand in its eyes. I thought it was going to rip my throat out, but it stopped and started to sniff me." She tightened her grip on him, and he wrapped his arms around her slowly, cringing slightly at her mislabeling his breed as leopards.

"It nudged me a few times before it stuck its nose right into my crotch." She flushed as she spoke.

This piqued Bradi's curiosity, as he wondered what had driven them into acceptance of her. The mark had something to do with it. She was now viewed as claimed by him, but that wasn't always a guarantee. He stroked the back of her long, layered hair and nodded to her, encouraging her to go on.

Something flickered across her eyes and she narrowed her gaze on him. "I called for you, you stubborn bastard and you never came." Her hand came up fast and struck him square across the face. Knowing that he deserved it for leaving her alone, he said nothing, but when she attempted to strike him again, he grabbed her wrists.

"Let go of me!" she cried out as she snapped her teeth at him.

He snapped back and gave her a wicked grin.

“Ooo, forget it! If your teeth broke my skin I’d probably end up with some sort of disease considering the way you run around with the ladies.”

He resisted the urge to inform her that she was now considered one of his ladies, the only lady in fact, and that his teeth had indeed broken her skin. “I’ll have you know, Doc, that I’m up to date on all my shots, or are you forgetting how you drooled over the sight of my ass as you injected me with them?”

The Commission had instituted mandatory shots for diseases and STDs to all of their enlisted, and Marisa seemed to take great joy out of throwing what she thought was his sex life into his face every chance she got. It was pointless to give the shots to him. His genetic make up didn’t allow for him to catch any sort of human disease. The worst he had to fear when bedding a woman was getting her pregnant. The shots, while they contained population control additives, did nothing to lower his sperm count. It didn’t matter, really. The only way he could get a female pregnant was if she was his true life mate. He highly doubted Marisa was that. Besides, she was on Commission shots too, so even if she was his true mate, not just his chosen, she’d be protected from pregnancy.

“How could I forget?” She glared at him. “And, for the record, should I cut myself on a rusty eel, I’m as good as dead. I’m allergic to the binding agents they use in the shots so I have none.”

“A rusty eel, huh?” Laughing, he pulled her close to him not caring if she protested. “I’ll do my best to keep you away from any more sharp objects or rusty eels.”

Chapter Five

Bradi finished putting the last of the large leaves over the crude structure and climbed underneath it to join Marisa by the fire. She sat there rubbing her hands together with her knees to her chest. It gave him a fantastic view up her ultra-short shorts and he savored it. His cock stirred to life and he could almost taste her sweet skin as he watched her.

He reached out to give the brula he'd managed to catch a turn to keep it from burning over the fire and he moved closer to her. She shifted and gave him a wary look. "What do you think you're doing?"

"You look cold and I'm burning up, so I thought you might want to be close to me." It was only a partial truth. Because I want to hold you seemed like too bold a statement.

"Oh," she said, moving closer to him. She looked up at the meat and cocked an eyebrow. "Are you sure that's edible?"

He chuckled. "Yes, it's similar to rabbit."

"I'm going to eat a bunny?" She sounded so innocent.

Laughing again, he turned the meat. "No, brula. Similar but not the same thing."

"How do you know so much about this planet? I thought you were from Margaidia."

He had to hide his delight. She knew, or thought she knew, where he was from. That meant that she'd paid attention to the details of his life. He nonchalantly turned the brula again and shrugged. "Well, I lived there for the last twelve years but I wasn't born there."

"Where were you born?"

He smiled. "Tell you what--I'll tell you a secret about me if you tell me one about you first."

Marisa stiffened. "I don't have any secrets."

"Fine, then neither do I."

She glanced up at him and shivered. Sliding his arm around her, he waited for Marisa to scream at him or hit him. When she did neither, he

assumed it was safe. They sat quietly and watched the brula cook. His gaze kept going to her legs and he wished that she'd come clean about her ability to heal just so she could mend the angry cuts on her body.

“Bradi?”

“Hmm?” he asked, not wanting to let her go and praying she wouldn't ask him to.

“What happened to the ship? It was fine and then all of the sudden it wasn't.”

The same question had plagued him from the moment he'd felt the first signs of distress on the ship and that had been a day prior to the crash. His gut told him it was sabotaged, but he didn't want to believe that one of his own crewmembers would do such a thing. The meteoroid shower could have been to blame, but even that wouldn't have caused the amount of destruction he'd seen on board the ship. “I'm not sure, honey.”

When she didn't balk at his term of endearment, he took it as a good sign. She sighed. “I wonder if Peter made it.”

He drew her deeper into his arms and was surprised when he felt her shift her body to meet his. Kissing the top of her head gently, he rocked her slowly. Marisa turned her face to meet his and when he noticed the unshed tears in her eyes, he instantly wanted to rip something apart.

* * * *

Marisa stared into the blue depths of Bradi's eyes as the firelight sparkled off them. It struck her how handsome Bradi was and she was grateful for the warm glow of the fire because it masked the faint red glow she now wore. This man who she'd assumed was a pig sat so quiet, stroking her back gently and rocking her softly. How was it that he could be so thoughtful when she'd only ever considered him for the chauvinistic candidate of the year award?

Bradi's full lips were framed nicely by his dark black goatee, and when he tipped his head slightly to look at her, she couldn't help herself. Leaning in, she pressed her lips lightly to his. His entire body stiffened and for a minute, she thought he'd push her away from him, but he didn't. When she felt his hand move into her hair, she realized what she'd started.

The kiss remained chaste at first and that bothered her. Was she not as good as the women he normally surrounded himself with? Marisa had never undergone any drastic body changes so her breasts were hers and hers alone, as was the rest of her body. At five foot five, she just missed hitting his shoulder and she knew that men tended to prefer the intergalactic supermodels to tiny packaged women like her. Didn't they?

Opening her mouth slightly, she let her tongue slide along his lower lip. She was met with a moan and Bradi's grip tightened in her hair. Pulling her head back slightly, his mouth came down hard on hers. At first, she forgot to breathe. Sure, she'd been kissed before, but never like this. Never with such raw unbridled passion. His tongue dove in and out of her mouth, mimicking mating and Marisa's legs drew together in an attempt to quell the burning between her thighs.

Bradi began to ease their bodies to the ground and she didn't fight him. She needed comfort, needed to lose herself in the moment. Guilt over her lust for Bradi tried to surface, but she suppressed it. Stranded on a strange, primitive planet with no hope of going home, she needed to feel something--anything, and for all the faults Bradi had, not making her feel wasn't one of them.

His hands seemed to be everywhere at once and she realized that she too was feeling him. Letting her hands glide over his back, she bunched his T-shirt up to feel his hot skin beneath. Hard muscles greeted her and she drew in a sharp breath as her pussy quivered. She worked his shirt over his head and couldn't believe how incredible his body was. The very thought of him fucking her damn near brought about an orgasm. She could only dream what the real thing would be like.

Bradi was always shy about letting people see him partially dressed and she couldn't understand why. "You don't have an ounce of fat on you."

Bradi chuckled and she realized that she'd spoken aloud. He bent his head down and kissed her collarbone lightly. "Mmm, I have yet to find any fat on you either."

"Oh please, my--"

He silenced her with a kiss as he ground his hips against her. The pressure of his hard shaft through the fabric of his pants was more than enough to stimulate her swollen clit. Each rub, each sway of his hips brought her closer to climax.

Needing to be closer to him, Marisa lifted her tattered gray shirt and let her bra rub against his hard chest. Bradi's hands found their way to her breasts and in just seconds, he was rolling her nipples between his fingertips, causing her to moan for him.

When his fingers slid into the top of her shorts, she tensed a bit. He stopped and looked down at her, capturing her in his mesmerizing gaze. "Do you want me to stop?"

She bit her lower lip and shook her head. "No, but I need to tell you something and you have to promise not to laugh."

His eyebrows arched as he nodded his head. "Yes?"

"I've never ... I've never been with a man before."

He nodded and placed a chaste kiss on her forehead. "We can stop until you are ready, honey."

"No," she said, a little too fast. "I'm ready, but I thought you should know so that..."

He smiled. "So that I'd be gentle with you?"

That wasn't exactly what she had in mind. "Well, I guess gentle would be nice, but more importantly, I think you should know that I wasn't kidding about not being able to tolerate the shots." The doctor within her kicked into gear. "That means that I have no form of birth control so you'll have to pull out of me before you ejaculate. I know that you had your shot but those aren't one hundred percent unless both parties are up to date. Plus, I think you should know that something odd may happen during this. I've never told anyone about this before but I come by my healing honestly. I..."

Bradi rolled off her quickly and grabbed his shirt off the ground. He turned toward the brula and gave it a hard twist.

"Bradi?" She sat up and drew her legs to her chest, never feeling more humiliated in her life. Marisa had been on the verge of confessing her gift to him and he'd acted this way. Climbing to her feet, she cast him an angry look. "What the hell was I thinking? Gods, I must be suffering from post traumatic stress syndrome to let you near me!"

She spun on her heels to go and shivered as Bradi spoke. “Don’t go far. The forest is deadly, especially at night.”

* * * *

Bradi watched her stalk off as he removed the brula from the fire to let it cool. He didn’t like the idea of Marisa roaming around in the forest alone in the dark, but he knew that she felt like he’d rejected her. The opposite was true. He’d wanted to take her more than life itself, but the moment she mentioned that she had no manmade form of birth control he knew why the panthers had taken to her so quickly--she carried his child.

It wouldn’t take her long to figure out that she was expecting and with that damned little embedded medical chip she had, she’d be able to scan the baby and know that what she carried was not human. He could jam its frequencies if she was close, but he wouldn’t always be next to her. And, when the baby did arrive, assuming they survived long enough to find his family, she’d learn one day that their child was more than met the eye, as was its father--her husband.

He knew that he should confess everything to her and tell her that he was a werepanther and that they’d made love twice on the POD, but he couldn’t. Not yet. He couldn’t stand to think about how she’d react to the knowledge that a supernatural being now grew in her womb. Humans hated his kind and he couldn’t bear to see the hurt and horror in her eyes. Granted, he’d witnessed Marisa do something miraculous aboard the POD but until she came right out and told him exactly who and what she was, he had to operate under the assumption that his wife was human.

Knowing that it wasn’t safe for her to be alone, Bradi went to find her. Before long he’d have to confess what he’d done and who he was. That would have to wait. Her safety came first. Well, that and the safety of his child now, too.

I’m going to be a father.

The thought struck him hard, leaving him doubling over and gasping for air. She’s my true mate and she hates me.

* * * *

Marisa sat at the edge of the wading pool and marveled at how the water seemed to be turquoise here. Not wanting to chance what might live in the depths, she stayed a good bit away from the water itself.

Humiliation and confusion swamped her. How could she have been so willing to give her virginity to a man she couldn't stomach being around only days before? Sure, they'd been through hell the last couple of days, but that didn't mean she had to give what she'd been saving for Peter to him.

Peter.

Guilt swept over her as she thought of how quickly after his passing she'd almost replaced him in her heart. She looked up at the planet's moons and rocked gently. "Peter, wherever you are now, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean for this to happen. I didn't plan on him."

Someone cleared their throat and she quickly wiped the tears from her cheeks. Glancing behind her, she found Bradi standing there. "What do you want?"

"I just came to check on you," Bradi answered softly.

"I'm fine, now go away."

He ignored her and came to sit next to her anyway. "Hmm, I see that you found a good bathing spring."

She perked up at the sound of a bath. "Bathing spring?"

"Yes, it's not nearly as warm as the hot springs that can be found on the planet, but it's safe and clean."

"Safe and clean?"

He laughed softly. "Yes, would you like to eat first or bathe?"

She was starving, but the sound of a bath was too good to pass up. "You can go back and eat. I'd like to clean up."

"That's fine. We can bathe if you want to. The brula's best served cooler anyway."

Marisa tipped her head and gave him a funny look. "We aren't bathing. I am."

Bradi shook his head and motioned to the surrounding trees. "Don't you sense the danger? We are being stalked ... or watched if you will, as we

speak. It's not safe for me to leave you here alone, and I'm in need of a warm bath as much as you, so it makes...."

Putting her hand up, she silenced him. "I get it, okay. Big bad ugly things roaming around equals you and I hopping in there together."

"Yes, that's the short version."

She let her toe dip into the water and her eyelids fluttered shut with the lure of a warm bath. On the ship, they'd only had access to cleansing chambers that used artificial water supplies. And, on Earth the water had been restricted for drinking only, so each home had similar chambers. Water baths were luxuries and only the wealthiest of Earthlings could afford them. The lure of actual water was too good to pass up. "Fine, but you need to face the other way."

Bradi chuckled and turned around. She couldn't help but watch him as he removed his shirt slowly. His muscles rippled with every movement and she wondered if he had to get his off duty clothes specially tailored to fit his large size. When he went for his pants, she gasped.

"Why did I have to turn around if you were going to stand there and watch me undress anyway?"

Marisa stilled. How had he known that she'd been watching him? Had her eyes borne through him so much so that he'd felt her? No. That was ridiculous. "You're so full of yourself."

He snorted and continued to undress. As hard as she tried to avert her gaze, she couldn't tear it away from him. When his firm backside was exposed, a smile moved to her face as she caught sight of his dimpled ass cheeks.

"Would you like me to turn around? You could see all of me then."

Marisa growled as she yanked her clothes off. "You arrogant, son of a...."

Two warm hands grabbed her waist as she brought her shirt over her head. Trapped part in the material and part in fear, she stood still. "Don't move, Doc. Something's close."

Images of the eel flashed in her head as Bradi eased her shirt off. Fearing what might be stalking them, she gave little thought to her nudity and

turned to face him. Bradi slid his hands down her torso, causing her breath to catch, before settling on the tops of her shorts.

“We should get you out of these so you still have dry clothes tonight.”

“I thought that something was close to us.”

“It is,” he said with a sly grin. He positioned his hand over his groin before moving to touch her.

She began to protest, but stopped when her gaze flickered down his tawny chest. She gapped when she saw the size of his cock. “My gods!”

It twitched and she jumped. Bradi laughed as he bent down before her. In a flash, he had her shorts around her ankles, and his face directly level with her pussy.

His eyes flickered closed and he swayed slightly. Fearing for his health, she touched his shoulder. “Janelle?”

“Mmm, you smell so good ... good enough to eat. Can I taste you, Doc?” His blue eyes locked on her and she knew that she should be appalled by his lewd comments, but she wasn't. She was turned on.

* * * *

“I want to run my tongue over you and lick your sweet cream. Allow me this pleasure, please.” Dipping his face forward, Bradi nuzzled in between her legs. She smelled so good, a mix of vanilla and his scent. There was little doubt in his mind that she carried his child.

The harder he concentrated on her scent, the more he found it mixing to match his own. He'd never given much thought to having children, not because he didn't like them, but because he never thought he'd be able to impregnate anyone. Genetics was funny when it came to were DNA. The recipient had to be a match for the seed to take and the chances of that were so rare that he'd all but given up hope.

Bradi parted Marisa's folds and ran his tongue out and over her clit. She bucked against his face and he laughed softly. He'd always thought her to be so stuffy, so conservative that he could hardly believe that she was as wild as she was and his.

Mine? Where the hell did that come from? She'll never accept me--not when she finds out what I have done, and what I truly am.

Bradi pushed the thoughts of rejection out of his head on concentrated on Marisa. Her legs trembled with each flick of his tongue and he sensed it right before they gave out on her. Grabbing her quickly, he eased her to the ground. He parted her legs and buried his face in her pussy. She tasted every bit as wonderful as he thought she would and more. He'd never get enough of his wife.

My wife.

The words weren't ones he'd thought would ever apply to him. In all the time he'd been alive, Bradi never once pictured himself married, tied to one woman. Now, as his tongue skated over her velvety folds, lapping up her cream, he couldn't imagine life without Marisa in it.

She slid her fingers into his hair and his chest tightened. This time, Marisa was fully awake and knew that it was he, not Pete before her, yet she seemed every bit as willing as she had in the POD. Could that mean that she felt the same for him as she did Pete? Did she love him, too?

Easing his finger into her tight channel, Bradi marveled at how wet she was. He wanted to slip his dick into her and let her body clench around him as he rode her, but he needed to see to her happiness first. Thrusting his finger in and out of her tight channel he smiled as she began to pant. "You like that, don't you, baby?"

"Mmhmm," she groaned.

"Tell me that you like it, Doc. Tell me that you like it when I touch you. Tell me that you want me buried deep in you. I want to hear you say it." Bradi needed to hear the words fall from her lips. He needed some sort of reassurance that she felt something for him. The feelings he had for her were like nothing he'd ever felt before.

Marisa shifted slightly. "I ... I like it when you touch me, Bradi. And, I want you. Gods, I want you!"

Flicking his tongue quickly over her clit, he stopped to suck on it. Marisa came with a jolt, wrapping her legs around his head and crying out. The beast within him rose rapidly to the surface and he knew that he'd never be able to fight it down on his own. His claws shot forth, and his incisors let down. The rippling on his back indicated that fur was only seconds

away and he knew that he had to get away from her fast. Pushing off her, he turned and rolled into the water.

Warm water greeted him upon his descent and he welcomed its aid. The beast within him struggled to be free, but he held it at bay--barely. Only Marisa could make him lose his hard-earned control. Only she seemed to be able to leave him in a permanent state of guard against shifting. If touching her brought about the change in him every time, then she'd soon learn what he truly was. A monster. An animal. A liar. The father of her child and her husband.

Breaking the surface, he glanced around for Marisa. She was gone. Panic welled in him as he climbed out of the water. "Doc?"

When she didn't answer, he didn't stop to dress, he shifted quickly into panther form to track her better. Catching her scent, he ran toward their campsite. He scanned it quickly for threats and when he deemed there was none, he shifted back into human form.

"Doc?"

Glancing around, Bradi found her lying by the fire with her back to him. Her curves were accented by the soft fire glow and he knew in that moment that he'd never be good enough for her. She deserved a saint, not an ass who left her lying on the edge of the water without so much as an explanation. Guilt swept over him as he realized that she'd taken his diving into the water as another sign of rejection. He walked slowly over to her and sat down next to her naked form.

"Marisa?"

She didn't answer. He leaned over her and found her eyes closed and her breathing shallow. She'd fallen asleep. He couldn't blame her. They'd had a hell of a last few days and she'd not eaten. The pregnancy probably contributed to her fatigue and he couldn't fight the urge to lie down next to her. Spooning her body with his, he held her tight as sleep took him as well. "Sweet dreams, wife."

Chapter Six

Marisa glared at Bradi's back as he walked ahead of her. They'd been walking all day and she was exhausted. Giving into her aching body's demands, she sat on the forest floor.

Closing her eyes, she tried once again to get her embedded med chip to work. "Scan body for signs of infection."

The chip clicked on and then instantly fizzled out.

"Doc?"

Peeking out of one eye, she growled when she saw Bradi standing close to her. She lay back on the ground and didn't care what crawled on her. She was tired and needed to sleep.

"We can't stop here. It's not safe," Bradi said, touching her leg lightly. "Are you going to talk to me? This silent treatment is getting old."

He was right. The last time she'd talked to him was by the bathing pool close to five days ago, and it had been hell staying silent. "Fine. What is it you'd like to talk about? Care to tell me how you always seem to know when something is stalking us or how you know so much about this planet?"

Bradi grew still and she gave him a fake smile. "That's what I thought. I'm tired, Lieutenant Commander, and I need some sleep. I've contracted a bug on this planet you seem to be such an expert on and all I want to do is go home."

"You need to eat."

The thought of eating turned her stomach. "I can't. Every time I put something in my mouth, it comes right back up."

"Gee, if we only knew a healer," he said wryly.

She sat up fast and glared at him. "Say what's on your mind, Janelle."

Touching her cheek, he gave her a wide smile. "You're even more beautiful when you're angry."

Stunned by his words, she turned her head. "Well, considering I only have you to keep me company that must mean I'm drop dead gorgeous all

the time, since you pretty much have me in a permanent state of pissed off.”

“Yes, you are gorgeous all the time,” he said, as if that cleared up everything.

She was too tired to argue with him anymore. Her body ached and her stomach was in a knot. Sinking back into the forest floor, she closed her eyes. “Please, Bradi. I need to rest.”

“I know, honey.”

Marisa wasn't sure if it was the please or the use of his first name, but he'd finally agreed to let her rest. When his arms pushed under her, she let out a yelp. “What the hell do you think you're doing?”

He smiled down at her as he lifted her into the air. “I'm carrying you. I told you that it's not safe to stop here and I meant it.”

Rolling her eyes, she pushed on his chest. “Put me down. I'll walk.”

He pulled her closer to him, allowing her to take in his manly scent. “I kind of like holding you and you're right--you need to rest.”

Opening her mouth to protest, Marisa stopped when she saw the muscles in his neck moving. Fire shot through her body and she had the craziest urge to slide her tongue over the beating pulse in his neck. Wanting to lick a man all over wasn't a feeling she was used to, and it scared her. Pride made her want to walk, but fatigue and fear were in control now. Unable to fight it anymore, she laid her head on his chest and closed her eyes. She'd never admit it to him, but she kind of liked that he was holding her, too.

* * * *

Bradi ran with Marisa in his arms. It was better that she slept. It meant that he could shift partially and travel faster. He kept a close eye on her to monitor her sleeping. The last thing he needed was for her to wake up and find him covered in a coating of black fur and his eyes glowing yellow. Somehow, he didn't think she'd take too kindly to that.

He'd spent five days trying to think of creative ways to tell her that she carried his child and was his wife in the eyes of his people. Nothing

seemed to be good enough and regardless what he decided to do, he knew he'd lose her.

Marisa was out of his league.

That wasn't acceptable. The fierce need to protect her, be near her, provide for her and love her was all consuming. He knew he'd never be able to let her go and that in the end, she'd undoubtedly demand to leave.

* * * *

Nina Janelle moved with a grace most human women didn't possess. She stopped in front of Pheebes, a trusted warrior among her guards. "What was so urgent that you needed to pull me away from my duties?"

"Forgive me, my lady, but I bring news that I think you should know."

She motioned for him to join her in her office. "Tell me this news."

"A group of my men, the panther pard, were returning from a scouting mission on the edges of the red sea and encountered an outsider."

"An outsider, really?" Nina's interest was piqued. They kept close tabs on the number of outsiders they permitted on the planet. Aside from the group that had arrived two months ago with her brother-in-law, they hadn't had any outsiders here for more than a few hours in decades. "Go on."

"Yes, my lady. At first they assumed the woman was alone, and they were starved for..." His eyes shifted downward. Nina knew the sexual cravings that the men had were great, yet she discouraged them from seeking fulfillment from anyone other than their chosen mates. To do so would mean certain death and not many risked that. Pheebes' admittance to the men being horny spoke volumes for the severity of what he was about to tell her.

"Go on."

"The men cornered her and immediately noticed that she bore the mark of one of our own. Thinking that she could be the mate of one of Stegian's men, they inspected further. She was with child, and they claim that she was covered in the scent of..." He stopped and stared at her.

Nina nodded her head. "Of who, Pheebes?"

“Of Bradiainn.”

“You are mistaken.” Stegian was an evil vampire sorcerer who had terrified her people for over a hundred and fifty years. Nina could believe that he was behind just about anything. She could not and would not believe that her brother was back.

Pheebes shook his head. “No, my lady. My men say that a large black panther surged forward and challenged them for the woman. Do you think he has been sent by Stegian to try to kill you and your sister?”

Nina’s eyes widened and her heart raced. As much as she didn’t want to believe it was true, she’d seen her own father turn against his family. Bradiainn had been banished from the planet by her father due to his rumored involvement with Stegian. If it was true, and he was back, he was a threat she didn’t want to imagine coming up against alone. “Tell no one of this. Organize a party of five men. Bring extra horses. We shall set out in an hour. If Bradiainn is here, we shall find him.”

Chapter Seven

Marisa snuggled in next to Bradi and tried her best not to get aroused. It was hard considering their close proximity. She'd also found that although she was tired all the time and had little ability to keep anything down, she was horny as all get out.

Bradi leaned over her and grabbed another piece of the fruit he called satunie, but looked and smelled like mango. "Here, eat."

Her stomach turned. "I can't."

"Doc, honey. You have to eat something. The ba..."

"The what?" she asked waiting for him to finish his sentence.

"The bug you have won't get better until you add food. You can't expect your body to get better when you are living off water and air only."

She laughed softly at the irony of the fighter giving the doctor advice, but knew that he was right. "Tell you what. I'll make you a deal."

"I am listening."

Biting back all of her better judgment, Marisa continued. "Give me what I'm craving and I'll eat your damn fruit."

"What are you craving?" he asked, a hint of amusement in his voice.

There was no doubt in her mind that he was going to make her say it. She rolled her eyes and swatted his chest lightly. "You." She reached down and cupped the bulge in his pants. "This."

Bradi growled and rolled her onto her back. For a moment, she thought she saw his eyes flicker to yellow, but when he stared out at her from blue orbs she knew she'd been mistaken. "Do not toy with me, Doc."

"Me, toy with you? Please. You're the one that runs away from me every time we get close." She shifted under him as he pushed his hips into her. "Listen, I know that I'm the last person that you wanted to be marooned with and I know that I'm not like your other girls, but I need..."

He dropped his lips down and kissed her quickly. "No, you are not like my other girls at all."

The harsh reality of his words hit her and she pushed at him to get him off her. “Off, Bradi. Now!”

He looked hurt as he rolled onto his side. “What did I say?”

“Like I didn’t hear it enough growing up ... like I need you to rub it in.”

Bradi blinked as he tried to wrap his arm around her. She pushed it off and glared at him. “You know, my stepmother never once hesitated to tell me how unfortunate I was when it came to looks and with my condition she said that I’d be lucky to ever catch a man’s eye.” She let her gaze go hard. “I wasn’t blessed with enormous breasts and extra long legs. I get that I’m not a supermodel or a Bradi groupie. I don’t need to be reminded by you that I don’t stack up against all of your bimbos.” Marisa tried to get to her feet, but Bradi seized hold of her and pulled her to him.

“I don’t know what the hell your stepmother was on that made her think you were inferior in any way, baby, but she was wrong. Dead wrong. I didn’t sit by gritting my teeth every time I saw Pete put his arm around you for no reason, lady. I think you are the sexiest woman I have ever....”

“You think I’m sexy?” Marisa asked, pulling him toward her. She didn’t wait for his answer. She took control of his mouth with her own and moaned.

* * * *

Bradi was too shocked to do anything other than kiss her back. Marisa’s mood swings puzzled him, but he knew the reason for them. Tracing circles around her warm tongue, he let his fantasies take control and he pictured her waiting eagerly by the door of their home for his return with their child in her arms. It drove him on, fueling his already overwhelming sexual desires.

Running his hands down her body, he slid his fingers into her shorts and cupped her cleft. Marisa bucked against him and bit lightly at his lips. Easing his fingers into her tight body, she began to cry out. He used his thumb to rub her swollen clit and continued to assault her neck and face with kisses.

“Doc,” he whispered, a confession of love closer to falling out than he’d have liked. “You make me crazy.”

Marisa's body wiggled beneath his touch and her cries of passion coincided with her sheath squeezing around his fingers. Knowing that she was coming by the touch of his hand left his hard cock oozing precome with anticipation. The need to take her was strong, but he wouldn't push her. When she was ready to let him make love to her, he would--again and again.

He pulled his wet fingers from her body and brought them to his lips. Marisa's eyes widened as she watched him lick her cream from them. Seeing the excitement in her eyes, Bradi put a finger near the edge of her mouth, daring her to taste herself. When her full lips slid over his middle finger, he nearly came on her stomach. She sucked softly and he couldn't help but moan.

"Do you like that?" she asked softly, a hint of mischief in her green eyes. He hoped it meant that she wanted more.

"Let me make love to you, Doc." It was impossible to mask the desperation in his voice, so he didn't even try. His heart stammered in his chest when she shook her head no.

"Not just yet," she panted, as she pushed hard on his chest.

Knowing that Marisa would never have the strength to budge him, he played along with her and moved onto his back. She moved over him, sending a veil of long chestnut-colored hair around them. Bending down to kiss him, she straddled his body and Bradi fought hard to keep from coming too soon.

She rocked against his cock, and he could feel the moisture from her pussy soaking through their clothes. "Doc," he pleaded.

Marisa laughed softly and moved slowly down his body. Tugging his shirt up and over his head, she looked at him like he'd always dreamed she would--with lust, passion, and he hoped, love.

She spread kisses on his chest, as she ran her hands over his body. "You're so big."

Braid chuckled. "Thanks ... I think."

"Mmm," she murmured as she ran her tongue out and over his nipple. "That's a good thing, but it's a bit distracting all day."

Sliding his hand into her hair, he tipped her head back. “Why is my being big distracting? I would have thought you would like that.”

“Because, when I’m not thinking about you wrapping your large arms around me, I’m thinking about the way they’ll look when you’re pumping yourself in and out of me.”

The boldness of her words shocked him. Marisa had always seemed so timid when sex was brought up, but now his woman was blossoming before his eyes.

My woman, he repeated in his head.

“Bradi?”

He realized that he hadn’t responded to her and he ran his fingers over her cheek. “I like to picture you under me, your hair spread out, and your eyes locked with mine as I fill you with my seed.” Bradi waited for her to pull away in disgust or throw Pete in his face. She liked to do that after he made confessions like that to her. She didn’t.

Instead, Marisa inched her way down his body, leaving a trail of hot kisses in her wake. He was afraid to move when she undid his pants. It wasn’t until she’d not only freed his throbbing cock, but had laced her fingers around it that he finally exhaled.

Running her fingers over the head of his cock, her eyes met his. Her tongue slid out and over the tip of his cock and he thought for a moment that he’d lose control and come. Thankfully, he managed to hang on. Marisa brought her hands up and cupped his sac gently as she planted kisses down the length of his shaft. On the way back up, she began to suck gently on the sides of his penis. Pleasure burned throughout his body and his right hand shifted quickly to panther form.

Carefully, he pulled his hands away from Marisa’s head and was relieved to see that she hadn’t noticed the change. Her full lips hovered over the head of his cock and he watched as she took him into her hot mouth. Never before had oral sex felt so good. There was something about having Marisa sucking gently on him as she stroked him that made all others seem pointless. Like a waste of time and energy.

Her sweet mouth slid up and down on his rigid shaft and the second he felt her scraping her teeth up him lightly, he moved to get her off him. “Doc, I’m going to come. Off....”

Marisa moaned and drove her mouth down on him hard and fast, sucking with all her might. Bradi's sac drew up and his body went stiff as he deposited his seed into her throat. She sucked harder, her eyes rolling back in her head, as she squeezed his dick tight.

"I love you, Doc," he said, no longer caring about his pride.

She pulled off him slowly, kissing the tip of his sated cock before looking up at him through hooded lashes. Her cheeks were stained red and she looked as drunk as he felt from their passion. "Hmm?"

"I said that I love you."

Marisa's eyes grew to the size of half dollars and she shook her head slightly. "You mean you love getting your dick sucked, right?"

Hurt by the way she'd managed to take a beautiful moment and twist it around worse than a man, he glared at her. "Doc, no. I said what I..." The sound of a twig snapping caught his attention. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Quickly, he grabbed Marisa and tossed her on the ground behind him. He fumbled with his pants and managed to get them closed, before looking off into the forest. He moved quickly to his feet, but stayed crouched low to the ground.

"Bradi?"

"Shhh," he hissed, cocking his head to the side, listening for any more indicators as to where the enemy was. "Come out. I know you're there."

* * * *

What?

Marisa sat up behind him and looked off in the direction Bradi spoke. Her eyes widened as she saw a woman so beautiful that she felt as if she should look away. Waves of dark black hair spilled around her and she wore the barest of coverings. A leather-clad Amazon woman was all that Marisa could think that came close to describing her.

The woman clutched a weapon on her side and narrowed her eyes first on her then on Bradi. "Bradiann, I had to come and see if the rumors were true."

Bradiann?

Marisa looked to Bradi for guidance, but he remained as still as a statue. “Hello, Nina. I would say that it is good to see you again, but that would be a lie,” he said, a clear British inflection evident in his voice now. It was as she’d expected. He’d been hiding it.

The vixen laughed and Marisa shivered. Nina looked at her and ran her tongue over her white teeth. “And you are?”

Bradi put his arm out and pulled her behind him. “She is not important.”

Not important?

His words stabbed her in the gut. A minute ago she could have sworn that he’d confessed to loving her, but the coldness in his voice said otherwise. Hurt that she could mean so little to him, Marisa blinked back tears. She’d thought that they’d shared something special, but now she knew that she’d just been a vessel for his release and nothing more. Another one of his endless stream of women. A Bradi groupie.

“I did not ask you, Bradiann. She has a mouth, let her use it,” Nina said, glaring at Bradi, her accent matching his. “Who are you, woman?”

Marisa shrugged her shoulders. “I’m Dr. Marisa Langston, or you can just call me unimportant, all depends on who you ask. But, hey, he got what he wanted so what should titles really matter now?” She couldn’t have sounded colder or more removed from the situation if she tried.

“A doctor?” Nina asked, looking her over from head to toe.

“Yes.”

“It is a truth, yet not a whole truth.” Nina took a step toward her and Bradi growled. “There is more to you, Dr. Marisa Langston, so much more. What are you not telling me?”

“Leave her be, Nina. I’m warning you.”

Nina let out a rich laugh and motioned for Marisa to come to her. “I would like to take a closer look at you.”

Marisa made a move to go to Nina. Bradi turned quickly and seized hold of her. “No!”

Suddenly, men surrounded them. Some held swords, others guns, but all were aimed directly at Bradi. He pushed her back and began to pace back

and forth before her. He took on the eerie feel of a predator and Marisa found herself backing away from him.

“Oh, Bradiann, do you really think you can take us all on?” Nina asked, a slight smile on her flawless face.

“I won’t let you take her. He’ll not get his hands on her!”

Marisa wanted to ask who Bradi was talking about, but knew better. Nina looked at her and for a moment, their eyes met. The knowledge that if push came to shove, Nina would indeed kill Bradi hit Marisa hard. She gasped. “Don’t hurt him. I’ll come to you.”

Bradi rounded on her. “Are you crazy? Do you have any idea what they do to women around here?”

“She’s a woman.” Marisa pointed to Nina.

“She is certifiable and does not count. Her judgment is nonexistent and her ability to see truths is dismal at best.” Bradi snorted and shook his head. “Doc, tell me you’re smarter than this.”

Nina clapped her hands together and looked around at her men. “Enough, take them!”

“Excuse me,” Marisa bit out.

Bradi knocked her back with his arm as two men lunged at him. He made quick work of them, sending them hurtling in the other direction. Two more charged him and one ran at her.

Marisa stared at the large man heading straight for her and let her instincts take over. She dropped down low and he just missed grabbing her. Swinging around, she knocked him hard in the back. For a minute, she thought that her eyes were playing tricks on her as she watched the man’s skin ripple beneath the two leather straps that covered his otherwise bare chest. When fur sprouted all over his body, Marisa screamed out.

“Doc?”

She turned to see Bradi’s attentions on her and not on the men attacking him. His blue eyes widened and his jaw went slack. Clutching his stomach, Bradi fell to his knees.

At first, Marisa didn't understand what had happened. She hadn't heard any weapons discharge, but when she saw the end of a silver blade sticking out from Bradi's stomach, she knew.

"Bradi!" she screamed, running for him.

A furred arm grabbed her around her waist and lifted her off the ground. She didn't need to look behind her to know that a monster held her. Her concerns were no longer for herself. All that mattered was that Bradi was dying.

Bradi reached for her and she felt her heart shatter into a million pieces. "Doc, I'm sorry...."

"Put me down!"

Nina ran to Bradi's side and looked up at her. "Can you help him?"

Marisa ceased to struggle. "What do you care?"

Nina touched Bradi's cheek lightly and looked back at Marisa. "He is my brother."

The thing holding Marisa let her go and she ran to Bradi. Dropping to her knees, she assessed the situation quickly. He'd been run through by the sword and she could only guess how many internal organs were damaged. Bradi fell onto his side and reached out for her. A man moved up behind him and grabbed hold of the sword.

"No!" Marisa shouted. Everyone looked at her. "If you yank that out before we get him somewhere that I can look at him, he'll bleed to death."

"Pheebees, back away," Nina said, her order stern.

"Yes, my lady."

"We need to get him to a medical unit, fast. With the proper equipment I might be able to repair the internal damage and stop the bleeding, but we haven't got much time."

"It will take us at least three hours to make it back to the compound, unless he is able to...."

Bradi reached out and touched Nina's leg, cutting her words off in mid-sentence. "No."

Nina stared at him for several moments before glancing back at Marisa. "You don't know, do you?"

"No, she doesn't know," Bradi said, as he coughed. "Please, Nina ... no."

"She has a right to know, Bradiann. If she truly loves you it won't matter to her."

Blood trickled out of the corner of Bradi's mouth and his eyes locked on Marisa. "She does not love me." His head hit the ground hard and his body went limp.

Nina turned to Marisa, her eyes wide with fear. "Help him!"

Marisa fought hard to stay calm. The urge to scream out in agony at the thought of losing Brady was hard to overcome but somehow, she managed. "Do I need to know anything about him, before I start?"

"Do you love him?" Nina asked.

Marisa opened her mouth to say no, but stopped. "Yes. I do love him."

"He is a shapeshifter. A panther to be exact. If you can heal him to the point that he can shift, he will live."

Bradi, a shapeshifter?

"Hurry!" Nina yelled.

"Leave us alone." There was no way she was going to have an audience for what she was about to try. They stood quickly and she put her hand up to stop the one called Pheebes. "Remove the sword from him."

Nina grabbed her arm and for a second she thought that she might snap it off. "You said he'd bleed to death."

Marisa closed her eyes and let her powers build. They flooded her arms quickly and she knew before she opened her eyes that her hands were glowing. It always happened that way. The white light followed close behind the feeling of weightlessness.

Nina looked at her and nodded her head. She hurried the others away from them and Marisa put her hands on Bradi's wound. Leaning down, she placed a kiss on his lips as hot tears fell down her cheeks. The gashes on her legs, that had been scabbed over but sore, pulled together. She knew it was working, but was unsure if she possessed enough power to save Bradi. She'd never tried to heal someone who was mortally wounded before, and didn't want to think about what would happen if she failed.

"I can't lose you, too," she whispered as she pushed more of her power into his body. "I don't care if you don't feel the same way about me. I love you, Bradi Janelle."

As the last of the light within her seeped into Bradi's body, Marisa felt her own waver. She'd used too much energy, too much power attempting to heal him. "I will follow you, Janelle. If you die, I'll follow to the afterlife. You stubborn bastard. I won't let you go without me. I won't. I love you and I won't let you go!" Laying her head on his chest, she wrapped her arms around him. Suddenly, she felt fur under her fingertips. Knowing that he would live, she let the darkness come for her.

Chapter Eight

Bradi dabbed the wet cloth into the pan of cool water and wrung it out. It had been a weeks worth of revelations and worrying. It felt as if a weight had been lifted off his shoulders when he and Nina had cleared up their differences. All he could think about when he'd been run through with the sword was that his father would somehow get his clutches into Marisa and hand her over to Stegian.

The very mention of the vampire made him shudder. The thought of his wife being subjected to Stegian terrified him. Once he realized that his father was no longer a threat and Nina was not in league with Stegian, he concentrated on Marisa. She'd been unconscious since she'd saved his life.

Wiping Marisa's forehead gently, he felt someone touch his shoulder. He knew without looking who it was. "Lorelei."

"Bradiann ... Bradi. I'm sorry. I'm not used to calling you by your newfound nickname."

It felt good to hear his twin's voice. It had been so long since he'd seen her that he was almost afraid to look upon her. She'd been away when he'd awoken to find Nina at his bedside with news of Marisa's condition, negotiating with the Neatalie village and had been summoned to return. "Nina tells me that you're mated now, Lorelei."

"I am. His name is Sevan and our child grows within me as we speak."

He knew that as well. What caught his attention was the name of her mate. "Sevan Vasil?"

"Yes. Why, do you know him?" Lorelei asked.

Bradi kept his eyes trained on Marisa as he continued to try to bring her fever down. "I know of him. The Commission thinks he and his men are dead."

Lorelei was silent for a moment. "We guessed as much. No, they are all, or, almost all, alive and well. We offered them the opportunity to leave, but all wished to stay. They think of this as home now, and we're glad to have them."

Bradi nodded as he continued to wipe Marisa down. “Is Christian back yet?” He hadn’t seen his childhood friend since his return and he hated to admit that he missed him. Losing Pete made him realize how precious and short his time with everyone could be.

“Not yet. He should be here by suns set. He’ll be happy to see you, Bradiainn. You two aren’t planning on blowing anything up again, are you?”

He laughed as he thought about the time that they’d accidentally set the kitchen on fire when they’d been ordered to help the kitchen staff as a punishment for wandering off into the forest alone. The Chieftain at the time, Christian’s father, had seemed so angry with them, but when they’d rounded the corner after he yelled, they’d heard him laughing.

Lorelei squeezed his shoulder gently. “Did Nina tell you of father and Jacquelyn?”

Bradi’s stomach twisted in a knot as he thought about his baby sister. Stegian had managed to completely control his father’s mind and he in turn attacked his own children. Nina had assured him that Jacquelyn’s spirit still lived on around them, that Christian had somehow engineered a way for her to appear in the form of a hologram, but his grief wasn’t lessened. She’d been but an infant when he’d left. Their mother had passed while giving birth to her and he’d sunk into a depression. It didn’t help that his brothers had been forced to leave the planet by then.

Guilt for having left his sisters assailed Bradi and he hung his head in shame. “I’m sorry that I wasn’t here to stop Father.”

She let out a small laugh. “You weren’t here to stop him because we believed him over you. We believed that you, our brothers, were the ones making deals with Stegian, not Father. He had us all fooled. Had I believed you, my own twin, then none of this would have happened. I am sorry that he sent you all away. I didn’t know until it was too late.”

“I know.” And he did know. Lorelei and he had shared an odd connection since birth. Born of the same womb but not the same egg, they had shared the powers of their parents. Lorelei had taken after their mother who had been a high priestess, where he took after their father who had been mostly werepanther. His body lacked the colorful, tribal-like tattoo markings of the Shamenians, but he could not only shift into a werepanther where Lorelei could not, he was one of the most powerful around.

He turned and looked into his sister's face and knew that she was reading him--scanning his mind. He didn't care. He had nothing to hide from her.

"You love this woman, don't you?"

Bradi nodded his head as he touched Marisa's hand. "I do."

"And she carries your child?"

"Yes."

"Then why do you look so troubled?"

"She'll never accept what I am, and even if she does, she'll never forgive me for how she came to be pregnant."

Lorelei moved next to him and put her hand on Marisa's head. "You seem so sure that she'll disappoint you. Why is that?"

Bradi looked away, not wanting to answer her question.

"Brother, just because Nina and I were blinded by lies and hatred does not mean that she will be as well. Have faith that she loves you."

The thought of Marisa loving him made him laugh. Her heart belonged to his best friend. It didn't matter that he was dead--she'd always love Pete.

"So, Nina didn't tell you everything after all. Did she?"

Bradi glanced at his sister and gave her a questioning look. "Huh?"

"Did Nina tell you how it is that you sit here before us?"

"Yeah, Marisa saved me. She gave too much of herself during the transfer of her power and now...." He couldn't bring himself to say it aloud. Now Marisa was dying.

"True, but did Nina tell you why she allowed Marisa to order them all away?" He shook his head no and Lorelei nodded. "She asked Marisa if she loved you and Marisa said yes. Nina then told her what you are, Bradi ... told her that you're a shifter, a werepanther and she still saved you."

The notion of that sounded very romantic, but Bradi knew better. The woman only tolerated him. She didn't love him. "She probably said that she loved me to get them to leave us alone. She doesn't want anyone

knowing about her gifts. And, if I'd have died she wouldn't have any way off the planet. She's resourceful."

Lorelei shrugged. "I suppose you're right, but then that wouldn't explain why when Nina ran to check on you, she found Marisa wrapping her body around yours and telling you that she would follow you into the spirit realm if you tried to leave. Do women who don't care for a man often do that?"

He stiffened, doing his best to absorb what he was being told. "She said that she'd follow me?"

"She did."

Bradi stood and took his sister in his arms. Her belly was round and he didn't want to hurt her, but he had to hug her. "Bloody hell, I can't lose her, Lorelei. I can't. She's my mate. She doesn't know it yet, but I marked her--claimed her. I can't lose my wife. I love her so much that it hurts to breathe without her next to me. Tell me what to do. I'll give my life for her. I love her that much."

Lorelei patted his arm and nodded. "I'll do what I can for her."

"No!" Bradi shouted, remembering what Nina had warned him about. "You aren't to put any strain on your body. You almost lost your child once. I'll not let you sacrifice it for us."

"Well, it's good to know that someone in the family has some sense," a male voice said from behind him. Bradi turned to find a tall blond man standing in the doorway. He tipped his head to Bradi and looked at Marisa. "She is beautiful. I can see why you love her."

Jealously hit Bradi like a train and he felt his lip curling. Lorelei laughed and patted him on the chest. "Brother, this is my husband, Sevan. Sevan, my brother Bradi."

"Good to meet you, Lieutenant Commander."

"Don't call me that. I have no title anymore. When Marisa returns and tells the Commission what I am, they will hunt me down and execute me."

“So sure that she’ll disappoint you,” Lorelei muttered, shaking her head. She put her hand out to Sevan and walked to him. “My brother is so bullheaded.”

“Wow, a member of your family’s bullheaded? You don’t say?”

Bradi couldn’t help but laugh. He liked Sevan and knew that the man loved his sister.

* * * *

Stegian tapped his fingers across his desk and let the information he’d just been given sink in. His long nails scraped over the wood surface and he knew that if he chose, he could shred it with one hand, but why? He wasn’t a barbarian, a monster, like the Commission had tried to make him be. No. He’d risen up above their betrayal and had made an empire for himself. He’d taken this otherwise pointless planet they’d inadvertently exiled him to and made it a thriving home for others like him. It would have been perfect too, if two men and their children hadn’t interfered.

Raiden Janelle and Chreathe Beauden had decided to rally against him, and lead the Shamenians and the supernatural traitors who had been aboard the vessels, herded from Earth, to stand and fight him. Chreathe was a hard kill, but worth it in the end. Raiden on the other hand had proved to be a vital pawn in his master plan and he mourned the day that his ungrateful children had put him down.

Oh, he had been one to watch, his torture techniques proved to be most invaluable.

Stegian thought about Janelle’s children once more. Seven in all, they could have been the destruction of him and his men, especially since they had teamed up with Chreathe’s sons. Fortunately, one of Chreathe’s boys had been easy enough to mind control and had swayed to his side.

The other, Christian, now the Chieftain of the Shamenians, proved to be stronger than Stegian had bargained for. Still, his plans for the planet and then total domination were moving along accordingly. Stegian had managed to control Raiden long enough to see him send his sons away and destroy one of his own daughters.

Now, one of the Janelle boys, Bradiann, was back and mated.

How interesting.

He'd always found Raiden's sons to be a unique challenge. They seemed to have more resistance to his psychic vampire commands than their father did and he always loved a good fight.

"Master, I bring you your food."

Stegian glanced lazily up at his loyal servant, Yunoc, and then to what would be his first meal of the day. A sexy little blonde werehyena stood before him. He couldn't remember her name and it didn't matter. He only wanted to fuck and suck her anyway.

"Come," he said with a flick of his wrist.

The girl's eyes widened, yet she came forward. Only wearing a collar, he could see her erect nipples and couldn't wait to run his tongue over them. His cock stirred to life and he put his hand out to the girl.

"Take me in your mouth and give me your wrist," he said, pulling his shaft free from his pants.

The girl moved forward and dropped to her knees, putting her hand up to him in the process. He licked along her wrist and found the perfect spot where her blood ran fast. He waited for her hot mouth to slide over his cock before he sank his fangs into her tender skin.

The girl sucked him sweetly, flicking her tongue over the head of his cock at random moments before deep throating him. She was good at what she did, but his mind was preoccupied. At some point during the suck off, he felt her loosening her grip on him, but he paid no attention to it.

His mind drifted back to Raiden Janelle's children, and the news he'd just heard. He'd wanted to get his hands on those boys for almost a decade, and now it looked as though he would. Knowing that Bradiann had mated made the deal even sweeter. Stegian now had the advantage he needed to bring another Janelle to his knees. It was almost too easy. The next generation of Janelle's needed to be wiped out or controlled. He didn't care which it was.

"Master," Yunoc said.

Stegian looked down at the werehyena and released his seed into her mouth. She lay motionless, with her head on his lap for a moment before

he realized that he was still sucking on her wrist. Lost in thought about bringing the Janelle line to an end, he'd taken too much blood.

“Yunoc, get this whore off me and throw her to the wolves. They've earned a treat.” He motioned to the girl in his lap. “Oh, and bring me another girl. I feel the need to fuck something now. I'm horny. Death always seems to do that to me.”

Chapter Nine

Marisa moved around the compound slowly. Her entire body still felt like it'd been trampled on by an angry herd of elephants, but other than that, she couldn't complain. The bug she'd contracted seemed to be easing up and the people here, or rather lycan/weres seemed friendly enough.

"Good morning, Marisa. How are you feeling today?"

She turned to find the blond healer and leader, Christian, standing behind her. When she'd woken in the infirmary several weeks back, she'd found him sitting in the corner of her room. At first, he'd scared the hell out of her, but once he showed her that he possessed similar gifts to her, she accepted his offer of friendship. "I'm good, and how are you today?"

"Don't you mean how is Bradiainn?"

"No, I said what I meant." She narrowed her gaze on him.

The men on this planet seemed to share a common bond--being pigheaded. Christian winked at her and she couldn't stay mad at him. "Is there any chance that you might want to tell me why everyone's in such a hurry around here?"

"Some things are better left for your mate to tell you."

"Yeah, when I get one of those I'll be sure to ask him."

Christian put his hand on her shoulder and smiled down at her. "Go to him. He is in the training yard with the others."

Marisa huffed. "He's known where to find me for the last eight weeks. The one time I did see him, he turned and ran in the other direction. He's a stubborn jackass and I'm tired of dealing with him. When the next cargo ship leaves for Margaidia, I'll be on it. Before you say anything, know that I'll wipe my memory of this planet clean. I won't risk the Commission finding out about any of you or your secrets."

Christian's eyebrows rose. "You can do that?"

She held up her hand to him. "The med chip that's embedded in my skin has options for me to erase used information. I've been studying it when I get the chance, since you people seem to be experts at jamming it." She

gave him a hard look. “And I think I can get it to wipe out my short term memory--at least several months worth.”

“So, you will not only forget Sargaidia, you’ll forget all that has occurred with Bradiainn as well?” Christian asked, his face void of emotion.

She patted his mammoth arm gently and smiled. “Now you’re getting the picture, champ.”

“I see. Does Bradiainn know about this?”

“I think that would require him to come within a twenty foot radius of me, don’t you?” Marisa turned to head back to her room when she felt her stomach flutter. Glancing down, she attempted to access her med chip. It immediately fizzled out.

“Marisa, there you are!”

Marisa turned to find Lorelei coming toward her. The woman was tiny as could be, all except for the swelling mound of her stomach. She claimed that she was only entering her sixth month of pregnancy, but she looked closer to nine months. If Marisa hadn’t been assisting Christian during one of Lorelei’s check-ups, she’d have never believed the news.

“How are the twins doing?” she asked.

Lorelei touched her stomach and rolled her eyes. “When one stops kicking, the other one starts. I don’t know how my mother did it. Three sets of twins would push me over the edge. If Sevan thinks for one minute that I am letting him impregnate me again I’ll chop his....”

Christian cleared his throat and put his hands down over his groin. “Some things are better left unsaid, Lorelei.”

“Men,” Marisa snorted, “are all the same.”

“Care to try another one on for size, Doctor?” Christian asked.

Marisa balked playfully. “Like you could handle me.”

He reached for her and she stepped away. Marisa giggled. “So, slow. Is that because you’re not a shifter? Are all Chieftains as pokey as you?”

Christian’s eyes lit up and he laughed. “Careful, little doctor. I would hate to have to teach you a lesson.”

Marisa laughed and took a fast step toward Christian, teasing him. He grabbed hold of her and spun her in a circle. “Ah ha, what will you do now?”

* * * *

Bradi walked up from the training fields with one thing on his mind-- checking on his wife. He'd spent more time lurking in the shadows over the last several weeks than not. He knew he was being a coward and the fact that Nina had come right out and called him one to his face didn't help either.

Come to think of it, every member of his family, including his holographic sister had come right out and called him a coward.

Somehow, the thought of facing Marisa and telling her that they'd not only had sex but that she now carried his child, was his wife, his mate, his life, scared him to death. Being in love was hardest thing he'd ever done. If she left, he'd never survive without her.

Bradi heard the sweet sound of her voice and followed the sound of it. He saw his sister, Lorelei, first, with her hands on her hips complaining about never letting Sevan impregnate her again and then he saw Marisa. Her long brown hair blew softly in the breeze and the white gown she wore made her look like an angel.

Laughing, she made a quick move toward Christian. Christian dodged her playful strike and swept her up in his arms. Bradi's heart stopped when the two didn't immediately break apart. The beast within him tried to rise as he watched Christian's lips come down on Marisa's. As quick as the kiss started, it ended, but the beast in Bradi didn't care how chaste it was. That was his wife, damnit.

He ran headfast at Christian with the primal urge to tear his heart out. How dare he touch his mate? How dare he attempt to lay claim to that which had already been marked?

“Bradi, no!” Lorelei screamed.

He didn't stop. Slamming into Christian, he toppled them both over. They rolled and Bradi let his claws spring forth from his fingers. He brought the tips up and pressed them to Christian's throat. “Mine,” he growled out, the beast riding him too high to form much else.

Christian smiled smugly up at him. “Then it is high time you proved it.”

It hit Bradi then that he’d been baited. Christian had sensed him coming and kissed Marisa to get a rise out of him. It worked. A little too well.

“What the hell are you doing?” Marisa asked, running up behind him. She pushed him hard, and he had the decency to pretend it hurt. “Get off him and suck those claws back in or whatever it is you do with them before somebody gets hurt. What were you thinking?”

“That you are mine,” Bradi said matter-of-factly.

“Oh, it’s about to get ugly around here. Come on, Christian. We better get out of here.” Lorelei reached down to help him up.

Bradi looked up to find Marisa glaring at him. Her green eyes were livid and he couldn’t recall a time when he wanted her more. She smacked him hard on the back of the head, and he bit back a laugh. “I belong to no one!”

“Not true. You are mine.”

She thumped him upside the head again. “I’m sorry, but the last one must have knocked what little sense you had right out of your thick skull. I belong to no one, Lieutenant Commander Janelle.”

“Actually,” he said, rising to his feet. “I would much rather prefer it if you call me by my newest title.”

“What, jackass?”

“No, husband.” He grinned and wagged his brows. “But you’re the only one who gets to call me that, wife.”

Marisa’s mouth dropped open and Bradi refused to back down. He’d spent weeks being afraid of this moment and he knew that it was now or never. “And while we are at it, wife, I think you should start thinking about what you want to name our child.”

Seconds ticked by, feeling more like hours. He expected Marisa to throw a fit. When she burst out laughing, he wasn’t sure what to do. “Oh, you had me for a minute there, Janelle. The husband thing was good, but the baby thing pushed it too far. Nice try, buddy. A baby requires sex. Of which, I’ve had none.”

She laughed harder and Bradi wasn't sure what to do, so he gave into his animal instincts. Grabbing her up in his arms, he ignored her protests and headed toward his quarters.

* * * *

“What do you think you're doing?” Marisa demanded as he plopped her down on the bed gently.

“I thought that would be easy to see. I am about to make love to my wife.” Bradi kicked off his boots and pulled off his pants. The urge to be in her was too great to bother with a slow seduction.

Marisa's mouth opened. Spotting an opportune moment, he leaned down and kissed her. Her fighting stopped and she kissed him back. Her mouth tasted so sweet that he didn't want to break the kiss, but needed to in order to get her undressed. He could have ripped the gown off her, but Nina had warned him that women did not take kindly to having their clothing torn to bits.

He grabbed hold of Marisa's gown and she smacked his hand. “Bradi? Have you lost your mind? You haven't even looked at me for close to two months and now you want to get me naked?”

“Oh, woman, I've looked at you. I've done nothing but look at you. I am tired of standing in the background, worried about what you think of me. I see you accepting Lorelei and Nina and hope that you can accept me, too.”

Marisa snorted. “Why wouldn't I accept you? Did you hit your head or something?”

Bradi put his hand out and let his claws spring forth. Marisa rolled her eyes. “Was that supposed to scare me?”

“Does it?”

“No.”

“It doesn't bother you that I'm a monster?” Bradi closed his eyes, afraid of her response. He was a soldier, a trained killing machine, but the thought of Marisa rejecting him did what no enemy had done before--it scared the hell out of him. He'd gladly face down a legion of charging

alien armies before having to force Marisa to acknowledge what he knew was coming--she wanted to leave him.

He felt the light touch of her hands on his face and then her soft lips on his. She pushed her tongue into his mouth and grabbed the back of his hair. He went to wrap his arms around her and stopped when he remembered that he was partially shifted.

Groaning, he backed them up and lowered their bodies onto the bed. He needed to be in her. To bury his cock in her silken depths and release everything he'd been holding. It'd been too long since he'd found release in her and his body couldn't go without it any longer. "I need you, Doc."

She moaned and lifted her arms above her head. Easing the gown off her, Bradi let his gaze travel over her luscious body. Her nipples seemed a bit darker now than when he'd last seen them and her lower abdomen had the tiniest of swells to it. He ran his hand over it and kissed her lips.

Mine, he thought to himself, possessively.

"Are you going to stand there all day, or are you going to finally fuck me?"

Marisa's choice of words hit him hard. His cock responded painfully, aching to be in her. He dropped his pants to the floor and eased over her slowly. Pushing his knee between her legs, he spread her open to him. The sight of her neatly trimmed curls nearly brought him to his knees with lust. His cock had a navigational system all its own and centered itself in the entrance to her heated core.

"So wet ... so ready," he whispered.

"So wishing you'd fuck me already."

With that, Bradi pushed into her slowly, allowing her tight channel time to adjust to his size. She gripped his arms tightly and he smiled when he felt her nails digging into his flesh.

"Bradi, stop. I don't think it'll fit ... in there."

"Oh, it'll fit, baby. Trust me." Dropping his head down, he captured Marisa's mouth. Timing it just right, he thrust his tongue into her the same time he pushed his cock in to the hilt. Marisa cried out in his mouth and he quickly began to work his body in and out of hers. Her pussy held

him tight and with each pass, he felt her relaxing more and more. Soon, he pumped into her and she responded with throaty moans.

“You feel so good, Doc. So good.”

She grabbed his ass and pulled on him. “Oh gods, Bradi ... oh ... yes, oh yes.” Her body milked him and he couldn’t hold back any longer. Wanting to share in her orgasm, he let himself go, spilling seed deep within her. Marisa stilled beneath him and then jerked to life. “Pull out.”

“Why?” he asked, feeling sated and serene as the last of his semen filled her.

“I told you that I couldn’t have the shots, remember? Bradi, I’m not on birth control.”

He licked her earlobe and laughed softly. “Doesn’t really matter now.”

She pushed harder on his chest. “Get off! I can get to the infirmary and do a cleansing before your semen has time to take.”

Bradi’s brow furrowed. “You would wash me from your body?”

Marisa’s green eyes locked on him. “I ... I don’t....”

He waited to hear her confess that she didn’t love him, that Pete was the only man she loved and that it was his children she’d only ever considered bearing. “It’s okay, Doc. I know that you don’t love me like you did Pete, but you should probably know that it’s too....”

Touching his face lightly, tears came to her eyes. “You’re right, I don’t love you like I loved Peter. I....”

Bradi tried to breathe, but he couldn’t get air to move into his lungs. He felt as if his entire world had just crumbled around him. He began to pull out of her and she grabbed his face hard.

“Damnit, Bradi, let me finish.” Tears ran down her cheeks as she stared up at him. “I don’t love you like I loved Peter. I love you more, way more, and if you think for one second that I’m going to trap you with a pregnancy to keep you with me, you’re wrong. I know how you like your freedom and I’d never try to....”

Bradi didn't wait to hear what else she had to say. Slamming his mouth down on hers, he felt his cock twitch back to life. Still embedded in her warm body, he began to move once more.

Marisa countered his thrusts, rotating her hips ever so slightly, making him cry out in pleasure. He drilled into her hard and fast, needing to assure himself that this was real, that she was truly under him, accepting him, loving him.

They climaxed together and he didn't pull out of her until he felt the last of his seed spew forth from his body. Marisa hit him hard upside the back of his head.

"Ouch, what was that for?"

"I just got done explaining that you couldn't finish in me and you did it again. Are you really that stupid or..."

"I am in love with you, Doc." He stared down her. "Marisa, I have been in love with you since the day Pete introduced you to me. I tried to fight it. Hell, I attempted to find relief in every whorehouse from here to Earth, but I couldn't do it. Every time another woman touched me I thought of your eyes, your smile, your quick and generally sarcastic wit. I wanted to fuck you out of my mind but couldn't get my body to respond." He groaned as he admitted it all to her. "Woman, you messed with my head from day one and I couldn't figure out why. When I realized that you were my mate, I had already done something so unforgivable that I was scared to tell you."

* * * *

Marisa stared at him, her mind working overtime. "Wait, are you telling me that all those drunken trips to whore houses that Pete would tell me you'd do were..."

"Uneventful considering that I couldn't get my damn dick to respond to another woman once I laid eyes on you, Doc," he said, huffing slightly, sounding embarrassed and agitated.

She giggled.

"Yeah, it's real funny that you broke me."

Arching a brow, Marisa wiggled beneath him. “Mmm, no part of you seems broken to me, Janelle.”

“Then you’ve not looked closely at my heart.”

Bradi rolled off her and she looked into his eyes, waiting for him to explain himself. This was all so overwhelming. Marisa wasn’t sure what else he could say that would shock her. Touching his arm lightly, she waited. “Bradi, talk to me, honey. Tell me what’s bothering you.”

He refused to meet her gaze. Instead, he took her hand in his and led it slowly down her stomach. He stopped on her abdomen. “Scan your body.”

“What?”

“Use your chip and scan your body.”

Marisa shifted and tried to take her hand from his. He didn’t let go. “I can’t, you guys make it go all screwy on me. It leaves my brain feeling like putty.”

Bradi averted his eyes. “Scan, I won’t interfere this time. You have my word.”

Shrugging, she closed her eyes and prepared for pain. “Diagnostic scan.” To her surprise, an image came up. She watched it flash before her. Not sure what she was supposed to be looking for, Marisa checked everything. The minute she found what Bradi had obviously known was there, she froze. “Oh my gods.”

Bradi’s hand tightened on hers. “What do you see?”

It couldn’t be right. Something on the planet had to be interfering. She checked again.

“I’m ... oh gods ... I’m pregnant.” Marisa triple-checked the information for errors. “This can’t be right, Bradi. It’s telling me that I’m in my second trimester already and I’ve never had ... before you, before today, I was virgin.”

Bradi sighed. “We made love on the POD. Twice. I thought you were awake.” He rolled away from her. “You weren’t. You thought I was Pete.”

Marisa lay perfectly still, as she soaked in what he was telling her. She scanned the baby closer and exhaled slowly when the chip confirmed that the child was indeed carrying the DNA of a shifter--like his daddy. She watched as the baby began to suck his thumb. Emotions of pride, joy and love swelled through her.

“Do not cry, Marisa.”

Opening her eyes, she found Bradi above her, wiping the tears from her face. “I’ll go, Doc. Christian will arrange for you to be taken to the nearest Commission base and you’ll be free to do as you wish with our child. ”

Marisa felt as though she’d been smacked. “You don’t want me to keep him?”

Bradi looked away and for a moment she thought she saw tears in his eyes. “Of course I want you to keep him. I love you ... wait, him? I have a son?”

Marisa let out a shaky laugh. “Yes.” She ran her fingers up his neck and pulled his face down to hers. “Why did you call yourself my husband? We’re not married.”

“Not according to Earth ways, but the minute I claimed you on the POD and gave you my seed, you became my wife. At least in the eyes of my people.” He tried to look away, but she held him tight. “Do you hate me?”

“Why would I hate you?”

“For forcing myself on you.”

Marisa couldn’t help herself, she burst out into laughter. He looked hurt, but she couldn’t stop. “Sweetie, I vaguely remember our first night on the POD. I thought that I dreamt it all, and assumed that it was Peter, but I wanted it to be you. I’ve always wanted it to be you. Granted, I thought I was dreaming and would have liked to remember our first time together better, but....” A sickening thought occurred to her. “How long have you known that I’m pregnant?”

“Since the night that you were almost attacked by the werepanthers.”

She smacked him hard upside the back of his head. “Damn you! You let me think I had the stomach flu all that time and you jammed my med chip, didn’t you?”

Bradi grinned at her sheepishly. “I was afraid to let you find out.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t want you to reject me. I love you too much to watch you walk away.”

She hit him again. “You idiot! I’ve already told you that I love you. What more do you want?”

He pushed her legs apart and settled his hips between them. Pressing the head of his cock into her wet core, he stilled and stared down at her. “Hmm, let me think.”

Chapter Ten

“Are you sure that you want to go out?” Christian asked.

Marisa turned and flashed him a wide smile. “Never been more sure.”

“Fabulous, then I think we should start our tour near the outskirts of the territory.”

Marisa wasn't an expert about the area, but she'd seen enough over her time on Sargaidia to know that they didn't tend to wander far. Christian put his hand on her shoulder and seemed to read her thoughts. “Have no fear, little doctor. We have many, many hours until suns set so let us enjoy our day together. Bradiann was most insistent that I keep you occupied. He was also very specific as to which activities I am and am not permitted to keep you occupied with. I believe that he will be most pleased with your suggestion of learning native healing techniques.”

She blushed at the mention of Bradi's name. They'd spent the night making love and she'd been disappointed to find out that he had to meet Nina at the training fields at suns up. The entire compound had been on red alert after Pheebes and his men had returned with news of a pending attack by some man named Stegian.

“I can't figure this damn thing out,” she said, trying again to wrap the gold cord around the loose shirt she wore, if you could even call it that. The thing barely came under her breasts and the pants they'd given her were so low riding that she feared that if they slipped down anymore, she'd be giving the world a free peep show.

Christian laughed and took the cord from her hands. “Here, put your arms up.” She did and he carefully wrapped the cord under her breasts, before crisscrossing it around her waist. She felt more like she was stepping back into time and entering the Roman era, but couldn't complain. The outfit was beautiful. Christian stopped wrapping her up and ran his large hands over her stomach.

“It's so strange,” she whispered, still amazed that she was going to be a mommy.

“I take it that Bradiann has finally told you.”

“I love him, and I know that he was afraid I’d take the news wrong. He didn’t intentionally deceive me,” she said, suddenly feeling the need to defend Bradi.

Christian nodded and took her by her arm. “I know. “

Marisa hesitated slightly before allowing him to lead her out of the room. Something was off. She couldn’t put her finger on it but there was something that wasn’t quite right. “So, tell me. Are all Chieftains this insightful?”

“I wouldn’t know. I am the only one. My father seemed to know quite a bit, but when you are young, you believe that all adults are wise.”

“What?” She eyed him closely. “You’re like the King.”

He nodded his head and motioned toward the guards approaching them. Marisa couldn’t help but notice the intricate markings on Christian’s body. The men rarely wore more than leather straps on their upper bodies and most of the time those only seemed to be places to store their weapons. Every now and then, Christian would wear a leather vest but that seemed to be on cool days. As much as she liked the idea of being surrounded by sexy men, she only had eyes for one--Bradi.

“What do all the symbols mean?” Lightly, she traced the side of Christian’s arm where several geometrical markings seemed to blend into tribal tattoos.

“That particular one allows me to connect with nature.”

That piqued her interest. “So, they actually do something other than accent your muscles.”

The deep laugh that bubbled forth from him let her smile as he winked at her. “That they do, little doctor.”

“I noticed that Lorelei has many, and that Nina has a few. Why doesn’t Bradi have markings?”

“Ah, their mother was a native Shamenian, and their father a werepanther mix. With such a varied genetic makeup each child received different skills and markings. Lorelei is a gifted healer. Nina is a warrior. Bradiann is a warrior as well. In time, I hope that you will be able to meet the other brothers, too.”

A blond guard approached and Marisa scowled. The very sight of the man from the forest made her stomach turn. Christian smiled. “Ah, welcome, Pheebees! I am pleased you have decided to join us this fine day.”

Marisa wasn't nearly as happy to see Pheebees as Christian was. The man had run her husband through with a sword. Granted, Bradi was fine now, but still.

Pheebees bowed his head and put his arm out to Marisa. She looked to Christian for guidance and he nodded his head. Not wanting to disappoint the King, she did as was required, all the while wanting to rip the man's arm from his socket for daring to harm her husband. It didn't matter that they'd thought him to be in league with this Stegian character. Bradi was Bradi and she loved him. No one had a right to harm him. No one.

* * * *

Bradi blocked his sister's kick and spun around to greet her with one of his own. She caught his foot in midair and flipped him onto his backside. “You have gotten soft during your time among humans, Bradiann.”

He rolled off the rock he'd landed on and growled at her. “Not all of us were born to destroy, Nina.”

This brought a laugh from her. “But you and I were, Bradiann. I have missed you.” She dropped her sword and sank to the ground next to him. “Do you have any idea where the others are?”

By others, he knew that she meant their brothers. Their oldest brothers, Demetrios and Anatolius, had been exiled off the planet three years prior to his own banishment. No one had any clue where they were, or if they were even alive. When Bradi learned of the depth of his father's deception and the amount of control that Stegian had over him, he wondered if his brothers even lived.

His younger brother and Nina's twin, Kyriakos, had left shortly after Bradi. No one was clear as to why, only that their father had insisted that he too had fallen under Stegian's control. Nina wouldn't admit to missing him, it wasn't in her nature, but Bradi knew that she did.

He tapped her leg lightly and forced a smile to his face. “I'm sure they're fine.”

“What if they are not?”

“Nina,” he scolded. “I managed to survive, didn’t I?”

“Yes, but not all our brothers were blessed with your stubbornness, dear Bradiainn.”

Bradi clutched his chest and pretended that her comment hurt. “Woman, you sure know how to warm a man’s heart. Maybe, if you learned this fine art, you would be mated, too.”

“Ha, Nina, warm a man’s heart? You’ve got to be crazy!”

Bradi jumped to his feet and let his claws extend at the sound of the intruder’s voice. He eyed the man suspiciously. There was something familiar about him, yet not.

“Whoa, kitty, put the claws away. I only came to report to the boss.” The tall, sandy blond-haired man looked past Bradi to Nina and winked. “Boss, consider this my report.”

Nina huffed and Bradi couldn’t hold back his laugh. Men didn’t rile his sister, so this one was a rare find indeed. He retracted his claws and extended his hand out to the stranger. Any man who was able to get under Nina’s skin was fine by him. “I’m Bradiainn, Bradi for short.”

The man eyed him warily before taking his hand. Bradi caught the faint scent of weretiger mixed with a hint of werelion and didn’t let his guard down. The man shook his head. “I’m not a threat. I got attacked a few months back by one of Stegian’s goons and now have the ability to lick my own balls. Isn’t that every man’s dream?” He set his gaze on Nina and smiled. “I’m housebroken, I swear it.”

Nina hissed, practically oozing rage. “Do you ever shut up, Jordan?”

Instantly, Bradi knew why the man had looked familiar. “Jordan Vasil?”

The man nodded and ran his hand through his shaggy blond hair. “Yep, brother to Sevan, and thorn in the side to Nina. How is it that you two know each other?” There was no missing the underlying question. He wanted to know Bradi’s interest in Nina.

“I’m her brother.”

Relief washed over Jordan's face. Bradi smiled. Nina pushed past them and headed toward the horses. The amount of energy she put into ignoring Jordan told Bradi that his sister was a far cry from hating the man, but it wasn't his place to pry.

Jordan glanced back at Nina. "Gee, boss, do you want my report or not?"

"As if you have anything remotely interesting to offer," Nina whispered.

"I'll have you know that my hearing is just fine!" Jordan shouted. "I started out as a werelion, boss. The weretiger attack only enhanced my supernatural prowess."

"You mean skill," Nina bit out.

"That, too." Jordan wagged his brows. It took everything in Bradi not to laugh at the two of them. Had he and Marisa fought like this?

Yes.

He laughed. They both glanced at him.

Jordan shook his head. "Anyway, the men I have undercover in Stegian's castle say he's got some big ass plot for revenge that involves an outsider--a female outsider to be exact."

Nina stopped what she was doing and locked eyes with Bradi. "What of this woman? Did you get a name?"

Jordan ran his hand over the back of his neck. "No, only that they call her the healer and they seem to think that not only will she make a powerful ally to them, but that she'll somehow bring your family to its knees. Something about stopping the next generation or something. Not sure what they're hoping for. Oh, maybe she's part dog, then she could eat all the damn Janelle cats."

"Shut up!" Nina shouted.

"Marisa," Bradi said, ignoring their lover's spat and rushing toward his horse. "He wants Marisa. He knows about her healing powers and the baby."

"Who's Marisa?" Jordan asked.

"His wife."

Chapter Eleven

Bradi rushed through the compound gates and dismounted his horse quickly, tossing the reins to the first person he saw. The redheaded teenage boy who caught them looked so familiar to him that he almost stopped to question him, but was too worried about Marisa to bother.

He ran full force toward his house. “Doc?” he called out, as he burst through the door.

“She’s not here. I’ve been waiting for her myself.”

Bradi turned slowly, not believing his own ears. “Pete?”

There, in the center of his living room, stood Commander Peter Williams. Peter gave him an odd smile before taking a step toward him. “You look like you’ve just seen a ghost, Bradi.”

“I ... we ... thought you were dead.”

A faint laugh escaped Peter’s lips as he turned in a small circle. “No, I’m very much alive, and I’ve been worried sick about the two of you.” Peter rubbed his side, as if feeling phantom pain and nodded his head.

The urge to embrace his friend was great, but Bradi held back, unsure of the welcome he’d get. “We are fine.”

“They told me that Marisa’s been staying here,” Pete said, glancing around their home. “Hardly seems like the kind of place she’d like.”

Did he know that Marisa was his wife now? “How did you find us?”

Peter waved his hand dismissively. “I called in a lot of old favors and managed to find someone who could track the POD signal. It took us a bit of time, but we finally found you two.” Peter put his hands out, and walked toward him. “It’s good to see you. I was afraid that you were dead. I couldn’t believe the preliminary reports concerning the POD when I saw them. I hoped beyond hopes that one of the life-forces that registered on the POD was Marisa. I never dreamed you made it off the ship, too. But, who was the third person?”

“Third person?” Bradi asked.

Peter's brows came together. "Yes, the POD registered three life forms on board right before its signal was terminated. Who was the third person?"

There was no one else a board the POD except for him and Marisa. It hit Bradi then--the baby. The POD had sensed the moment of conception and had included it in its signal. Bradi stiffened and waited for Peter to probe more. He didn't.

"Umm, I'm not sure. The damn thing malfunctioned and we shot right past the rendezvous point. It's sitting at the bottom of the red sea as we speak. We were lucky to land there. If we had hit solid ground, we would not have survived."

A knock sounded at the door and Peter looked at Bradi. "You going to get that?"

"What, oh ... yeah, hold on." Bradi tried to regain his composure and opened his door. The redheaded boy who had taken the reigns from him stood there looking at him. It hit him then, it was the boy from the POD. Snatching the boy's collar, he yanked him through the threshold. "Why you little son of a...."

A hand clamped down on his shoulder. "Before you tear his head off, you should know that he's Dr. Graves' grandson and he saved my life," Peter said.

"I told the little bastard to give me five minutes. He took off the second I cleared the damn doorway." Bradi ran his hand through his hair to avoid striking the kid. "I had to drag Doc further than I should have to get her out of there."

"Ceelean, tell the Lieutenant Commander that you're sorry before he decides to tear your heart out."

The boy gulped and took a step backwards. "I'm ... I'm s-orry."

"There, that's better, now isn't it?" Peter said, with a chuckle. "Now, where's my fiancée?"

"Umm, Pete, I don't know how to tell you this, but...."

"Bradi, get the door. My arms are full and Christian is loaded up, too!" The sound of Marisa calling out to was both a relief and a worry. She was

safe from Stegian, but about to walk into another hornet's nest. "Janelle, the door, now! I see your horse out here. Don't make me...."

He opened the door slowly and found a large mound of plants greeting him. Assuming that Marisa was behind them somewhere, he began to unload her arms. "You should not have carried all of this."

"Pfff, please, these are light. You and Christian sound so much alike at times that it scares me. Oh," she said, her eyes lighting up. "You should see the healing properties in some of these. That one with the blue tint is similar to aloe, except it heals burns instantly. Christian showed me and I've got to tell you, it blew my socks off. Bradi ... what's the matter?"

* * * *

Marisa eyed Bradi. He seemed a bit pale to her. Following him through the doorway, she reached for him. "Are you sick? Did you get too much sun? I told Nina to take it easy on you. I...."

"You never do stop lecturing about one's health do you, Dr. Langston?"

Marisa's heart thumped wildly in her chest. Had she just heard who she thought she did? Turning slowly, her gaze drifted first over a redheaded boy who looked even paler than Bradi and then it fell on Peter.

She dropped the plant in her arms and stared at him for a moment, too shocked to move. Christian came in behind her and stopped quickly. "Marisa, what's wrong?"

"Peter?" she asked, reaching for him, unable to believe that he was not only alive, but standing in her living room.

He caught her hand in his and pulled her to him. His embrace was strong, passionate, overwhelming. Marisa's lungs screamed for air, but her body refused to take a breath. This couldn't be happening. His lung was punctured. She thought he was dead. And now there was Bradi and the baby.

Peter cupped her face and brought his lips down on hers hard and fast. Normally, a kiss from him could bring her to her knees, but now she wanted to push him off.

"Little doctor?" Christian's voice brought her back to her senses and she ended the kiss with Peter.

Marisa touched Peter's face lightly, still unable to believe her own eyes. "You're alive."

He kissed her fingertips and drew one seductively into his mouth. She heard Christian gasp and wondered what could be going through his and Bradi's minds.

"Please," Marisa said, pulling her hand back from Peter. He looked her over and smiled.

"I guess this planet agrees with you, Marisa. You're glowing! I've never seen you look so beautiful."

Did he know?

She glanced back at Bradi and found his jaw clenched tight and his eyes blazing. "Peter, I don't know what to say. I ... I thought that you were gone. We thought you were gone," she added quickly, still looking at Bradi. His face didn't change and she wanted to run to him and toss her arms around his large neck. She didn't.

Peter touched her chin and directed her attention to him. "I wasn't sure that you'd survived either, but I knew that I couldn't stop looking for you, Marisa." He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled a scannable notepad out. "I brought our engagement contract with me, so if they have a Minister or a licensed uniter, we can make it official." He didn't give her a chance to respond. "Gods, I've dreamt of this moment. I've wanted to hold you in my arms and make love to you since we departed Earth. I can't wait another minute."

"Peter, I think that we should...."

He ignored her and looked at Bradi. "Who can we see about making this official? The sooner the better. I want to be buried so deep in my wife by the end of the night that this planet sends her off because she's screaming too loud."

"Peter!" Marisa shouted, shocked by his statement.

"You would need to speak with our Chieftain," Bradi said coldly, never once revealing he was her husband now.

Didn't he want her anymore? Had he changed his mind?

Peter clapped his hands and walked over to Bradi. “Great, take me to this guy and we’ll get the ceremony started. Oh, and I want you to be my best man, of course.”

“Of course,” drawled Bradi, his gaze hard and on her.

Marisa’s brow furrowed. “Bradi?”

Christian stepped forward and broke the tension in the room. “I may be of some assistance in locating the Chieftain. If you’d like I will take you out in search of him.” He looked directly at her and tipped his head. She knew then that Christian had bought her and Bradi some time to talk and thanked him with a silent nod.

“Right this way,” Christian said, motioning to the front door.

Marisa waited until she was sure they were gone before moving toward Bradi. He jerked away quickly and glared at her.

“I won’t hold you back, Doc.”

“What do you mean you won’t hold me back?” She glared at him. “And what the hell was all that about? You practically handed me to the man.”

Bradi laughed. “I have feared this day from the moment we got on that POD. I knew, in my heart, I knew that you would never be mine.” Abruptly, he turned his back to her. “Just go, Doc.”

“You think you can get rid of me that easily? You think that I’m going to walk away from you, from us, without a fight?”

He didn’t move. Reaching out tentatively, Marisa touched his back. “Bradi, please don’t send me away. I love you.”

“Don’t do this, Doc.”

“Gods damn you, Bradi! I’m telling you that I love you and you’re pushing me out the door. In case you forgot, Mister, I’m already married to you.”

“Not according to Earth customs.”

She snorted, not believing that Bradi could be so childish. “Well, guess this baby isn’t really here either. I mean, you don’t seem to care about our

marriage anymore, am I to assume that you don't care about me or our son?"

When he didn't respond, Marisa drew in a sharp breath. "Oh gods, that's it. I was just something to bide time with. Now that Peter's back you know you can go back to your groupies." She touched her stomach. "Damn you to hell, Janelle! I will love this child enough for the both of us! I don't need you! Go ahead! Go back to it all!"

That got Bradi's attention. He turned around slowly, and she saw why it was that he hadn't faced her--he was crying. Running to him, she threw her arms around his neck and pressed her mouth to his. Bradi kept his lips closed tight, so she moved to his cheeks to kiss away the tears there. "Bradiann Janelle, I love you with all my heart and I don't care if you want me to leave. I'm staying here with you so just get over it!"

She paused. "Well, if you do want to go back to all those women I'll..."

Bradi lifted her off the ground and backed her up against the wall. His mouth came crashing down on hers and the minute that she tasted his salty kisses, she began to cry as well. "I love you, Marisa. You hardly ever do that."

"You called me by my name."

"I thought it was only fair, you called me Bradiann."

She stroked his long black hair back from his face and planted kisses all over his neck. "I need you in me, Bradi. I need to feel your cock buried deep in my body. I need to know that you won't leave me. That you want me here, with you."

"Pete will be back soon. We need to sit him down and explain what has happened."

Digging her nails, lightly into the back of his neck, she growled and bit at his lower lip. Her pregnancy hormones picked then to rear their ugly head. "I said that I needed you. Do your husbandly duties now before I really get pissed off."

A wicked grin spread over his face as he pushed his knee between her legs. "What did you have in mind?"

Grabbing hold of his cock through his pants, she licked up his neck and laughed softly. “How about you fucking me against this wall for starters?”

Bradi wagged his dark brows. “Mmm, how about I make love to you against the wall instead. Same results, makes me feel like a romantic guy changing the terminology.”

Marisa unfastened his pants and let them fall to the floor. It wasn't so easy to get herself undone. “Err, Christian tied me up and now I'm stuck.”

Bradi narrowed his eyes, as he tipped his head. The unspoken question on his face was enough to tell Marisa that her husband was a jealous man. Not that she needed anyone or anything to remind her of that.

She snorted. “Not like that ... he helped me figure out the cord thing.”

He laughed as he let a claw spring forth from his fingertip. Slashing through the cord and the material, he freed her instantly. “Your breasts are getting bigger.”

Marisa rolled her eyes as she stroked her husband's erection. “So is your cock.”

Bradi dropped his head down and took one of her nipples into his mouth. Her body reacted with a jolt and she cried out as he sucked hard on it. Desperate, she pumped his shaft. “Please, Bradi, hurry. I need you in me.”

He growled out as he pulled his head up. His eyes flashed to yellow and she knew he was fighting to stay in control of his beast. The truth was, he'd always have to fight it, and that hurt her heart. She wrapped her legs around his waist and stared into his yellow eyes. They flickered back to blue and she knew that he was struggling with his beast. “No, let it be, and let your hands go. I want you to make love to me, Bradi. No worries, no rolling away and into water.”

“No.” The look on his face confirmed her suspicions. Bradi had been hiding from her when he'd rolled in the bathing pool that night so many months ago. His running, his hiding who and what he was, had to end.

“Fuck me now!”

“D-o-c,” Bradi growled out as he slammed into her, impaling her with his cock. He smashed her body to the wall, and sent hot juice running down her thighs. With each thrust, Bradi left the back of her head banging against the wall. It would have been painful if the feel of him buried deep within her pussy didn’t feel so good.

Clawing at his back, she held tight to him as he continued to pump his hips rapidly. His back rippled and she knew that he was just this side of shifting. The thought of that should have scared her, it didn’t. It turned her on. “Oh, yes, Bradi ... yes.” She cried out as she felt her orgasm building.

White lights flashed behind her eyelids as her inner legs tightened. A tingling sensation moved down to her toes. Bradi snarled as he pushed her hard, one last time against the wall, and finished deep within her, spitting his seed into her.

Panting and still coming, Marisa hugged him tight as she wiggled on his still hard shaft, utilizing all the pleasure it had to offer.

Bradi’s eyes shifted back to blue and he tried to back away from her. “Doc, I’m sorry. I lost control.”

“Shhh,” she whispered pulling his mouth to her. “It was perfect. It’s part of you, Bradi, and I love you, so I love it as well.”

“You are too good for me. You know that, don’t you?”

Marisa moved her hips more and felt him flexing his cock deep within her. He lifted her free of his shaft and eased her to her feet. She thought he was done. When he turned her to face in the other direction and pulled her hips back, she knew she was wrong. As he hooked an arm around her midriff and took her toward the floor, she glanced back at him. “Bradi?”

Instantly, she felt the head of his cock rubbing against her soaked slit. A low rumble sounded from his throat as he ran his hands over her ass. Pulling her cheeks apart, he slid a finger dangerously close to her sensitive anal opening. “Bradi?”

“Relax, Doc. I would never hurt you.”

“I know.”

He pushed his finger in slowly and she felt her tiny rosette fight back against the intrusion. Bradi ran his other hand up her spine and rubbed his cock near her opening. “Relax, baby. Let me love all of you.”

Working his finger in and out of her slowly, he moved his other hand around to the front and began tweaking her swollen clit. Without thought, she bucked back against him, driving his shaft into her pussy and his finger deeper into her ass. The sensation of being so full was too much and she came instantly. Bradi pulled out of her and placed the tip of his dick to her anus and slipped it in slowly.

White-hot pain tore through her body and for a second, Marisa thought she would either pass out or scream. Bradi reached back around and toyed with her clit again, as he eased his length into her more. “Push down, baby. Push down.”

Marisa did as she was told and the pain lessened, quickly making way for a unique sensation that brought her pleasure. Her body tightened as another orgasm hit her. “Oh, yes ... Bradi, yes ... more!”

He pushed in to the hilt and she thought that she might explode.

“So tight ... you feel so good.”

Bradi began moving in and out of her slowly, letting her ease into the idea of having his cock buried in a new location. Marisa was lost in the bliss of his tweaking, tugging, and screwing and screamed out as yet another orgasm claimed her.

Bradi slammed his body to hers and released his seed into her. Moaning in ecstasy, he draped his body gently on hers, still buried in her, and still coming.

“What the...? Marisa?”

The sound of Peter’s voice caught Marisa off guard and she turned to see Peter and Christian standing in the doorway. She leaned forward as Bradi withdrew slowly. Disgust moved over Peter’s face and his eyes hardened. “You’re fucking our best man? My best...? Marisa? It’s Bradi! You hate Bradi!”

Bradi tossed her his shirt and it took her three tries to get it on, because her hands wouldn’t stop shaking. Marisa glanced at Peter and then to her husband. Bradi finished lacing his pants up and put his hand out to her.

She took it carefully, and moved closer to him, needing the shelter, the safety of his arms.

Peter reached for his weapon and Christian put his hand on the man's shoulder. "I would not advise that, Commander."

Peter attempted to advance on Bradi, but Christian held him in place. "I would not advise that either."

"Well, do you advise my best friend and fiancée to fuck each other senseless?"

Christian's eyes met Marisa's and she felt color creep over her face. The man had just watched her taking it from behind. It didn't get much more humiliating than that. "No, I do not advise that, but I do recommend that mated pairs--husband and wife as you refer to them, join as often as possible. In as many ways as they wish to. Our race is dying out and we need all the children we can get."

"Husband and wife?" Peter asked in disbelief.

Bradi stepped forward. "Pete, I am sorry. I never intended to fall in love with her. It just happened. I swear to you that the only reason I acted upon my feelings for Marisa was because we believed you were dead."

Peter snapped his head up. "What? You're telling me that you're married to her? Oh gods, when the hell...? You never would have acted on it?" Resignation moved over Peter's face. "You loved her before the crash, didn't you?"

Bradi nodded. "I will not deny it. I have loved Marisa since the moment I laid eyes on her. Some part of me must have known that she was my true mate, even from the beginning."

"I don't give a shit what part of you figured out what, Bradi. You were my best friend. You don't do that to friends."

"Peter, you had little respect for Marisa. How many times did you ask me to cover for you when you were screwing someone else down in the private's quarters? How many times did you tell me that although Marisa was," Bradi put his hands up and made quotes with his fingers, "a looker, she wasn't your type, but her family's money made it all worthwhile?"

Marisa's mouth fell open as she listened to Bradi accuse Peter of such awful things. Part of her wanted to think he lied, but inside she knew what her husband said was true.

Peter locked gazes with her and laughed. "Oh, don't look so shocked, Marisa. Why do you think I proposed to you without first getting to stick my...."

"Watch it, Pete. That is my wife to whom you are speaking."

"And my friend," Christian added, his tone as deadly as Bradi's.

Peter chuckled. "No, that's no one's wife or friend. That's a whore and an unfaithful little...."

Bradi was on him in an instant. He pressed his clawed hand to Peter's throat, as if daring him to say more.

Marisa ran to him and grabbed his arm. "Bradi, no. He's not worth it."

Peter's gaze fell on her. "You let a shifter fuck you? Gods Marisa, if I'd have known it was that easy to get a piece from you, I would have brought my dog along and let you suck my dick while he mounted you."

Christian ripped Peter back a fraction of a second before Bradi slammed his clawed hand down. He struck the wall, leaving a gaping hole in place of where Peter's head had just been.

Bradi growled and lunged for Peter. Christian put his hand out and white light spread forth from it, pinning Bradi in place. "Bradiann, go and comfort your wife. I sense her distress and it is not good for her. I'll see to this ... thing."

"Let me kill him, Christian."

"No, friend. I cannot let you do that. You, of all people, understand the fine line we walk between being like Stegian's men and staying decent. Allowing you to slay this man that you once called a friend could be your undoing, and I will not let that happen."

"Thank you, Christian," Marisa said, moving up and wrapping her arms around her husband's waist.

"Think nothing of it, little doctor." He winked as he grabbed a grumbling Peter and stalked away.

“I need a bath. “ Marisa tugged on Bradi. “Come and join me.”

“I think I need to go out for a bit.”

A sharp pain shot through Marisa’s stomach and she clutched it quickly. It passed quickly and she righted herself. “Please, Bradi.”

Laying her head against Bradi’s back, she held him tight. “Why didn’t you tell me about all the things that Peter was doing when we were on the ship? I would have walked away from him.”

“And, you would have terminated your employment with the Commission and I would have never seen you again.”

“You let him make a fool of me just to keep me around?” Marisa was shocked.

Bradi turned and pulled her to him. “No, Doc, I let him make a fool of himself just to keep you around and I would do it again in an instant. Come on, didn’t you mention a bath?”

“Yes,” she smiled mischievously, “I did, dear husband.”

Chapter Twelve

“Thank you again,” Sevan said, pulling her into yet another hug.

Marisa patted his back and laughed. “All I did was assist in the delivery of your boys.” She glanced toward the room where Lorelei now rested.

It had been a long delivery to tell the truth, both she and Christian had been concerned about Lorelei. Her blood pressure had plummeted and they’d lost heartbeats on both babies. Two months earlier, shortly after Peter had left, Lorelei began to experience odd cramps, similar to the ones Marisa now had on a regular basis but kept hidden from everyone else.

“You did more than just assist, Marisa,” Sevan said, his voice low, his tone even. “You combined your power with Christian’s and saved not only Lorelei’s life, but my children’s as well. I will never be able to thank you enough.”

“Sevan,” she said, putting her hand on his shoulder. “She would have done the same for me.”

He nodded, knowing it was true. Glancing back at the door, he smiled and let out a long breath. “I thought that I’d lost her there for a moment.”

Marisa patted his hand and motioned to the door. “Go, sit with her while she rests.”

Marisa rubbed her shoulders and did her best to let the tension out as she watched Sevan head into Lorelei’s room. Strong hands moved over her own and she jumped.

“Calm down, woman, it’s me.”

“Mmm, Bradi,” she said, rolling her shoulders under the weight of his touch. “That feels so good.”

Bradi wrapped his body around hers and she felt his cock digging into her back. “I could make you feel even better. Once, you’re rested of course.”

“Of course,” she said.

His hands slid around her and came to a rest on her very swollen belly. “How’s my son doing this morning? His mommy’s had a rough night and I’m worried about them both.”

As if on cue, the baby kicked out hard. Bradi yanked her back to him with such a force that it knocked the wind out of her. “Was that what I thought it was?”

Marisa coughed and patted his large arms, encouraging him to loosen his hold on her. “Bradi.”

“Oh, sorry.” He kissed the top of her head gently. “Got excited.”

She ran her hand over his and pressed down lightly on her stomach. The baby immediately pushed back and Bradi gasped. “He’s a stubborn little thing with a hell of a kick.”

“Have you thought about a name for him yet?”

Marisa turned to talk to her husband and the room suddenly seemed to spin around her. She swayed and Bradi grabbed her. “Doc?”

Righting herself, quickly, she smiled up at him, not wanting to alarm him. His stubble-covered jaw line was tight and she knew he was concerned about her. The pregnancy had been plagued with problems for the last couple of months, but she’d done a fairly good job of hiding that from Bradi. He had enough to worry about as it was. The added stress of knowing she wasn’t doing as well as expected wasn’t something she wanted to concern him with.

The spies they had in Stegian’s camp had reported that his people were up to something again, so Bradi and the rest of the group had been busy preparing for the inevitable. Telling him that she wasn’t sure she’d make it through the pregnancy seemed wrong to do to him at a time like this. His people needed him level-headed, not worried and grieving. One problem after another had arisen and Marisa had done her best to heal herself, but for some reason, her powers couldn’t seem to fix this.

She chanced a glance down at her belly. Only entering her sixth month, she didn’t hold out much hope that the baby could survive on its own if it came early. Her knowledge of the behind the scenes happenings was the reason she refused to name him. The thought of losing him already kept her up nights as it was.

“Doc? What’s the matter?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re lying.”

She really hated the fact that Bradi and his shifter sisters could sense lies. It made it extremely hard to hide the problems in the pregnancy from them. “I’m just tired, honey. Really. I need some rest.”

* * * *

Bradi swept her up in his arms and headed toward the front door. One look at her told him that it was getting worse. Christian had warned him that Marisa and the baby were not doing as well as expected, but he didn’t want to believe it. Marisa had told him over and over again that all was well, and that she and the baby were fine. Seeing her so pale, so sore, and so tired concerned him.

Chapter Thirteen

Bradi rose slowly from the table and glanced around the briefing room. Sevan seemed preoccupied, most likely from lack of sleep. Twins will do that to you. Jordan hadn't taken his eyes off Nina since he'd arrived, but he proved to be well versed in the art of war so Bradi let that slide. Nina was completely engrossed in the latest reports on Stegian and Christian was staring Bradi right in the eyes.

“What troubles you, old friend?”

Bradi forced a smile to his face and did his best to look as though he had no cares in the world. Christian shook his head, indicating that he wasn't buying it and Bradi shrugged. There was no way that he was about to pour his heart out about being concerned over Marisa. She'd seemed fine when he woke up this morning and had insisted that she was going to go and visit Lorelei and the new twins later today. Against his better judgment, he agreed to let her go.

“What of the news regarding Stegian's interest in Dr. Langston?” Nina asked, always one to get straight to the point.

Christian leaned forward and tapped his hand on the table. “Nina, is it so hard for you to refer to her by Marisa or even Dr. Janelle? She is your brother's mate now.”

Nina rolled her eyes and smiled sheepishly. “Sorry, Bradiainn, I meant no disrespect.”

Bradi waved his hand in the air dismissing it all and walked toward the back wall. They'd been gathered around the conference table for the majority of the day and had made minimal headway. They did manage to discern that the ship that had brought Peter had landed near Stegian's fortress, but other than that, they were at a loss.

“Relax,” Christian said, appearing next to him. “Pheebes is guarding Marisa.”

“I know. I just can't help but worry about her. Things are not as they should be with her pregnancy.”

“I know.” Christian drew in a deep breath and patted Bradi's back.

No part of him wanted to ask the question that had to be spoken aloud, but he had little choice. He had to know. “Will she live, Christian?”

“Are you not concerned about the child?”

Bradi slammed his fist into the wall, dangerously close to Christian’s head. All eyes fell upon him, but he didn’t care. “Of course I am concerned about my son, but I cannot lose my mate, my wife, my world. I can’t lose either one!”

“It may come down to a decision, and I believe that Marisa will choose the baby, Bradiann.”

“I know.” Bradi hung his head, hoping that no one would notice the unshed tears in his eyes.

“If she instructs me to save the child and not her, then I will abide by her wishes, old friend.”

Bradi nodded, unable to offer anything further to Christian. He knew that Christian would honor whatever Marisa wanted and he knew that he hated the fact that the possibility of having to pick between his wife and his son was fast becoming a reality.

Closing his eyes, Bradi did something he hadn’t done since his mother was alive--he prayed. For a moment, he could have sworn that he heard the sound of a young woman giggling. He knew Nina’s voice and that wasn’t it.

Looking up, he searched the room for signs of her but found none. “What the...?”

Christian’s lip twitched. “It would appear my upgrades to Jacquelyn’s computer interface may have been successful after all.”

“Her what?” Bradi asked, still searching for signs of the girl.

Lorelei and Nina had explained in detail that Christian had hooked Jacquelyn’s body up to machines after she nearly died at the hands of their father. They told him that Jacquelyn could manifest into the holographic form of the age she had been when the attack occurred. Since he’d arrived home, he hadn’t seen his baby sister do anything of the sort. No. He’d spent many a day checking in on her vegetable state, her body

in a bed, barely recognizable as human--more machines, wires, artificial life than anything else.

Something had gone wrong shortly after Sevan and his vessel had arrived. Jacquelyn had apparently rushed in and saved Lorelei's life and that of her unborn child. In the end, whatever Jacquelyn had done had proved to be too taxing on her body, her mind and she'd shut down, gone into herself.

Christian had spent a great deal of time tweaking her machines, building new technologies that he was sure would help ease the strain the old ones placed upon Jacquelyn's human body. No one but Christian thought it would work.

Hearing the faint echo of a young woman's laugh again, Bradi began to rethink doubting his childhood friend. If Christian had succeeded, even just a tiny bit, then Bradi's baby sister, who, according to Nina, had been locked in the age of twelve for years would now be permitted to virtually age at her correct pace.

* * * *

"Tell me, witch, what news have you?" Stegian asked, as he approached one of his favorite old crones.

She tipped her head and lifted her arms upwards. "Ah, I drain the child of its lifeforce as we speak. Every day I take more and more."

"Why is it not dead?" He grabbed her arm and jerked her to him. "I do not wish to have to kill you, but I will."

With her face this close to his, he could smell her stagnant breath. His stomach turned at the sight of her wrinkled, pale green skin and hairy chin. She gave him a wide, milky-eyed stare and he knew that she looked into his soul, or what little was left of it. "You fear the coming of the child. Why?"

"I fear nothing."

Her foul breath brought bile up in his throat and he needed blood to wash it down. Lacing his long fingers around her neck, he tipped his head and smiled down at her. His power poured through him and he watched with a sick satisfaction as her skin pulled back from her bones. She shrieked out and reached for him. Before she was able to touch him, he let her go. Her

face returned to its normal, ugly mess as she panted. “Master ... I drain the child to near death each day, but its mother’s healing powers bring it back.”

If what the crone said was true then this child would be born not only part werepanther, but also with the power of a healer like no other. That was not acceptable. He’d spent too many years building his empire here to allow another generation of daywalkers to threaten him. “Then we shall kill the mother.”

“Master,” Yunoc said from behind him. “They keep the compound tightly guarded and the women are watched constantly.

Stegian turned and put his hand out toward the door. “I know the perfect bait.”

Chapter Fourteen

Marisa walked slowly toward Lorelei and Sevan's home. She didn't need to look behind her to know that Pheebes followed her. He'd been trailing her for the greater portion of the day. She knew that he meant well, but it was annoying all the same.

"Can't you go to lunch or something?" she called out.

"No, I have sworn to protect you and that is what I shall do."

"Fine, but could you at least take a break to eat and bring me something while you're at it? I'm craving just about anything sweet so take your pick and I'll eat." She turned to see him closing in on her.

"As much as I would love to assist you, Doctor, I was instructed to stay with you."

"By whom?"

"Too many names to list. I can assure you that all have your well-being on their mind."

Marisa didn't like the idea of a permanent babysitter, but couldn't deny that after the stories she'd heard of Stegian, the vampire terrified her. "The suns are high in the sky, Pheebes, and you yourself told me that the compound is safeguarded to notify you all of suspicious weres, so why can't you take a minute to bring me lunch? Oh, I bet Lorelei would be thrilled to have someone bring her something as well. She's nursing twins and needs all the nourishment she can get."

Pheebes seemed to mull over her words. His gaze darted toward the village and she knew that she had him. Laying it on thick, she ran her hand over her swollen belly. "Oh, the baby kicked. I bet he knows that uncle Pheebes is going to make his mommy happy."

"You will go straight to the Devi's home?"

If Lorelei hadn't told her that the natives called her Devi, then she'd have been lost. "You have my word that I will go straight to the Devi's house."

"Very well. I will meet you there."

She exhaled as she watched Pheebees walk away. He was a kind, handsome, man but the thought of him acting as her shadow for the rest of her life scared the hell out her.

With a light skip in her step, she headed for Lorelei's.

“Marisa.”

She glanced over toward the compound fence looking for signs of life. Something moved in the brush and she was just about to scream when Peter walked out. His clothes were tattered and torn, and his hair was a good deal longer than when she'd last seen him.

“Peter?”

His eyes locked on her and she felt as though someone had punched her in the stomach. Clutching herself, she staggered toward him. “Peter, I thought you'd gone.”

“Marisa, you have to help me. I tried to board my ship and these things attacked me. They're coming for me ... help me, please.”

She eyed him warily. It seemed odd to her that Peter, a man who prided himself on his fine upbringing, would have enough survival skills to last in the wilderness for eight weeks, but she couldn't in good conscience leave him out there with the likes of Stegian's goons.

Running to the nearest security gate, she stood before its scanning screen and let it see that it was her. The gate slid open quickly and she motioned for Peter to come. He took a few steps toward her, then tumbled to the ground. Instinct took over and Marisa raced toward his fallen body.

She dropped down next to him attempted to roll him over slowly. He swung around and knocked her to the ground. Landing with a thud, pain shot through her back. “Peter?”

Peter's blond head of hair appeared above her and he leered down at her. His eyes seemed to scorch her with no more than a look. When he got to her swollen belly, his eyes narrowed to slits. “Get up.”

Marisa opened her mouth to yell for help, but stopped when she felt something cold and hard pressing against her stomach.

“One sound and I will cut this abomination from your body, Marisa.”

Unsure if he was telling the truth or not, Marisa froze. Peter touched her neck, the blade still in his hand, and ran his rough fingers over her skin. His touch used to bring her joy, now it made her skin crawl. There was something about him, something different. It was his eyes. Where once they were brown, now they were gray.

“So, soft, Marisa ... always so soft,” he whispered.

She didn't dare move. Whatever had happened to Peter had left him wild, untamed, frightening.

“You'll come with me.” When she didn't respond to his command he put the knife to her throat and sneered at her. “He promised I could have you.”

Who? The question was on the tip of her tongue, but she knew better than to ask it.

Marisa stiffened as he jerked her to her feet. Wanting to run, shout, anything that would grab the attention of the villagers, she twisted slightly, preparing to run.

Peter seized hold of her hair and yanked her back to him. His hot breath hit her cheek as he spoke. “I will gut you, Marisa ... know that. And when your screams bring Bradi, the others that lurk around me will hold him down and make him watch as I cut you to pieces, then we will tear him limb from limb. It is as the Master wishes it to be.”

The Master? It hit her then who he spoke of. “Stegian,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

* * * *

Bradi took another sip of wine and rubbed his temples. If they continued to sit in here spinning their wheels they'd be too old to go after Stegian. All he wanted to do right now was attack and assure that his family was safe.

The door to the conference room burst open and all eyes went to it. When Bradi saw Pheebees standing there he knew that something was wrong. “What has happened? Is it the baby?”

Pheebees paled and shook his head no.

“Then speak.” Christian commanded.

“She is gone.”

“Who is gone?”

“The lady doctor. She was hungry so I went to retrieve lunch for her, and she was to go to Lorelei’s, but she never arrived.” Pheebees said, hanging his head in shame. “The pard men are tracking her scent as we speak. I did not stay to see what they found. I thought that you would want to know.”

Bradi couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. Christian grabbed his shoulder and it was all the jolt he needed to run out the door.

* * * *

Marisa pulled at her wrists to free them, but the manacles on them would not give. Each time she pulled, they only got tighter. Her feet barely touched the floor as it was, so she stopped struggling. She did her best not to think about the sound of the mice scurrying about around her. The sound of boots scraping over the floor grabbed her attention.

“Ready to surrender yourself to me?”

Marisa didn’t recognize the voice, but had a good idea of who its owner was. “I’ll not give you an inch, Stegian.”

In a flash, something was behind her, touching her, rubbing against her. She bit back a scream and kept her eyes forward. Cool hands gripped her neck and she felt fingernails digging into her skin.

“Ah, I know that you will taste divine. I do so miss a woman who tastes as good as she feels when my cock is in her, and you do want my cock in you, don’t you, Healer?”

She wanted to ask how he’d managed to pop up behind her, but she didn’t. “No.”

He rubbed against her back and she felt his erection digging into her skin. “The answer to your question is magic. I have always had the gift to wield it, but it was not until I became what you see before you that I truly knew how to use it.”

“Hmm, I haven’t seen anything before me, Stegian,” Marisa said, shocked that she’d let that slip out.

A cold laugh sounded behind her and she shivered. “I see why Raiden’s son likes you.”

Stegian moved around her slowly, but she didn’t turn her head to look at him. Instead, she let her eyelids flutter closed. “You believe me to be hideous, do you not?”

Marisa saw little point in lying to the man. “I have no idea what you look like, but I’ve heard of the things that you’ve done and those are heinous crimes that are inexcusable.”

He grabbed her chin and she felt his hand warm a bit to the touch. “Look upon me, Healer. Let me see myself through your eyes.”

“Nooo.”

He tightened his grip on her. “Look.”

There was a certain push in his voice that she could no longer ignore. Opening her eyes slowly, she looked upon him. At first she thought it a trick--another use of his magic, because the man she looked upon was not hideous. In fact, he was far from it. His long brown hair was pulled tightly back from his face leaving nothing obstructing his high forehead, strong jaw, and gray eyes. He was tall, taller than she thought he’d be and a hell of a lot bulkier too. Why she had assumed that he’d be this hideously thin monster with scales was beyond her, but he was a far cry from it and that made him even scarier.

His lip pulled into a smile. “I am pleased to know that you find me attractive, Healer. Most fear me so much that they do not dare look upon my face for fear that I will capture their minds with but a look.”

“Can you do that?” Marisa asked, fearing that she too would succumb to him.

“With most, yes, but not you.”

“Why?”

He laughed. “That I do not know, but I find it intriguing.”

“Why do you do it?”

He moved closer to her and touched her face lightly. “Why do I do what?”

“Why do you hurt the Shamenians?”

Stegian bent down and Marisa sucked in her breath as his lips came to her face. He flickered his cool tongue over her skin before flashing her an unnaturally white smile. “Because I can.”

“There’s a mature answer.”

He grabbed the back of her hair and jerked her head back. “You would dare to speak back to me?”

Someone ought to, she thought to herself.

He tapped the side of her temple lightly and smiled. “I can hear you.”

Great, gorgeous, psycho, and a mind reader.

“I like you, Healer, and I am not prone to liking anyone.”

“Like me enough to let me go?”

“I wish I could, but you see, I need to eliminate Raiden’s line, and the quickest way to do that is to keep you until Bradiainn comes, kill him, and then I am afraid that I will have to kill you as well.”

“No!” someone shouted.

Stegian turned and then looked back at her. “It appears that you have a rather brave admirer.”

“You promised that I could have her.”

“Peter?” Marisa asked.

Peter moved up toward her and seemed to drink her in. It was unnerving and very un-Peter like.

“What did you do to him?”

Stegian laughed and shrugged. “When he landed near my home, I greeted him as an honored guest. When he returned from his visit with you enraged, I helped him free himself of his inhibitions.”

“Meaning, that if he feels the urge to fuck you like a dog then he will,” Stegian said. Marisa tensed at his words and looked at Peter. “I can stop him, Healer. I control him now. All you have to do is agree to help me and I will not allow him to harm you.”

“Pfft, you said you were going to kill me. Geesh, remember your threats before you go making promises.”

Stegian lowered his mouth to hers and she pulled her lips in, not wanting to kiss him. He didn't seem to care. Squeezing her cheeks hard, her lips puckered out. His cool lips pressed down on her mouth. His tongue flickered into her mouth and she considered biting it. He tightened his hold on her cheeks and she knew that he was scanning her thoughts.

How a man who seemed as though he could have it all turned so violent was beyond her. It was clear by his actions toward the Shamenians that he could not be redeemed. It seemed a shame, because her gifts had always given her the ability to sense others like her, healers, and she sensed that in him. He had the gift to restore life, but instead had decided to take it--as often as he could it seemed.

Stegian dropped his hand from her face and backed away from her. He wiped his mouth and let his finger linger over his lip. “Your powers are strong to be able to persuade me so easily.”

“Persuade you? I didn't ask you to kiss me.” She wanted to smack his face, but her bound hands prevented that. The blood had long since drained, her hands were now numb.

Peter moved closer and looked as though he intended to touch her. Stegian's hand shot out and he grabbed Peter by the throat. “Do not touch her.”

“She's mine.”

“No, she is not.”

“You said you wanted the baby dead and I could have her!” Peter spat.

Stegian backhanded him, sending him hurtling into the wall. Marisa closed her eyes tight, not wanting to see what Stegian would do to her now. “I ... regret,” he seemed to choke on his words, as if he'd never spoken even semi kindly to a soul in his life, “having to do this, Healer, but the child cannot be allowed to survive.”

Marisa bit back a cry and just stared at him.

“Hag.”

There was a bright light and an old woman appeared before them. “Yes, Master?” Her eyes appeared to be covered with a white film, yet they fixed on Marisa. “Oh, you have brought the child closer for me to drain.”

“Drain?” Marisa asked.

Stegian’s face dropped. “Do what you must, Hag.” With that, he stormed out of the room.

Marisa found herself wanting to call him back. It was odd that the leader of evil had seemed less of a threat to her than the old woman and Peter. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Peter climbing up. His eyes locked on her as he wiped the blood from his mouth.

Heat flared through her stomach and brought Marisa’s attention back to the old woman. The woman stood with her hands out, chanting something softly. Cramps rippled through Marisa’s body and she cried out.

Peter pushed his body against the back of her, and she felt his erection. Lifting her dress in the air, he pulled her hips back to him.

“Please, Peter, stop this. Stop her ... she’s hurting the baby,” Marisa cried out as pain shot through her body.

“No,” Peter said, his voice harsh. “She’s ridding you of that abomination.” He clawed at her hips and rubbed his body against hers. The hag’s eyes lit like fire and an orange light shot forth from her to Marisa’s stomach.

Marisa screamed out as her stomach cramped. A loud growl caught her attention as the weight of Peter’s body was suddenly ripped from her. Waves of blond hair spilled around her and she looked up to see Christian standing before her. She tried to ask him where Bradi was, but when she heard another growl, she knew.

Christian cut her wrists free and caught her as she fell forward. She clung to his arms, and cried out as another cramp ran through her. “The hag ... she’s doing this.”

“Sevan, stop the witch!”

Bradi moved off Peter's limp body and focused on the old woman before him. He watched as Sevan charged her, his sword drawn. The witch cackled and turned a hand out to him. Sevan's body flew through the air and Jordan did a partial change, catching his brother before he hit the ground. The witch turned and looked at Christian. She put her hand up and Bradi leapt into action, snatching up Sevan's sword and bringing it down hard and fast. The witch's arm went one way and her body went another. She screamed out, but Bradi didn't stop his assault. She was the reason his baby had suffered.

With a flick of his wrist, he turned the sword around and backed into her, effectively ramming it in to the hilt. He pushed her off the end of the sword and turned to Christian. He held Marisa's still body in his arms.

"She is dying," Christian said, softly.

Jordan and Sevan moved up next to him. Jordan's face said it all. He was sure Marisa was dying as well. "Let's get her home."

Bradi scooped his wife up in his arms and drew in a sharp breath. She was so weak, so unlike herself. Christian touched her forehead and her eyes closed slowly.

"Thank you," Bradi said, knowing that Christian had just eased Marisa's pain.

Epilogue

Bradi sat with his head down, afraid to move. His life had changed so much in a few short months. The rustling of a chair moving behind him caught his attention. He turned and smiled as Christian sat down.

“How’s she doing?” Christian asked.

“You tell me. She doesn’t seem to have changed a bit in the last week. How can that be?” Bradi looked down at Marisa and touched her cheek gently. She hadn’t moved since they’d brought her home and everyone was doing their best to stay out of his way.

“She’s only at rest because I keep her that way.” Christian exhaled. It was clear to see the Shaman cared for Marisa. As it should be.

“I know.”

“She’ll live and be able to have more children.”

Marisa’s eyes popped open and she looked from Bradi to Christian. Bradi stood quickly and touched her forehead. Her fever was gone. He looked up at Christian with wide eyes, relieved she was awake but scared something else might be wrong. “I thought you were willing her to rest.”

“I was.” Christian said, seeming as shocked by Marisa’s awakening as Bradi was. It was rare for Christian to be caught off guard with anything relating to medicine or healing. He was an expert. A man born to the art.

Marisa’s gaze went to her stomach and Bradi saw the pain in her eyes. Her breath caught. “Oh gods ... no.... Bradi, no.”

“Shh, Doc, it’s all right. Everything is all right.”

Her head shook violently. “No, it’s not all right. The baby?”

“Nina!” Bradi called out, needing to see his wife at peace but wanting to yank her up from the bed and hold her close. Gods how he missed her.

The door to the room opened and he heard his sister there before she even spoke. “Bring in my son, Nina. It is time he met his mommy.”

Marisa covered her mouth and each tear she shed chipped away at his heart. “You didn’t keep him ... did you?”

Bradi was shocked by her question. “Of course I kept him. He’s my son--our son!”

Nina came back into the room and Bradi turned to see her carrying the baby wrapped up tightly in a blue blanket. Pride welled in him, just as it had done every moment he looked upon his son. “Here you go,” she said, handing the child to Bradi.

He took his son gently and looked down into his eyes. “He has your eyes and my hair.”

Marisa sat up on the bed, but then backed away from him, seeming beyond hesitant. As if she didn’t want to accept what was before her eyes. “He’s alive?”

“Of course he’s alive, Doc. What the ... oh, honey, you thought that I had kept him and that he was ... oh, sweetie, no. He’s perfect.” Bradi sat of the edge of the bed and held the baby so that she could see him. “He’s not only alive, but healthy and right now, asleep.”

Marisa let out a half sob and reached for the baby. “But how? He was too early and under so much stress.”

Christian cleared his throat. “Excuse me, I know this is a moment for the two of you, but I think that I might be able to clear this up for Marisa.” Bradi nodded his head. “Your healing power surged once we brought you back with us. At first we thought that you were dying, but once the light cleared we realized that you were not only fine, but had saved the baby. And in the process, had removed him from your womb, and strengthened his heart and lungs. He is part shifter so he naturally is stronger than a normal human baby, but Marisa, whatever you did brought about a perfectly healthy baby boy. I was just telling Bradi that I can find no evidence of scarring in your uterus and you should be able to have many more children. Now that the hag is dead, they will not be drained of their life-forces.”

Bradi watched his wife’s eyes light up as she held their child and he wrapped them both tightly in his embrace. “We weren’t sure that you were going to wake up. You didn’t show any signs of coming around.”

Marisa pressed her lips to his and he felt them trembling. “I love you so much, I couldn’t go where you weren’t.”

“I love you, too.” Bradi touched her cheek and looked down at the baby.
“And you too, little man.”

“Does he have a name?” Marisa asked, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“No, I wanted you to name him.”

She smiled. “I’d like to name him Eli Bradiainn Janelle.”

“Eli?”

Marisa looked hurt. “You don’t like it?”

Bradi shook his head. “No, it’s a fine name. I just wondered what made you pick it.”

She laughed. “Oh, it’s in honor of the first thing to welcome me to your home planet. A giant eel.”

“Giant eel? Where?” Christian asked.

“In the red sea that we crashed into,” Marisa said, holding their child tight to her bosom, where he belonged.

“Interesting. I had always thought him a myth. Remember when our fathers told us of the ancient guardian of the waters? The one that protected the innocent?”

“Yes, they said it was an ... eel,” Bradi said, stunned that Marisa had seen it. Laughter welled up inside him and he was left no choice but to let it out. “Eli is a perfect name for our son. If he is anything like his mother he will become a legend as well.”

THE END

Excerpt from WICKED LUCIDITY by Mandy M. Roth at New Concepts Publishing!

Prologue

“Do you hear me, dark angel? You cannot defeat us all.”

I snickered as I stared up at the vampire that had me pinned to the hard pavement. He stared down at me with eyes that weren’t even strong enough to decide between pale yellow and orange. Neither of which were

found in nature but then again, vampires weren't exactly run of the mill. Well, unless you lived my life. In my reality, they were staples.

His rank breath moved over me as he practically spat in my face. "Have you nothing to offer, dark angel?"

He pushed down harder, using his forearm to press against my throat. My eyes widened as I stared up at him. I could feel him trying to force his power, his dark magik into my mind. Had I been human, it would have worked. He'd have been able to turn my mind with ease, bend my will to suit him.

For once, I was thankful that I was anything but human. I let my body go limp, pretending to succumb to the death he offered. His smugness almost radiated off him. I lay there, careful to use my own power to mask my life signs.

The vampire laughed, the sound so full of evil that I had to fight not to cringe. I remained still as he climbed off me. "Let all know that I have slain the great dark angel! She died at my hands! She took her last breath before my eyes! She...."

Blah, blah, blah.

I struck out fast, ramming the heel of my boot into his groin. "She is sick of hearing you babble, asshole." I rolled, following him as he backed up cupping himself. Quickly, I delivered another blow to his midsection, catching him off guard and sending him tumbling to the ground.

I got to my feet fast and towered over him. Grinning, I stared down at him as I put my hand out. My magik rose to the occasion. "Stake," I said, conjuring one instantly. I glanced at it and then the not-so-smug-looking vampire on the ground.

He hissed. "No. You were dead."

"Technically, you're dead so do we even need to get into a debate or do you want me to get this over with?"

"Boss?" Seger, my second in command, called out from around the other side of the large building. "You back here?"

The ugly vampire seized the momentary distraction to sweep my legs out from under me. Never one to take the easy route, I flipped high into the

air, tucked my long legs into my body, and used my power to stop myself. Redirecting my momentum, I flipped back toward him.

He gasped as I extended my body, striking him back to the ground. I slammed the stake down, scoring a direct chest hit. A puff of dust surrounded me and I held my breath until it cleared.

A strong hand fell upon my shoulder. “Boss? Karri, you okay?”

Glancing down at the partially shifted, clawed hand, I smiled. “I take it that you guys ran into some more bad guys.”

Sege chuckled, allowing his bloodied lycan claws to slide back under his skin. The light layer of fur there began to recede quickly, leaving only a human hand in its place. “Yeah, you can say that. If you add in the dead bodies I see lying around you, I’d say our count for the night is up to forty-three. That’s a hell of a lot higher than it should be. Any word from the powers on what’s going on--why the bad guys seem to be coming in droves?”

The idea of the powers--the men and women sworn to oversee and protect the innocents--giving a damn about a surge of evil in the tiny Midwestern town we had only just arrived in made me laugh. We, various teams of four soldiers, dedicated our lives to serving them, righting wrongs and keeping humans safe from things they could only dream about. The thanks we got was double-crossed or flat out ignored. “They don’t care, but I do.”

“I hate to admit it but you were right to want to warn the team based here, Karri. These demons we fought tonight aren’t just piss ass nothings. They were strong. Strong enough to take all four of us to beat.”

“Yeah,” I whispered, looking around at the carnage. Sighing, I lifted my arms high into the air. “Tell the others to hold on. I’m about to play clean up.”

Sege grinned and pressed his hand to his walkie-talkie. “Karri’s playin’ housekeepin’. Watch your asses or you’ll end up dusted too.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head as I let my power ride out and over the dead bodies. A second before I let it loose, I felt another presence, a familiar one. Gasping, I stared around at the darkness, trying to locate the source but finding nothing.

“Karri?” Seger asked, pressing up against me.

“Do you sense that?”

“Sense what?”

I shifted a bit, still feeling a familiar presence. “Someone I know is close.”

He chuckled. “Not to point out the obvious, Karri-Lynn, but Amber, your best friend lives a few blocks down.”

“I know that. Not her, idiot. Someone else. Someone powerful.”

“I don’t feel anything, boss. But I believe you do.” He put his arm around me and pulled me into the warmth of his body. “Come on, let’s get rid of these bodies before a human wanders in and finds out that their shiny, happy world isn’t so sparkly. And then we need to get you moved into your new place.”

I looked around at the bodies and snickered. “Somehow, I thought it would be different here, Seger.”

“Different how?”

I shrugged. “I don’t know. Less violent.”

He laughed, deep and from the gut. “Oh, darlin’, you’d be bored to tears if you didn’t get to chop at least one demon’s head off a night.”

As sick as that sounded, he had a point. “Suburbia, here I come.”

Chapter One

I stared at the large four-story Victorian home in front of me. What was I thinking? The place was huge. Too big for just one person and certainly too much work for me. Calling it a fixer-upper was a far cry from the truth. My need to start a new life and protect the lives of others had outweighed my better judgment. I was hardly a master craftsman and I’d just taken on the project of a lifetime.

Pulling a box out of the trunk of my car, I glanced around at the rest of the neighborhood. It was even better than Amber had described it. My house was one of three on the cul-de-sac. The one to my left had caught my eye the moment I’d arrived. The white home with green shutters

looked as though it had been meticulously tended. Of course it would be my luck to move next door to someone who was picky. I could already see the feuds over my unkempt lawn. Maybe, if I were lucky, neighbors would get mad enough to clean my yard because they were sick of looking at it.

“Karri, get your butt up here. You have got to see this!” Amber, my best friend, shouted from the four-story window.

I headed in, carrying the box of cleaning supplies as far as the front porch before I ran up the stairs. Walking into the large, full attic, I found Amber digging through two large chests I had specifically told the “movers” to put in the far back corner of the basement.

Yeah, they listened well.

The movers, also known as “my men,” were currently out to lunch. They’d spent the morning setting up my home office. Since they worked for me in the fight against evil, it was in their best interests to get me up and running as soon as possible. Livelihoods and actual lives depended on me. They’d already banished me from the room because I was hovering too much. They told Amber that she could stay, but from the way they were all staring at her breasts, I was scared to leave her without a chaperone.

Amber dug through the contents of the chest, her long auburn hair falling in and over it. She looked like a curious nymph all tucked in on a secret she couldn’t wait to reveal. She held up an object with a long silver handle and a pickaxe-like top. Her blue eyes grew with fascination. “What is all this stuff?”

“Weapons. They’re all from my father’s collection. I finally took them out of storage.”

“Wow,” she whispered.

I went to her quickly, removing the Martha war pick from her hand, convinced she’d put an eye out if she wasn’t careful. “Let’s leave it be. Our luck we’ll chop our fingers off or something.”

“Pfft, you’re like Karri Lee, fighting queen. Hey, did you see the thing that looked like brass knuckles but it has claws on it instead? That’s wicked cool.”

I chuckled. “Yeah, it is wicked all right.”

Amber had a flair for dramatics. Not that it came even close to meeting mine, but still. The coffee shop she owned was set up more like a psychic reader’s home base, but the locals seemed to flock there for the coffee all the same. In truth, she was very sensitive to most people and places so it made sense that she’d naturally lean toward the Psychics R Us look. Had she not been battling sickness, her skills and gifts could have developed more and she would’ve made one hell of a psychic.

As far as I knew, or rather, as far as Amber let on, she’d been doing well for the greater part of a year now. I hoped that was true. The idea of losing my closest friend terrified me. The idea of losing her to a cancer-like illness that human doctors didn’t understand and continually mislabeled sickened me. Amber’s sickness came from not using her powers. It was that simple. Since she was unaware that she even had powers, it wasn’t an easy fix and telling her to use what she’d been burying since birth wasn’t as cut and dry as it sounded.

One had to come into their powers on their own. It was just the way things were. Trust me, if I could have fixed her by shouting “use your magik,” I, of all people, would have. It would have saved me a lot of pain and several deals with the devil.

Amber laughed. “Have you looked in the mirror?”

“No. I don’t have one hung up yet, so unless I can find a really reflective puddle then I’m not getting to see myself anytime soon. Why?”

Amber shook her head. “You look like an erotic cowgirl housekeeper.”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” She pulled her long hair back at the base and fastened it with the tie she kept on her wrist. “I can’t ever remember seeing you with a do-rag on your head. Don’t get me wrong, the whole big brown eyes, white-blond hair hanging in loose strands from that rather sad bun thing is hot. But the red handkerchief, barely there, tiny top you’ve got tied over those borderline obscene breasts might be a bit too much. That looks like a bikini top gone horribly wrong.”

I snickered. So did Amber.

“Sort of like a cowgirl’s version of a day at the beach, Karri. Oh, I do love the dirt on your nose and cheek though. And the jean cut-offs thing you’ve got going is all the rage. The topper is the brown work boots. Nice.”

Glancing down, I bit my lip as I checked myself over. “I wasn’t aware I was being judged in the housecleaning portion of the pageant. If I say that I want to end world hunger for my question and answer time with the panel judges, will I still have a sporting chance of winning? I really want to be Ms. Bitch of the Universe.”

Amber shook her head and started down the wooden steps. “You are such a smart-ass.”

“Thanks. Can I get some points on that as well? Have they wised up and added that category yet?” I answered following behind her. She went toward the front door and I went for the fridge. “Pick your poison,” I called out.

“Beer.”

“Beer it is. I should have known. You’re all cute and dainty looking, right up until I see you chugging on a cold one. Sorry I was a bad influence on you.” Grabbing two, I headed out and found Amber sitting on the front porch steps with her head down. Immediately, I worried that she was lying about being in remission. I’d seen her at her worst with it and had no desire to see her go through it again. If I could head it off, I would. “Hey, you feeling okay? We can take a break. In fact, we can call it quits for the day. I don’t win a turkey or turn into a pumpkin if I don’t finish unpacking by midnight. And since I have no prince, I’m in no hurry. Should I leave behind a work boot for any possibilities to find me later?”

Laughing, she shook her head. “I’m fine. Don’t start worrying for no reason.”

I sat down next to her and handed her a beer. “I earned my worry badge, honey. Take it or leave it.”

She nudged me and giggled. “I’m glad you finally moved out here. I hated knowing you were alone in New York.”

“I wasn’t alone, Amber. I had Chester.” I grinned from ear to ear as she moaned.

“Karri, a parakeet, which has since died, doesn’t count.”

Taking a sip of my beer, I winked as I aimlessly fiddled with the triple knot, silver charm necklace I wore all the time. “Now you’re discriminating against nonhumans. What happened to you? We didn’t graduate that long ago.”

Amber snorted. “You know it’s bad when I start thinking seven years is a lifetime.”

To Amber, seven years was a long time. As sick as she’d been, it was a miracle that she was here at all. I wrapped my arm around her and gave her a good squeeze. “This is a music moment if I ever felt one coming on.”

“Oh no, you aren’t going to get me dancing around in public again. My days of that are long gone.”

Ignoring her, I hopped to my feet and rushed to find my portable CD player. I’d last seen it in the dining room but that didn’t mean much in the middle of a move. With the endless heaps of boxes scattered about my house, it could be buried anywhere. “Tony, Tony, look around.” I smiled as I did my slight homage chant to the patron Saint Anthony who was supposed to help me find lost things. Or, at least that’s what I think he was good at helping with. My luck he was the one you asked for help when you wanted to lose something.

I let my power up just enough to find what I was looking for. The second I zeroed in on the CD player, I dropped the power.

As I picked it up, I found a box marked dresses and costumes. Setting the CD player on it, I picked it up and took it out with me, happy that I’d propped the screen door open with a brick. Trying to carry it all would have been impossible otherwise.

I set it down next to Amber and wagged my brows. Opening the box, I couldn’t hide my excitement as I saw all the things I still had. I grabbed the long white wedding dress and its sister, a floor-length emerald green maid of honor dress. “Look what I found.” I held the dresses up. The green one had been tailor made for Amber with the idea she’d be my maid of honor. Yeah, that’s right. I was supposed to be the bride. I bit back a laugh. Too bad it didn’t work out that way.

Amber shook her head. “No way.”

“Hey, we might as well get our use out of them.” Tossing the green dress to Amber, I laughed as she caught it and pulled it over her head quickly.

I stepped into the sleeveless wedding dress and pulled it up my body. Its large, bell-like bottom flared out all around me. I zipped it as best I could and bent down to the CD player. “I thought one of these moments might come about so I made a CD for the occasion.”

Amber covered her eyes and peeked out from between her fingertips. “Please tell me that you didn’t do what I think you did.”

I pushed play and stood before her. One of the seventies disco songs that I’d played to death when we lived together came on and Amber squealed. “No, you still have this? You were too young to like it in college. I’ll dig a hole so you can bury it. Dump the wedding stuff in it too. I’m sure I can even find you a sparkling silver shovel to bury it with.”

Putting my hand out, I waited for her to take it. She refused it. I didn’t give up. I swayed my hips back and forth, reenacted every seventies dance I could think of and was on the verge of singing. Amber stared out from under her hands, laughing hysterically.

“Hey, are you suggesting I dance like a court jester?”

“Yeah, if court jesters should be in a thong on a pole, then you sure do. Only you could pull it off in that getup.” She dropped her head down and snorted. “Heaven help the children of the neighborhood.”

“Come on, Strawberry Field. Get out here.”

“Don’t go calling me that again, Karri.”

I kept dancing. Seeing Amber happy made me not care who thought what of me. Not that I’d ever cared much in that department anyway. “I’ll keep hitting repeat on the playing of the funky music if you don’t join me.”

Amber stood slowly and sighed. “Know that I do this only to spare your neighbors any further torture.”

“Mmmhmm.” I put my hand out to her and pulled her gently to me. We did a fake bump of hips. I concentrated hard on paying attention to my strength with her. It wouldn’t take much power on my part to inflict damage to her and that wasn’t something I’d allow to happen.

The second Amber began moving her head to the beat, I couldn't help but smile wide. "I knew you still had it in you. And I would like to point out that even considering all of his flaws, he, note that I'm not naming names, did a wonderful job of selecting a dress that looks hot on you." Every piece of me wanted to shout exactly who had had the dresses made. Somehow, the very whisper of Jean-Paul's name could bring him and I wasn't really up to seeing him. Not that he'd venture out in broad daylight, but still. I held my tongue.

"Gee, I'll have to send him a thank you."

I laughed. "Umm, please don't." We moved to the beat, just like old times. "Whoohoo, it's still there. I was afraid you might have either lost your love for our private disco revival moments or did your best to forget them."

The faint sound of a screen door opening filled the air. It made the idea of being in a real neighborhood all that much more exciting. There wasn't, as of yet, any demon shouting out how I was the Dark Angel sent to destroy them all. No. There was the sound of a screen door. As mundane as that may be to anyone else, to me, it was heaven.

The feeling of being watched came over me then passed quickly. I didn't obsess about it. In fact, having an audience for my theatrics was always kind of fun. At the moment, Amber laughing and smiling was the most important thing to me.

"How could I ever forget those revivals?" she asked, spinning into my arms and then back out again. "You worked your magik over me and left me a closet fan of music that people run from. Sorry but that includes the '80s."

"Hey, I say we start a petition to get leg warmers, ripped up sweatshirts and spandex back on the market. Think jumpsuits and front men of bands. Though, unless they're a lycan or shifter of some sort, they aren't allowed to have chest hair."

"Oh, we're making exceptions now?" Amber mused, as we danced in close to one another shaking our upper bodies and laughing. "Are you now dating blonds too?"

I gasped. "Bite your tongue. That's blasphemy! Blonds--ugg. My hair is blonde enough. I don't want to be staring at another head of it. Besides,

doesn't every little girl dream of growing up to find that tall, dark and deadly man of her fantasies?"

"You mean tall, dark and handsome."

I shrugged. "That too, but really what's the fun of a pretty face? If the guy is that worried about what he looks like, he'd hate me. There have been days when I have to think about whether or not I brushed my teeth. It's gross. I know. But I don't care." I shook my hips a bit to the music and laughed. "And if he can't hold his own, that leaves me protecting two people. No thanks."

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