



Wereplanets: In Ice

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## **Wereplanets: In Ice**

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### **Wereplanets: In Ice**

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## **Dedication**

For Dayna Hart, Eden Bradley, Loribelle Hunt, and Emma Petersen who all held my hand through this one and insisted that killing off main characters was not an option, no matter how stubborn they were. And for Shelli Stevens, who read my book and said my hero was totally worth having sex with. Just the kind of reaction I always hope for. Thanks ladies!

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### Chapter One

“Help me! Please...somebody help.”

Jain’s teeth chattered as she scanned the foreign landscape. Snow covered the rocky ground in a thick layer and massive trees surrounded the clearing on all sides, hemming her in so she couldn’t get her bearings. Night began to fall, and the temperature dropped rapidly. Crossing her arms over her breasts, she rubbed her numb hands over her biceps to try and stimulate circulation. God, she was so cold. Ice bit into her legs, scraping the skin away and leaving her feet raw and bleeding.

She’d been wandering around naked since her ship crashed and her personal pod had released her from cryogenic freeze. Had anyone else made it out? The ship had held a full crew and one other passenger. It had exploded in a fiery array of reds, yellows, and oranges, but she’d seen no one else from the ship. The roiling smoke had spun through the towering trees and into the afternoon sky in twists of black soot. Since no rescue party had responded to the crash, she assumed she’d landed in an uninhabited area.

“Hellooooo!” Her voice echoed over the frozen landscape.

With each moment that passed, she felt her strength draining, her ability to reason slipping away. She struggled to collect her wandering thoughts, to plan how to save herself. Fading in and out of consciousness, she wondered how much longer she could last without shelter. She had no idea what planet she was on. She should have landed on Aquatilis,

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where her brother worked as a marine geneticist, but Aquatilis was almost completely covered in water and she was in the middle of a mountain range. Something had gone seriously wrong. There weren't supposed to be any other inhabitable planets in this solar system, but she could breathe and the gravity was *almost* normal. Where the hell was she?

\* \* \* \* \*

Kesuk had seen the fiery explosion in the distance and come to investigate. His sentries fanned out to surround the clearing. The feud with the Browns had just been settled, but it looked as though they wished to start again. He heaved a weary sigh, his paws crunching through the thick sheet of ice as he drew nearer the inferno. Would they ever learn?

Their leaders smiled and bowed to his face while their warriors slaughtered his livestock and stole his women. He slid his tongue over his long fangs, enjoying the idea of catching them breaking the pact. His young daughter might enjoy a Brown slave. A low growl of pleasure rumbled through his chest at the thought. He hadn't started this feud, but he'd finish it.

Relishing the prospect of a good fight, he quickened his pace. Rolling his shoulders, he stretched into a lumbering run, his long strides eating the distance. Pricking his ears, he stayed alert for signs of an ambush.

"Help me."

The ragged cry sounded to his left, bringing him up short. His breath snorted clouds in the icy air as he waited to hear it again. Padding lightly, he crept between the trees, winding his way toward the origin of the noise.

*A woman.* A woman unlike any he'd ever seen. Naked, glorious, tiny, her short tufts of brown hair sleek against her skull. Her eyes drew him, greener than the leaves of a Sitka tree. He ran his tongue down a curved canine tooth, eyeing her softly curved form, the thatch of tight dark curls between her slim thighs. Perhaps it was not his daughter who

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would gain a slave this day. Her sudden appearance and odd coloring demanded he examine her more closely. His men would investigate the explosion and seek him out to report their findings. They knew their duty because he trained them well.

Foolish of her clan to allow her out alone. What was she doing in the borderlands? Her skin was too pale to be a Black or a Brown. He sighed in regret as he drew near. Perhaps she was addled, such birth defects or misfortunes were known to happen. She wandered through the snow, her broken gait and dazed expression making it plain she would freeze to death. And soon. He raised his nose to the wind, trying to catch her scent. She wasn't of his clan, that much he knew, but she was on his land.

She belonged to him.

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### Chapter Two

She dreamed of a polar bear. Massive and frightening, it blurred and shifted, somehow turning into the most beautiful man she'd ever seen. Unfortunately, the man was also frightening. His white-blond hair glinted in the wavering sunlight while his coal-black eyes tracked her like a predator after prey. She squirmed under his gaze, uncertain how to proceed.

Neither of them wore any clothes and they stood in a great green forest. He towered over her, forcing her to tilt her head back to maintain eye-contact as he drew closer. Without warning, he thrust a huge hand into her hair and drew her forward, slanting his mouth over hers, muffling her weak protest against his lips. Hot excitement spun through her, dampening her pussy, making it clench with want. Her breath rushed out, panting against his lips as their kisses grew more urgent. His heavy masculine scent caressed her nose. She couldn't explain her fierce reaction, but she didn't want to, content to follow his lead.

He forced her back into a bank of snow, his big body heating her front as he came down on top of her. Her legs parted to accommodate him, and she gripped his shoulders to pull him closer. She wanted him. She wanted him now. Her fingers slid down his smooth chest, flicking over his flat nipples. He reciprocated by closing his mouth over the tip of her breast and drawing on it strongly. She moaned, sucking in frigid air as her body raged with unbearable heat. Her fingers tangled in his pale hair. The dense, silky texture was unlike anything she'd ever felt before.

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Spreading wet kisses up her chest, he bit the side of her neck. She jumped at the sharp sensation, and then tilted her jaw to allow him greater access. The head of his cock rubbed against her pussy lips, probing for entrance. Lifting her hips, she forced him into her. Her slick sex stretched to admit his huge length, making her moan as he thrust deeper and harder, again and again. She wrapped her legs around him, moving with him, their combined body heat melting the cold snow. Hot pleasure came in rolling waves, building—

She jerked awake, still shivering with unspent desire. Panting for breath, she waited for her heart to stop pounding. The dream repeated in her mind. She frowned. She'd never fantasized anything like that before. Not ever. She'd always controlled the sexual encounters with her ex-husband, however unsatisfying those encounters had been for both of them.

Putting thoughts of her sad love life aside, she focused on her surroundings. Gray striped pelts lined a massive bed, cocooning her in warmth. A fire crackled in a stone hearth, reflecting light in a round room. Leaning forward and twisting her head around, she saw the only entrance was an arched wooden door right next to her bed. The entire room looked like something out of a medieval holostory, except the walls were smooth and curved with laser precision. She squeezed her eyes shut, trying to blink away the remnants of her dream. Where was she now? Pinching herself hard, she winced. Definitely awake. Well, this was a far better scenario than the last time she'd been conscious, where she'd dropped into hypothermia. At least she was warm and sheltered. Lethargy weighed her limbs. She must have been given pain killers of some sort because her feet ached a little, but not as much as they should. When she tried to wiggle her toes, she found they were too swollen to move. Tugging the huge pelt up, she saw that someone had wrapped them in neat bandages.

The sweet, high-pitched sound of a child's giggle pierced the quiet as a little head poked up from the foot of her bed. Maybe six years old, the girl was paler than a moonbeam, her dark gaze dancing with merry laughter.



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"You're awake." An odd accent spiced the child's voice, but she was speaking Earthan Standard. Curiouser and curiouser.

She decided to gather as much information as she could from the only human she'd seen since she landed on this planet. "Hello. Where am I?"

"Sea Den."

"Seaden?" She raked her memory to find a city called Seaden. Nothing came to her.

"What's your name?"

"I'm Miki. Who are you?"

"Miki, that's a pretty name. My name is Jain Roberts."

"My brother's name is Nukilik."

"And how old is Nukilik?"

"We're both seven."

"Seven! That's very grown up."

Miki nodded, sending her cloud of hair flying. Her smile showed an adorable gap in her front teeth.

Jain found herself smiling back. "And what about your parents? What are their names?"

"Mama's dead. And papa's name is—"

"Lord Kesuk." A sub-bass voice boomed from the door. "That's enough, Miki. You know you're not supposed to be in here. Go find your nurse."

Miki's little face scrunched up in consternation. "I forgot, papa."

"We'll discuss that later. Go on." Disapproval laced his deep tone.

Miki scurried away, pausing at the door to give Jain a jaunty little wave goodbye.

Jain tucked the furs under her armpits and attempted to sit up, not wanting to meet the man flat on her back. After a few moments, she admitted defeat. She didn't have the strength to rise. The bed dipped and a large hand settled between her shoulder blades, supporting her with ease, while another hand brought a cup of steaming liquid to her mouth. Her stomach growled, distracting her as she realized she was starving. She cupped her hands around the mug he offered and sipped at the hot liquid.

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"Oooh, that's good." It tasted like some kind of spicy chicken stew. She turned to thank Miki's father and came nose to nose with the man from her dream. *Her very explicit dream.* Her heart skipped a beat before racing ahead at a gallop when she realized he was naked to the waist. He wore gray leather pants and laced moccasins, but his chest was bare and as smooth as she'd imagined. His hair was damp, but she'd bet when it dried it was the same silver-blond she recalled. Her mouth felt suddenly dry, so she drank more of the broth to stall a moment so she could collect herself before speaking. "Th-thank you."

"You are welcome." His gaze dropped to her lips as he spoke, his hand burning against the bare skin of her back.

She flushed under his scrutiny, smoothing her hand across the pelts, fully aware that she was naked. "What is this place?"

His eyes narrowed, assessing her. "You are not addled."

"Well, I may have hit my head in the crash, but I think I'm all right now." Had he just insinuated that she was stupid? Not knowing where she was made her geographically challenged, damn it, not moronic. It wasn't as though she'd crashed the spaceship. She was just a passenger, not the damn pilot. Who the hell was he to call her stupid? So, fine, he was huge and intimidating and gorgeous, that didn't qualify him as some kind of super genius. She really didn't need to deal with some rude jackass today. Things were already bad enough without any help from him. She squelched her anger as she always did, pulling back from feeling too much. She pasted on a bright smile. "Were you the one who rescued me?"

"I did." Rising, he folded massive arms, triceps standing out in relief. He shifted, raised an eyebrow, and seemed to be waiting for something.

"Um...thank you?" She gritted her teeth over the sentence, hating even the slightest admission that she was incapable. She hated that she'd needed saving at all. She could take care of herself when things went according to her meticulous plans.

He grunted. "What clan are you and how did you come to my land?"

"I don't understand."

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"Don't toy with me, little bear." He stalked closer to the bed, looming over her.

She shrank back into the pillows. "I—I'm not from a *clan*. Am I in Scotland?" Relief sang through her. This explained everything. Her spacecraft had landed back on Earth. Someone could tell to her why her ship had crashed and if anyone else had survived. Clans, indeed. "I was on my way to Aquatilis."

He snarled, his upper lip curling in disgust. "The fish people."

Assuming he must be one of the purists so adamant about not mixing human genes with animal, she sighed. This would be an ugly argument. She put on her best lecturing teacher face. "It's necessary for the survival of humanity to adapt to the conditions of other planets before the sun supernovas. Gene-splicing is the best way to make that happen."

Shock flashed across his face for a moment, followed by swift calculation. "You are Earthan?"

"Of course I'm Earthan, what else would I be?"

He leaned against the foot board, staring at her in complete disbelief. It was the most human expression she'd seen on his face since he'd walked in the door. "You left Earth before the sun died? That was a ship that exploded?"

"Yes, of course it—wait, what do you mean *before the sun died*? Scientists say it will be around for at least another hundred years." *What the hell was going on here?*

"No, our loremasters teach that the sun died too soon. All but the humans on the four experimental planets perished. That was nearly five hundred turns ago." He watched her closely, waiting for her reaction, something akin to awe in his dark eyes.

Shock and doubt roared through her. Her ears buzzed, making her sway. "That isn't funny."

"It is not a jest, little bear."

"This is a joke. A horrible joke. It isn't funny! I don't know what kind of sick game you're playing, but I want my brother. Right now, do you hear me? *Right now.*"

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He clamped his hands over her shoulders and shook her in short little jolts. Then he wrapped his fingers around her jaw, forcing her to meet his steady gaze. "Calm yourself."

"Five *hundred* years...no, that can't be. I'm supposed to meet my brother on Aquatilis. He works there. He—he's my only family. The only one I have left. Please...please, tell me it's a mistake." She tried to jerk from his grasp, but he was too strong. Hot tears flooded her eyes and she choked to fight them back. She couldn't cry in front of this emotionless man who'd just ripped her whole life away in a single sentence.

He released her, stroking the skin along her jaw. "I'm not sure how it's possible, but it is true."

"It's not. I won't believe it." Irrational, unreasonable rage pounded through her, made her glare at him. She knew this wasn't his fault, but he was the only one here to blame. Everything was spinning out of control and that couldn't happen. This was unacceptable.

A stoic sigh escaped his lips. He bent and gathered her furs tight around her and scooped her off the bed, lifting her with no more difficulty than a small child.

"What do you think you're doing? Don't touch me." She wriggled to get down.

"Be still," he snapped. "I'm hardly going to molest you. Invalids and simpletons do not arouse me."

"I am *not* a simpleton." She tugged her left arm free of the pelts and wrapped it around his neck.

"Then stop acting the part. We have a long way to walk and you cannot travel the distance on your own."

She glowered at him, but remained still. Where the hell was he taking her? Why couldn't he just *tell* her what was going on? She fisted her fingers in the furs. Anger simmered through her at one more thing slipping away from her control. She hated that he was right. She couldn't get far by herself, but she wouldn't give him the satisfaction of admitting it.

He chuckled. "Stubborn little bear."

"I'm not a bear, I'm full human."

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With each of his strides, her left breast brushed against his chest. Though she wasn't cold, goose bumps shivered over her skin. The friction of each brush of her naked shoulder against his smooth chest seemed exaggerated. Excitement twisted through her, heating her blood until her heart pounded. Her nipples peaked and she was grateful for the camouflage of the thick furs. She tried to control her breathing, but his scent filtered in with every breath. She fought the urge to bury her nose against his neck and breathe deep. Yeah, that would go over well. Actually, it might and that in itself could be a problem. He rolled his shoulder and her arm slid across his skin. Oh, God. Just that small movement was enough to make her hyperaware of every inch of her pressed against his hard body.

"Never think for a moment that I don't remember you are unique. You are nothing like my people."

Whispering erupted up and down the cave corridor as they walked through an intricate system of tunnels until she had no idea how far they'd gone. Pale-featured people with dark eyes stared at her from wide rooms and stone hallways. She shrank into Kesuk's chest, avoiding eye contact, feeling their gazes on her as they passed. Shafts of light pierced the gloom from small openings overhead no wider than her fist. Glass capped the holes and made the light reflect and spread.

A bend in the corridor showed an opening so narrow Kesuk had to turn sideways to get through it. The cold slammed into her like a wall of ice once they cleared the protection of the cave. She snuggled up to Kesuk for warmth. How did he manage to go shirtless? He didn't even seem to notice the frigid wind buffeting them. A guard stood on either side of the entrance. They nodded to Kesuk, but stared at her until he grunted at them, then they snapped to attention and resumed scanning the landscape.

"What are they looking for?"

"Predators and enemies." They crested a rise and Kesuk spun them in a slow circle. "Look around you."

"Predators?" She squeaked. "What kind of predators?" This place got *worse*? She swiveled her head around, trying to see anything

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dangerous. Jagged mountain peaks covered in snow and a type of tree she'd never seen before soared toward the brilliant blue sky. These trees weren't firs or spruce or any other kind of evergreen she knew of, but they were a rich leafy green against the pure white snow. How was that even possible? It looked like something from an Amazonian rainforest. In the middle of Antarctica.

Nothing but a light breeze seemed to be moving, so she started to relax. They were safe. Then Kesuk's whole body tensed, and his nostrils flared as he raised his nose to sniff the air. A quick glance back at the guards had them standing at alert on either side of Kesuk, spears in their hands.

"What's happening?" She turned back to look at Kesuk.

"An enemy."

"Who—"

"Shhh."

She scanned the tree line in vain, searching for the enemy he spoke of. Straining her eyes, she still couldn't see anything but trees, rocks and snow. Unease fluttered in her belly.

Suddenly, a large black figure broke through the underbrush. "It's a black bear!" she cried.

"Yes, it's a Black." Kesuk's lips pulled back in a small snarl.

"Is it dangerous?" She flicked her gaze between Kesuk and the enormous bear lumbering toward them through the thick snow banks.

When the bear reared up on its hind legs and roared, she squeaked and tried to climb Kesuk. Her arm slid back around his neck in a strangle hold.

"Easy, little bear," he soothed, his gaze never leaving the bear.

A horrific sucking noise sounded as the bear seemed to shrink, his bones snapping and retracting, the hair disappearing from his legs until a huge, dark-skinned man stood before them. *A very nude man.* She choked, still squeezing the life out of Kesuk, unable to believe what she'd just seen. A shape-shifting bear! There were only supposed to be fish-shifters on Aquatilis. No experiments had ever been conducted with large predators.

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The stranger's black eyes gleamed with avarice as they swept over her, lingering on her bare arm and the upper curve of her breast. She retracted her limb into the pelts, trying to cover as much skin as possible. This man was dangerous, that much she knew, and Kesuk didn't seem to like him. He swaggered forward, his gaze never leaving her.

"That's far enough. What news from Meadow Den?" Kesuk's deep growl sounded even lower than usual.

"So the rumor is true, then? A *real* human."

"She crashed on *my* land."

"Does she have a name?"

"*Mine*." Kesuk's voice was flat and brooked no argument.

The dark man grinned, his teeth flashing in an ugly yellow line as he took another step forward. His penis twitched and rose into a huge erection as he leered at her. "I'd offer an exchange. Three of yours for her."

An exchange? The man was trying to *buy* her? Three of Kesuk's what? What did they barter with here? Oh God, he wouldn't give her to the disgusting man, would he? Her stomach executed a slow pitch and roll. After all, what did she know about her rescuer? Feeling lightheaded, she started to gag a little, horrified by what the black bear might do to her. Rape at the very least. After he was done with her, would he pass her off to his men? She swallowed hard. If he had even half as many followers as she'd seen in the caves—she cut herself off, ruthlessly suppressing her panic. She couldn't even let herself think it.

Kesuk's arms tightened around her and she turned into his shoulder, pressing her forehead against his collarbone, struggling to pull air into her dry throat. She was going to vomit, she just knew it.

"She is not for barter." Kesuk growled low, his chest vibrating with the sound. She looked up in time to see enormous fangs begin to slide out of his mouth. Kesuk was a bear, too? Realization hit her right between the eyes.

*He was the polar bear in her dream.*

Whipping her head around, she saw that the bear had come even closer. She froze, refusing to cower because she had nowhere to go.

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"Five of your people for the little tasty."

An inhuman roar exploded from Kesuk, his fangs fully emerging, long, curved and deadly. Clenching her teeth, she fisted her hands in the pelts to keep from screaming.

"Get off my land, Black. I have no more use for you."

Kesuk's guards raised their spears and began circling the man. He snorted at them, but backed away, folding over onto all fours and shifting into his bear form as he ran. She shivered at the sickening noise the change made.

After the black bear left, Kesuk shifted her in his arms. "Believe me now, Jain Roberts? Is this the planet you knew? Is this the water world you intended to land on? Are we the advanced people you lived among all your life?" His questions hammered at her disbelief. She'd used his physical presence as a distraction before, but *this*....this she couldn't deny. This wasn't Earth. This wasn't Aquatilis and she'd seen nothing so far to indicate the type of technology she was used to. And the black bear she'd just witnessed change shouldn't even exist. At least not yet, not in her time.

"Take me back to my room," she whispered, squeezing her eyes shut to block out the bright snowy-white day, so at odds with the black empty void yawning inside of her.

She held herself together during the interminable walk back to her round chamber, focusing on *not* thinking about what had happened to everyone she knew. How terrified they all must have been when the sun supernovaed too soon, the horrible deaths they'd faced. Kesuk deposited her in the wide bed, tucking the soft pelts around her. Everything that had happened since the crash hit her in one relentless wave after another. She couldn't take it all in and the truth overwhelmed her. She twisted away from him. Jesus, she hated losing control in front of people. Burying her face in the furs, she tried to stifle the sobs she couldn't stop.

"I'm sorry." His hand cupped the back of her head, stroking her hair gently.

"Please, leave me alone for a while."

"I will return soon. We have much to discuss."



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He moved away from the bed, leaving her cold and bereft. She didn't know what to do, what to think. Never intending to return to Earth, she'd left everything behind to join her brother on the Aquatilis colony. Pressure built in her chest, choking her. Tears leaked from her eyes and she let herself sob into the blankets. Her brother, her only family, gone. All the people on board her ship, including her brother's colleague Sera Gibbons. She hadn't known any of them well, but they would have at least been with her now. And Sera, well, they might have become friends. A million possibilities spun away into nothingness. Everything and everyone she knew was dead, killed by nature and time. She was five hundred years from where she started. Loss and grief tore at her. She could cry forever and never be rid of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Imnek." Kesuk nodded a greeting to the guard outside Jain's door as he passed, his stride eating the distance between him and the mouth of Sea Den.

The woman was a distraction he didn't need right now. Or ever. She attracted him too much. He'd come close to ripping the Black's throat out for daring to want her. She belonged to *him* and no Black was going to take her from him. He shook his head. No. No, she was only here temporarily, so he couldn't get attached to her. She couldn't matter enough to make him lose control. He had his people to care for and protect. Losing control in front of an enemy was not a luxury he could afford.

He was master of himself and everything within Sea Den. She'd know that soon enough. She was a temporary distraction. Nothing more. A feral grin pulled at his lips. Perhaps she could serve as a very pleasurable temporary distraction. When she recovered her strength, he could think of many things to do with that pretty little body of hers. He had to keep in mind that she would only be here until he could hand the last Earthan over to the next trading vessel.

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A *real* Earthan. Unaltered, unable to morph between human and animal form. Such a thing was unheard of on any of the four inhabited planets. Humans were extinct. He shook his head in astonishment, struggling to bend his mind around the explanation. Earth itself had faded almost into myth among his people. It wasn't until the weretigers' spaceship landed three turns ago that they'd known settlements on other planets still existed. In fact, the weretiger king, or Amir, was scheduled to return before Thaw to exchange trade goods on his way to Aquatilis. That was only three weeks away. He respected Varad, perhaps the weretiger could offer some insight on how the woman could have been floating in space for centuries and be perfectly functioning after a crash landing.

A million questions raced through his mind as he calculated possibilities and probabilities. What had happened to make her ship go off course? Why had they never made it to Aquatilis? What was the likelihood that she'd landed on the *one* planet in this solar system besides the fish world able to sustain life?

"Papa!"

Miki's small voice echoed along the corridor as she scurried after him, unable to keep up with his longer stride. An Arctic bear cub trotted alongside her, Nukilik. Affection and pride squeezed his heart when he saw them. Miki puffed up beside him and collapsed against his legs with dramatic exhaustion.

Kesuk grinned down at her. "Yes?"

"Are you going sea swimming? Can we come? Please, papa?"

Miki's dark eyes widened and she folded her hands together to plead with him. Nukilik nodded in agreement, bumping his shoulder up against Kesuk's other leg.

*Please, papa?*

The cub's shaky telepathy was improving daily. Another fierce wave of pride hit Kesuk's chest, followed by an endless need to protect his young against all threats. He would not lose them to predators as he had lost their mother. Lingering pain echoed in his heart at the thought of Maruska. Their daughter looked so much like her. She would have loved to see their cubs grow.

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"You can come, but stay near me at all times. Nukilik, go get four more guards to accompany us while Miki and I change."

*Yes, my lord.* The cub gave an exaggerated bow of his long neck before scurrying off.

"Scamp."

"Ready, papa?" Miki tugged on his boot lacings.

He scooped her up and flipped her into the air, catching her over his shoulder while she squealed in delight. "Ready."

He set her down and watched while she changed into Artic bear form, her little body stooping onto all fours, pulling in as white fur spread down her arms and legs. Her nose turned black and elongated into a snouted point. She bowed her head, her neck stretching in to the long slim line characteristic of his species. Tiny curved ears popped from the top of her widened skull. Though he'd done it himself countless times, the sound of changing forms had always bothered him, the strange suction and snapping pop of bone and cartilage as the body reformed made his skin crawl.

She shook from head to claws, wagging her tuft of a tail so vigorously it shook her whole back end. Tumbling forward in a wild display of acrobatics, she landed with a splay-legged thump in front of him. He ruffled the fur on her head.

*Let's go, papa! Hurry, hurry.*

"All right, youngling. Patience." In a moment, he'd assumed his own bear form, flexing his claws against the cave floor. His cub pranced on her paws ahead of him down the corridor, turning back to watch his progress every few steps, her black eyes shining with excitement. At the last fork in the tunnel to the sea entrance, they met with Nukilik and the four requested guards, two in human form and two in bear.

"My lord." The soldiers dipped their heads in salute.

He swung in next to the front guard, who glanced sideways several times before speaking.

*Amir Varad comes soon.*

Kesuk grunted. *The weretigers will land before Thaw, yes.*

*The human would make an excellent bargaining chip.*

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Kesuk's hackles rose and he had to rein himself in from snapping at the other bear. What was *wrong* with him today? The soldier was right, was he not? Isn't that what he should use her for? He'd saved her. She couldn't stay here. The weretigers would want her and would pay a great sum to have her. He snarled even thinking of it, stalking down the twisting tunnels until he reached the icy wading pool that opened out into the frozen ocean.

Several hunters passed them on their way in to the warm fires of the upper caverns, their fishing lines full of the day's catch. Miki plunged into the pool with her usual reckless enthusiasm while Nukilik preferred to wade in and test the water first. He'd worried for them since Maruska had died, but they'd adjusted well during the last two turns. He was the one who'd struggled to move on. An unmated leader was looked upon unfavorably, a sign of instability in the clan.

A tilt of his muzzle signaled the two guards in human form to keep watch at the sea entrance while the two in bear form scouted out into the open water, wary of orcas. Shaking away his concerns, Kesuk slid in after his cubs, making sure they stayed above water, enjoying the rare time he had to devote to them.

Before he could stop himself, he wondered how the woman was faring. He licked his lips, anticipation building in his gut as he thought of seeing her again. The slim lines of her pale body were burned into his mind and he wanted to stroke his hands over her, burying his cock inside of her again and again until they were both spent. He sighed. Unfortunately, there were a few things she needed to know before they could begin to explore the attraction between them. He doubted she would take it well when he explained the new position she had found for herself by crashing on his land.

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### Chapter Three

"I'm sorry I lost it earlier." Jain blurted an apology out to Kesuk as soon as he made it through the doorway, her cheeks flushing hotly. She had blubbered all over the man and he hadn't even turned a hair, just tucked her in like a child. She was furious with herself for the lapse.

"What did you lose?"

Did she have to spell it out for him? Her face heated further. "I'm sorry I cried in front of you."

He raised a brow. "Are you sorry you cried or just that you cried in front of me?"

"Both." She glanced away, not meeting his eyes. "I'm just sorry. Can we talk about something else?"

"If you wish."

"What—what was that man going to trade me for? Five of something?"

"Five of my people they've taken as slaves."

"Slaves! That's awful. Barbaric."

He growled, his eyes narrowing. "Beware of passing judgement, little bear. Slavery is common practice here for those captured in raids or battles."

"You have slaves?" Something in his face made her swallow hard. Damn. She'd just insulted the big, scary man who'd saved her bacon and kept her from Black bear rapists.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

He returned a tight smile. "We need to discuss what to do with you now. I saved you, so your life is now mine, according to the customs of the Bear Clans."

Her eyes popped wide in shock. He thought he *owned* her? She bristled. No one, but *no one*, controlled her. "I don't live by those laws."

"You do now."

"So you saved me and I have to serve you forever?"

He shook his head. "No, slavery is not permanent. You work until your debt to me is paid."

"And who decides when my debt is paid?"

"I do."

She scoffed. "Oh, that's fair."

A deep growl rumbled up from his chest. His eyes flashed as he leaned close, getting right into her face, their noses almost touching. "You are not of the Bear, so I will forgive that insult. Once. Do not make the mistake again and do not *ever* question my honor. You will be released when your debt is paid."

She bobbed her head in a nod, fear and adrenaline making her heart race. The man was enormous and he had fangs. He could kill her with both hands behind his back. She licked her parched lips and cleared her throat. "And where will I go then? As you said, I'm not a Bear, I have no clan to return to. From what I've experienced so far, I doubt I would survive on this planet without protection."

"There are far greater dangers than rival clans and the cold. We will negotiate your position here when the time comes, little bear. Rest now."

"Wait. Please. How will I work off my debt? I can't cook or sew or do anything domestic. We had machines to do that for us in my time. I taught history to children on Earth." She struggled upward again, and the furs slipped down, baring her breasts. Squeaking, she hauled the covers back up while he watched, his gaze lingering on the edge of the pelt. A hot blush flooded her cheeks again, but she set her jaw and ignored her embarrassment. After the incident with the Black bear, she wasn't taking

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any chances. "I assume the work won't include *servicing* any of the men on this planet."

A dimple tucked into his cheek as his white teeth flashed. "That isn't work, little bear. That's pure pleasure."

Her mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out. Her mind replayed the dream she'd had of them together. Pleasure didn't even begin to describe it. She couldn't help but wonder if he was as good in real life as she imagined. Squeezing her legs together, she tried to quell the sudden ache between them. She'd just met him, how could he do this to her?

"Perhaps you need a demonstration."

His gaze heated and he leaned toward her, his lips touching hers. She caressed his jaw as her mouth moved under his. His hands caught hers, forcing them behind her back, holding them so she couldn't move. He tilted his head to deepen the kiss, sliding his tongue along her bottom lip.

"Open for me."

Obediently, she stroked his tongue with her own. Goose bumps erupted over her flesh and her heart rate kicked into warp speed. Her skin felt too hot and too tight. Wetness flooded her sex, made her moan and press closer to him. She tugged at her arms, wanting to touch him, but he shifted her wrists into one big hand, using the other to thrust the furs down. His fingertips closed over her breast, his rough skin abrading her nipple.

"Oh, God." Her breath rushed in and out, she couldn't suck in enough oxygen to satisfy her lungs. She arched into his caress, pushing her breasts forward.

Nothing had ever felt this good. His steely hold almost made it better for her. *Sexier*. It was wrong to be so turned on by this, but she couldn't remember why just now. A low rumble sounded in his throat as he swooped down to capture her nipple in his teeth, worrying the peaked flesh. He flicked his tongue over the tip, exciting her further, making her cry out.

A light knock sounded on the door. "Lord Kesuk."

## Wereplanets: In Ice

Kesuk jerked back, panting hard as he stood and tugged the cover up over her chest. He stalked to the door and flung it open to glare at the intruder. "Imnek."

A gangly young man stood beyond the threshold, his gaze darting from Kesuk's glower to Jain's flushed face and back again. Shifting nervously under Kesuk's glare, he cleared his throat.

"Speak, boy," Kesuk demanded.

Snapping his gaze away from Jain, Imnek focused on the hulking man in front of him. "M-my lord. The weretigers have landed and will visit High Den before traveling to Sea Den."

"Hmph. Leave us." Kesuk shut the door in the boy's face.

Jain cleared her throat, struggling to come to grips with what just happened. No man had ever made her want so much, so quickly. Not even her husband. Just thinking about Kesuk made her body throb, having him near pushed her past anything she'd ever experienced. All the feelings rushing through her scared her to death. Feelings weren't logical, weren't controllable. She needed to step back and *think*, and she couldn't do that with him touching her and confusing her. When he swung to face her, his gaze hard with lust, she grasped at the first thing she could think of to distract him. "Um...weretigers?"

"Yes."

"They landed? They have a spaceship?"

Hope fluttered in her chest. There was technology somewhere. Not everywhere was like this, where they had slaves and bartered with human lives and kissed people without asking. She pressed her tingling lips together. The man had actually held her down to kiss her! Her sex clenched at the mere thought of what he'd done. She shook herself. She was not excited about some backwoods barbarian sticking his tongue down her throat. She *was not*.

"Yes."

"And...?" Could she have another word please? She wanted to know about the other wereanimals. Was he allowed to tell her more? Did he even know? Maybe the weretigers were better. Maybe she could go with them.



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"And they will trade with the Browns before they come here."

"Browns? Not the Blacks?"

"No. Meadow Den is too remote, they will meet with the Blacks in the borderlands."

"I see." Only she didn't see. Browns? Borderlands? "So, where do the weretigers live?"

"Vesperi."

"Is that a planet? Or is it a country on a planet?"

"A planet in a neighboring solar system."

"Are there any other people in *this* solar system?"

"Aquatilis."

Realization slapped her straight in the face. Oh, shit. She knew what planet she was on now. Icy dread slid down her spine. Only one other planet in Aquatilis' solar system could support human life and she didn't even want to remember the stories about what happened to the humans who settled there—*here*. She shuddered, stomach roiling because she had to ask and she really didn't want to. This should not have happened. She should be safe on Aquatilis five hundred years ago. Licking her lips, she forced the question out. "This...this is Alysius, isn't it?"

*Please say no. Please say no. Please say no.* For once, she actually wanted to be dead wrong.

"Yes."

Again, with the one-word answers. She wanted to shake him. "Yes?"

His eyebrow hiked up. "Yes, this is Sea Den on Alysius. Home of the Arctic Bear Clan. I am Lord Kesuk, leader of the clan. Are there any more questions?"

She shook her head, mute. Entire settlements had been wiped out on this planet, the first ever to be colonized. Large animals had attacked and killed the unprepared settlers. When they'd founded the colony on Aquatilis, they'd abandoned the failed attempt on Alysius until they could develop a way to eradicate the animals without damaging the ecosystem of the planet. Colonization had still been in its infancy when she left Earth.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

"In my time, scientists said adapting to Aquatilis and becoming merpeople would prove easier for humans than staying on this planet."

He sucked his teeth at the mention of merpeople. "It takes a predator to kill a predator. The first bear-shifters settled here just before the sun failed. We had to learn to survive with the means at our disposal. Or die with those who came before us."

"My brother said—"

"You journeyed to Aquatilis to join him, yes? What of the rest of your family?" He switched topics, turning the focus on her. She hated that. She didn't like to talk about herself or her past. Especially not her family.

"They were dead. After my divorce—"

He interrupted again. "What is *dee*-vorce?"

"My husband and I—"

"You are *mated*?" His eyes narrowed, his shoulders tensing.

A frisson of panic slipped up her spine, sweat breaking out on her forehead. It was the same look he'd worn before he mentioned his precious honor. What had she said? She raked her mind for what she might have done to piss him off now. "Divorce is when you get *un*-mated."

"There is no un-mating. Mating is for life."

She threw her hands up. "Fine then. I'm a widow. He's been dead half a millennium. Oh, *darn*. Happy now?"

He growled, but made no further response.

"Anyway. My husband and I divorced and I was at loose ends, so I decided to stay with the one family member I had left. Aquatilis colony was looking for teachers for the growing merchildren and I hoped my brother and I would become closer if I moved near."

Now, why had she said that? He didn't need to know that "distant" was a good way to describe her relationship with her family. She'd been the misfit non-genius in her logical, rational, scientific family. She sighed, her mood darkening. Any opportunity she had to try to develop a relationship with her brother was gone now and she ached for the loss. Her eyes smarted, but she resolutely pushed the tears away. There was

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nothing she could do about it. She shouldn't cry over something that never was.

"Your marriage was unhappy?"

"To put it mildly."

"He beat you?" Kesuk's fangs popped out, his face reddening.

"No!"

He relaxed a little, fangs retracting.

How could she say this in a nice way? "He just didn't want me."

"Fool. Who would not want you?" He snorted.

There was a loaded question. "Um. Well, he wanted other women."

And there came the fangs again. "He was unfaithful to you, *his mate*? Did the man have *no* honor?"

"Look, buddy. Honor wasn't a big deal back then. Neither was infidelity, really. I just got tired of dealing with it, so I bitched at him and he left me for his girlfriend. We divorced. End of story." And end of discussion. She didn't want to talk about this. Time to go back to her questions about Alysius.

His eyes lost focus for a moment and his head cocked to the side as though he were listening to something. How powerful was a bear's hearing? She didn't know.

When his gaze sharpened and fixed on her, she shivered under his stare. If just a look did that to her . . . she didn't stand a chance if he touched her again. That terrified her. She controlled everything about her life and he was not the kind of man to let her run things. That much she knew already. And he thought she was a *slave*. Nothing about him should turn her on. He was pushy, peremptory and rude.

"I am needed elsewhere. I will return later."

She opened her mouth to ask another question, but he issued a sharp nod, turned and left the room, leaving her mouth flapping over an outraged response.

"Well, I was just dismissed, huh?" She stuck her tongue out at the now closed door.

## **Wereplanets: In Ice**

Yep. Definitely rude, crude and socially unacceptable. At least in her society. So why the hell had she stared at his tight ass in those leather pants while he walked away from her?

She sighed, wondering where he'd needed to go. Whether she liked it or not, she was bored and lonely without him.

## Crystal Jordan

### Chapter Four

Jain's eyes narrowed as she lay in that big bed of hers. Her pretty mouth tightened into a scowl of annoyance. Tension stiffened Kesuk's shoulders. He'd had enough to deal with in the two days since he'd seen her without coaxing her out of an ill humor. He considered her for a moment before deciding she needed a reminder of who was in charge here.

"Would you like to see more of your new home, slave?" He asked it just to tease her. He couldn't help himself. His little bear reacted so well. Remembering the indignant look on her face when he'd left to handle an altercation between two soldiers had made him laugh, and he resisted the smile that pulled at his lips now. Preparing for the weretigers' arrival had consumed his every waking moment the last few days, but he'd found himself thinking of her far too much. So, here he was, taking the first opportunity he had to come to her.

"Can I have some clothes first?" She shifted, tucking the covers tight to her chest.

"You have no clothes?"

She smacked a hand down on the fur pelts. "Nope. Completely naked here."

"Are you now?" A slow grin spread over his face and he let his gaze slide down the soft curves of her body outlined by the pelts.

His cock twitched as he recalled the first sight of her naked in the snow. It was all he could do not to slide his hand to his leathers to readjust

## Wereplanets: In Ice

the uncomfortable fit. Her breath caught as her eyes locked with his. She felt this too, he knew it.

Blushing, she looked away, licked her lips. He cut off a groan. Surely she knew what that did to a man. He wanted that little pink tongue caressing his cock.

Her gaze flicked back to him. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?" He let his desire for her show, so there was no mistake, just to see how she'd respond. It was only a matter of time until he had her. It had been a very long time since any woman presented any challenge. For the duration of her stay here, she would be his.

"Like *that*."

His grin widened and he ran his tongue down his canine tooth.

"Like you want to undress me."

"You are already undressed."

"That's entirely beside the point."

He approached the bed and watched her breathing speed as he neared. Her gaze flicked over him, cheeks flushed. Good, he made her nervous. An excellent place to start. As he reached out to touch her, her pupils expanded, staring at his hard dick straining the fastenings of his pants.

"If you wish me to stop looking at you as though I want you naked, then do not look as though you want me to undress you."

"I'm not." Her voice was breathless, her gaze riveted on his cock.

"Stop."

"What?" She looked up at him, naked hunger on her face.

"We go." He bent and scooped her up before he talked himself into burying himself between her legs and staying for a full turn. She was well enough to suffer from boredom, but not well enough to walk. If she couldn't walk, she was too weak for the hard sex he had in mind. He schooled himself to patience, knowing he would have her slim legs wrapped around his waist soon enough. Or around his face. He banished that thought before he made it impossible to walk correctly.

## Crystal Jordan

Her small form fitted against his chest, her cheek on his shoulder, short dark hair tickling his skin. The sweet smell of her filled his nose. He breathed in, enjoying the experience of being this close to her.

"Where are we going?" Her arm slid around his neck.

Eyes closed for a moment, he savored the feel of her fingers splayed across his shoulder, her other hand pressed to his chest, stroking over his nipple. His breath hissed out. She would drive him to madness. His cock rode the seam of his leathers as he walked out of her chamber and out into the main corridor.

"Is everyone here always naked?" Her wide green eyes followed the progress of a soldier who'd obviously just assumed his human form.

Kesuk growled to hurry the guard on his way, not liking the way his little bear stared at the other man.

Glancing down at her, he answered her question with a shrug.

"Not always, but our clothing does not come with us when we shift."

She blushed, glancing into a side cave at an equally nude woman before turning away. "We had laws in my time about indecent exposure."

"Indecent? Nudity is a natural thing, little bear." He frowned. The advanced past had been so provincial?

"Oooh." Her grip tightened around his neck when she spied what lay beyond the end of the tunnel. He gritted his teeth as her breasts moved against his chest, nothing but the edge of a fur keeping her soft flesh from pressing against his.

Dripstone rose from the floor and spiked down from the ceiling, creating a circular stone paddock. Only his ancestors had been able to carve with such precision. They'd lost so much in the centuries since settlement. The little one in his arms brought that home to him more forcefully than anything had since the weretigers landed on Alysius.

"Stalactites and stalagmites. I saw them in the Carlsbad Caverns when I was a child. These are huge compared to those."

"Dripstone. It is created by dripping water." He jerked his chin to indicate the droplets of water falling from the tips of the stone.

"What is this place? And why are some of the areas laser cut and the rest natural?" Her wave encompassed the cavern and the dripstone.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

"Whatever was expedient. This area needed to be large for the herds."

"Herds?"

They cleared the upper tunnel and noise from the paddock rose to an overwhelming cacophony. From this position, they overlooked the wide valley of stone separated into paddocks by carved barriers. Loud bawling of cattle and sheep in large grassy fields echoed around them. Sunlight streamed through thousands of covered light shafts in the cavern roof. Men and women roamed the herds, checking the health of young calves, rounding up the sheep for sheering.

Jain leaned forward as he backed away from the precipice, trying to look at everything at once. A sweet smile spread over her lips when she got a better view of the herdsmen. When she stopped trying to keep a stranglehold on every detail, she let herself enjoy life. He could help her in that area. She might even thank him.

"Where are we going next?"

She turned that wondrous smile on him and he almost missed a step. The woman was beautiful. All the women on this planet had dark eyes and were tall with sleek muscular bodies. Not Jain. Perhaps it was her child-like size that made him feel protective. Even that excuse sounded flimsy to him because he'd never thought of her as a child. Since the moment he'd seen her, he'd wanted her, and he always got what he wanted.

"We go to sup in the main cavern."

He wound his way through the twisting tunnels with an ease born of long practice, the smells of cooking food calling to him.

She sighed. "I'll never find my way back."

He grinned. "Reach into my back pocket."

Her eyes widened, snapping up to his face. "What?"

"My back pocket, little bear. The left one."

Her hand slipped from his shoulder down his back, smoothed over his bare skin, bumped the top of his leathers before curling into his pocket. His breath hissed out as her fingers moved over his ass, rubbing against him as she searched the pocket.



## Crystal Jordan

Keeping his tone innocent, he shrugged. "Oh, did I say left? I meant right. Try the other pocket."

"You did that on purpose!" She slapped his chest.

"Perhaps. The right pocket, little bear. Go on." Teasing her meant teasing himself, and he wanted to take her against the tunnel wall. Right now. He usually had more control than this when dealing with women. Frowning, he shook himself. He was no randy boy intent on mating with anything that moved.

Dipping her hand down, she tugged a folded sheet of parchment from his leathers. She smoothed it out against his shoulder. "It's a map."

"Yes."

Her smile was back and was the first thing his people saw as they walked into the wide cavern. All noise fizzled to a slow stop. She tensed, going rigid in his arms when she noticed they were the center of attention. She looked up at him in distress.

"Shh, little bear. They are simply curious about you. It will fade the more you are around them."

Her lips tightened and she said nothing, her chin jerking down in a small nod. She tugged up the furs in a self-conscious gesture. He hadn't the heart to tell her they'd all seen her naked the day he brought her in from the snow. It had taken many people many hours to get her warm again, to save her fingers and toes from frostbite.

"Jain!" Miki waved from the head table, bouncing in her chair, a huge smile splitting her face. Her nurse saved her cup from tipping over as her waving got a bit too enthusiastic.

Jain smiled back at his daughter and returned a small wiggle of her fingers.

"Where is Nukilik?" Kesuk directed his question at the nurse as he settled Jain into the chair to the left of his.

"He decided to break his fast with the guards in the lower caverns."

"Ah." He smiled, remembering that he had done the same as a boy, eager to learn the ways of warriors.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

"Have you met Nukilik?" The nurse turned a kind smile on Jain and Kesuk blessed her for her open warmth. He had chosen well when he made her caretaker for his cubs.

"I've only met Miki and Kesuk. Oh, and my guard, Imnek, when I tried to leave my room." Jain turned an accusing glare on Kesuk.

"It was for your own protection."

"Sure it was, but then I am a *slave* here aren't I?" Anger made Jain's brilliant green eyes almost incandescent.

He leaned close to speak in her ear. "Yes, and as such, you are under my protection. The caves can be dangerous, little bear. Your insistence on independence does not erase the need for caution."

She wrinkled her pert nose at him, and turned away to speak to Miki's nurse.

He chuckled, sorry he'd missed young Imnek trying to keep her in her room as he'd ordered. As he had said, it was for her own protection. She wasn't yet well and even with his map she could easily become lost in the caverns. Some of the caves were no longer in use and it would take awhile to track her, especially if she fell and hurt herself. Refocusing on the women at his table, he caught a lively conversation about Earthan versus Bear Clan politics.

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"It's too much." Jain folded her arms and glared at the stubborn man across from her. As usual, Kesuk remained cool and collected. It made her want to kick him. Why couldn't she ever hold onto her calm when he was around? He'd invited himself into her room again, and Imnek had just let him in. This was why messing with the boss was never a good plan; they did whatever they wanted and didn't ask for permission.

"What is?"

"What? This! All this." Her hands flapped to encompass the room, which was now overburdened with more clothes than she could ever wear.

## Crystal Jordan

Kesuk shrugged. "You said you needed clothing."

"I just wanted an outfit."

"You have been outfitted."

She sighed, knowing she wouldn't win this one. Settling back into the padding of her large chair, she toyed with the cord that belted her leather pants. Kesuk leaned back into the cushions of the matching chair that sat opposite hers. A crackling fire lit the handsome planes of his face. "Thank you. It's more than I need."

"If you need anything else, ask in the kitchens and they will give you whatever you require."

"I'm used to providing for myself. Working for what I have." She shifted under his stare. Why had she even admitted that?

"You are not yet well enough to work. Give yourself some time. You nearly died, little bear. You look lovely in that."

Pleasure warmed her and she brought herself up short. His approval shouldn't matter this much to her. She shouldn't care about this man. He was dangerous to her peace of mind, her hard-won calm. When the weretigers came, she was leaving. She needed to remember that. She shrugged, brushing a negligent hand down her bottle green wool tunic. It matched her eyes. "Thanks."

He casually waved in a serving woman who brought a tray of food. The woman smiled at Jain and she grinned back. Her name was...Bel?

"Thank you for bringing me dinner."

"Supper," Bel corrected gently. "We call it supper here."

"Supper." Jain nodded in acknowledgment. She noticed the tray Bel set down held more food than she could eat in a week. She raised her eyebrow, meeting Kesuk's gaze as Bel left the room. "Inviting yourself to dinner?"

He lounged in his chair, handing her a mug of mulled ale, serving up plates for both of them. "You don't really want to dine alone."

She didn't, but it irritated her that he said it. "You know me so well."

"I wish to."

## Wereplanets: In Ice

Something about the position of his body or the hot, hard expression on his face made her recall her dream. "Kesuk, the day we met..."

"Yes?"

Hot blood singed her cheeks and she knew her face had gone bright red. Smooth, Jain. Very smooth. "Did we...did you...what exactly happened after you found me?"

"You don't remember, Jain?" A wicked grin spread over his face, belying the innocent tone.

A shiver slid up her spine at the sound of her name on his lips. "I was naked—"

"Indeed." The grin grew wider, his eyes twinkling at her.

"—and freezing to death. I don't remember much of anything." Unless the dream was real, and then she remembered too much.

His tongue slid down a canine tooth, a sign that she already knew meant he intended to tease her. Here it came.

"It was such a deeply moving experience for both of us, little bear. I'm crushed." Clapping his hands over his heart, he actually batted his eyes at her.

"Oh, brother." She rolled her eyes.

"I'm *not* your brother."

No kidding. As if she'd have those kind of fantasies about her brother. "I just—tell me what happened. Please?"

He tilted his head and considered her for a moment, sipping from his mug. "My guards and I saw the explosion and came to investigate. I found you naked and freezing in the snow. When I changed, you fainted."

"You were in your bear form?"

"Yes."

"I saw you change?"

He shrugged. "I believe so. You were not coherent, little bear. A bit longer out there and you would have died."

So it had been a dream. *A very lusty dream.* She flushed, recalling how vivid the texture of his skin and hair had felt.

## Crystal Jordan

His gaze swept her face and his voice became silky. "Why do you ask?"

She cleared her throat, blushing so hard her face tingled. "No reason."

"Come now, you don't expect me to believe that, do you?"

"I had a dream," she mumbled into her cup while she took a quick sip.

His eyes gleamed. "A sexy dream?"

"Maybe." She stared at her lap, not daring to look up.

"Tell me."

"I can't do that!"

"You can. Tell me, little bear. Did it make you moan?" His eyes locked with hers, heated, a little smile playing over his lips.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Was I inside you?"

Nodding, she squeezed her eyes tightly shut, as the fantasy played out in her mind. Her thighs clenched together as she tried to contain the wet heat building between them.

A small choking sound came from Kesuk and she opened her eyes to find the fire in his gaze matched the flames in her body.

"Come here." His voice was low, demanding. Its rough edge slid over her skin like velvet.

She stood, her cup falling from her numb fingers, walking to him because it was the most natural thing in the world to do. No thought, nothing. Just reaction to this man, this moment. When she reached his chair, his hands rose to her waist. He pulled her into his lap and her legs straddled his thighs. The muscles in his legs flexed, spreading her further, pressing her against his straining erection. She gasped, rolling her hips to increase the contact. Sweet pleasure arced through her body. Nothing had ever felt this amazing. And he wasn't even inside her yet.

His lips touched hers, a gentle brush. She opened her mouth on his, darting her tongue out to slide over his lower lip. He tightened his grip on her waist, pulling her against his cock, grinding their pelvises together.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

She moaned into his mouth, the sound waking her from her daze. She pulled back, panting. "Kesuk."

"I love my name on your lips, little bear."

"We shouldn't." Her fingers gripped the arms of his chair, her hips moving backward. "It's too soon. We just met. We have to be rational."

His hand stayed her motion, not letting her escape, but not forcing her closer either. "Passion and reason don't often mix, Jain. And this is passion."

Taking her fingers, he guided them to his hard cock, cupping them to stroke his length. She closed her fingers around him, taking over the motion, fondling his dick through his leather pants.

He groaned, dropping his head back against the chair as he pressed himself into her caress. "Little bear, the things you do to me."

She wanted more, needed it. Throwing a lifetime of caution aside, she traced her hand over the lacings of his pants, using nimble fingers to untie them. His cock sprang free into her hand, the head glistening with pre-cum.

"Stroke me, little bear. I love your hands on me."

"You do?" Her gaze flicked to his handsome face.

"Oh, yes."

"Touch me, too."

"Where did I touch you in your fantasy, Jain?" His eyes were hard, glittering with unmasked lust.

Could she tell him? Maybe if she started small. "My hair."

"Like this?" His strong fingers slipped into her hair, massaging her scalp, sending tingles over her skin.

"Yes."

"Where else?"

"Everywhere," she whispered.

Sliding his hand down from her hair, he circled her nipple through her tunic. "Here?"

She froze at the sensation of his hand on her, hot pleasure storming through her. Nodding, she leaned forward, her nipples peaking into tight crests.

## Crystal Jordan

"Where else?"

Blood rushed to her face, her breath panting out. "B-between my legs." Just the thought of him touching her there made her thighs quiver.

"I like this dream." His other hand slipped low, cupping her sex, moving his hand against her tight leather pants.

"I did too."

She caught her lower lip between her teeth and arched forward to meet his stroking, still fondling his cock. Her hand slid up the shaft, and then curved over the head as she rotated her palm over the bulbous crest. She wanted to put her mouth on him, feel the slide of his long shaft between her lips as she sucked him. She licked her lips, staring at his cock, anticipation rolled through her in waves as his hands teased her pussy and nipple.

A soft growl sounded from his chest. "Keep looking at me like that and our night will be over far too quickly."

"I want to suck you." She looked him in the eyes.

He groaned and laughed at the same time. "Little bear, you're killing me."

"Please."

"Later, I promise. Later."

She nodded, scraping a nail over the tiny opening of his cock. He pulled in a sharp breath, arching into her hand. He clamped his fingers around her wrist, removing himself from her grasp.

"Take your tunic off," he ordered.

Arms crossing over her body, she grasped the edges of her top and pulled it over her head in one swift motion, baring her small breasts to him. He dipped forward, catching a nipple in his mouth and sucking hard while his fingers tugged at the laces on her pants. She jerked back, standing to shove her pants off. She couldn't wait, didn't want to wait. Her pussy wept with juices. She wanted that thick cock moving inside of her, wanted him more than she'd ever wanted any man in her life.

"Ah, Jain. Come here." While she stood, he jerked his shirt off, tearing his pants completely open.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

Stepping forward, she swung her leg over his lap and mounted him in one smooth motion. He pulled her in, his hands guiding her hips forward until her wet vagina hovered directly over the head of his penis. Then he pushed down, forcing her to take him deep. She balanced her hands on his shoulders and sank down on him, feeling him embed in her so deep he touched her womb. God, he was big. She squirmed, just to enjoy the friction.

“You’re so deep.”

“Yes.” He grunted, beginning to work her on his cock, lifting, lowering.

She squeezed her knees into his flanks, rising to ride him. Their plunging dance moved faster and faster, skin slapping together loudly.

It felt so good, so amazing, so *right* that for a moment it scared her. Her movements faltered as she tried to focus on something else, to not have this white-hot pleasure matter so much. He shouldn’t be able to do this to her, she shouldn’t *let* him do it to her. Staring at the chair behind his head, she concentrated on what she would teach her class the next day. Yes, now the pleasure was not so close, so deep. Now she could think.

He froze, pulling her tight against his pelvis, stilling their movements.

She blinked, focused on his eyes. “Why did you stop?”

“Why did you? One moment you were with me, the next you were gone.”

A guilty blush washed into her cheeks. “Gone? You’re still inside of me.”

Cocking an eyebrow, he didn’t bother to contradict her. “Do you want me to stop?”

Did she? Would it make it easier? “No,” she whispered. “Don’t stop.”

“Kiss me.”

Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to his, light caresses of warm flesh. His tongue swept out to lick her bottom lip before pressing into her mouth.



## Crystal Jordan

"Mmm." She leaned closer until her breasts brushed his chest, rubbing her nipples back and forth over his skin. The feel of his flesh against hers was amazing and she sank again into the intense visceral pleasure of his touch. His hands stroked up her back, tugged on her hair. She tilted her head back and he nipped at her throat. Winding her fingers through his thick hair, she pressed him close.

Shoving her away, he knelt on the plush fur rug, lowering her and spreading her legs wide, a hand pressing each thigh to the floor. She flushed, her hands lifting to cover her exposed breasts.

"That's right, little bear. Fondle them for me."

"Kesuk..."

He smiled, his hot dark gaze sliding over her body, focusing between her legs. Bracing his forearms on either side of her hips, he lowered his shoulders between her spread thighs. His tongue parted the lips of her pussy, slipping over her labia before flicking her clit.

"Kesuk!" She fought to keep her fingers from burying themselves in his hair, from tugging him closer.

*Do you know how good you taste, Jain?*

She pressed her hand to her forehead, gasping as his voice echoed in her mind. "What? How?"

His tongue circled her clit with deliberate slowness before he drew it between his lips, suckling her wet flesh.

*One of the many benefits your generation left behind. Don't you like it?*

"Yes."

*Play with your nipples for me. Show me what you like.*

Panting, she relaxed her hands to cup her breasts, lifting them high before letting them bounce back. She circled her fingertips around the areolas, made them pucker into tight nubs.

*This is a great deal of sweetness, little bear. Do you think it rational?*

Using that wicked tongue, he lapped at her juices, sucking her swollen lips between his teeth.

"Kesuk."

*Perhaps if I made it easier for you, more controlled.*

## Wereplanets: In Ice

"What do you mean?" Her hips strained toward his mouth, pushing toward her orgasm, not caring what answer he gave. Her eyes squeezed closed. She was so close, any moment now she would—

He pulled back and her eyes popped open. "Hey..."

One hand reached for the slim cord that had belted her pants closed. He turned back to her, licking her cream from his lips with obvious relish. She blushed, glancing away. He clasped her wrists in his right hand and with a quick twist, tied the cord around them. "Hey!"

"Relax, little bear. You will enjoy this."

She jerked at her wrists as he tied the other end of the cord around the heavy leg of her chair. "I don't—"

"Have you not enjoyed everything else I have shown you?"

"Yes, but—"

*Then you will love this.* He maneuvered back between her thighs, his broad shoulders forcing her legs wide as he resumed the ministrations of his mouth and tongue on her hot flesh, sucking hard on her clit.

Her back bowed at the abrupt change in sensation, wrists pulling hard on the cord as she struggled to move against him. "Kesuk, I want—"

*Shh...let go.*

She whimpered, tugging at her hands. "I can't let go of anything. I'm tied up."

Her pussy flooded with more moisture from saying the words out loud. She shouldn't like this so much. Tears pressed against her lashes as her thighs burned and her sex pulsed with want.

*You don't have to control anything, to be rational or reasonable. Just feel how good this is.*

It *was* good. The panic from before reared again, but she couldn't back away from it this time, she was bound. And free to do nothing but feel. Oh, God, it was so good, so hot. She twisted against the bindings, chafing her wrists, the heat building higher, hotter than ever. Spiraling down into intense need again, she couldn't fight it this time, didn't want to. She gave herself over to it. Tingles washed over her skin. *She felt.* She felt the softness of his hair brushing the insides of her thighs, the bite of his fingers into her flesh as he held her open for his mouth, the sharp nip

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of his teeth on her clitoris, the wetness of his tongue deep in her pussy. She screamed, jerking on the cord, needing this, *him*, right here, right now. Loving what he was doing to her, for her. It had never been this good before.

*Yes, Jain. Let go for me.*

He growled against her pussy, the vibrations making her sob. She was so close, she could feel herself teetering on the edge of orgasm.

*"Please, Kesuk."*

Lunging up, he braced his arms on either side of her torso, holding himself above her as he buried his huge cock into her quivering pussy. She wanted to rub her hands over the flexing muscles of his chest, feel the sinew shift under her fingers, but the bindings held fast when she pulled. His hard thrusts pushed her forward, the soft fur rug sliding against her back as they moved. The feel of the fur and his silky hot flesh pushed her closer, higher. She arched her back, rubbing herself against his chest and the rug.

"Kiss me," she demanded. Her hand met with the chair leg she was bound to and she curled her fingers around the wood, the sharp carvings biting into her palms. The slight pain was just one more sensation piling on top of all the others.

He slanted his lips hard over hers, almost punishing in the force of his kiss. His dick worked inside her, shoving deep. Her body bowed under the building waves of pleasure washing through her. It felt so amazing, so hot. They were wild, biting at each other's lips. His fingers clenched hard around her thighs, jerking her further open, so she couldn't control the depth of his thrusts. The slapping sound of flesh on flesh turned her on. He manipulated her clit with his fingertips, flicking it in time with his pounding thrusts.

*"Kesuk!"*

It was more than enough to push her over into orgasm. Her pussy tightened on his cock as she came. Their eyes locked and she gasped as the midnight irises of his eyes bled all the way to the corners, turning the entire orb coal black. His back bowed hard, hunching forward as he rammed into her, then froze. He threw his head back, his fangs sliding out

## Wereplanets: In Ice

as he roared his orgasm, his hips pounding forward in short jerking thrusts.

He collapsed onto his elbows, careful not to crush her. His forehead rested against hers as they panted hard. The snap and pop of the roaring fire sounded loud to her ears and she noticed they'd crashed into the table, making their drinks spill over onto the fur rug. That was a mess she didn't want to explain to Bel. Shoving himself up to balance on his hands, Kesuk pulled from her pussy. The slide of his cock made her moan. Tugging her wrists free from the cord, he rubbed the circulation back into her fingers. His arms slipped beneath her shoulders and he lifted her against his chest. Her head fell into the crook of his shoulder and her eyes drifted shut. He dumped her on the bed and she bounced, her eyes popping wide. Spinning away, he walked stark naked to her door.

She crossed her arms over her bare breasts. What the hell had happened? Hadn't he enjoyed it as much as her? He was leaving, so apparently not. Humiliation crawled over her skin. "Kesuk?"

She hated that her voice wobbled on his name. Just when she thought she had a handle on the situation, he did something to confuse the hell out of her again.

He paused, the open door in his hand.

"Is everything okay?"

Why was she even asking? She shouldn't care. She didn't even like him. Did she? No. Of course not. Then why had she slept with him? Everything was confusing and out of control again, so she hugged herself tighter and tried to pull back, shutting down the emotions, trying to remain calm and logical like her parents and husband had always insisted. Ten deep breaths and she'd forced herself back to cool composure.

"Everything is fine."

"Okay. Sure. Thanks for having dinner with me."

Dinner, right. They hadn't even eaten. She told herself it didn't hurt at all that he never looked back, shutting the door behind him with a final thunk. Crawling under the coverlet, she tugged it up to her chin, curled into a tight ball and escaped into tear-stained sleep.

## Crystal Jordan

### Chapter Five

After leaving Jain, Kesuk plunged into the icy sea to cool his blood. He sucked in a breath as the freezing water met with his semi-erect penis. The water swirled around his chest as he walked deeper, hoping the frigid temperature would cool his ardor. He couldn't believe he'd lost control over the woman and almost shifted while still inside her. He hadn't lost control during sex since...ever.

What would have happened if he had changed inside of her? Such a thing was not practiced among his people. Jain was a tiny woman, hurting her would be too easy. A good lover, a good man, a good *leader* should be able to maintain control at all times. Tonight he had failed in that.

He still wanted her. The woman was addicting. Her smooth, soft skin and Sitka green eyes drove him mad. Touching her had been a bad idea. He needed to stay away from her until the weretigers took her off his hands.

He rolled his shoulders, trying to work out the tension.

*My lord?*

Flaring his nostrils, he caught the scent of Jain's young guard as his large white bulk maneuvered down the tunnel and into the sea entrance. "Imnek."

*My rotation is complete, my lord. You wished for my nightly report on the Earthan.* The Arctic bear dipped his head in salute, not meeting his eyes. Imnek had been standing outside Jain's door all night, the young guard

## Wereplanets: In Ice

knew what had happened. Kesuk's respect for the boy increased. He would do his duty even though he'd have to deal with his lord's sour disposition.

Kesuk returned the nod. "Report."

*She is bored and needs stimulus. We need to set her to a task.*

"She tried to escape you, I've heard."

The bear shifted from paw to paw. *She...may have tried, but I handled the situation, my lord.*

"When I ask you to report on her activities, I expect a complete report. Am I understood?" Irritation whipped through him and he knew he spoke unfairly to the boy, but his reaction to the human had him rattled. He attempted to rein in his ill humor without much success.

*Yes, my lord.*

"Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

A long pause ensued where the young guard obviously raked his mind for any small detail he'd missed. *She is beautiful and all the clansmen stare at her.*

Kesuk growled, slapped the surface of the water, his jaw clenching. They would dare to ogle her?

Imnek hurried on. *I believe she is unaccustomed and uncomfortable with male attention. Or nudity.*

Impressed with the boy's sense of observation, Kesuk found himself nodding in approval. "Well done. Report again tomorrow."

The young bear straightened, snapped a crisp nod and turned in the direction he had come.

"But Imnek? I expect to be apprised of *all* her movements."

*Very good, my lord.* Bowing again, Imnek left, his claws scraping against the stone floor as he went.

Digging his toes in the soft sandy bottom of the pool, Kesuk considered the situation. He couldn't let anyone else deal with her. She was his problem and he wouldn't push her off onto anyone else. Especially any of his men. They might get ideas about sampling her sweetness and he had to protect her.

## Crystal Jordan

Tonight was a mistake he wouldn't repeat. He simply had to maintain control and do his duty. Touching her again was not an option.

But now that he'd thrust inside her, not even the cold water could dull his lust for her slim body. His cock twitched in fevered memory and he groaned. This did not bode well.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I can walk by myself." Jain's irritated voice echoed down the long corridor. Kesuk had insisted on continuing her tour of the caves, but she didn't have to be nice about it.

She hated being carried, and not having any say about where she went or how fast she got there. After what had happened the last time she'd been helpless in his arms, she didn't want to repeat the experience.

Or maybe she did, but without the part where he dumped her into bed and ran like hell. Her luck with men was holding strong. Damn.

Heaving a long suffering sigh, Kesuk set her down and steadied her until she gained her balance. Her feet were encased in supple leather boots, double-layered in fur for cushioning. Her long dress fluttered down to cover her legs. The gown was almost medieval in cut and style, with a tight bodice and belled sleeves, only it was made from butter soft leather and lined in the same gray-striped fur that covered her bed.

"This is the main entrance of Sea Den."

The tunnel twisted down at a sharp angle to a wide mouth. It overlooked a breath-taking view of a frozen ocean. Sentries stood on either side of the entrance and she nodded to them in greeting. They stared at her for a moment before nodding back. She walked quickly to escape their stare and nearly stepped off the edge of a cliff. Kesuk reached out and caught her before she went over.

"Oh my God!" She clung to the arm he wrapped around her waist, heart pounding. Her limbs started to shake from the close call and she slumped back against him.

"Careful, little bear. It's dangerous."

"Why is the main entrance so hard to get to?"

## Wereplanets: In Ice

"To keep out enemies and predators."

A huge black and white whale leapt from the ocean beyond the ice shelf. She gasped. "A killer whale!"

"An orca."

"Oh, that's what we called them on Earth, too. How did they get here?" She turned and grinned up at him.

"Our ancestors brought them. Sea life is abundant here; the water makes them safe from the predators. The land animals have had a harder time surviving. As have we."

"Why didn't they have merpeople here then?"

"They may have intended to. The sun died before anything more than the basic settlements were in place." He shrugged, his shoulder moving against her back.

She shivered as an icy blast of wind scoured the sea cliff. Glancing up, she noticed a narrow path winding far up the rock face. Snow spun in whirling gusts from the sheered-off edge of the mountain. He lifted the edges of his cloak and drew them around her. She snuggled back into his warmth.

"Is the entire planet covered in ice?"

"No, but the high reaches are the areas least inhabited by predators, so the clans settled here. The original Earthans were in the southern hemisphere. Dangerous there."

"How many other dens are there?"

"Two. One for the Browns—High Den—and one for the Blacks—Meadow Den."

"Are they near here?"

"The Artic lands form a large triangle. The Brown lands border us to the south, the Blacks to the north. Their lands extend beyond ours into the mountains, and eventually meet."

"Do they like each other?"

"No more than we like them. The Browns don't coexist well with anyone and the Blacks are thieves and scavengers who'd pick the bones of their dead."

"That's disgusting."



## Crystal Jordan

"Indeed."

An icy blast of wind whipped the cloak around them. "Well, are there seasons in the high reaches or is it always cold?"

"Cold? This is warm. Thaw is only a few weeks away."

"Warmer weather. Oh, thank God."

"Thaw is when the predators venture north to hunt."

She didn't want to ask. "Hunt what?"

"Us."

"There's always a catch." She sighed.

His chest rumbled in a quiet laugh.

"How do you survive?"

"Hibernation begins at Thaw and lasts during the summer. We stay in the den until the first snow fall."

"We can't leave at all?"

"Hunting and gathering parties go out to collect food stores, but no one else. It is too dangerous."

Then she should put in her request before Thaw came. "Where'd my ship crash?"

"Southwest of here." He tensed against her back.

She twisted to look him in the eye. "I want to see it."

He sighed. "Jain."

"Please, Kesuk."

"It's nothing but a charred hull. You were the only survivor."

"I know, but—"

"My warriors scouted the area thoroughly after I returned with you. No one could be found."

"I believe you, but I need some closure. It's important to me. I—I didn't know anyone on board really well, but they were the last humans like me." She laid a hand along his jaw.

He sighed, his dark eyes showing resigned affection. "As you wish."

"Thank you." She placed a soft kiss on his lips.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

He went rigid against her for a moment, then groaned and tilted her jaw up to deepen their contact. She sucked his tongue as it pushed past her lips.

*Thank me properly, slave.* His growl echoed in her mind.

Spinning quickly, he swept her into his arm, fingers quickly working her long skirt up around her hips. The cold air hit her naked skin and she shivered as he cupped the backs of her thighs and drew her legs around his waist. He freed himself from his pants in a few seconds. Her back hit the cliff wall as he shoved his hard cock deep inside her.

"Yes!" The abruptness of his thrust made her back bow at the intense pleasure-pain, her pussy stretching to the limit. She dug her nails into his shoulders as she wrapped her legs tight around him, clamping her knees on his flanks to ride him. Needing to touch his skin, she slid her hands under his shirt, splaying her fingers on the flexing muscles of his back.

*You dreamed of us in the snow, did you not?*

He scooped a handful of snow from the rocks beside them, rubbing it against the back of her thigh. She gasped and arched in shock, the cold making her hotter for him, her moisture coating his cock with each push. He rotated his hips as he plunged into her, deepening his thrust, changing his rhythm. She stayed with him, their mouths fused, tongues dueling. She sucked his bottom lip into her mouth, bit down and scraped the soft flesh as she pulled back. He groaned and dipped his tongue back into her mouth. The coppery taste of his blood excited her more, spurring her on. Her nails bit into his back, raking over his flesh. He grunted, his hips slamming harder into hers. He slapped her thigh. She peaked into orgasm, fisting hard around his cock, milking him.

He filled his hands with her ass, pulling the cheeks apart. He stimulated her anus with a finger before pushing in.

She drew in a sharp breath. "Kesuk!"

Chuckling, he buried his finger in her ass again and again, rocking her on his cock. He worked in a second finger and the sensation was more than she could take. She was so full, so hot. Grinding against his dick and

## Crystal Jordan

fingers, her pussy clenched tight before she shuddered again, coming hard and fast.

He pulled his cock from her soaking pussy, lifting her higher on the wall. His fingers spread her ass cheeks further.

"Oh, God." She moaned into his mouth as the head of his penis pressed against her hole.

He sank in deeply, one slow inch at a time. She gasped, her ass flexing around him. Too full. It was too much. She wanted more. Using his shoulders for leverage, she lifted off his cock, letting gravity sink him back in. He groaned, burying his face in her neck.

He thrust deep and hard, moving them at a punishing speed, their ragged breath and slap of skin on skin echoing off the cliffs. He slid a hand over her hip and between them, working her clit with a finger. She cried out, the sensation more that she could take. When he sank his teeth into her neck she convulsed into hot orgasm. Moments later, he groaned his own completion, pumping hot fluid inside of her.

She panted, her forehead resting against his shoulder as she came down from the high. The pleased fog that settled over her mind gradually receded as her heart beat slowed and her muscles relaxed. What had he done to her? She had *never* had sex in public before. Embarrassed heat raced through her when she remembered the way she'd cried out. Then a horrifying thought occurred to her.

"What about the guards?"

"Hmm?" He licked a lazy line from her neck along her collarbone, making her shiver as the cold touched her wet skin.

"The guards. They must have heard us. I'm so humiliated."

"I told them to withdraw when we first came out. Did you not notice them leave?" He pulled back to frown at her.

"No. Telling them to leave is just as bad. They're going to know what we did."

"Would you have preferred they stayed near by and heard us? I prefer my sex a bit more private than that. If you have other ideas..." A wicked grin spread over his handsome face.

"No! Jesus, Kesuk. That's gross."

## Wereplanets: In Ice

He shook his head. "I don't understand the way your mind works half the time and the other half I am certain I don't want to. Why are we talking about my soldiers?"

"Let me down. I can walk on my own."

He snorted. "Where have I heard that before?"

"I have no idea. You must have a nasty habit of hauling people around."

She moaned at the slow slide of his flesh inside of hers as he pulled his cock out. God, he still had a semi. She gave serious consideration to shoving him up against the mountain and going at it again, but then she really might not be able to walk on her own. Wouldn't that just give him all kinds of ammunition for carrying her around everywhere? *Nope, not happening.*

She turned toward the cave, ignoring the throb of want in her wet pussy and the sight of his cock disappearing inside his pants as he fastened the fly.

## Crystal Jordan

### Chapter Six

A week after Jain arrived, Miki came to fetch her for her first day of “slave” duty. She blushed at the thought of what had happened the last time Kesuk her called her that.

Kesuk confused her. Her violent reaction to him was completely out of character, and being with him made her do things she shouldn’t. Like have sex on the side of a mountain. Wanting him this much made no sense. It was too intense for her to control, and it wasn’t logical at all.

“Here we are.” A flourish of Miki’s tiny hand ushered her into a large room filled with children of all ages, half of them naked.

She shook her head. She’d never get used to this comfort with nudity, though Kesuk did his level best to keep her naked as often as possible. Sighing, she pushed thoughts of him aside.

“Where are we?”

“The lesson room.”

“Lesson room?”

“Yes.” Miki nodded, a smile creasing her lips. “Papa says you’re our new loremistress. Our old one died last Thaw.”

“Loremistress? I’m your new teacher?”

Miki bobbed her little head as she leaned in to whisper, “Don’t tell, but I think you’re much nicer than her. Or the loremaster before her. They were both *old*.”

Compressing her lips to keep the smile from breaking through, Jain wagged a finger at the girl. “Now, Miki, that’s not nice.”

## Wereplanets: In Ice

"But, it is true." A young male voice spoke from her elbow. She looked down and found a smaller version of Kesuk looking up at her, complete with serious expression.

"You must be Nukilik."

"Yes. Miki and I are to help you settle in today."

"Well, lead on, kind sir."

Nukilik's forehead wrinkled as though he wasn't sure if she was teasing or not. Then he stepped forward and introduced her to the rest of the rambunctious group. The class immediately fired off a wild cacophony of questions about Earth. They wanted to know where she had lived and what were *mi-cro-waves* and how old she was. The day slipped away in organized chaos as she finally assumed a role she knew—teacher.

The next day five adults attended her class. Then ten. Then twelve. Soon she had a constant audience slipping silently in and out of the back of the lesson room. The adults' endless curiosity about her matched the children's. They surrounded her at mealtimes and in hallways. These were the kind of eager students she'd have given her left arm for on Earth.

Miki and Nukilik were her constant companions, followed by Imnek, who she'd already surmised Kesuk had sent to watch her. Even when he wasn't there, he controlled her. It wasn't as annoying as it used to be. Maybe *half* as annoying. And a little endearing that he cared. Even though it was obvious he didn't *want* to care. She kept that little bit of knowledge to herself, glad she wasn't the only one struggling with whatever was happening between them.

The days and nights slid by. Though she would never admit it to Kesuk, she was adjusting to this new lifestyle with greater ease than she could ever have imagined. She hoped the weretigers were as welcoming as the Artic Bear Clan. Over a week after her first class, she was at dinner, surrounded by the usual motley crew of adults with questions, when Miki tugged on her sleeve.

"Yes?" Jain asked, grinning down at the girl.

"I have something for you." Miki smiled shyly, an expression Jain had never seen on her face.

## Crystal Jordan

"That's so sweet. I love presents." Please God, don't let it be anything live or slimy.

Miki tugged Jain's hand into her lap and dumped a small pile of something into her palm. Jain lifted her hand and found a dozen tiny round shells. They looked like a cross between a tiny conch shell and a sand dollar from Earth. All of them were perfect.

"Oh, Miki. They're so pretty. The best present *ever*." And they were. Jain didn't remember the last time anyone had given her an impractical, just-because present. Her family had thought holidays too foolish and sentimental and her husband hadn't cared enough to bother. She hugged Miki tight and started to tear up, but she managed to blink back the emotion, burying the happiness along with the hurt the way she always did. Tucking the shells into her pocket, she cleared her throat and straightened, resuming her meal.

\* \* \* \* \*

After dinner, Jain and Kesuk returned to her room. She expected him to pull her into his arms and make her scream for hours. She shivered, a little grin playing over her lips. He made just as much noise as she did when they had sex.

Instead, he sat down on the bed, his fingers splayed on his spread knees. His expression was unusually serious. "Since you came here, you act as though you're living someone else's life. As though all this is temporary and you intend to wake up soon. You pull back when circumstances becomes too real, when you feel too much. You did it when we loved the first time and again tonight with Miki."

Crap. He'd noticed that? She sighed. "That's how I was raised, Kesuk."

"Hiding from life won't make it stop moving forward without you."

"Like time did."

He snorted. "An unfortunate comparison, but yes."

## Wereplanets: In Ice

His hands curved around her waist, lifting her astride his lap. The position brought her eye to eye with him, and nothing had ever felt this intimate. This *right*.

She jerked back, denying herself and him. "I shouldn't want you this much. Ever since I came here, everything's been jumbled up and confused. I didn't used to be like this. I never doubted who I was or what my purpose was. Everything was clear...what I should do, who I should be with, where I should go. It was all planned, all logical. My life made *sense*."

"That was the way of your world, your people. Everything ordered and in its place. Life is not about planning every moment. Joy comes in the spontaneity of life, Jain. It doesn't have to make sense. Sometimes people die when they shouldn't. They also love where they shouldn't. Those are things you cannot decide."

"I enjoyed my life before," she insisted.

"Such rigidity is not a good thing in one as young as you."

"I'm over five hundred years older than you."

He cocked a thick blond brow and folded his arms.

"All right, fine. I'm still not that young. And I'm not rigid, I'm logical."

"No, your family was logical, perhaps. Your mate. But not you. You pretend to be logical because you think you should, because it's safer to believe you're in control. Deny yourself all you want, but I see the passionate woman in you. I've held that woman in my arms, clawing my back, screaming my name in ecstasy."

She squeezed her eyes closed, shutting out the image he painted. He was right. She'd always pulled back when emotions got too deep. Her family had been scientists, eminently logical. Nothing emotional was acceptable. Since her husband had left her for another woman and her parents had died, her emotions had been locked in ice, frozen and untouchable. Was that who she really was? Who she really wanted to be?

She sighed. "I'm sorry, Kesuk."

"Do not be sorry, be here."



## Crystal Jordan

"I want to be." And she did, so much. She wanted to be where she mattered, where she was safe to *feel*.

"If you want it, then you'll do it." He pulled her tighter to his pelvis until she felt his hard cock.

"That simple, huh?" Arching an eyebrow, she smirked down at him.

"Some things are. Like this." He slipped a hand between her legs, rubbing her through her leather pants.

Pleasure swirled through her, but she twisted her leg to avoid the touch. If he wanted to bring up personal issues, she had a thing or two to say to him as well. Maybe they should just get this all out in the open. She wasn't the only one here with flaws, damn it.

"And then there's *you*."

"Me? I have done nothing." He cocked an eyebrow, wary of what she might say. Women were unpredictable. A man never knew what strange things ran through their minds or what would pop out of their mouths.

"Ha! You're Mr. Fix-it. You have to fix everyone and everything. Let's forget about me and my control issues for a second. You also keep your soldiers from fighting, *and* insist on handling every last detail of the preparations for the weretigers' arrival. You need to try delegating some things. Let the rest of us work it out for ourselves. Trust your people. Trust me. We won't end up killed by predators."

Her hands planted on her hips, which still straddled his thighs. They should be loving now. How had his evening's plans gone so awry?

He narrowed his eyes. "You would prefer I'd left you dying in the snow?"

She snorted at him. "Don't be deliberately dense. I'm not saying we don't need you or your help *at all*, I'm saying we can do some of it ourselves. You don't have to be all things to all people, Kesuk. You have advisors and soldiers. Let them do their jobs. They're competent or you wouldn't have put them in those positions in the first place, am I right?"

"Yes." He didn't like the direction of her questioning.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

"I'm guessing this micromanagement started after your wife died. You used to listen to your councilors, used to let your lieutenants make some executive decisions about their men."

"I was younger then." Why was he defending himself? She *wasn't* right. Was she?

"And now you know everything and don't need anyone?"

"I did not say that."

"But that's what your actions say to your people every day."

"That—"

"Everyone else is allowed to be human, Kesuk. Me, your family, your men, but not you. You have to be perfect. Why is that?"

He slid his tongue over his teeth. Perhaps now was a good time for a distraction. "It was a human between your legs last night, was it not?"

She ignored him. "You see your wife's death as your failure. Now you keep everyone at arms length so you never get hurt again. Miki and Nukilik are your only exceptions."

Anger flashed through him. "Are you finished pretending you know me?"

She flinched. "I didn't realize I was pretending."

"You've known me only a few weeks, yet you've uncovered everything that's wrong with me. How miraculous."

Face flaming, her eyes sparked with anger and challenge. "And you're any better? You constantly tell me how wrong I am, how I need to let go and feel. Sometimes it takes an outside opinion to see what's really going on."

He snarled, his fingers tightening on her hips. He did not wish to consider this. "You have no idea what you are talking about."

"If I'm wrong, I'm wrong. It wouldn't be the first time I misjudged a man. Don't dismiss what I said because it's uncomfortable to think about. Deep down, you know I'm right." She poked a finger into his chest.

A knock on the door, interrupted his retort. He growled. Typical.

"Come," he snapped, holding Jain still when she tried to get up from his lap.

## Crystal Jordan

Imnek opened the door, glancing at them once before fixing his eyes on the far wall. "My lord, the weretigers have crossed the border into our land."

Jain's lips tightened. She thought he'd run off to fetch the weretigers himself. And she'd be right. He sucked his teeth in self-disgust.

"Take a contingent of guards and escort our guests to Sea Den."

"Me, my lord?" The boy's eyes popped wide, his voice raising an octave.

"You are qualified, are you not?"

He snapped upright. "Yes, my lord!"

"Go then." He turned back to Jain, smirking. "There, you see? Delegation."

She lifted her chin and folded her arms, which plumped her breasts. His hand twitched as he fought to keep from peeling away her clothes and filling his palms with her soft flesh. "Uh-huh. Make a habit of it."

Growling, he gave into impulse and pulled her closer to him, crushing her lips under his, ending the argument the best way he knew how. He brought a hand up to close over her breast, making her moan into his mouth. She responded to him every time. He loved that about her. His cock hardened to painful stiffness and his free hand cupped her ass, lifting her so he could rub himself against the juncture of her thighs.

"Papa?" Miki's wavery voice sounded from outside the room.

"Every time. Every *single* time." He groaned and laid his forehead against hers.

"I seem to recall at least one time on the side of a mountain..." Those exotic green eyes tilted up at the corners as she grinned.

She licked her lips, her eyes dropping to his mouth. He stroked the breast he still held, plucked at the nipple. Gasping, she leaned into him.

"Jain?" The door latch rattled as Miki struggled to get in. "Please, let me in."

The ragged edge of Miki's little voice alerted him. A nightmare. She hadn't had one in over a turn. He set Jain on the bed and opened the door,

## Wereplanets: In Ice

stooping to gather Miki up to his chest. She buried her head in his shoulder, already sobbing, her thin arms clinging to his neck.

"Sweetie, what's wrong?" Jain reached over and smoothed Miki's hair, obviously distressed by his daughter's tears.

"I h-had a bad dream. Can I s-stay here with y-you, Jain?"

"Of course."

Kesuk groaned, mourning the loss of a night in Jain's bed. A father's duty was never done. Miki leaned away from him and held out her arms for Jain. His eyebrows rose. That was new. Miki never sought out anyone but him when she had a night terror.

His surprise was echoed by the look on Jain's face as she tucked Miki into her arms. She rocked the girl, swaying from side to side with each step as she walked to the bed. Tucking Miki under the furs, Jain crawled in next to her, snuggling close. He shifted, feeling awkward and unnecessary. Jain looked up, patting the bed in invitation. Walking across the room, he banked the fire until the room was lit in a soft glow and joined them.

Jain hugged Miki closer, resting her chin on top of the girl's head. "What was your nightmare about?"

"Mama."

"Oh?"

"About when she left."

"It's all right to miss her."

"Papa says we don't need to because we'll see her in the next life."

Jain seemed to consider that, to consider his beliefs before answering. "Remembering the way you loved her in this life isn't bad. Even if you get to see her again."

He smiled down at his daughter, propping himself up on an elbow. "You will see her again, Miki. Don't ever doubt it."

"I won't, papa."

"Go to sleep now." He tucked the covers under her chin and she closed her eyes.

"I love you."

## Crystal Jordan

"I love you, too." Kissing her forehead, he petted her hair until her chest rose and fell in slow, even rhythm.

"She's not allowed to grieve?" Jain asked.

He turned the question on her because he knew his answer would only make her bring up his need to control everything. "Do you allow yourself to grieve? Truly?"

She didn't speak for a long moment, her breathing slow and easy, so he thought she slept too.

"How did your wife die?"

Her soft words washed over him in the darkness and he closed his eyes against the ugly memory, the guilt of his failure. The woman was right about that, the failure, the guilt. "There was a raid."

"And she was taken as a slave?"

"No." He couldn't speak of this to anyone. He never had before.

A small hand cupped the side of his face, stroked his cheek. "Tell me."

"The Blacks overran a hunting party. It was normal, it happens all the time. We attack them, they attack us. Slaves are the commodity of choice. Trading them is how we get the things we need. Deer and bison stay to higher elevations, fish are in the sea. We use the exchange of people to get goods. Simple. Easy."

"But not that time."

He swallowed hard. "No. Not that time."

"What went wrong?"

"During the raid, predators attacked too. My mate was with the hunters and she—she was taken by the predators."

The memories washed over him in relentless waves. After his warriors told him Maruska was gone, he'd hunted for her for hours, tracking the pack of predators until he finally found her body. She'd been mangled and half-sunken in an icy stream, her blood making the water run pink. He'd roared out his grief, the pain more than he could contain. Then he'd taken her in his arms and rocked her, knowing he was too late to protect her. She was gone.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

His breath shuddered out as he allowed himself to recall his failure. He couldn't bear to suffer such loss again. He would never leave himself or his clan so vulnerable. Hunting parties now went out with an entire contingent of guards. No women or children ventured out alone. Ever. He accompanied as many expeditions as he could manage. It was his duty to protect his people. He would not fail again.

Jain's soft hand stroked over his cheek, pulling him from his reverie. He shook away his gloom, turning to face her. She withdrew her hand, settled her chin in her upturned palm. "Hi. Where did you go?"

*I'm right here.*

"You loved her."

Fierce guilt hit him again, threatened to strangle him. "I did."

"I'm so sorry, Kesuk."

"Yes." He made his voice abrupt, hoping she would let this subject go. He did not wish to speak of it.

"What was she like?"

He sighed. Maruska. What had she been like? He was ashamed to admit he could no longer see her face in his mind, but he remembered the life they'd shared. He summed it up as succinctly as possible. "She was the exact opposite of you."

Jain gasped, a small sound of pain. "I understand. Good night."

She slid down to curve around Miki, closing her eyes. He winced, realizing how what he'd said would be taken by his current lover. Foolish.

*Our marriage was arranged by my father. We were raised together, respected each other's strengths. Love grew from that respect, slowly and over time. She was...boisterous and wild.*

"Nothing like me."

"Don't assume that is a bad thing. My mate is dead. I don't wish to replace her with a pale imitation." He reached to slip his fingers through Jain's hair, the dark silken length sliding between his fingers. She tilted her cheek to lean into his palm, opening her eyes to meet his gaze.

*You are a beautiful woman, Jain.*

She huffed a laugh, looking away. "Right."

## Crystal Jordan

"What's this? Look at me, little bear." He frowned when she didn't comply, tilting her chin so he could see her expression.

Her jaw flexed in his hand, but she didn't try to pull away. "You don't have to say those things to me, Kesuk. I know what I look like. You don't have to lie."

He swallowed his anger at that, stroked his thumb along her jaw. "Questioning my honor again, Jain?"

"No!" She glanced down at the sleeping Miki and whispered, "No."

"Why would I bother to lie?"

She shrugged, looking anywhere but him. "I don't know."

Something deeper lay here. "Who made you doubt?"

"I'm just not pretty okay? I've always known it. Besides beauty is not as important as intelligence."

He heard the echo of someone else in her voice. "Hmm...your family told you this? Or your mate?"

"Both. He...my husband and I grew up together. He was part of my family."

He suspected her husband had been far more a part of her family than she had. "They were proud of you?"

"No, I..." She shook her head. "They were very busy. We didn't spend much time together. They worked on projects and experiments."

"They sound frigid."

"Their work was very important." Her voice came out stiff, controlled.

"Did they not love you? Tell you they approved of your accomplishments?"

She scoffed. "I'm just a teacher. My brother and husband were the scientists."

This explained so much about her, her need to control everything in a world that wasn't safe. Anger burned in his gut, the muscles ticking in his clenched jaw. He wanted to go back in time and pummel the unfeeling parents who had abandoned the vulnerable young Jain. He growled at the mere thought of her mate, a man who should have made up for a lifetime

## Wereplanets: In Ice

of no love. Made her see she was beautiful and wanted. He would never permit Miki to mate with such a man.

"Here we have no scientists. Loremasters are valued. They carry our history into the future."

"Things here are backwards of what I know."

"Different is not bad, Jain. You will adjust." What was he saying? She was leaving when the weretigers arrived. He sighed, pushing that knowledge away. Best not to deal with it tonight.

"Do I have a choice? Everything here happens to me. I have no say in it."

"Controlling everything is not the answer either, Jain."

"Controlling nothing is irresponsible. I'm going to sleep now. Good night, Kesuk." Her voice was prim and antagonizing.

Sighing, he fought the urge to throttle the stubborn wench. Yes, entirely the opposite of his easy-going mate. Too bad he'd developed a soft spot for recalcitrant women.

He dipped his head to meet her gaze. *You are beautiful, Jain. I would not say it if I did not mean it.*

"I know." She shook her head and closed her eyes again, sighing.

She would come to see he was right in time. Unfortunately, with the arrival of the weretigers, their time together would soon draw to a close. He hated to miss seeing her passionate nature come full bloom. He didn't allow himself to consider that some other man might get to enjoy her after she left Alysius. She deserved what happiness she could find. Chest tight with an emotion he had no business feeling, he reached out to slide a tender hand down her soft midnight hair, reveling in the silky feel of her soft cheek. He lay for a long while, watching her chest rise and fall in sleep before he tucked the furs tighter around her and his daughter. The two most precious females in his life.



## Crystal Jordan

### Chapter Seven

At sunrise the next morning, Miki dragged Jain along on a hunting and gathering party. She was curious to see more of the planet. With her clothes on this time. They bundled in warm cloaks and slung gray-striped leather satchels across their shoulders. Everything was striped here. She made a mental note to ask Kesuk why at dinner this evening.

That thought brought her up short. This outing was also a convenient way to escape Kesuk. He hadn't been in bed when she woke up this morning and he hadn't bothered to leave a note about where he'd gone so early. She didn't really want to see him after they'd shredded each other last night. She'd said more than she should have about her family history. Her heart gave a painful squeeze. What an awful mess.

Miki thrust her hand into Jain's and pulled her as fast as her little legs could go. "Jain! Come on, we must keep up."

"All right, I'm coming. Hold your horses." At least spending time with Miki was guaranteed to lift her dark mood.

"We need to stay with the guards. There are predators at Thaw."

"Have you ever seen one of the predators?" She swallowed, glancing around, grateful for the full contingent of Kesuk's huge guards.

"Yes, but I've never seen a horse. What is it? Why do you have to hold it?"

Squeezing the girl's hand, Jain laughed. "It's an expression that means *don't be impatient*."

Miki wrinkled her pert little nose. "I don't think I like horses."

## Wereplanets: In Ice

Soon they were spread out in a small clearing, chattering, laughing, Miki showing Jain how to pick fresh berries.

"This one. It's the very best one this turn." Miki held up a tiny plum colored berry between her fingers before popping it into her mouth and chewing with exaggerated delight. She'd declared the same thing about almost every fruit she'd picked.

"If you don't stop eating the very best ones, how will anyone know you found any at all?"

Miki grinned. "I'll tell them. Oh, but *this* one. It's the very b—"

A high-pitched scream of animal pain rent the air, raising chills down Jain's arms. Her head whipped around to see one of the guards go down in spray of crimson blood and gore on the white snow. A huge gray tiger-striped animal pounced on his chest, fangs bared. It was vaguely the shape of an Earthan wolf, but nearly the same size as Kesuk in his bear form.

Jain gasped. "Oh, God."

"Come Jain, back to the caves. They hunt in packs!" Again, Miki grasped Jain's hand tight, pulling hard.

Women and children ran and screamed, dumping their satchels and changing into bear form to run faster.

"Go, Miki." Jain ran behind the girl, making sure she kept up as they followed the line of Arctic bears. Adrenaline sang in her veins. Her heart pounded as her arms and legs pumped hard, kicking up snow behind her. Roaring sounded from the clearing they'd left behind.

They skidded through loose gravel alongside the steep ravine that led to the back entrance of Sea Den. Suddenly, Miki lost her footing and dropped over the side.

"Miki!" Jain dove for the girl, catching her hand and keeping her from falling to the rocks below. Miki's wide, frightened eyes locked with hers as her desperate grip tightened. The dark irises of her eyes disappeared as the black spread to touch the corners of her eyes.

"Don't let go!" Miki's nose turned black and started to elongate, her breath panting out, growing heavier by the moment as she started to shift forms.

## Crystal Jordan

"I won't, honey. But I can't hold you if you change into a bear, okay? I've got you. It's okay," she soothed.

Miki whimpered, but her nose resumed its human shape. "Okay. Okay. Can you pull me up?"

"Yeah." Jain grunted and shimmied backward over the gravel. Small rocks scraped the skin on her stomach as her short tunic rode up. She wrapped her free hand around a protruding rock, ignoring the bite into her bare flesh, because it kept her from sliding into the ravine. Miki hefted her torso over the lip of the crevice, and then curled up her knee to hoist herself the rest of the way. She flopped over on her back, panting.

"Come on, sweetie. We need to hurry." Jain pushed onto her knees, intending to pull the two of them to their feet.

Miki sat up, sniffing the air before her gaze focused over Jain's shoulder. "*Get down.*"

Jain hit the ground, hunching over Miki as a hulking dark shape flew over their heads and down the side of the ravine. The predator scrabbled for purchase, growling and leaping for the top. Its loud baying would bring more if they hunted together. Where the hell were all their guards?

Jain hauled Miki into her arms, sprinting for the nearest tree with low limbs. It was a young sapling, but it looked like it could hold them. If the predators were like the wolves on Earth, they wouldn't be able to climb a tree. *She hoped.*

The predator topped the edge of the ravine and hurtled toward them at astonishing speed. Oh, God.

She shoved Miki on the lowest branch. "Climb up!"

After Miki hefted herself up to the next branch, Jain jumped to catch her elbows over the branch. She'd always been awful at chin-ups in school. Her booted toes kicked into the tree trunk, giving her purchase so she could haul her left knee up. Something snapped around her right ankle, yanking her back. Her chin scraped on the bark. She caught the branch with her hands and it bowed under the combined weight of her and the predator.

"Jain!" Miki shrieked.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

Jain screamed, panicking as the predator's teeth bit into the tough leather of her boot with crushing force. She swung wildly, fighting to hold onto the branch. Looking over her shoulder she could see the evil thing's yellow eyes. Drawing her free foot back, she aimed for the tip of its snout. She connected, hard.

The predator yowled and dropped her foot, shaking its head madly. Adrenaline pumped through her veins as she hauled herself back up on to the branch. She sobbed for air, bouncing on her good foot and forcing herself to climb up and up, away from the predator.

"K-keep going, Miki. High as you can."

"Are you all right?"

"Yes. Just c-climb, sweetie." Jain pulled herself as high as she could before the slim branches began to bow under her weight. That only put her about thirty feet above the ground and the little tree shook as the predator hurled itself at the base. She straddled a branch and tugged Miki down in front of her, wrapping her arms around the trunk to secure them in place. Bark bit into her fingers and the branch chafed her inner thighs. The pungent aroma of tree sap filled the air as leaves and twigs broke away.

A second predator joined the first, circling the tree, baying eerily. The hairs stood up on the back of Jain's neck and she prayed harder than she ever had before. *Please, let the guards be all right and on their way to help. Please let Kesuk come.* Her ankle throbbed and she squeezed her eyes shut, not wanting to watch as the predators hurled their combined weight against the slender trunk. The budding leaves shivered at each impact.

A deep roar sounded in the distance. More must be coming. What the hell was she *doing* here? She didn't want to be mauled and eaten by some freakish wolf-tiger beastie. She bit back a sob, pulling air in through her nose to calm her erratic breathing, coughing as she sucked pollen into her airway.

"Make them go away, Jain." Miki whimpered, her tiny fingers forming claws to dig into the tree. Jain couldn't think of a single comforting thing to say, so she just hugged her close and held on for dear

## Crystal Jordan

life, literally. They weren't getting her out of this tree until they knocked the damn thing over.

The roaring came closer, almost upon them. She turned her head in the direction of the clearing, watching to see how many predators would come. Instead, a massive Arctic bear broke through the line of trees, followed by four more. It let out a bellowing roar, leaping forward with claws extended and fangs bared, galloping for the nearest predator. The two met with a loud crunch of bone and sinew, two huge animals locked in combat.

"Kesuk," Jain breathed. The two rolled away and she strained to see what was going on, careful not to lose her balance.

Terrifying growls, squeals, and grunts exploded from the two fighters. They reared back on hind legs to slash at each with tooth and claw. The predator slammed Kesuk over and they spun sideways through the snow before they crashed into the base of the tree. Jain squashed Miki against the tree as the wild swaying started to crack the trunk. The whole tree began to give way as half the roots tore from the ground. The two hit the slim tree again and again, the impact of fangs on flesh audible as they ripped into each other.

As quickly as it had begun, it stopped. Everything was silent.

"Papa!" Miki tried to dive down, but Jain held her still.

Groaning, Kesuk heaved away from the still predator. Blood matted his white fur. He shook hard from head to tail before approaching the foot of the tree. The predator's fleeing pack mate was easily overtaken by the other bears and dragged to the ground. Jain looked away, she didn't want to see anymore.

*Come down now. It's safe.* Kesuk's thoughts echoed in her mind.

She eased her cramped grip on the trunk and scooted back to let a straining Miki down first. The girl made short work of the climb down, landing on her father's back and chattering about how she hadn't been scared and how exciting it was and how Jain had saved her from the big, bad predators.

Jain followed more slowly, the ache in her ankle becoming more pronounced. Adrenaline still pumped through her system, making her

## Wereplanets: In Ice

hands and legs shake. She reached the lowest branch and bent to grasp it, lowering herself to dangle a foot from the ground. Bracing herself for the pain, she dropped down. Gasping as her ankle nearly buckled, she stumbled back against the trunk.

*Jain?*

"I'm fine." She straightened, laying a hand on the dense fur on Kesuk's back while his now human and very naked warriors gathered their silver-and-black striped kill. Well, at least she knew now why almost everything they wore was striped.

Shaking that inane thought away, she turned toward Sea Den and began the long slow walk back, careful to pick her way through the rocks and gravel so she didn't worsen her ankle by twisting it. A large young bear pulled alongside of her, nudging her hand with his nose until she used his shoulder for balance. She suspected it was Imnek, but couldn't be sure and didn't ask because she was so focused on getting back in one piece. Miki, now in her bear form, gamboled ahead of them, pouncing into snow drifts.

\* \* \* \* \*

Steam rose from the large tub, the heated water lapping around Jain's thighs and buttocks as she lowered herself into her bath. A low moan slid from her lips at the sensuous delight of the water on her skin. The stiffness eased from her calf and ankle and she flexed the joint. Sighing, she leaned back against the rim and tried to relax.

The fear she'd felt this afternoon was not something she'd soon forget. How had these people survived so long with those *things* hunting them? Why had they settled this planet if they hadn't been able to eradicate such a threat? Back on Earth, she'd heard reports of whole settlements being wiped away without a trace. Now she understood why.

She tapped restlessly against the sides of the tub, water sloshing as she shifted. Sighing, she gave up and tried to leverage herself out of the tub. She was still too keyed up from the adrenaline rush to really relax.

## Crystal Jordan

She was still half-in, half-out of the water, when the door slammed back against the wall, making her jump.

Kesuk stood there naked, having just shifted. His eyes were still black from corner to corner, and something wild and dangerous lurked in his gaze. Her stomach fluttered, breath speeding with anticipation. Sharp desire rushed through her, peaking her nipples, dampening her pussy, readying her for penetration.

He kicked the door shut behind him with one foot as he advanced across the room. "I won't be gentle."

"I don't want you to." No, she wanted him fast and hard, to burn off the terror she'd experienced today. Knowing what he needed, what she needed, she lifted her arms in invitation.

Never hesitating, he scooped her out of the tub, dripping water all over the floor. She ignored the mess, thrusting her fingers into his hair, pulling his lips to hers. They bit and nipped at each other, and she dragged her teeth hard over his bottom lip.

Setting her on the edge of her side table, he lifted her knees in his hands, pushing between her thighs. "Lean back," he rasped.

She reclined on her hands, widened her legs for him, arching hard as he jerked her pussy lips apart to thrust into her. He started a fast, deep rhythm, pumping into her hot channel.

They fell on each other with a desperation she'd never expected. Beads of bathwater rolled down her arms and legs, making her slide on the table. Her head rested against the wall, her neck tensing as she moved with his thrusts. Tears gathered at the corners of her eyes, slipped unchecked down her cheeks, the emotions of the day pushing forward until she couldn't contain them anymore.

He was hitting her just right and she was screaming, the sound too loud to her ears, but she didn't care anymore. Her fingers wrapped around the edge of the polished wood table and she pressed her pelvis up to meet his hard thrusts. He pulled her knees higher on his hips, pistoning deep, faster and faster.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

"I'm coming." Her hips froze midair, legs tensing as her pussy spasmed around his cock. His thrusts became deep and wild as they raced each other to orgasm, their eyes locked, riding the storm together.

His fangs slid out and he roared as he came, his head thrown back, the muscles on his neck and shoulders tensing. His hands clamped on her ass, pulling her closer, pressing his cock as deep inside her as she could handle. Then he sighed, relaxing, his forehead dropping to rest on her chest.

The drag of his hot flesh in hers as he slid out of her made her pussy clench on his dick. He groaned, thrust against her cervix hard and pushed her into an aftershock of orgasm. She shuddered, clinging to his shoulders. Backing away, he slid an arm under her legs, lifting her against his chest. A few steps, and he laid her across the bed, settling beside her.

He feathered his fingers down her legs, made her shiver at the light touch. She eased her legs apart a little, hoping to encourage further exploration. His fingers circled her injured ankle and she flinched from the touch. She could walk on it, but it was bruised.

"Did I hurt you before?" Concern creased his forehead as he examined her leg.

"No. It's just sore. Really." He wasn't going to stop for the night, was he? He'd never stopped at one orgasm before. She felt cheated.

"Hmm...I think you need to keep this ankle elevated." He flashed a wicked little grin and her heart turned over. God, she adored being around him. Just in these small moments between them. How he teased her and made her laugh. Maybe even when he made her mad. Even when she wanted to kick his ass, she knew he cared. Her problems mattered to him. She had a very short list of people in her life she could say that about. Plus, sex with him was the best she'd ever had. She smiled back at him. Nope, she couldn't forget the great sex.

Still grinning, he propped her legs on his shoulders and kissed his way down her good leg to swirl his tongue under her knee. She moaned, surprised that was such a sensitive area. He nipped the soft flesh, and echoing fire flashed between her legs. As always, she was hot for him within two seconds. She didn't think she'd ever get used to it.



## Crystal Jordan

"Put your hands above your head."

"Yes, *master*." She smirked, but stretched her arms up, locking her hand over her wrist.

"I see you're learning your place here."

She opened her mouth to argue, but when he shifted suddenly, pressing his cock deep into her wet pussy all that emerged from her throat was a low moan.

He grasped her thighs, controlling her movements, pumping so slowly she wanted to scream. The angle was amazing. It was so tight. Rolling his hips, he increased the friction, slipping one hand down to flit over her swollen clitoris.

She strained upward, her hand tight on her wrist. "Please let me touch you, Kesuk. Please, I want—"

*Begging, little bear? I like that. Do it again.*

"Please." Her hips bucked, but his hand moved from her clit to press down on her belly, staying her movements, making her sob in frustration. "Go faster, deeper, *something*."

Chuckling, he resumed his lazy circling of her wet flesh, pushing into her, pulling away. She clamped her pussy on his cock, squeezing tight with each thrust, until he groaned. Grinning, she watched his control slip. His breath hissed and his fangs slid out.

"Jain," he growled.

"Yes?" She kept her tone as sweet and innocent as she could, but she knew the wide grin that split her lips gave her away.

His next thrust slapped against her and she gasped. Hot pleasure rolled through her. Her thighs flexed to meet his next push. He slapped her ass, the shock thrusting her into orgasm.

"Kesuk!"

But he wasn't listening. He'd lost all control. His eyes were solid black and he pounded roughly into her, consumed by his own needs. He threw back his head and roared his finish, filling her with his hot seed.

He collapsed beside her, panting. He turned her on her side, and then buried his face in her hair, each breath fluttering the short strands.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

His arms tightened around her, pulling her back against his chest, cradling her to him.

She fought the sudden tears pressing against her lids because she felt...safe. Right here on this barbaric, backwards planet with this uncivilized man.

"I thought I'd lost you. That I failed you." His harsh whisper seemed to echo in the chamber. "You and Miki. I thought..." He swallowed, shook his head and stopped speaking.

"You didn't." She turned to face him, laid a hand on his cheek, smoothing her fingers over his strong jaw.

"I could have. In a few more moments—" He leaned his forehead against hers, shuddering, breathing ragged.

Stroking his shoulder, she tried to comfort him. "It didn't happen. You can't control everything, remember?"

He chuckled. "My own words used against me."

"Used *for* you. You were right." Her fingers slipped into his hair.

"Truly? Say it again, little bear. My ears must be deceiving me."

"Shut up." She laughed, bucking away from him.

Planting his palm in the middle of her back, he arched her torso toward him, dipping to suck her nipple.

"Ah." Clenching her fingers in his hair, she pulled him closer.

He bit and released her nipple, just rough enough to make her moan, pulling as much of her small breast into his mouth as he could. His stubble scraped at the soft underside. She hooked her leg over his thigh, opening herself to his thick dick.

A crisp knock interrupted them and they both groaned.

"If it's one of my soldiers, he'll be on night duty for a full turn." Kesuk reared up, his still-hard cock bouncing in the air.

A sleek man with dramatic black-striped auburn hair walked in without waiting for permission. His kohl-rimmed gaze took in the entire situation, including Jain's blushing cheeks. Everything about the man was golden; including his skin, his eyes, and the thick loop in his ear. What appeared to be faded henna tattoos curved in stripes over his forearms.

## Crystal Jordan

Kesuk gave a warning growl before jerking the pelts over Jain.  
“You have a great deal of nerve coming in here, cat king.”

“The correct term is *Amir*, and felines are known for their arrogance. I am no exception.” The golden man favored her with a charming smile. His pupils were slitted like a cat’s. Fascinating.

Forgetting to be embarrassed, she held out her hand. “Hello. I’m Jain.”

“So you’re the lovely woman who’s caused such a fuss. I am the Amir Varad Mohan.” Ignoring Kesuk, he swept her hand to his lips.

“Are you really a cat king? They were just considering gene-splicing experiments with Siberian Tigers when I left Earth.”

“Yes, tigers were successfully spliced. The king of the jungle, as it were.”

“That was lions.”

“I don’t see any lions left. They abandoned the throne.” His golden eyes twinkled in good humor and she liked him immediately.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kesuk padded naked to his own room, Varad on his heels.

“My apologies for interrupting, Lord Kesuk. I wished to warn you—”

“Warn me? Of what?”

“The Aquatilian ambassador accompanied me on this voyage. He awaits us in your main hall.”

A growl rose in Kesuk’s throat. “He should have remained on the ship. He has no business here.”

“He wants to collect the humans.”

He frowned, shooting a quick glance at the other man. “The humans? There is only one.”

“No, there is a second. She was at High Den.”

“What did you have to trade to get her?” Browns were notorious in their wily dealings, so much so that he was amazed they had parted with the other human at all. Especially if she was attractive as Jain.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

"Nothing. They thanked me to take her. She is not as...amiable as your human."

"Mine?" He missed a step, the blow hitting him hard. *Jain*. He braced an arm against the wall, trying to catch his breath. A hard hand closed over his shoulder.

"I am sorry, my friend."

Kesuk shook Varad off. "I'm fine. I knew this day would come. I planned to send her with you when you came."

"Not everything goes according to plan. Keep her if you wish. Unless my instincts deceive me, the lady would remain if you ask."

"No. No, she is not suited for this world." If he said the words enough, he would believe them. He had to. It was his duty to do what was best for those under his protection. Look how close he had come to losing her this day. He shook his head. He couldn't keep her and she would be safer hidden under the oceans of Aquatilis.

"Kesuk—"

"I will join you shortly. I must dress."

## Crystal Jordan

### Chapter Eight

Jain pulled the soft dove-gray tunic over her head. It fluttered around her thighs, almost brushing her knee-high charcoal boots. Wanting to look good for Kesuk and his guests, she forked her fingers through her short hair. The side slits on her tunic exposed tight striped leather pants with every step she took. She hurried to the main hall, limping a little on her stiff ankle.

Before she'd even entered the room, a loud feminine voice demanded, "I don't want to be patient. I want to see her now. I want to make sure she hasn't been mistreated."

She knew that voice. Breaking into an uneven jog, she rounded the last corner.

"She has not been mistreated." Anger laced Kesuk's deep voice, his prickly honor at question.

"Dr. Gibbons? *Sera?*" Jain asked, stunned to see someone from her ship.

"Jain." A huge smile lit the young scientist's face.

"Where did you...*How* did you...The ship exploded. No one else got out but me. I waited and waited and no one else was there."

"My cryogenic pod was thrown from the ship. The ship probably started to break up when we entered the atmosphere. I was thrown clear of the crash somewhere in the mountains and ended up with a bunch of smelly bear shifters...You're hurt." Sera abruptly changed topics as her

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gaze took in Jain's limp. She turned an accusing glare on Kesuk. He growled in return, his irritation plain.

"I had an accident, Sera. It wasn't Kesuk's fault. He saved me from hypothermia." *No need to mention the predators.*

Jain stepped up onto the dais that held the main table and Kesuk's large chair. She stood next to him, placing a hand on his shoulder. Bare-chested, he wore tight leather breeches and a long, sleeveless leather cape with a huge fur collar, making him appear even more massive than he already was. A hammered silver circlet hugged his muscled bicep. Some symbol of his rank in the clan? She'd never seen him wear it before. He lounged in the chair, his leg hooked negligently over the arm, chin propped in his hand. She fought a grin as she realized he was playing the barbarian they thought him to be.

Sera sniffed, scanning the large hall with obvious distaste. Jain stiffened, wanting to defend this place. She loved it here. She loved the people; exuberant Miki, contained Nukilik, controlled Kesuk. *Kesuk*. She tried to be rational, to see Sea Den through Sera's eyes. Large, scrubbed bare stone floors, decorated skins on the walls, trestle tables. It lacked the technology she was used to, but the roaring fire and groups of chatting people made it homey and welcoming.

*She wanted to stay.*

"You're coming with us, Jain."

Sera's voice broke through Jain's reverie. "What?"

"We'll be on Aquatilis in three weeks. They came to get us."

"They?" She swiveled around, seeing Varad and another man behind him. The stranger's pale skin set off the sheet of inky hair that hung straight to the middle of his back. Almost as white as Kesuk, he had deep turquoise eyes and a high forehead. He also had an air of perpetual blasé boredom.

The man had a small flat nose, and his nostrils flared in obvious distaste as he took in the main hall of Sea Den. Then he turned to Jain and executed a neat bow. "Ambassador Hahn of Aquatilis at your service, Dr...?"

## Crystal Jordan

"Oh, I'm not a scientist. My brother was. I'm a school teacher. And please, call me Jain."

Disappointment flashed in his turquoise eyes, but he recovered quickly. "How charming. You may call me Bretton, of course."

Memory kicked in and her history knowledge popped up. "Sirius Hahn was the founder of the Aquatilian colony. Is he your ancestor?"

"The very same." A wide genuine smile curved his lips. Bretton was a handsome man when he wasn't wearing a condescending look. "Aquatilis will embrace a woman with so fine a knowledge of our past. I'm sure we can arrange for more...comfortable lodging than the Alysians offered you."

"I somehow doubt Aquatilis could compare." Jain grinned, remembering the feel of soft pelts under her back as Kesuk pounded inside her. A private smile lit Kesuk's face as he glanced up at her, letting his gaze slide down her body.

Bretton's lip curled. "Unlike the barbarians, we still have use of most of the technology from your time. It will be much more to your liking."

Kesuk's gaze flashed with resentment. When he smiled, he let his fangs show. "It is unfortunate that our calls for aid from your *advanced* people resulted in nothing. Our loremasters teach that while we were struggling to survive, your *technology* was worthless because you never came. How un-neighborly."

The ambassador flushed, took a small step back. "Yes, well. We had our own problems when no supplies were delivered from Earth. Our life support systems were failing and half our population was still made up of unaltered humans. You understand our dilemma."

"Oh, yes. I understand perfectly."

A cold silence settled over the group as old bitterness played out between Kesuk and Bretton. Jain took a breath. "As far as I can tell, every one of the colonized planets have done what they must to survive. For Aquatilis, that meant preserving the technology that runs your life support systems in the underwater city. For Alysians, it meant learning to

## Wereplanets: In Ice

cope with being hunted by predators." Flexing her sore ankle, she shivered at the ugly memory.

Varad stepped forward. "An excellent assessment. I'm sure you would be fascinated to know about the adaptation the weredragons have made on their desert world."

"*Dragons?*" Sera and Jain echoed together.

Sera's brow puckered. "That's not feasible. All the other shifter species were created from splicing human genes with known animals. Dragons are a myth."

"These are not." Varad shrugged.

"I want to see." Academic zeal lit Sera's eyes. This was the kind of puzzle the woman lived for.

"We have several Harenan diplomats stationed on Aquatilis. You'll see them soon." Bretton's nasal accent cut across their conversation. He smiled at Sera and she all but melted in a puddle at his feet. Oh, dear. Sera was the youngest scientist to be recruited to Aquatilis, and only then because of her precocious genius. She had no social skills or experience with men. How unfortunate that her first crush would be on such a techno-snob.

Jain rolled her eyes, and then sighed. She probably fawned just as much when Kesuk smiled at her.

Kesuk rose from his chair and bent to Jain's ear. "We must speak, little bear." He held out his hand and she placed her fingers in his proffered palm. He drew her away from the group as they discussed the vagaries of dragons and led down the hall to her chamber.

She knew what this was about. What he was going to say. Panic exploded in her belly. *No*.

His big hands closed over her shoulders and she leaned back into his warmth. His forehead rested against the back of her head.

"I don't want to go." The words burst from her.

Tears pressed against her lids. How could she leave this place now? She loved it here. They needed her for what she could teach them. She was valued, free to be herself as she never had been before. No expectation of



## Crystal Jordan

rigid logic. If Bretton was anything to go by, she doubted that would be the case on Aquatilis.

"You cannot stay." Kesuk's hands tightened on her shoulders.

She closed her eyes over the pain. Her voice grew softer. "Why?"

"It is not safe here."

"It's not safe anywhere. Even technology malfunctions. How else did I end up here? Now?"

He sighed, his breath tickling the back of her neck. "Jain—"

"Safety isn't a good enough reason. What else do you have?"

"I don't want you here. This is my Den. You must go."

He didn't want her to stay? Pain hit her square in the chest, squeezed her heart in an iron grip. She searched for something, *anything* to change his mind. "But...but, my debt isn't paid. I'm still your slav—"

"You risked your life to save my cub. Your debt is repaid. I release you."

She turned to face him, pulling out of his arms. "I only did what anyone would have done."

"That is not so. Anyone in my clan would have left her for dead."

"That's horrible and barbar—" She cut herself off, the look on his face freezing her blood. "Oh, Kesuk, that's not what I—"

"No. Perhaps you are right. You will be more suited to the *civility* of Aquatilis." He spun on a heel and strode from the room, never once looking back.

Her breath choked on a sob. "Kesuk."

Light-headed, she leaned against the bed, her body tingling with shock. She felt as though a part of her had been ripped away. *He wanted her gone.*

Well, she sure as hell didn't want to stay where she wasn't wanted. She began to pack, stuffing her clothes and belongings randomly into a satchel. Her hands shook so badly, Miki's shells slipped through her fingers to scatter across the floor.

"Damn."

She gathered up the shells, crawling half way under the bed to retrieve a few strays. The only man to ever make her feel didn't even want

## Wereplanets: In Ice

to be on the same planet with her. Her breathing rattled past parched lips as she tried to swallow the huge lump in her throat. She pressed her forehead against the cool stone floor, trying to push away the emotions like she used to. She tried to make it matter as little as her husband leaving her. She couldn't.

Someone knocked on the door. "Jain?"

"I'll be out in a minute, Sera."

"What are you doing under there?" Footsteps tapped across the floor.

"I dropped Miki's shells." Where were they? She searched, frantic to find them all. She couldn't leave them. She just—she couldn't. They were her present. Her breath sobbed out, stirring the dust.

"There are plenty of shells out here. Just leave them."

"No. I have to bring them all. I *have* to." Tears burned her lids and she clamped a desperate hand over her mouth to stifle her sudden sobs.

"Okay...okay...I'll help you." Sera's usually impatient voice was kind and soothing.

"I can do it myself. I can—" They were her *present*. The only connection she'd have to Kesuk and his family after she left. Her hand closed over the last tiny shell. She sighed, an inordinate amount of relief singing through her. A tear leaked down her cheek. "I have it now."

She swiped at her eyes, sniffing as she shimmied out from under the bed, dragging a few stray dust bunnies with her. Standing, she brushed off her clothes and turned to slide the shells into her bag, avoiding eye contact with the other woman.

"It's better that we're leaving, Jain. We were supposed to go to Aquatilis in the first place."

"I know." She cleared her throat. She'd dealt with difficult situations before. She could handle this. She didn't have a choice. If Kesuk didn't want her to stay, then that was it. End of story.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Crystal Jordan

The big bed was empty without Kesuk. Cold. Jain squeezed her eyes shut, willing sleep to come. Wavering dawn sunshine filtered through the small light shafts in her ceiling. *He hadn't come to her.* She swung her legs over the side of the bed, standing. If he wouldn't come to her, she would go to him. She deserved one more time in his arms, damn it.

She realized she was stark naked and had no idea where his room was. He had always stayed with her. Stumped, she sat back down. Looking around, she tried to remember where she'd put the map he'd given her when she'd first arrived. Maybe his chambers were labeled. On her knees, she rummaged through her pack, trying to find something that felt like parchment.

Her door swung open.

She froze. She didn't even need to look to know it was him.

"Kesuk."

He didn't say a word. In two strides he was on her, scooping her into his arms. She clung to his neck, wrapping her legs around his waist. Thank God he was already naked. She could definitely develop a distinct liking for nudity. *If only she had more time.* She shoved the thought away, focused on enjoying this time with Kesuk. Her last time.

Stroking his hands over her back, he seemed to relish the feel of her skin, burying his face in her neck to breathe deep. Surprised that he wanted to go slow, she tightened her legs to press closer to him.

"Kesuk, I—"

*The time for words has passed, little bear. Be with me tonight.*

"Yes." The answer was simple, plain. She'd take what she could get before she had to leave. One night. One time. One moment. If that's all there was, she'd let go and enjoy it. He'd broken down all of her barriers and she was done pretending he hadn't. She wanted him.

His mouth covered hers, tongue twining with hers in a slow, deep kiss. Walking blindly, he lowered her to the bed. The furs felt soft against her back as he settled on top of her. The tip of his dick rubbed against her wet pussy lips. Arching up, she waited for the hard thrust that would bury his cock deep within her. It didn't come. Instead, he moved

## Wereplanets: In Ice

backward, spreading soft kisses over her jaw and neck. She gasped when he nipped her earlobe, the sting causing hot moisture to pool between her spread thighs.

"Please."

*Shh.*

He pressed his lips to the base of her neck, and his teeth raked over her collarbone. She buried her fingers in his dense, silky hair, loving the texture of it, tugging sharply to speed his progress. Not wanting to wait, she wriggled her hips, pushed the head of his cock into her vagina. He sucked her nipple deep into his mouth, drawing hard on the tip.

Frantic, she bucked against him, her heart pounding hard. She couldn't wait. She needed him now. She clamped her legs tight around his hips, pulling him down as she arched up. He groaned, his cock sinking into her, setting a slow, steady, maddening rhythm. Twisting beneath him, she tried to urge him on.

"Kesuk, *please*." She cupped his cheeks between her hands, forced him to look at her. "I want you. No one can make me feel the way you do. Only you. Now *hurry up*."

Surprise flashed across his face and he laughed, a cocky grin playing over his face. *Like this?*

Three quick hard strokes filled her to the limit. "Yes."

Her hands closed over his ass, pulling him closer, deeper. He quickened his pace, taking her hard, just like she liked it. His masculine scent filled her nose as she sobbed for breath. She clung to him as he rode her, locked together, driving toward orgasm. A few more moments and she would go over, but she held it off, fighting to draw the pleasure out.

He froze, his eyes going all black, his hips jerking in fast plunging strokes as he came inside of her. Groaning into her mouth, he sucked her lower lip between his teeth.

*Jain. I...Jain.*

His thought echoed in her mind, connecting her to him as she shuddered hard, pussy clenching around his dick, her nails biting into his back, her legs tight around his waist.

"Kesuk," she whispered.

## Crystal Jordan

Dawn broke and lit the small skylights in her room, the beams gilding his pale skin in a golden glow as they held each other tight, not wanting this last moment to pass. He pressed his forehead to hers, his unsteady breath caressing her face.

Then he rolled off her, taking his warmth with him. He rose gracefully from the bed, his large body beautiful in the morning light. "I will leave you to your final preparations."

She swallowed and crossed her arms over her breasts. "You're not even going to see me off?"

His long fingers clenched on the wood of the doorframe. His voice grated out. "No. I...can't. Imnek will escort you."

Hot tears flooded her eyes and she tilted her head back, trying to hold them in. "Okay," she whispered. What else could she say? It was over. Finished.

"I'm sorry, little bear."

A soft laugh caught on a sob at his use of her nickname. God, she would miss that.

He finally looked at her, glancing back over his shoulder, a sad smile playing on his lips. "You wanted me to delegate."

"Just...go." She made herself watch as the door closed behind him.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

### Chapter Nine

A thin layer of ice crunched under Jain's heavy boots. She walked with Sera, Bretton and Varad toward the weretiger ship. A huge number of Kesuk's guards accompanied them. He seemed to have emptied out the entire Den for their escort. After her last jaunt outside, she wasn't complaining, but it seemed overkill to send this many to protect them. Her steps dragged. They'd been walking for hours, but it seemed the shortest journey of her life. Everything inside of her wanted to turn around and run back, but instead she pressed forward.

"I have some theories."

Jain sucked her cheeks in to stifle a laugh. How many times had she heard that phrase when Sera was working with her brother? Her heart squeezed at the bittersweet memory of her emotionally distant brother. It hurt so much that even the possibility of growing closer had died with him.

Jain gave Sera a sad smile. "Theories about what?"

"About why we never made it to Aquatilis, of course." Sera rolled her eyes as though she couldn't believe Jain wasn't keeping up with her line of thought.

"Tell me." Jain wasn't sure she'd understand half of what Sera said, but she'd listen. *Anything* to help her not think of Kesuk.

"I would like to hear this as well." Bretton walked a few paces behind them, his hands clasped behind his back.

## Crystal Jordan

Sera blushed and swallowed hard. "Um...well, it's simple really...we, um, we...it's possible the hyperdrive failed when we were down jumping and my postulation is that we came out of lightspeed too quickly and actually ended up in the neighboring solar system, still traveling toward our destination, but slowly. Then we were caught in the orbit of Alysius for centuries, those on board sustained by the life support systems in our individual cryogenic pods."

"Why wasn't the crew alerted to the problem?" Varad matched stride with Jain on the right.

"Our ship was strictly a supply berth. Jain and I were the only passengers. On supply ships, it was procedure for the crew to enter cryogenic freeze shortly after the jump to lightspeed and the system would automatically wake them at the end of the standard jump. Ours was not standard, so the crew never woke up. However, *it is possible*—"

"So, why did we crash? Why didn't we remain in orbit forever?" Jain interrupted Sera's academic rambling.

A frown puckered the other woman's face. "Well...I don't know exactly."

"You're here now, that's all that matters." Bretton smiled at Sera.

Jain actually thought the good doctor might swoon. She fought her fifth eye roll of the day. Her gaze met Varad's and he coughed into his palm to hide his laugh.

"What's Aquatilis like?" Sera grinned back at the ambassador.

"It's wonderful, much better than this. Atlantis is a beacon of lights you can see for miles. We have acres of botanical gardens inside the city proper with dozens of shops to choose from. Saltwater silk would look phenomenal with your lovely hair, Doctor." Bretton's nose wrinkled at the thick fur cape Sera wore now. *Jain's* cape.

Jain's hands balled into fists as she tried to rein in her anger. Bretton had only been here a few weeks. He didn't know anything about these people. She brushed aside the fact that she'd only been on Alysius a few days longer than he had. It had been, what? Three weeks? That was all? It felt like forever. And yet, it had passed far too quickly.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

Sera smiled. "I can't wait. I hate it here. It's like something out of a backwards caveman holostory."

"Not everyone here is like the Browns." Jain bit her tongue. Damn, she should learn to keep her mouth shut.

Their guards grunted in agreement.

"Look at this place." Bretton waved his elegant hand to indicate their uninhabited surroundings.

"It's beautiful. Just because it's not like *your* planet doesn't mean there's anything wrong with it. You're awfully rude for someone who's supposed to be a representative of your people, *Ambassador* Hahn." Jain didn't bother to hide her disdain.

Bretton flushed, whether from anger or embarrassment, Jain didn't know and didn't care. The snob could go sleep with a predator for all she cared. They'd be the perfect match, and she didn't give a damn that she was being unfair to the Aquatilian.

"If you like it so much here, why are you leaving?" Varad's casual question knocked the wind out of her anger.

"Kesuk...doesn't want me." Jain's voice sounded stilted, even to her own ears.

God, it hurt to even say it, let alone feel it. He didn't *want* her.

Varad folded his hands behind his back. "Hmm...that's funny."

"I'm not amused." She shot him a dirty look. Had she thought Varad was the polite one? Well, chalk that one up to another wrong assessment of a male.

"I meant, Lady Jain, that your Lord Kesuk—"

"He's not mine." She clamped her eyes closed, determined not to cry. Not now, not in front of all these people. Striving for her old calm, she opened eyes that were still misty with tears. Damn Kesuk for making her feel and then throwing her away.

"As I was saying...Lord Kesuk did not act like a man who didn't want you."

"That's funny because he's the one making me leave. So what did he act like, hmm?" Her voice was so sweet it was acidic.



## Crystal Jordan

"Like a man doing his duty and cutting his heart out in the process. Like a *good* man with the misfortune to be in love." Varad's mouth kicked up in a memory only he could see.

"You speak like someone with experience." Jain's mind raced. Could it be true? Kesuk was making her leave as a duty? He loved her?

"I am mated."

She blinked, only paying half a mind to the conversation. Her heart fluttered wildly in her chest. Kesuk *loved* her. Stupid man. Stupid, wonderful man with his stupid, ridiculous honor. She smiled at Varad, a huge blinding smile.

Varad blinked, looked away and muttered. "I am mated."

The spaceship came into view, a huge monolithic silver blemish on the pristine forest landscape. Seeing it, Jain made an immediate decision, no thinking, no planning.

"I'm staying."

"Excuse me?" Bretton looked stunned.

"You can't be serious," Sera exclaimed.

Jain took a deep breath, and the heavy weight that had been crushing her chest lifted. "I'm staying. I hope you all have a nice trip."

Varad threw back his head and laughed, the rich sound bounced off the surrounding mountains. He caught her hands in his. "Oh, my lady. Remember the look on his face when he first sees you. You must describe it for me in detail when I return next year."

"Only if you bring your mate with you so I can meet her."

"Done." Varad kissed each of her hands.

"My lord would not appreciate your actions," Imnek growled. Surprised, Jain glanced at the guard who'd stayed within three steps of her the whole journey.

At first she thought Imnek meant encouraging her to stay, but he didn't even look at her. Instead he stared pointedly at Jain's hands tucked in Varad's grip. Varad stepped away from her, bowing to Imnek. "I trust you will see her safely back to Sea Den."

"Her protection is *my* duty." He glared at the weretiger.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

Jain didn't even want to figure out what kind of manly undercurrents were going on here. She was just glad no one was going to make her get on the ship.

"You should come with me. You'll be living in the Dark Ages here." Sera frowned at Jain from the bottom of the pallet loaded with all the trade goods. As the men started loading supplies onto the Vesperi ship, Jain crawled on top and pilfered through the bags until she found hers.

Jain hefted her pack, hopping down into the slushy Thaw snow. The men were growing impatient, watching them work it out. "I love him."

"You could love someone on Aquatilis. That's where we were supposed to go in the first place. And even Varad says it's not as backward as here."

She arched a brow. "That doesn't sound like Varad."

"Not in so many words, but that's basically what he said." Sera folded her arms and tilted her jaw.

Jain sighed. "Things have changed."

"No kidding."

"I meant things have changed with me. Maybe you can walk away from love and find something else that will make you happy. Maybe all you need is your work and your machines, but I need Kesuk and I'm staying."

Sera's eyebrows rose until they almost met her hairline. "You are different."

"I just said that."

"Yes, but you would *never* have said anything like that before. Or told off Bretton. It was always yes dad, yes brother, yes husband."

"Yes, Sera."

Sera snorted, then sobered. "You're sure you'll be okay?"

"As sure as I can be."

"Good luck." Sera leaned in and offered a tentative hug, awkward with affection.

Jain squeezed her tight, popping a kiss on her cheek "You, too."

## Crystal Jordan

"We'll see each other again," Sera whispered in her ear. Then she bolted up the ramp and into the ship.

Waving until the door sealed closed, Jain turned to Imnek, grinning. "Ready?"

"Lord Kesuk is going to kill me."

She looped her hand through his arm. "Well, he wanted you to make more executive decisions. Congratulations, you've succeeded."

Imnek just groaned in response.

\* \* \* \* \*

It was for the best. It was for her own good. Kesuk stalked to her room, flung the door open and stomped inside. His gaze swept the room. He could still smell her. Smell the lingering scent of their sex. He dragged in a deep breath, knowing he'd need to remember every detail in the future, when the pain had subsided. It had been that way with Maruska. Someday, he would cherish his time with Jain. Someday the pain would fade. Now he felt as though a dull blade had ripped his heart out.

He'd been so careful. Not to need her. Not to get attached to her. Not to love her. He wasn't strong enough to lose two women he loved in one lifetime. Nothing had ever hit him as hard as she had. Feelings had developed gradually with his mate. But with Jain? His world had tilted on its axis when she crashed into it. Going back to the cold man he had been before Jain wasn't appealing. Duty was a poor substitute and he knew it now. He'd had Jain to point it out. Passion he could handle, control. But, love? He sighed, laid a hand on the untidy furs, imagining he could still feel the warmth of her body on them. The warmth of her smile, her touch.

"Papa?"

He straightened, turning toward the small voice. Miki and Nukilik stood in the doorway, tears streaking their faces. "Yes?"

He waved them forward and they ran in to hug his legs. "Where did Jain go?"

## Wereplanets: In Ice

"She left for Aquatilis. Did she not say farewell?" Surely Jain would never have done such a thing. She adored his cubs, of that he had no doubt.

"She said she had to leave. When will she be back? Next turn with Amir Varad?" Nukilik's steady eyes gazed up at him, waiting for him to say the right thing. He wished he knew the answers for them.

"That's a very long time to wait, Papa. We'll be so much older then. What if she doesn't recognize us?"

"She's not coming back."

"Not coming back? Why not?" Nukilik's forehead furrowed.

Miki dug her fingers into the top of Kesuk's boot. "She'll miss us very much. She loves us. She said so before she left. She said we weren't to forget."

"Then you're not to forget." He stroked Miki's soft hair back. He took a deep breath, sat on the edge of Jain's bed, and pulled a child on each leg. "Jain was supposed to go to Aquatilis. She needs to be there."

"She didn't like Ambassador Hahn. I could tell. She likes us, so she should have stayed here." Nukilik nodded at that logic. Simple. Reasonable. Fair. The boy would grow into an excellent clan leader someday.

"She has to come back. We love her and she loves us," Miki sobbed, her fingers clenching in the laces on his shirt. He hugged her close, knowing nothing but time would ease her grief.

The distant roar of the weretigers' spaceship flying over Sea Den shook the ground under his feet. The dull ache in his chest intensified to a sharp, blinding pain. He closed his eyes, swallowing. Jain was gone. It was well and truly over now. He felt...empty.

\* \* \* \* \*

Jain found Kesuk lying in her bed, the covers still mussed from their love making, his arms folded behind his head, staring at the curved ceiling.

"I couldn't do it."

## Crystal Jordan

Jerking upright, he twisted to stare at her. He blinked, his expression blank for a moment. "You're supposed to be on the ship."

"I couldn't leave. I was there, ready to board and do what you wanted, what you thought was best. Hell, what was *logical*, but I just...couldn't do it." Spreading her hands, she shrugged.

"I told you I didn't want you here."

"You lied."

He blinked. "What?"

"You lied. I understand, you were trying to do the right thing. I really do get it."

He rolled to the edge of the bed, his booted feet landing on the fur rug. "You won't be able to leave for another turn."

"Yes, that ship has sailed." She grinned, starting to enjoy his confusion. It was about damn time she had the upper hand in something.

"Jain..." He trailed off, at an obvious loss for words.

"I'm staying. I already decided and there's nothing you can do about it. Be angry if you want, but I'm still here. You won't stay mad long though. You want to know why?"

"Why?"

"Because you love me."

He choked.

"That's right, you love me. It took me a while to figure it out, but now it all makes sense. You try to make me happier with myself, more comfortable in my own skin. You worry about me all the time. You sent a whole legion of soldiers to guard me today. Did you really think we needed that many? You saved me from the snow, treat me with respect even when you're being a bossy jerk, and get angry when people try to hurt me."

"I would do the same for anyone under my protection."

"Maybe, but you didn't have to bring me under your protection in the first place. The Blacks wanted to buy me, so you could have gotten rid of me if you wanted to. You didn't want to. You wanted to keep me."

"Blacks are scavengers. I wouldn't—"

## Wereplanets: In Ice

"We can argue about this all night long if you want, because I'm here for another year, so we have plenty of time. Or we can occupy ourselves with something more entertaining..." She smiled at him and unbuttoned her heavy fur-lined jacket. Her tunic quickly followed and his gaze locked on her bare breasts. She bounced on her toes a little to make them jiggle for him, their tips peaking tight.

He sucked in a hissing breath. "Jain—"

"Touch me." She leaned forward so he could do what she wanted.

His hand lifted to stroke down the slope of her breast, fingers plucking at her nipple. Using his other palm to cup her ass, he pulled her forward and buried his face between her breasts. He breathed deep, nudged her soft flesh with his nose, slid his tongue up to swirl around the crest before sucking it deep into his mouth, pulling back to worry the very tip of her hard nipple between his teeth.

She caught her breath, rising on tiptoe to get closer to that wicked mouth. She moaned deep, fisting her fingers in his hair. She loved the silky feel of it against her hands.

He sucked a deep breath, let go of her nipple and rested his chin on her chest. "I did the right thing."

"You did. So did I." She stroked his hair, tears gathering in her eyes.

"Kiss me."

A wicked grin played over her lips and she dropped to her knees between his spread thighs. She slid a fingernail up the leg seam of his pants toward his cock. It strained against the leather as she traced the lacings up to the top, tugged the strings open. "As you wish. You didn't get to have me as your slave very long. Maybe I should make it up to you?"

"Ah, little bear. I do love how your mind works."

His heavy dick slipped free and she wrapped her fingers tight around the base and stroked to the tip. Rotating her hand around the head of his cock, she licked a bead of pre-cum from the tip. She sucked the whole head in, her lips slipping down to the shaft as her hands worked his flesh up and down, slow at first, then faster and faster.

## Crystal Jordan

He groaned, his fingers slipping into her short hair, using his grip to pump her mouth like a pussy. His cock touched the back of her throat. "Hmm," she hummed around his dick, looking into his eyes so she knew he saw her envelope his cock in her mouth.

"Jain." Panting hard, his hands slid under her arms, lifting her off the floor and away from his cock. He rolled them onto the bed and jerked at the lacings on her pants, which tangled tight.

She laughed. "Hey, I wasn't finished yet."

"I very nearly was."

"That was kind of the point."

He growled in frustration, ripping her pants open, the tough leather snapping under his strength. "Lift your ass."

She obeyed, leveraging her hips up to help him slide her pants down, trusting him to take her where she needed to go. He had her naked in a few seconds, and rolled her to her hands and knees. He slid his fingers between her pussy lips, stroking her clit. She moaned, pushing back into his hand. He pressed down on the small of her back, arching her ass up.

The head of his cock pushed at her opening, and then slid hard and deep into her pussy. She dropped down, pressing her face to the covers, gasping at his deep penetration. His hand reached around to stroke her clit in time with his slapping thrusts.

"I can't—"

"You can." He rotated his hips, grinding her in a different rhythm.

"Kesuk..."

"Straighten up," he ordered. His hands pulled up on her ribcage until her back pressed to his chest.

One of his hand resumed stroking her pussy. The other fondled her breasts.

She reached back to tug on his hair, twisting her head around to pull his mouth to hers. His lips captured hers, stroking his tongue into her mouth. Their tongues rubbed, stroked, dueled as their bodies moved together in hard, pounding rhythm.

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Blood sang through her veins, pumping her heart fast. She rubbed her ass against his pelvis, bouncing on his hard cock. He broke from her mouth, his teeth moving to her shoulder and biting down.

"Kesuk." She clawed his strong thighs, which flexed to pump into her hot pussy. Her juices made a slapping noise as they coated his dick.

He pressed down on her clit, rode her on it with his thrusts, pinching her nipple hard.

"I'm coming! Kesuk, I'm coming!" She twisted under the lash of pleasure, her pussy spasming hard. Her heart pounded so hard she could feel the beats just under her skin, her whole body flushing. Oh, God.

"Yes." He pounded with short, jerky strokes, his breath harsh against her neck. Stiffening, he froze, shuddering his orgasm.

Gasping hard, they collapsed on their sides. He wrapped his arms around her, cradling her back against his chest, burying his nose in her hair, breathing deep.

She rubbed her hand over his forearms in lazy circles. "I was right. That was definitely more fun than arguing."

He grunted, his arms tightening. "You had your chance to go. I let you. Now, you're mine."

"And you're mine. Forever." She sighed, snuggling back against him, content.

"Forever."

"I love you, Kesuk."

"I know."

"*I know?* That's all I get?" She clawed his arm in retaliation.

He chuckled. "I love you, too. Now kiss me."

His cock rose between the cleft of her ass and she gasped in surprise, pushing her hips against his hardening flesh.

"Again?"

"Forever."

**The End**



## **Crystal Jordan**

### **Author Bio**

Crystal Jordan only began writing about a year ago, after she finished graduate school and needed something to fill the hours that used to be eaten away by homework. What started as a hobby has quickly become a new career. She now writes paranormal, futuristic, contemporary, and erotic romance. Additionally, she is a member of RWA and its erotic romance chapter, Passionate Ink. She also belongs to the award winning author's resource website and forum RomanceDivas.com, where she serves as a moderator and Paranormal co-liaison.

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## **Wereplanets: In Ice**

Also Available from Cobblestone Press, LLC

Full Swing by Crystal Jordan

### **Chapter One**

She loved hot, sweaty sex. Which is probably why her husband's big body moving against hers felt so amazing. Tyler's long fingers gripped her hips, working her on his cock. Head thrown back, she clasped his biceps for balance as she straddled his lean hips, riding fast and wild. Each penetration filled her, stretching her pussy to the limit. Only her slick moisture made it a comfortable fit. She shifted her knees to the right to change the angle of his thrust.

Tyler's breath erupted in a painful hiss. "Jill."

Right. His damaged knee, the long surgical scars bisected his muscular leg from calf to mid thigh. She recoiled left so she wasn't leaning on it. "Sorry," she whispered.

"Don't be." He settled back against the headboard and let his hands slip up her back to cup her shoulders, pushed her long hair out of his way, and pulled her tight against him as his pelvis rocked in a new rhythm. Jill trailed her tongue from the base of his throat up to his ear where she bit down lightly, his salty tang bursting over her taste buds. His breathing hitched and he groaned low, shoving deep inside of her.

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The Army Ranger tattoo on his shoulder rippled as the muscles in his arm flexed. She bent to nip at the corded flesh of his bicep. Inhaling the musky scent of his skin, she let the smell and feel and taste of him seep into her senses. Everything about him turned her on, made her want more and more. She arched in his arms, pressed flush against him, loving the sensation of his lightly furred chest rubbing her skin.

Not even the high-powered air-conditioning could keep the Florida heat from making sweat bead across her forehead, pool at her collarbone, and slide between her breasts. The cool air blowing against her heated skin made her shiver and her nipples harden. His head dipped to pull the tip into his mouth, grazed it with his teeth and nipped at the taut crest.

The sweet sting made her breath catch. Heat flashed through her breast. Her core tightened spasmodically in response, pulling a low moan from her throat. She splayed her fingers against his scalp to press him closer. The prickle of his close-cropped brown hair tickled her palms as his dark stubble abraded the sensitive skin beneath her breasts.

The bedsprings squeaked in time with their movements. Nothing else but the sound of their panting breath and the slap of skin filled the air. His rich brown eyes met hers briefly before he reached down to manipulate her clit, flicking her swollen flesh with nimble fingers.

"Tyler!"

Her breath choked out and her mind went blank as she moved with his hand. She reached up and dug her fingers into the headboard behind his shoulders, using it for leverage to pump herself harder and faster on his cock, pressing his erection as deep as she could take it. Blood roared in her ears as her heart pounded in a frantic rhythm, her entire body flushing as she pushed toward orgasm.

She clenched her sex tight around his penis and ground her pelvis down, just the way she knew he liked it. The action was more than enough to thrust them both into orgasm, and they shuddered together.

A tear leaked from the corner of her eye as she came in a rush so intense it ripped open-mouthed sobs from her throat. Her thighs jumped and quivered as she fought to stay upright and not collapse her weight on his bad leg.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

She tried to pretend everything was the same as it used to be. That she and her husband didn't fight constantly, and then have sex the rest of the time to avoid actually talking. They certainly didn't laugh anymore, in or out of bed. Sex had taken on a desperate edge as they tried to forget how bad things were between them. Don't think about the problems with their marriage—just fuck until it all goes away. They'd had a lot of sex in the two weeks since Tyler came home from the hospital.

Twin trails of tears snaked down her cheeks, and she hurried to swipe them away. Not that Tyler noticed; he'd rolled away as soon as they finished, leaving her to stare at his tanned back. He was leaner than he had been, but still a big, strong man. She'd always loved that he made her feel petite and feminine.

"Ty..."

"What?" He didn't even glance at her. Despair and anger squeezed her throat shut. The emotions warred for dominance as her mouth opened and then closed again. She couldn't think of anything to say that wouldn't start an argument. Another tear leaked from the corner of her eye.

She reached out to touch him, but hesitated before making contact. The contrast of his skin against hers always amazed her. His skin was dark from a lifetime spent outdoors. Not even a year in the hospital had managed to rid him of his tan. For a moment her hand hung a hairsbreadth from his shoulder before she let it fall back to the mattress. Curling on her side, she faced away from him and didn't even bother to check the slide of tears. How could five years of marriage have fallen apart so fast?

\* \* \* \* \*

"This isn't working, Jill." He kept his head bent as he sat on the edge of the bed. When he got no response, he lifted his eyes to see that she'd frozen while climbing out of bed, her tall, softly curved body bare. He stared because this was perhaps the last time he'd see it. Decades spent on a golf course had made freckles smatter over her pale skin. Her

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coppery mane of hip-length hair was the first thing he'd noticed about her when they met in college. He's always loved the silken feel of it running through his fingers.

Taking a deep breath, he braced himself for what would come next. The room still smelled of sex, the sheets warm from their bodies. Knowing he was doing the right thing for her didn't make this any easier.

She clung to the fancy knobs on the footboard. "Wha—What do you mean?"

"This isn't working. We both know it." He fought hard to stay calm, to not open his mouth and let the first stupid, sarcastic thing come out.

"It doesn't have to be this way."

"It shouldn't be this hard, Jill. It never was before. You never used to cry when we slept together." Her ocean blue eyes widened at that. Yeah, she thought he hadn't noticed. "You shouldn't have stayed with me. You shouldn't have given up your golfing career. You should be with a guy who can take care of you, not some broken down has-been."

He watched her face grow paler at his bitter words. Her grip on the bedpost tightened as she swayed. Pain darkened her eyes and he wanted to call the words back. Hurting her like this killed him, but she needed to be as far away from him as possible. He was poison.

"I *have* given up a lot. I'd give up more if it meant you're here and you're whole and safe."

"*I don't want to be here.* I don't want to be safe. And you call this whole?" When he pounded on his thigh, just above his fake knee, she twitched as though to protest, so he hit it again. Pain slammed into him in waves, but he welcomed it. He deserved it for hurting her.

Anger flashed in her eyes. "How long are you going to be mad, Tyler? It's been a year. When are you going to see that you survived, even if your knee didn't? You have the opportunity to start again. You're an expert in security, demolitions, and God knows what else. You could work as a consultant or even start your own company. We have the money. So, you can't be a Ranger. Be something else!"

"A desk job," he sneered.

## Wereplanets: In Ice

She speared her fingers through her hair. "Jesus! Why do I even bother? It never goes in. It's like talking to a brick wall!"

"Dammit, Jill! You have no idea what this is like."

She spread her fingers in obvious frustration. "You're right. I have no idea what it's like to suffer from major head trauma, to have doctors dig four bullets out of my chest, to have another bullet shatter my knee, to undergo twelve different surgeries, including a knee replacement almost a year after the fact. I don't know about any of that, but mostly I don't know what's going on in your head because you never tell me anything. We don't talk. We just yell like this. *Talk* to me, Ty. We can work this out."

"No, we can't. This is never getting better. Talking about it won't fix anything. It won't help me run a four-minute mile. Won't make me a Ranger again." He grabbed for his cane and missed, knocking it into the side table and scattering his pill bottles. Jill rushed over to pick up the mess, but he fended her off. "I can do it myself. I don't need your help. I don't need *you*. Just...just go away."

Still kneeling before him, a bottle clutched in her hand, she flinched as though he's slapped her. "Is that what you want? For me to leave? You push and push, Ty. I have to tell you, I'm not sure how much more I can take."

"Then leave."

"That's what you really want?"

"That's what I just said, isn't it?"

No, it wasn't, but he couldn't bring himself to say the actual words. He laughed at himself, angry at his own hypocrisy. Not that she'd know he wasn't laughing at her, but that would only help his cause. If he *ever* heard anyone speak to her this way, he'd beat them to within an inch of their life.

"I'll be gone by morning," she whispered. She rose on shaky legs and he reached out to steady her, but she flinched away from his touch. Her reaction hit him like a solid punch to the gut.

"Where will you go?" He had no right to ask, but he had to know she'd be all right.

She stared at him for a moment, her expression blank. Then she

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blinked and seemed to collect herself. "St. Augustine. Brooke has a house in the World Golf Village. She said I could stay there anytime."

The corner of her mouth quivered while she fought for calm. *Please don't let her cry. Please.* He wouldn't be able to stand it. He'd apologize for everything and promise to make it better. It would never be better. *He* would never be better. She turned and bolted from the room, the door slamming shut behind her.

He'd done it. She'd leave and go back to the Ladies PGA tour, get on with her life, just like she should have done a year ago when they dragged his broken body back on a stretcher. Why didn't he feel better? Shouldn't doing the right thing make him feel less like a bastard? It would get easier. It had to.