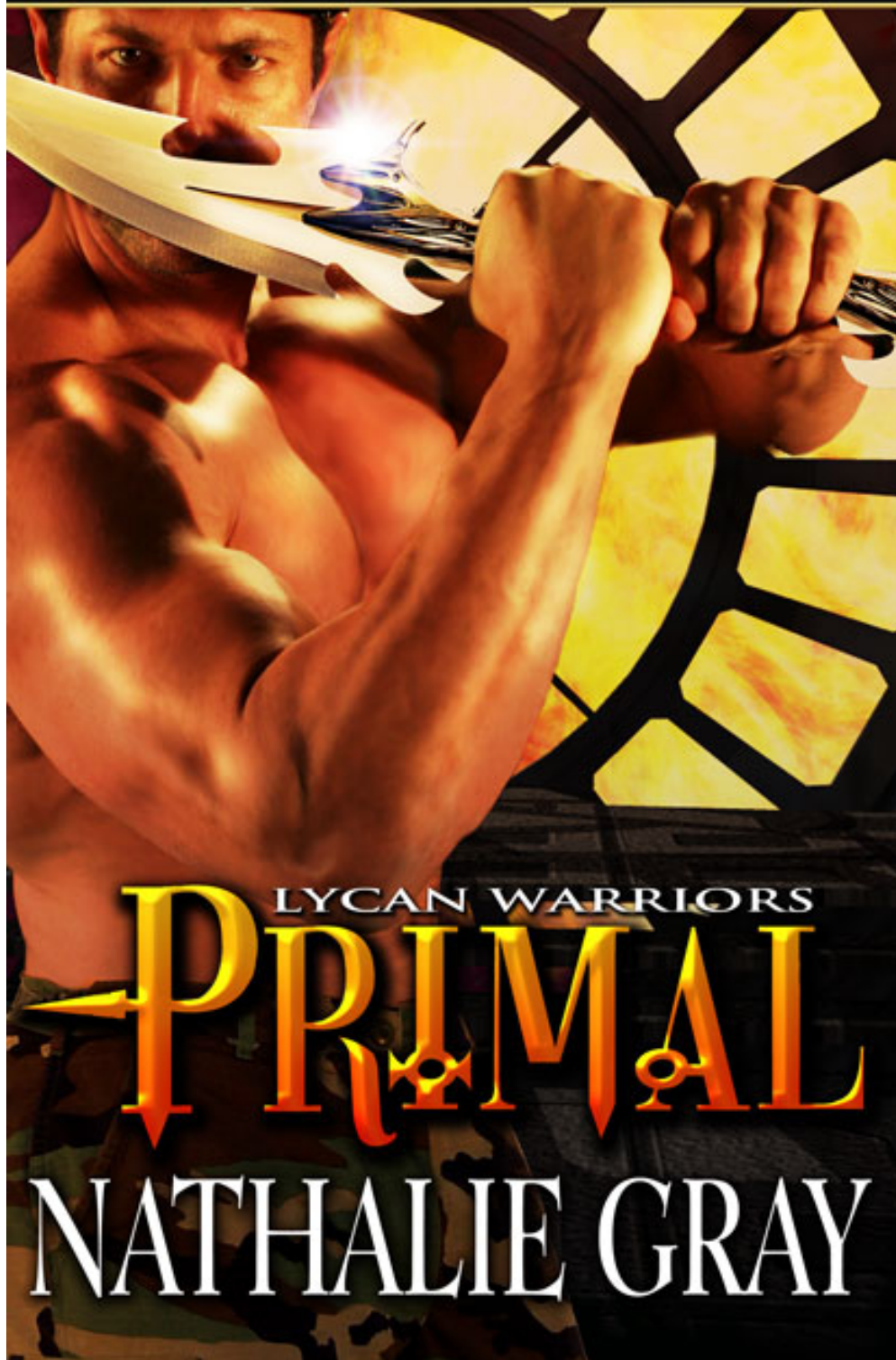


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



LYCAN WARRIORS

PRIMAL

NATHALIE GRAY

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Primal

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PRIMAL

Nathalie Gray

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Prologue

Liberty was the first member on Solomon's lycanthrope team of soldiers for hire. Her specialty is technology. She's seen every member join in, some of them to stay, others to leave—permanently. But one colleague has always managed to make her lose her legendary cool. Unlike her, Cupcake hails from a humble background, hasn't a credit to his name and lets people think he's just a mountain of muscle, all brawn and no brain. She knows better and has lusted after the quiet, towering lycan with the serious eyes for years, silently wishing he'd just make his move.

After their momentous mission, Solomon's team secured a data clip containing intel that could topple Earth's oppressive government. A violent solar storm fried Liberty's vision implant and she had to stay on Antioch Space Station with Cupcake and Dragana until her wealthy family could work the connections and get her a new implant. The squalid colony isn't what she's used to but with Cupcake by her side, she doesn't mind. Only she's never known the stoical man to act so nervously and realizes he drags behind a heavy past. And with the stakes at their highest, with the enemy closing in, Cupcake's past could destroy both their futures.

Chapter One

3 March 2534 Era Vulgaris, 1200 hours

Antioch Space Station, pop. 5.1 million

8.2 light-years from Earth

Cupcake tried not to fret and hover around her like a disproportionate shadow. He really did. But he couldn't help it. Liberty Silke was *really* bringing out the protective lycanthrope in him.

It was all he could do not to start frisking guys who merely looked for a place to sit. If the intended repository for their butts came anywhere near a twenty foot radius, then they were fair game to Cupcake's evil eye and pec twitches. Or both if they appeared remotely interested in the gorgeous woman. Not that he could blame them for dreaming. Still, he'd crush their skulls if they so much as *looked* as if they were *thinking* anything improper about her.

Liberty could take care of herself. He knew that. As a member—the first too—of Solomon's team of lycan soldiers for hire, she could and had pulverized men almost as large as Cupcake. But she was injured now, vulnerable. With her vision implant fried, no more pixelated feedback. She was back to biological blindness.

Cupcake presently scowled at a man who seemed to be checking her out from across the smoky, grubby diner. Who did he think he was, looking at her that way? Cupcake leaned sideways on his stool so he could give the impertinent prick The Eye. Coming from him, a six-eight, two-hundred-and-eighty-pound ex-street fighter, The Eye never failed. And it didn't now. The man hurriedly averted his gaze.

Yeah. You keep that in mind when you're looking at a real lady.

"Are you scowling at some poor man again?" Liberty asked, a mocking curve to her lips, those unseeing milky eyes crinkling at the corners behind the blue-tinted goggles.

He turned back to her as if the world had suddenly blinked out. But then again, he usually felt this way. Everyone and everything could go to hell on a double-decker and he wouldn't give a damn as long as he could be within eyesight of Liberty. She truly was the finest thing he'd ever seen in his momentous life. Tall, six feet he'd guess, and athletic with skin the color and shine of coffee beans, she was the only woman he'd ever, would ever, love. But she wasn't for him. She had class, money, connections. He had his fists and an oft-broken nose.

"He was trouble. Just made sure he knew we were on to him."

She chuckled.

Hell, he loved that throaty sound. A sigh swelled his chest.

Her milky eyes smiling behind the goggles, she reached out and probably meant to pat his wrist or something, but her hot palm—and if that long graceful hand didn't just set his blood to boiling—landed on his elbow instead, the tips of her fingers grazing his biceps. A jolt of electricity and adrenaline shot through him. He fought the urge to move a bit closer.

Hands off, man.

"I don't need a bodyguard as much as a guide, Cupcake. Please stop scaring away all the *nice* people on Antioch." She grinned mockingly.

Cupcake cleared his throat. Yeah, Antioch Station and its *nice* people.

The more they stayed and waited for her vision implant to arrive, the more he stood the chance of being spotted by someone from his old life. And the thought terrified him. Ha. Richard "Cupcake" Moriarty, ex-mobster hit man, star pugilist and lycan...*afraid*? Definitely a first. Still, what if he was recognized? It'd been several years since he'd left his old bosses behind—skipped town more aptly—but he still looked the same, the same giant lycan with the broken nose and buzz cut, the same lifeless blue eyes that had scared so many opponents in the arena. Being recognized by the station mafia didn't scare him half as much as Liberty discovering what he'd once been. Now *that* would hurt. So for the past four weeks he'd kept his chin down, only occasionally looking up to scare away someone who seemed too interested with the beauty at his arm. It was all he could do as they waited for her implant to get to Antioch—which was taking an inordinate amount of time—and for Solomon to reply to their message.

"Do we need anything for breakfast tomorrow?" she asked, standing and stretching those long legs of hers.

He averted his gaze, glad she could see neither his uneasiness...nor his erection. The suit she wore could trigger sprinkler systems on half the station. Cupcake had tried discreetly to tell her she, well, she *stood out* against the lowlifes who populated their side of town. Liberty had just laughed him off. She was used to fine things and wasn't the least bit embarrassed or self-conscious by them, which was fine really...anywhere else but on Antioch. Cupcake hadn't said anything more on the subject. But that suit! A two-piece, white synthleather number with heeled boots to match and nothing underneath the jacket. Sometimes, with his height and the right angle, he could see a hint of breast. He didn't *look* for the opportunity, mind you! Never! It was just there, glorious and tormenting.

"No," he replied, also coming to his feet and offering his arm. "I think we're good."

Even if he wished her—illegal—implant would get here already, he lived for the intimacy of their walks together. Because she was now really blind, with not even pixelated feedback to go by, she preferred to hold his arm to navigate the thick crowds to and from the small two-room habitat they'd rented. And Cupcake, as much as it kind of shamed him to admit even to himself, lived for those precious minutes when her hand would squeeze his upper arm while her other would rest against his wrist. Serious heat would seep into his skin and keep him grinning well into the night. Heavenly.

He kept an arm well in front to push aside anyone not quick enough for his taste as they walked out of the dingy place—well below standards for his classy companion but she hadn't said a thing. Surely she could sense, *smell* mostly, the lack of sophistication. Too classy to even remark on it. He glowered a pair of men out of his way and finally led Liberty to the street corner where they waited with the multitude for a rickety sky-train to squeal to a stop. He found them a spot by the window.

He'd been born and raised on Antioch Station but couldn't remember the smell being so bad. Man, it reeked. And the graffiti...jeez. He was glad Liberty couldn't see those.

Then he saw something that squeezed his heart and clenched his jaw. Damn.

Right across from them, on a glossy sheet of plastifilm blinking red to draw more attention was a poster for an upcoming fight between The Bulldog and Stone Lapierre. Two men scowled at each other on the ten-second vid. They had broken noses, soulless eyes and an assortment of facial scars. The last time he'd seen such an advertisement, it'd been *his* face. And it'd looked every bit as scary...every bit that of a killer. Which he'd been. Was still.

"Everything all right?" she murmured by his side. He saw her hand going for her waist where her volter should've been. But with Antioch's no-gun law—the only enforced law—the quickest way into the brig was to carry a piece. He felt naked without a weapon and could only imagine how it felt to walk around blind as well.

"Yeah, it's all good."

She shook her head. "You're such a bad liar." Then sobering, she leaned closer to his chest. He swore she'd hear his heart hammering and swallowed hard. Her breath touched his neck, his chin. It was warm and smelled of lemonade. "I think we should check the cruiser again. Just in case."

They'd been "checking the cruiser" for four weeks now, their only discreet means of communications off station, checked once a day, every day as they waited for news on the implant and Solomon's reply to their message. They'd had no luck on either front.

"Sure. Now?"

She nodded.

So they switched trains at the next stop, rode the graffiti-covered, piss-smelling affair for half an hour then disembarked near the spaceports. Cupcake wrapped his much larger hand over hers while they approached the rented hangar where they'd stashed their stolen Global Alliance of Nations—GAN for short—cruiser. But this time, a short message waited for them when Liberty powered up the ship and sat at the lone console near the front. She clicked her code, waited for the digitex to fire up then switched to voice command. Cupcake stood on the tail hatch with his back to her so he could provide cover in case things turned to shit. They always did. Eventually.

He heard the machine's robotic voice tuned down low. Liberty had good hearing, he could barely pick up the sound at all.

"Finally." She whistled. "Expensive too. I'll have my eyes back in a couple more days."

Cupcake couldn't help the twinge of melancholy assailing him when he thought of the day she wouldn't need to hold his arm anymore and instantly berated himself for being so damn selfish.

"I'm glad to hear it. When exactly, did they say?"

Her well-known family, who owned the largest media conglomerate on Earth and who had taken nepotism to a whole new level, had finally been able to extend its long tentacle to Antioch, despite the local mafia. Cupcake was glad for it. He'd been beginning to suspect something wasn't right and was glad to be proven wrong.

"Two days. Maybe three if they have to bribe any of the relay stations." She twisted on the bench and grinned back at him.

With a sigh, Cupcake couldn't think of anything else he'd rather do than look at that smile.

* * * * *

Cupcake's face disappeared below her mons just as a shot of adrenaline spiked through her body.

"Haaa!"

Damn. He was good.

With hands firm but gentle, he parted her thighs wider, which she helped by anchoring her heels against his massive shoulders – the guy's shoulders were perfect for enthusiastic oral sex! While he stabbed his tongue into her, licked and suckled and bit her flesh, Liberty bowed off the mattress, tore at the sheets and generally made a big mess of the bed altogether. No one could eat a woman out the way Cupcake could.

"Come on, big boy," she urged with a heel into his back. "Level two!"

"Level Two" in her fantasy world involved lots of lube and ten inches of glorious, smooth, pliable acrylic of whichever color she felt like that day. Today would be purple.

Yeah. Purple is nice.

Where had she put that piece of wonderment again? Oh that's right, under the pillow. She snaked her hand there, retrieved her toy and let it glide along her belly, pointing downward at Cupcake. He took it, grinning.

Liberty knew for a fact the shy lycan with the serious eyes would never, ever, behave this way, but he was in her mind and she got to call all the shots.

Back to it then.

So Cupcake grabbed the toy, rubbed it around her sex then slipped it inside to her utmost delight and thrill. Slow and languorous pushes triggered fire to spread outward from her distended pussy and while he worked his magic – Cupcake was good with his hands, very, very good – Liberty caressed her breasts, rolled and squeezed them before bringing them together in the center.

"Mmm. Lube."

Cupcake grabbed a jar of lube, which had miraculously appeared on the bed by her hip and dipped the end of the toy right into the – what color should it be this time? – blue jelly and swirled it once as one would a sausage into a jar of mustard.

Nice analogy. Liberty chuckled under her breath.

With a wide smile – another thing Cupcake never did for real – he slapped her butt cheek and rolled her onto her front. She climbed up on her elbows and knees, wiggled her ass at him and gasped when he plastered himself right up against her, his hands everywhere, both cocks going in at once.

The double penetration stole her breath. She cried out, panted his name, knew in the back of her mind the only time she'd get Cupcake to ass fuck her with a purple dildo would be in her mind. But it was all she had. For now. Maybe someday if she were lucky, he'd let her get within ten feet of him.

Fire titillated her cunt, her anus. Liberty bucked back to match his rising rhythm, his increasing vigor. He took her hard for one disorderly fuck. And after she came, after his name ripped out of her, mangled and barely understandable, after he thrust into her with one last violent push, they both collapsed onto the bed. Spent. Sweaty. Happy.

Cupcake put his delicious mouth near her ear and murmured, "I love you."

With a start, Liberty's little daydream screeched to a halt and she careened back to reality. Her sex throbbed impotently. But she was used to that. In this world, the real world, Cupcake never touched her.

Liberty had felt his arm twitch when he'd tensed back on the train. She'd wondered if her giant self-declared bodyguard had been intimidating someone into giving her a seat. Again. With his menacing size, buzz cut, broken nose and icy blue eyes, his black old-fashioned leather "motorcycle" outfit – she was a history buff if nothing else – when her companion wanted something, he received it.

That implant better get here in the specified two days or she'd end up kicking Cupcake's oh-so-fine butt for his incessant hovering and doting. But then again, she had other reasons as well. For one thing, she couldn't wait to see him once more. Not that she'd ever seen him properly, only as a collection of tiny squares, but those tiny squares had been fine indeed. She realized not many women would ever categorize him under "yummy". He looked positively deadly and sported a permanent five o'clock shadow that clung to his square jaw no matter how often he shaved. But she thought he was cute in a rough-edged kind of way. And he always, *always* smelled nice. Clean. Soap and a hint of aftershave. Men didn't wear aftershave anymore, which was a shame. But Cupcake did. And those pale eyes, forward chin and strong neck. And those shoulders, goodness, whew!

Okay, woman, calm down.

But he *was* scary. Very scary. She'd seen him demolish many a front door on their momentous missions or take down half a dozen bad guys without breaking a sweat or

drawing a weapon. And when he changed into lycan form, he caused more damage than a herd of stampeding rhinos. With rabies.

They made their way back *home*—for lack of a better word—in silence, each lost in their inner world. She wished she could peek inside his head, see what he thought about, *who* he thought about. Maybe there was some lucky girl somewhere on Earth who waited for his return. Ha. Their return. She wanted to go back to Earth too, but with the recent events of their stealing a data clip containing intel likely to topple the government, she doubted she'd see her real home anytime soon. Not that Antioch was all bad. For starters, her ever-vigilant, self-appointed bodyguard Cupcake was with her. What else did a woman need?

When they reached their floor, which creaked near the seventh pace and smelled of cat litter 24/7, the mountain of muscle that was Cupcake patted her hand and stopped by her door.

"I'll scan the place, okay? Give me a moment."

She was about to argue but knew how futile it was and just let the overprotective giant have fun doing his "house clearing". In a strange and illogical way, she was kind of glad not to have her implant right away for it meant she had a bit of time left to enjoy Cupcake's proximity. It'd all end in two days. He'd go back to the introverted, quiet lycan with the serious eyes. The one who never touched her.

When she heard him slam her door shut and lock it—three times then roughly test the bolt—she leaned against the opposite wall and crossed her arms. For a second or two, she was alone in the corridor, without her ever-present bodyguard and promptly felt isolated. She'd become so used to having him within reach. Air moved when he opened the door again and announced her room was "cleared". As though he'd performed an exorcism.

She knew he'd say no but asked anyway. "You sure you won't come in for some tea at least?"

He must have shaken his head out of habit for he cleared his throat and replied a quick "no, thanks, I am all right," and gently nudged her inside so she could lock the door. He'd test the bolt again of course.

Liberty just shook her head. She shouldn't have for another searing headache tried to squeeze inside her orbits and pinch her optic nerves. Since the solar storm, during which the flares and resulting electromagnetic energy had fried the fragile nanotechnology in her head, she suffered the worst headaches and bouts of insomnia. She hadn't told Cupcake though. He'd probably stomp up the stairs and demolish the neighbor's place for playing too-loud music or demand to rub her temples nightly.

Liberty chuckled. Maybe she *should* tell him then.

She had a cold shower—the only form of shower in the smelly building—and went to bed wearing the boxer-camisole set Cupcake had been forced to buy for her because she couldn't see. He swore it was midnight blue. But she knew men. When she had her

eyes back, she'd probably take one look at her pajamas and go "eeck!" But he'd tried his damndest. He always did.

* * * * *

Blades of blinding light stabbed at her brain. A gag choked her. She tried to put her hand in front of her face but couldn't move. Beyond the porthole, the sun exploded. The monstrous wave came at her, swelling, turning a gorgeous, mortally gorgeous shade of gold. Liberty couldn't look away. She felt it burn her eyes, claw inside her skull.

Oh goodness, the pain.

She woke with a whimper struggling up her throat. Liberty shivered as she ran a shaking hand over her face. Nightmare. Again. She knew the routine now. She'd have a bad dream around two or three in the morning then spend the rest of the night tossing and turning and thinking. About the data clip Solomon and Eva had taken with them on their stolen Iron Conclave ship. The slender redhead used to be a spy, sent to kill Solomon and his team of "genetic deviants". Under order from Chancellor Vonatos himself too. Not bad. But Eva had changed sides after falling in love with Solomon. Liberty shook her head. She'd been trying to find him a girl for years. But the irascible, foul-mouthed, stubborn lycan had been hard to shelve. But he was now and Eva was a good woman.

Except for Solomon, at thirty-seven Liberty was a bit older than the rest of the team and had always considered herself a bit of a big sister to them all. She'd tried to find a boy for Dragana, even more of a loud-mouth than Solomon. But the Valkyrie had scared away any promising prospects. Maybe she should find her a girl. She had her room two blocks down in a building identical to their own in noise level and smell. Liberty sighed. The only one she'd never tried to match was Cupcake.

A stab of pain made her cringe. She rubbed her temples, realized her hands shook badly. Remnants from the nightmare still clawed at her even if she couldn't remember much. Kicking off the thin blanket, she got out of bed, padded toward the direction of the door and listened with her ear against the cool surface. The upstairs neighbor's music thumped regularly. A baby cried somewhere in the building. People arguing. Small clicks and taps and unidentified sounds. As a lycan—and a blind one—she heard things no one else did. And on a space station that always seemed on the verge of something nasty and violent, noises were varied and plentiful. Dragana had called fetid Antioch, the largest colony outside of Earth, "a big-ass, crowded, floating bazaar".

Liberty agreed. She couldn't tell because she hadn't *seen* it per se, but she could *smell* it all right.

Another jab of pain came slicing through her brain. It was worse this time. Much worse. She needed help. She realized she'd unlocked and opened the door only when she felt herself stumble out into the corridor, stubbing her toe against something tubular and cursing as she fell. She felt thick and rock-hard arms around her as she and

the man—hard chest, huge shoulders...had to be a man—toppled to the side. She *humphed* when they hit the floor.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Cupcake's deep bass voice sounded tight with worry.

"My...argh. My head."

Another jab flashed in brilliant colors at the back of her brain. She snarled. The pain was just too damn much. Her knuckles began to burn, her gums too. Adrenaline spiked. Her body was reacting, the lycan half pushing to get out.

Oh shit. She was changing.

He grabbed her, held her against him as he climbed to his feet.

She couldn't stop it!

"Cupcake!"

"I know."

Muscles burned with the strain pulling at them. Tendons too. Something snapped along her shoulders. She would've howled in pain but Cupcake's hand pressed firmly against her mouth. She heard a loud bang and realized he'd slammed the door shut. Her heels dragged against the floor. He was carrying her. A soft and lumpy something hit her back and legs then a heavy weight pressed her against it, kept her arms from flailing and feet from kicking. She realized they were lying on her bed with him on top of her as he kept her from demolishing the place and going out into the night to get shot and killed or worse...

"Breathe," Cupcake whispered in her ear. He was panting. "Breathe."

Her whole body shook, burned, writhed, with the change to lycan form. But with his soothing murmurs, his unyielding grip and weight pressed against her, she felt the beast receding. Stars popped behind her eyelids. It'd been close.

Liberty let her head rest against the mattress. "I can't...breathe."

Cupcake's weight lifted slightly but he didn't roll off her. And she noticed only then he was half naked. From guessing, he must have worn some type of shorts or something. Boxers? But his muscled torso, arms and legs were naked. And hot. So hot.

One of his hands still gripped her wrist, held it above her head and with the angle, his arm rested almost against her face. She could feel muscles bulging every time he moved.

"Are you okay now?"

She nodded. "What were you doing at my door?"

"There's bad stuff happening on Antioch. All the time."

Liberty rolled her eyes. "So you just sleep curled up at my door?"

"No. Sitting on a chair."

"You don't need to do that, you know." She shifted her pelvis, which pressed against his. They fit perfectly.

"I know. I want to. Until you have your eyes back."

Then he'd go back to his own bed.

A jolt of sexual awareness flushed her cheeks. This was Cupcake on top of her *on a bed*. How many times had she imagined what it'd feel like? Hell, it was just as good as she'd thought. Better.

He meant to leave. She could tell for he barely breathed and must have had his face angled away for his breaths didn't reach her skin. She raised her head slowly until her chin met something—his jaw? Her own breath warmed the space between their skin, and for a crazy moment that lasted the lifespan of a spark, Liberty considered kissing his throat, lip it gently, see what he did.

Woman, what are you doing? You work with the guy. And it's Cupcake, for goodness' sake. He's...

Cupcake was special. Dear to her.

But she couldn't stop. His body called out to hers even if *he* clearly didn't. No aftershave tonight, only the clean smell of soap and the feel of rough stubbles against her cheek. He had one thick thigh jammed between hers. She shifted her legs, widened them.

He released her wrist. "Um."

She ignored him. Years had gone by during which she'd watched him from a distance, waited and studied, waited some more for the signs, as subtle as she knew they'd be with a man such as Cupcake. There were days when Liberty thought—could swear to it—she detected a bit of fire in his pale eyes, a hint of longing in the way he glanced at her when he thought she wasn't looking. After she'd lost the implant, she'd had to rely on other senses and it'd been difficult to gauge. Cupcake was so guarded.

With a long inhalation, she brushed her lips along his throat, right up to his forward chin then back along his jaw until she'd returned to the starting point. She heard and felt him swallow hard.

"Liberty?"

"Shh."

Tentatively until she met the top of his head, she lowered the arm he'd pinned above her—the man had such hot, hot skin—she used the tips of her fingers to trace his square face, the broken nose, the gorgeous lips she remembered all too well. His breath caught in his throat.

A mass grew at the juncture of her thighs. He was getting hard. "We have to stop."

"I know."

Still she caressed his face. Because his torso was pressed against her, not heavily but still enough for contact, she could feel—hell she could probably *hear* it too—his heart hammering in that barrel-thick chest of his. Something pointy and warm brushed her upper arm. His nipple?

"Liberty," he murmured, his voice strained and low. "It's not right."

Before she could reply, he gently rolled off her. The mattress caved in when she felt him sit against the edge of the bed. It sprang up a bit when he stood, the sound of his feet faint for someone his size.

She rubbed her face. "I'm sorry."

"Me too."

She heard him sigh as he stepped out of her room and softly closed the door.

Chapter Two

"Look at that mess," Dragana snarled as she cracked open a can of water. Liberty knew it was water because it was the only thing the woman ever drank. Gulping announced she'd taken a long swig. "Fucking disgusting is what it is."

All three sat facing the vidscreen of a fish-smelling eatery near the "good" part of town. But not *in* it. She was getting a little bit sick of living this way and couldn't wait until she could see again. And finally hear about Solomon. It'd been six days since she'd sent her message. He hadn't replied. Even Dragana was starting to get worried.

Speaking of worry, Liberty had been anxious to see how Cupcake would react to her today after their brief exchange of the night before. So far, he acted as if nothing had happened.

She presently smelled him to her left while Dragana sat to her right. One always knew where Dragana was. One only needed to follow the noise.

A digitex bolted to their table relayed the news with Common-English audio description so she could follow the news like everybody else. The reason they sat here instead of their usual eating spot, which didn't even have a functioning toilet, never mind an audio description of the vidscreen. Ugh. But Cupcake and Dragana were right, they couldn't be seen in the good part of town in case they were recognized. Their profiles had undoubtedly been flashed to every security force in the system, even Antioch mafia-owned authorities.

Things were heating up back on Earth. According to the robotic narrator's genderless voice describing the images, the latest batch of arrestees filed out of the police shuttle, wearing gray coveralls and ID suppressants. These latex masks were meant to adhere to a person like a smooth, gray, feature-less face. No one would recognize them before the trial but if they were found guilty—in their case, of being "genetic deviants"—then the authorities would remove the suppressants and the media circus would come to town. Families, jobs, neighbors. It'd all get chomped down by the sausage machine that was the media.

Liberty had always been deeply disturbed by these fake-flesh masks. It not only stripped the wearer of his or her identity but also of their humanity.

But these weren't *humans*, now were they? Which was the whole point to Chancellor Vonatos' little show of power.

Liberty turned her back to the vidscreen "Did you check—"

"The cruiser?" Dragana finished for her. "You know I did. If only to clean Peanut. Poor thing's been alone for weeks." She snorted a laugh.

Peanut, the woman's monstrous volter. A weapon that could and had disseminated death at the rate of two-hundred nickel beads a second. As far as portable weapons went, only grenade launchers could cause more damage.

By her side, Cupcake remained silent. He'd been even quieter than usual since their...

What should I call last night anyway? A slip-up? A wasted opportunity? A momentary lapse of reason?

She knew he hadn't tried to make her feel dumb or crazy but he'd been right. It'd been a wrong thing to do. Not that she regretted doing it. Even just remembering the heat of his body still made her sigh. Life was just wrong sometimes.

"Well, Rickie, welcome home," suddenly said a man to her left.

She swore she heard and felt the air congeal around her. A squeak announced Cupcake had shifted on his seat. He didn't reply.

"Who're you?" Dragana demanded.

"An old friend of Rickie's," replied the man, coming closer. She smelled pricey cologne on him. A faint trace of accent lifted some of the syllables. REE-Kee.

"Nolan." Cupcake's voice was *tight*.

For once, Dragana shut her mouth at the right time. She must have been as shocked as Liberty felt. For some reason she couldn't explain, Liberty felt left out and jealous and simultaneously immature at feeling this way in the first place. She hadn't known Cupcake's real name was Rickie. Richard?

"Hi," she said with her most charming smile, her right hand extended over the table. Coming from a rich, influential and socially connected family always helped during tense moments. She could whip out her oily political persona any day of the week. "Hi, I'm Amanda. Mr. Nolan, is it?"

Judging by his voice and the fact his foot tapped a manic beat under the table, Cupcake was about to explode.

A large, warm hand wrapped around hers, shook it twice. Not too hard. Not too soft. Just right. And he kept it clutched while he said, "It's a pleasure to meet you, ma'am."

Liberty knew this one was trouble. And not cheap trouble either. Political trouble. Public persona trouble. From the handshake and from the tone, coupled with the cologne, the smooth accent, the use of only his last name. He was rich, he was socially skilled and he knew Cupcake's name.

"What do you want, Nolan?" Cupcake said with a flat, hard voice. His foot tapped more rapidly under the table.

"Yeah, *Nolan*," Dragana put in with a mocking tone to her remark. She must have been smirking, which she did a lot. "What can we do you for?"

Surreptitiously, Liberty moved her foot under the table until it rested over Cupcake's. His breath slowed, his manic tapping stopped. He didn't take it away either.

"It's been what, Rickie, ten years?" Nolan asked, his voice rising, indicating he was doing something physical. She heard grating against the floor. He was dragging a chair to join them. "How have you been? Aside from being lucky enough to attract the attention of two fine-looking ladies."

Dragana snorted a laugh "Yeah, bud, you keep it up and I might forget you just invited your ass at our table."

Nolan laughed. "Well, you're bold. I like that. I value frankness above everything else. Isn't that right, Rickie?"

Fine hairs along her nape rose in waves. Fear tingled up her spine like clusters of stiletto-wearing spiders. She wanted to shiver but forced herself not to. Goodness, she wanted her implant *now*! When would her uncle's guy, a man named Abacan, get here? She felt so vulnerable, so bare without her sight, even if it'd been pixelated and fickle during solar storms.

"What do you want?" Cupcake asked again.

"Oh just to chat. It's been such a long time. Nobody has forgotten you, Rickie. The boss still has all the vids from the good old days. And the stills. Talks about you sometimes. Spent a long time looking too."

She distinctly heard Cupcake swallowing. She didn't know who Nolan was except for an overbearing jerk who'd "invited his ass" at their table as Dragana had said. But what she *did* know was Cupcake didn't like him, didn't want to be near him and this alone first and foremost told her two things. Nolan was dangerous. And he knew something.

Something Cupcake didn't want to share.

Liberty cleared her throat as she pushed her chair back. "I wish we could stay, Mr. Nolan, but we have something urgent to do." She extended her hand again and this time, she was the one to shake and "trap" Nolan's into her own. "It's nice to know someone else would think of Rickie so warmly. I know I wouldn't leave a *single* brick unturned if I were looking for him. And goodness help those who hurt him."

Nolan gripped her hand just a bit too tight for polite society. "I'm sure you would, Miss Amanda. But be careful around bricks though, a pretty lady such as yourself could get hurt."

A heat wave announced Cupcake had stood and drawn near. "Watch your mouth, Nolan," he snarled low.

"That's okay," Liberty replied, intensifying her grip on Nolan's hand until she felt knuckles rolling against her palm. He sucked in a breath. Lycans and "genetic deviants" had at least this going for them. They were stronger than any human. "Mr. Nolan only meant it as a joke, I'm sure."

"Yeah," Dragana added. A sound of scraping metal against concrete indicated she'd stood as well. "Funny guy, he is. Har har."

"We'll be in touch," Nolan snarled tightly before she let his hand go.

"No, you won't." There was steel in Cupcake's voice.

He pressed his elbow against her arm and she took it, slipped one hand underneath and the other over his forearm. He was shaking.

When they stood outside—well, *inside* still but outside according to space station standards—Liberty was glad she was tall for Cupcake ran down the street, around what she thought was a corner but realized must have been some alcove or narrow alley. Their hurried footsteps sounded enclosed and reverberated once.

"We need to get off Antioch. Fast."

"Why's that, *Rickie*?" Dragana asked mockingly. "Nolan spooked you?"

"Don't call me that."

"*Dragana*," Liberty snapped.

"What? It's his name, right. So it's Richard. Richard what?"

Cupcake suddenly dropped her hand. Movement and the sound of someone gurgling made Liberty fan her arms and grab whatever she reached first. Some bits of shirt covering a rock-hard back. Cupcake.

"Get your paw off me, you great lug," Dragana growled.

He must have for Liberty heard panting, following by a long string of curses. "Man, Cupcake, can't you take a fucking joke anymore?"

"No."

Cupcake's voice turned toward Liberty, who released what she held and shook her head. "We have to get the cruiser functioning again and get off Antioch. Today. Now."

"We have to keep our brains in the 'on' position, all right? The cruiser would take us only to the next closest station. Everybody with half a brain would find us right away. That's how Iron Conclave did it in the first place, remember? Found us because of our small mass and coming out of faster-than-light. Not many cruisers get to FTL and dock at deep space stations."

"I know, but we have to find a way," he replied, sounding tired and...afraid?

"Plus, I need to wait for the damn implant."

Notions, fears that she'd become a dead weight flooded her. She pushed the self-pity to the back of the row with a promise to wallow in it a bit later. As soon as she got her hands on a bathtub. Self-pity always worked better during a hot bath.

"Oh shit, that's right. We can't leave, man." Dragana cursed again. "Can't we just break Nolan's kneecaps? I'll go get Peanut."

Dragana's answer to every bump in life. Break something. Or shoot it.

Liberty heard Cupcake sigh. "You can't touch him, Dragana. He's one of them."

"Antioch's mafia, you mean?"

Cupcake gasped, cleared his throat, coughed. "Um. Yeah."

Even Dragana didn't reply right away. "His kneecaps would be just as breakable as anybody else's."

The fire in her voice was gone.

"And they own the spaceports," Cupcake said in undertones.

"We better haul our asses over there and get the guns then, if we have to stay here, in lovely Armpit of the Universe." Dragana chuckled then cleared her throat. She didn't sound as flippant as usual. Liberty could relate too well to the feeling.

"Let's go to the cruiser and see what we can do," Liberty said. She reached out, nodded when a thickly muscled arm slipped underneath her hand.

"But we'll wait until your connection gets here with the stuff. You can't go on this way. It's dangerous."

She agreed with Cupcake but couldn't help the feeling that because of her they were all taking too many chances. "We'll see what the comms say. Then we'll decide."

"Let's go," Dragana said. She sounded farther away. "It's going to take us a good hour to get to the hangar. I don't want a surprise party waiting for us. I just bought this outfit and their blood will mess it all up."

Liberty shook her head but still smiled. There was no deflating Dragana. On Solomon's team, Dragana and her beloved twin—Ivan, now dead—had been the official morale boosters, and in the sister's particular case, the expert marksman and attitude adjustor.

The crowd felt even more oppressive as they made their silent way to the spaceports where they'd stashed their stolen GAN cruiser. Smells of cook shops, bodies, the wail of sirens, the smell of pollution, smoke. It was all overwhelming.

They reached their destination—Liberty recognized the faint odor of diesel from the sky-train's station not far from there—and because Cupcake still held her arm in a hot, protective bear paw of a hand, the sound of grating metal indicated Dragana had gone ahead and opened their rented hangar. She cursed loudly.

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

"What?"

Cupcake's hand twitched on her arm.

"What? Talk to me, *someone*."

"It's gone," Cupcake murmured at her side. "The cruiser's gone."

"I was here this morning, man, who can move a whole fucking cruiser so damn fast?" Dragana's voice, despite the short distance, sounded as though she stood right next to Liberty. The finesse on that woman...

"*They* can."

Liberty hadn't tried to sound all doom and gloom but it came out that way just the same.

"They moved our cruiser *after* we met Nolan, like..." A short silence followed Dragana's remark. She must have been checking her watch. "Not even two hours ago?"

"I told you they own the spaceports," Cupcake said. "They're the ones renting the hangars. Of course they'd know where to look. A quick call..."

"How the fuck did they know where to look?"

Liberty patted the air. "If they own the spaceports, then they have access to passenger and cargo manifests. While we walked here, Nolan must have had his port guys make a quick check for Cupcake's description, found nothing. So he knows he must have come in on a private ship. Not many private ships to check, I'd guess. Then *poof*, this cruiser shows up on their database. They send guys to check the hangar, find weapons. It wouldn't take long for heavy equipment to tow it out."

"They use a hover crane actually. They used to anyway."

"And you know that how?" Dragana asked.

Cupcake either cleared his throat or growled something, Liberty couldn't be sure. Plus, she didn't really want to know.

Dragana must have been working on her repertoire for she let out a particularly colorful and imaginative curse. "Can't you rig us something, Liberty? I mean, if someone can, it's you."

"I could, but I'd need *something* to rig and now we have *nothing*."

Okay, woman, think.

Adopting what she knew Solomon would call The Pondering Look, she closed her eyes for focus—a habit she'd picked up soon after having the nanotech implanted the first time.

"We can't get off the station because the cruiser's gone," she murmured. "But we have to stay anyway to wait for my eyes, which are supposed to get here tomorrow. We can't go back to our place because they undoubtedly know where we live. We'll need access to a bank so I can draw more credits but we won't be able to rent anything else long-term because they'd know where to find us there too."

"Are we fucked?" Dragana asked, mocking once more. "Because if we are, then I wanna take down as many as I can first. So we'll need nickel and lots of it."

"The guns were in the cruiser," Cupcake calmly remarked.

"Oh fuck, they got Peanut!"

"Let's go get credits first," Liberty announced. "Better yet, let's split up. Dragana you go get credits. Cupcake and I will need a place with Intersystem. A cafe or something. I'll send a quick note to my connection and tell him about the change of plans. Then we'll meet you someplace where they won't find us right away."

"They have less reach in Chinatown," he said. "And they'll be checking the trains."

"How do you know that?"

"He's from here, remember?" Dragana mumbled. "*Rickie's* from here."

"Chinatown. Good. We'll meet there tonight. They have one of those gilded gates, right? What time is it?"

"Yes, they do," Cupcake replied. "Half past four."

"At the gate, at say nine? The lights will be dimmed for the night. It'll be better." She grinned despite the fear squeezing her heart. "Although it makes no difference to me."

Dragana, good old Dragana, chortled. "I didn't say it, you did. Okay, see you at nine."

Liberty retrieved the ID strip she carried in her boot—her family's full clout didn't quite reach this station but she'd still managed to borrow a cloned credit strip—and gave it to the other woman, along with the access code.

"We shouldn't stay here," Cupcake remarked as he slipped his arm under her hand. The heat of his gentle fingers helped diffuse the tension coiling in her body.

They left the spaceports, walked for *hours*. By the time Cupcake said they'd arrived, Liberty's head pounded with each step. She kept quiet and her eyes downcast so he wouldn't see the pain through the darkly shaded goggles. She knew he would and didn't want to feel worse about herself. It was enough she was a big dead weight he had to carry everywhere. Goodness, how had she managed before the implant?

You hadn't managed, that's how.

True, she'd felt a prisoner of her own luxurious home, her high-paying job. Until she'd decided enough was enough. She was a lycan, a freak already, unable to vote or hold a job outside family influence—thank goodness her family was filthy rich, ha—and so she couldn't make it much worse by going underground to procure some illegal piece of genetic enhancement. Damn the law. All however many of them she'd broken. The microscopic piece of tech had meant a new life for her. She'd met Solomon and had known right away he was a kindred spirit, a fellow lycan. She'd helped create his mercenary team, carved herself a niche as the resident engineer and all-around tech girl geek and hadn't looked back.

Looked back. Ha.

"So, um, Cupcake," she began, shrugged. "Should I keep calling you that?"

His arm twitched. "Yes."

"Okay. You let me know if it's something you feel like talking about. Nolan, I mean."

"It's not."

The short reply though said gently, stung her deep. Cupcake didn't want to talk and had a right to keep what Nolan represented all to himself, but she'd thought of all people, she'd earned his trust. Maybe not.

"Maybe some day," he added after a while. "Okay?"

She nodded, immensely relieved.

And tried not to jig.

Cupcake's heart squeezed painfully. His worst fear was becoming reality. His old life had caught up to him. Liberty would have to learn the truth. Because in this case, what she didn't know *could* hurt her. He should know.

Nolan looked exactly as he'd remembered. The smirk, the perfect blond hair combed just so, with some gray in it now. He'd been one of the many suits tagging his bosses' steps and doing their dirty laundry so to speak. Cupcake had done many jobs specifically for Nolan. He enjoyed watching when Cupcake did his *work*. He threw a furtive glance at Liberty—even if he knew for a fact she couldn't see him looking at her, he still suspected she'd feel his gaze anyway—and his throat closed.

His very worst fear.

He felt trapped in a silent movie when they met Dragana, shared the credits amongst all three. Numb. Detached. Trying to read lips and failing. He wanted to tell Liberty but would never, ever risk losing her friendship. Yet he was too used to Antioch to think for a second they stood a good chance of getting away. It'd taken him months to plan his own escape the first time on board a sanatorium barge destined for Earth. He'd had to spend four days hunkered down in the lower decks. Months of planning and sheer luck too. No way they'd get the same luck now. Not twice for the same guy. Life just didn't work that way.

If Liberty's guy reached Antioch tomorrow and they could get on board his ship, fine, but if anything happened and he was late—say, because the corrupt port authorities refused clearance to dock—then they were all as Dragana had put it, *fucked*.

For extra security and to make sure one strike wouldn't down all three of them, it was agreed she'd secure board across the street at a place called The Red Wall while Liberty and he would lodge in an old factory converted into transient lodgings some ways down the crowded, noisy, smelly street. They'd already settled the argument a couple weeks back that Liberty would not *ever* be separated from either Dragana or him until she had her eyes back. The thought of her alone in a strange building, surrounded by the scum of Antioch... Cupcake shivered.

They presently obtained adjacent rooms but with a shared bathroom. He felt himself blush at the thought of, well, *going*, while Liberty and her keen hearing were next door.

He cleared his throat. "I'll get something to eat from the cafeteria downstairs."

Liberty nodded, hugged herself. Her head must have hurt again. Damn. He wished he could do something.

In the lobby, he bought plastic containers filled with some soy-based pseudo-meat *something* with ready-to-heat tea and a handful of fortune cookies. He loved those. Loved reading the tiny messages he could barely unroll in his too-big fingers. He particularly enjoyed the upbeat ones. *Fall seven times, stand up eight. Every day may not be good, but there's something good in every day.* He could use a good pick-me-up right about now. Cupcake shook his head.

On the spur of the moment, he crossed the street, towering over everyone by a good head and shoulders, and stooped to enter a tiny, foul-smelling herbs shop.

"What do you need, young man?" asked an old, old woman with skin like leather and hair made of spiderwebs.

"Something for headaches. Bad ones."

"You or her?" she inquired with a smirk.

Cupcake felt his cheeks warm. "Her."

"This," the old woman said after rummaging under a cluttered counter. "*Haw Par*. Old as world. Four credits."

He narrowed his eyes at the tiny glass jar with the metal lid. It was barely as big around as a walnut. "What's in it?"

"Tiger's Balm. Good stuff."

"Um. She's vegetarian, so I don't think she's gonna like —"

The tiny woman rolled her eyes. "Not to eat. To *rub*."

"Oh."

"Rub this on temples. Twice tonight, twice tomorrow." She smirked as she put the little jar on the counter between them.

After making sure the list of ingredients didn't contain any tiger bits — Liberty *was* a vegetarian and a zealous one — he paid and brought the red-topped jar with a pouncing tiger embossed on the lid and the food back to their rooms. They ate in silence, she sitting on the corner of the bed, the tiny tray balanced on her lap, he standing by the window, occasionally looking out.

"They're well connected," she commented after swallowing. "But they can't find us that quickly."

"I know."

He couldn't eat and abandoned all pretense, threw the stuff into the chute and crossed his arms tight so he wouldn't start pacing. He felt trapped. And he was becoming stressed. Not a good thing with him. He didn't have practice with stress and didn't want to discover tonight of all times that spikes of anxiety would make him change.

Liberty cringed, put her tray down by her feet and rubbed at her temples.

"Oh wait," Cupcake said, retrieving the tiny jar from the low — stained, scratched, delaminated and so beneath his classy companion — table and proffered it. "I got this for your head. Rub your temples with it, she said. Twice today. Twice tomorrow."

Liberty smiled through her obvious pain. "You learned it by heart coming back, didn't you?"

He didn't need to answer. He had and she knew.

It quickly became obvious she wouldn't be able to get the thing open without making a mess so he knelt in front of her, gently took the jar from her fingers – tried not to stop breathing when hers touched his – and twisted the lid off.

"Here," he said, giving it back.

Her hand shook when she held it out, palm up. *Poor woman's in big-time pain if she's shaking this bad.* His Liberty was usually so cool, calm and collected.

She's not your Liberty.

He felt so cheap. He should be doing this for her. What kind of friend was he? A big, dumb, clueless *guy*. Maybe he should go get Dragana. But he didn't think he could stand the noise right now.

Just do it.

"You should take your goggles off first, I think."

She nodded, removed the blue-tinted goggles and kept her eyes squeezed shut.

"It's okay," he said.

"White eyes don't gross you out? At least with the goggles it's not so obvious."

He shook his head, remembered she couldn't see. "No."

"You don't mind doing it?"

He did mind, truth be told. He was terrified to touch her. Hurt her. Afraid he wouldn't want to stop. Afraid he'd never get to do it again.

C'mon, man. It's the least you can do. We're all in deeper shit because of you.

"I'll do it."

"Thanks."

Her voice was thin, he found. Threadbare undoubtedly from pain and stress. Which made him feel even worse. Without his colorful past, they'd still be living in their rented place, safely waiting for her guy to show up with "her eyes" as she said. But because Cupcake had been, well, what he'd been, they were now running, hiding, living *here*.

After smearing a small amount of the minty-smelling stuff on index and middle fingers of both hands, he slowly reached for her face, which was set dead center, her unseeing eyes on his face. Heat from her heralded imminent contact. Then his skin touched hers and he thought he'd have a heart attack.

"Are you grinding your teeth, Cupcake? You don't have to do this."

"It's okay, I was afraid to hurt you."

Gently, reverently, he rubbed tiny circles along her temples, at the dawn of her hairline, back again and above her eyebrows. A soft sigh left her, reached his face, caressed his lips in a velvety whisper. He had to close his eyes to keep focused on her face. His gaze had slid down her long and slender neck, the chocolate-colored skin so smooth and shiny, and lower inside her jacket. She breathed harder, which swelled her breasts against the synthleather. The lapels moved away from each other, revealed even more glorious skin. And the shadowy curve of a breast.

"You're good," she commented softly.

Liberty spread her thighs a bit so he could kneel closer to his work. A knee touched him on the side where the large back muscles attached. He'd been slashed there once, during a vicious fight and had always been acutely aware of that place. Cupcake leaned over so he could massage her from a different angle, fingers upward in circles, tiny and light. Her skin was so, *so* hot and smooth.

He caught himself gazing down her cleavage again, at her heaving chest. He forced his gaze back to her face.

Big fat mistake.

Her head was cocked to one side, her lips parted. Her breath mixed with his when she leaned over very, very subtly. Her shoulder-length ebony hair grazed his forearm. She could've been a modern-day Cleopatra. His queen. And he could see himself warring for her, in her name and glory, killing and dying for her. He swallowed hard.

Liberty moistened her lips by pressing them together then released them. Cupcake watched mesmerized as her lips filled back in, blood rushing to darken the plum-hued flesh. A glimmer of tongue darted behind her teeth, which were perfectly planted and stark white.

He realized he'd stopped both rubbing *and* breathing.

Focus, focus, focus.

The mantra didn't help him. Nothing could.

"Cupcake?"

"Yeah?"

"Would you kiss me?"

He swallowed in a desperate search for saliva. It was all gone. Not a drop left.

Then as he watched her lean even closer to him—he could now smell her too, which wasn't helping him any—it occurred to him how he might be sharing his last private moment with her. Tomorrow, if things went well, she'd have her implant and wouldn't need him anymore. And if things turned ugly, well...

For the first time since he'd met the classy lady nine years and seven months ago—he'd never forget the punch to the gut the mere sight of her had caused as she stood beside Solomon, arguing over something or other—Cupcake *considered* it. Even for a brief moment he entertained the notion, the glorious prospect of both of them making love. His hands on her. Hers on him.

He was shocked to feel her lips pressed against his and realized he'd been the one to make contact first. He drew back as if he'd been smacked, swallowed hard, meant to apologize but couldn't talk.

"I'll take that as a yes," she murmured, closing the distance.

He didn't pull away this time.

Cupcake forgot all about ointments and tigers, smirking little old ladies and soybean-based takeout, which all tasted the same no matter what coloring or sauce they used. He forgot Nolan and the bosses—Mr. Fargo, Big Denis, Mrs. McCutcheon and her brutish lycan sons. He forgot seedy Antioch and the missing cruiser. He no longer cared about any of it. All he wanted, all he'd *ever* wanted really was to wrap Liberty Silke in his arms and never let go.

She was a good kisser. Not that he had much to compare her with but still. Wow. He had no idea a simple kiss could make a guy want to drop like a stone and just grin at the ceiling. Since puberty—and he was now thirty-four—he'd been intimate with women three times. Four, if counting right now. Before he'd left Antioch, the bosses would send girls to his place as a "gift" for a good fight. He didn't want pity fucks nor had he been interested in the skinny little things, except for Ella, who'd been kind and trying her best to shield her little sister from Fargo's immoral business. So when the bosses would send the sisters into Cupcake's apartment, the girls and he would watch movies on the digitex or play cards or whatever. One time when he was nineteen or twenty—he couldn't remember—he'd let his guard down and had had sex with Ella while her sister slept on the couch. She'd been his first. They seemed to have both found something to enjoy in the other's arms, even if they'd never repeated the encounter.

Fargo's female entertainers were just glad to come rest at Cupcake's for a while. When they'd been at his place for a reasonable amount of time—had to keep the pretense after all—the chauffeurs would bring them back to wherever they'd found them. He'd quickly become popular with the bosses' girls as they *all* wanted to go with him after fights, which had garnered him quite the reputation. And his moniker too. Ella had started calling him Cupcake and everyone had thought it hilarious. He preferred it over his fighter name.

Liberty moaned softly and Cupcake careened back to the here and now. He'd been secretly fantasizing about this for so long he was surprised he hadn't started sweating like a pig.

He framed her face with his hands while she made small sounds deep in her throat and if those soft moans didn't just make him want to run around and pump his fist in the air. But she pulled away. He nearly fell forward and caught himself on the edge of the mattress by her thigh.

"Cupcake," she said, her unseeing eyes searching his face. "If you don't want to share my bed, say it now, because if you pull back at the last second, it'd make me cranky. And you know me."

He couldn't help it. He chuckled. Cupcake couldn't remember the last time he'd done that. Chuckling? Even sex was a classy affair with her. "Share my bed", what a nice way to put it. He'd remember it for next time. If there ever was a next time. Although he could die right now and still be a happy man. He'd kissed Liberty Silke.

"Yeah, I know how cranky you can get," he replied through a smile. He ran a thumb over her chin. "I won't pull back. I'm not the brightest crayon in the box but I'm not *that* dumb."

The grin slid off her face. "You're *not* dumb. Don't you dare speak that way!"

He just shrugged.

"You think I'd kiss an idiot?"

He shook his head. "I didn't mean it that way."

"I know how you meant it. Self-deprecation is fine and all and kind of cute on you, but I don't like when you put yourself down. *That* makes me cranky."

"I know what I'm worth is all." *And what I'm not.*

It was her turn to frame his face between her hands. He wrapped his over and closed his eyes. He could stay this way forever.

"You mean a lot to me. Now kiss me before I throw myself at you. And without my eyes, I might end up on my butt."

"I'd never let you fall. I'll always be there to catch you."

Chapter Three

I know you would.

Liberty knew him more intimately than anyone else did. Although she realized she didn't know him as well as she thought. Who was Nolan and what did he represent aside from someone with whom Cupcake obviously didn't want to hook up again? And who was *Rickie*? But the feel of his lips against hers brought her right back.

They shared a prolonged kiss, several minutes if she'd have to guess, during which Cupcake's hands never strayed but remained where he'd put them, light and tender, shocking given the size of mittens he had. One on her shoulder, the other cupped around her jaw. No hurried dive into her cleavage. No groping of her butt. As if he were more than content just to kiss and touch her. Dear Cupcake.

Liberty pulled back just enough to free her lips but not too far so she could still feel his breath on her skin. "I want you to touch me, Cupcake. Everywhere."

A tentative hand slid from her shoulder to her elbow, down lower then alit on her hip. She chuckled at his awkwardness. "You were pawing around looking for it as if you didn't know where my thigh was."

"My eyes are closed."

"Why?" She kissed his throat.

"So I see things your way."

So he could see things her way. Wow. She felt herself blush. No one had ever been so sensitive. So thoughtful. And people who thought Cupcake was nothing but a brute, a mountain of muscle, all brawn and no brain—how wrong they were.

Liberty reached to his wide chest and after a bit of fumbling found the zipper to his old-fashioned leather jacket. She pulled it down, enjoying the sound of each hook releasing and as she opened the garment, aftershave-smelling heat wafted out to her.

"You smell nice. You always smell so nice."

His cheek moved against her own. Was he smiling? She wished she could see. He smiled so rarely and so guardedly. Tomorrow. Tomorrow she'd see it all again. For now, she'd touch and smell and lick and taste.

"Thanks."

When she finished unzipping his jacket, she slipped her hands inside and pushed it back over his massive shoulders, Cupcake helping by rolling them one at a time. The garment was a tight fit. Probably custom-made for his muscled frame. After running her hands over his chest, she guessed he wore one of those sleeveless T-shirts, one with a crew neck.

"What color is it?"

"Black."

She nodded, continued with her tactile exploration of this hot and hard specimen of man. Just glorious. She loved his frame. Solid. No sinewy muscles underneath a too-thin skin, which had always given her the shivers. Cupcake was built like a tree, with just enough definition to his musculature to make it a playground of shadows but not too much that each striation was visible. She didn't enjoy men with shoulders where threads of muscles played under the skin. She didn't want to have a course in physiology when she made love with a man, she wanted something robust against which to warm her hands. And her legs.

After she heard the rustle of leather jacket landing on the floor, she pulled his shirt over his head and returned to letting her hands get to know Cupcake's every magnificent inch. Because she suspected he wouldn't do it himself without invitation, Liberty leaned back with her hands behind her butt and cocked her head.

"I'd like you to take mine off."

She felt him kneeling closer, right between her thighs. The urge to lock him in caused her quad muscles to twitch.

A soft touch indicated Cupcake had flicked the button. The release parted her synthleather jacket, which was creamy white if she was to believe Dragana, and matched her outrageously expensive boots. The release liberated her breasts. He must have been able to see them now.

To her shock, Dragana had proven an excellent shopping partner in choosing an outfit for Liberty. She'd described the styles, cuts and colors perfectly. Poor Cupcake, who'd gotten a "biker suit that makes him look even meaner" according to Dragana, had waited outside for hours and hadn't said a word when the pair had finally walked out with their purchases. According to Dragana, she'd bought herself a "kickass denim outfit". Liberty wouldn't be found dead wearing denim. Antioch catered to every taste it would seem.

One of Cupcake's hands reached hesitantly inside her jacket's shoulder and slid it back.

"I won't bite," she murmured then unable to help it, added, "too hard."

A heavy weight settled on either side of her, causing sharp depressions right by her hands, then heat announced he'd moved closer to her throat and face. His mouth landed moth-light against hers, traced her lips, her chin, underneath her jaw before dipping under and following her neck to the space between clavicles, which he spent a while kissing. Shivers forced her spine into a C, which pressed her chest to his face. She tried not to pant when Cupcake's kisses brought him down between her breasts—she wished she had more of those. Liberty opened her mouth when he closed his around a nipple.

"Ohh..."

"Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No, but I will if you stop again."

His chest rumbled when he chuckled. He paid similar attention to her other nipple, trapping it between his burning-hot lips, sucking gently then releasing, repeating the process, adding pressure, using a hand to cup her humble breast. She wished she could see him, see both of them together. With his pale skin and black leather clothes, and her own dark skin and white synthleather, they must have made a visually pleasing contrast. She couldn't wait to get her new vision implant to replace the one the solar storm had fried. The nanotech was probably still attached to her optic nerves, slowly disintegrating until her body would naturally eliminate it. Her family's extended connections had finally reached Antioch. Not a moment too soon for she intended to get her hands on Cupcake's fine body as often as she could and would love to see him the next time she had him naked.

Tomorrow, she thought as she lay on her back, bringing Cupcake with her. *Tomorrow I'm going to see him again.*

When he kissed her, when his hot and soft lips landed on hers, Liberty forgot about tomorrow, about Antioch and Nolan. She even forgot about her blindness, which didn't happen often lately. Only Cupcake could make that happen.

"Mmm," she moaned against his mouth, trapped his head and crushed him to her.

A large hand cupped her hip, squeezed, snaked upward along her flank and stopped over her breast, which he caressed with a callused but gentle thumb, round and round. Liberty squeezed her legs harder so she could press her pelvic bone against him, experience to its fullness the rock-hard quality of his body. There wasn't a single soft spot to him. He was all jaw, thick shoulders and solid back. And she knew this back had been built durable. Custom-made for long rides.

Both naked from the waist up, they rolled around on the bed, almost fell but Cupcake kept them put with a thick arm before sliding her back in the middle of the mattress. When he squeezed a muscled thigh between hers, Liberty moaned. Goodness, the man could do this to her with only a leg? How good would it be when he'd sink in? She couldn't wait to find out.

"Lie down on your back," she whispered, pushing him at arm's length. His chest corded when he did as she told him, pushed himself off her and flipped onto his back.

Leather pants made that lovely sound, a mix of squeak and murmur, when Cupcake spread his legs wider to accommodate her as she knelt between. She started at his knees, let her hands run upward slowly, nails digging into the thick leather, followed by her tongue, which she kept narrow and pointed so she could flick the tip hard enough for him to feel through the pants. A soft gasp from him accompanied her progress uphill. She would've grinned had she not been afraid to insult his male pride.

"I've been wanting this for so long, Cupcake," she murmured between licks. "So long."

He caressed her hair softly as one would test the feel of a silk shawl, let it run between fingers, afraid to pull a thread in the exquisite affair. A thick lump strained

under the pants. She grinned. Oh dear. So he *was* proportional. She'd always wondered. Liberty pawed for the closure to his pants, found it. With her breaths coming in short and quick, she snapped the button, closed her eyes even if it changed nothing in her case, then kissed and licked the portion of hard belly she'd just denuded. Cupcake was panting quickly now.

As she pulled the zipper down, each tiny hook a delight in itself, she kept one hand over the stiff bulge—she swore it was pushing against her palm—so she could angle it up toward the V she'd just created. She snaked a hand down into the zipper. He wore nothing else underneath the leather pants. Good man. Then Liberty was grabbing his cock to pull it out. It wouldn't. Cupcake was too big.

Liberty chuckled. "My, my. I'm going to need two hands for this, won't I?"

A half chuckle, half groan was Cupcake's only reply.

"Lift your butt up for me."

While he did, Liberty grabbed fistfuls of his waistband and yanked downward. The subtle scent of him reached her, made her salivate.

"I'll try not to bite," she growled as she grabbed his burning-hot penis and angled it to her mouth.

"You don't— Ha!"

The rest of Cupcake's words were lost in the gasp following her wolfing down the entire, oh she'd say, ten or eleven inches of him. Each vein and ridge and smooth curve triggered feral impulses to fire down her every limb. She wanted him with a passion that bordered on violence. She'd waited so damn long!

"That's all mine," she murmured between pulls. "All mine." Long sucks, quick pumps. "You're all mine."

While she sucked him, she fisted his shaft, rotated her hand, squeezed his balls until Cupcake began to shake under her. A large fist in her hair announced she was doing good work. But she wasn't done. Not even close!

"Let it out," she urged, pumped faster. "Let it come."

Two fists in her hair made her accentuate the pressure of her lips around his silky cock. So thick and rod-straight. The glans like an arrowhead of flesh. Next time with any luck, she'd see it too.

She retreated to the end of him, kept her tongue under the tip and flicked it repeatedly, made an open-throated "ahh" sound, which seemed to do wonders to his earlier awkwardness. He pushed his hips up.

"That's it, let it come."

She trapped his balls in a merciless fist while she continued corkscrewing his cock with her other hand. Another hip thrust.

"Liberty..."

"Mmm."

Give it to me, she chanted in her head. *Come, come, come.*

"Liberty...I'm—"

He did.

Only he would've pulled out had she let him. She didn't.

An initial burning jet preceded a series of tiny pulses at the base of his cock, which she squeezed and milked, shoved down her throat hard enough to make herself gag. She barely got a taste for him, so deep she'd taken him. But what little she got melted her between the legs. Goodness. Salty and piquant. She took it all from him, swallowed repeatedly so she wouldn't waste a drop of his precious cum. His thighs quivered with spasms by her sides. Still she fisted and pumped.

"You didn't have to," Cupcake murmured while his hands released her hair and smoothed it back.

Liberty pulled off, kissed his glans with a loud smack. "You thought I'd let you get away? Ha."

"Now it's my turn."

There was a difference in his tone. Gone was the hesitation and gaucherie. Cupcake wasn't asking.

Liberty couldn't help but grin wide when she felt a pair of large, hot hands encircle her waist and showing incredible strength—she was no nymph—lifted her cleanly off the bed. She felt Cupcake shift under her then chuckled when he settled her back down so she lay on her front.

Tentative hands reached for her shoulders.

"Are your eyes still closed?"

"Yeah."

"You don't have to."

She felt his breath on her nape then his mouth between her shoulder blades. "It's better this way. If I looked at you, I'd go crazy. And *you* don't have a choice."

"But you do, you *can* see," she replied, silly tears welling.

"Doesn't matter."

In the manner his hands reached uncertainly down her back to cup her butt, she knew he hadn't opened his eyes.

Dear Cupcake.

The sound of leather announced he'd removed his pants. A pair of thuds—the boots—followed. She felt bereft strangely enough for the whole half a minute it took for him to return and settle between her legs. Heat preceded his hands on her back, which he massaged slowly, carefully.

"That's so good."

"You have no idea," Cupcake replied.

Any thought of happy crying and cuddling with the best lover she'd ever had evaporated when he kissed her spine and triggered a series of frissons to shoot down to her limbs. Whoa!

He reached around her waist and unsnapped her pants. She shifted and twisted as he pulled them down around her legs, thongs trapped in the synthleather garment and going with the rest. The twisted mess ended around her ankles so Cupcake unzipped her boots, seemed to fiddle around unsuccessfully for a way to pull them out then finally managed to just yank the whole thing off. She lay prone, naked, tingling all over as she waited for his hands to come back to her. They did. And boy if Cupcake's hands weren't the best kept secret in the galaxy! They *knew* how her body worked. If not her clothes.

Cupcake began by tracing serpentine shapes down her spine, went back up and repeated the process but adding a bit of tongue work. Liberty shivered when he reached her coccyx and licked it in long, leisurely passes.

With an almost reverent hand, he followed her cheeks down between her legs. Juices, which had accumulated in her folds, positively spilled when the tips of his fingers reached her vulva, gently parted her, rubbed back and forth before slipping down to her thigh. Liberty arched her backside and pushed against his hand.

"Mmm, do that again."

Cupcake did, only this time, he pressed a finger against her lips and slipped in by an inch or so. She was so wet. And so ready!

"Oh that's good," she breathed.

She felt him back down from the bed then grab her knees and pull her to him. She hurriedly came up on her knees and scooted backward until she felt his face against her vulva. A shocked "Oh!" escaped her.

Hands trapped her knees, pulled her wide, which she gladly helped by spreading herself as far as her trembling thighs would go. With a low growl, Cupcake crushed his mouth to her sex. She'd waited so long! Finally!

She had no idea he could be so intense. Cupcake devoured her in long, burning sucks, which he punctuated with deep-throated growls, murmurs she couldn't understand and a "mmm" of what sounded like pure bliss to the towering lycan. Without even using his fingers, which he kept around her knees in a firm but painless grip, Cupcake stimulated her in ways she'd never been, pushed his tongue inside, retreated so he could rub his chin against her clit, suck it noisily then release it with a pop. Spasms tightened her entire cleft, from vulva to anus, and still Cupcake worked his magic. With the sheets in shaking fists, Liberty felt the first subtle signs of her impending climax. A tightening, a shiver. She arched, pushed back against his face.

"Oh that's it, that's it."

Right before it hit, she felt Cupcake stand behind her.

"Yes! Come on!"

As the first wave began, a tingly ripple quickly swelling, Cupcake anchored her hips by two handfuls and slowly, angled just right, penetrated her. She couldn't help it. She let out a long cry of ecstasy, which filled the room and seemed to spur him on for he sank all the way, retreated then bucked back in. He was so impossibly thick.

"Oh!" she cried out. "Oh yes, that's it, come on," she urged. "Push, *push*."

He growled in reply, pushed harder, deeper, completely unfurled her around him. She knew she couldn't take another inch of him but still she tried with her fists as anchors, her hips as axis, she undulated, arched, bucked back, she spread even wider until it burned, forced him to widen his stance—she felt him vacillate for a second before his cadence accentuated, his thighs working like magnificent pistons. He pumped, pounded, pushed in hard. Fast then slow. With near violence then using the utmost quietness so shocking for a man his size.

"Ah! Cupcake! Yes!"

Colors swirled in her unseeing eyes, burning needles poking her distended cunt and her breasts bouncing wildly, Liberty didn't just take him in. She welcomed Cupcake, her precious friend, her delicious and *large* lover.

With the wave relenting, the fire that accompanied Cupcake's cock withdrew as did he.

"I want you on top," he said in her ear. A flick of tongue on the lobe triggered a growl of acquiescence.

"Sit on the bed," she replied. Hurriedly, she pulled and pushed until she had him sitting in the middle of the bed, leaning back against the headboard with his arms raised along the edge.

She knelt over his lap, facing away, and backed until she felt his cock nudge her sex then reaching back and trapping his muscular arms on the headboard, she raised herself on the balls of her feet.

Before she could sink down on him, Cupcake tilted his hips up. She cried out incoherently. After the first uncoordinated thrust, burning hot and stretching her pussy impossibly wide, Liberty began to bounce over him. She gathered momentum and force, slammed back down hard enough to make skin clack, fast enough to follow the springy mattress's natural impetus. Cupcake snarled and huffed behind her. Still she recoiled and slammed back down.

After a violent buck, Cupcake trapped her wrists so he too could participate in the aggressive penetration. Liberty rolled her hips so hard his cock slipped out more than half the times but she'd sink back around for the next downward drive. Fire tingled up her spine and down her arms, which Cupcake still had trapped close together. After a particularly brutal thrust, Cupcake popped out. Liberty never had time to stop when she rolled too far forward and sank back on him. His cock plunged in her ass, almost halfway down. A cry of animalistic abandon left her, joined a split second later by one of his.

She'd never taken a lover in the ass, a toy, yes, but never a man and had always believed one should start slow. Oh well.

To her thrill and wonderment, she followed through with it, no discomfort or awkwardness, sank a bit deeper, movement that triggered spasms in her legs. Abandoning her wrists, Cupcake grabbed at her waist and lifted her up.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, kissing her shoulder. "Are you hurt?"

Liberty shook her head, still prey to the fierce orgasm building, swelling, shredding the last of her coherence.

"Fuck me," she snarled low under her breath. "*Do it.*"

Cupcake seized one of her legs, pushed her down so she lay supine then kept it against his heaving chest while he made room for his knees. His penis nudged her, teasing. Liberty was about to voice her urgency when he sank in all at once and started hammering.

She couldn't help herself and used her fingers, front and back, clit and anus, and kept in cadence with Cupcake's penetration. Furiously he took her. Both their voices mixed, rose, swelled. She couldn't take it anymore.

"Harder!" she yelled at him. "Harder!"

Out of some reserve of energy she didn't know he possessed – that any man could possess – Cupcake increased his hip movements and forced a cry of bliss from her when he began to twist, fuck her in figure eights. And every other number out there!

Then it happened.

She came like a bomb. In the back of her mind, she felt him follow her a split second later, felt the burning jets pulsing deep in her. He'd come again, good man. She took her fingers out of herself so she could roll her breasts and pinch her nipples, moan and gasp and whisper her pleasure at him. Exactly how she'd imagined it would be. Just perfect. Her dear Cupcake.

Tenderly, he released the leg he still held to his sweaty chest, bent it down and as she made room for him, he lay by her side. Hot, his hand alit on her belly. "Liberty," he whispered. She had no idea how she could tell, but she knew he was smiling. "Liberty."

"Enjoy the sound of my name?" she asked half joking, half hoping he'd say yes.

"It's the best sound in the world." He took her wrist, kissed the inside of it.

Liberty rolled onto her side, rested an arm over his chest, so muscular and hard and perfect, and planted her chin on his biceps. Smells of sweat and both their essences wafted to her. She licked her lips then his skin. Salty. "Did you open your eyes?"

"Not once." He traced her shoulder, wrote something with a finger.

She sighed when the neighbor's music began to pound. Outside their window, noises intensified with the late night as they did everywhere humans congregated. Shreds of after-climax made her shiver.

"You want me to go talk to him?" Cupcake offered.

Liberty smiled but shook her head. "You can't beat up someone just because their music is too loud."

"But I can beat up someone because they annoy you," he retorted deadpan.

She chuckled. Yet he didn't join her.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

Their moment was nearing its end. She hated it. A small sniffing sound followed by a mumbled curse made her sigh. She rolled off Cupcake and smacked what she hoped was his thigh in the hopes of keeping the mood light. They'd finally made love. After years of gazing from a distance. How would he deal with this, she wondered.

"I'll go take a shower," he said. She felt him rise.

"Then you're coming back here, right?"

He didn't answer.

"Cupcake? It's okay to come back here to my bed."

Please come back to my bed, she added mentally.

"Um. I think I'll sleep next door. It's better that way."

The old awkwardness was back. It broke her heart. She'd been sure he would've felt comfortable enough to return after his shower. This was her old Cupcake. He was worth the wait. But then again, maybe he was right and should sleep next door. She wasn't sure having the gorgeous man all to herself would be conducive to rest. Smart man.

"Are you mad?" he asked. His voice sounded farther away. The guy could be stealthy. Especially for someone his size.

"Of course not. It's better this way, I guess. In case Dragana comes barging in as she usually does."

She heard him mumble something and knew the thought of the loud woman finding them together in bed must have terrified him.

"Goodnight then," she said, rolling to her side, the one facing his door even if she couldn't see him.

"You sure about the music? I can't hear myself think."

"We'll let them have their fun. And we're only staying here for one night. With any luck tomorrow I'll have my eyes and access to a ship."

"You sure you're not mad? I don't want you to think it meant nothing." She heard his sigh.

"Go take a shower," she replied with fake levity. Her heart was breaking even if she knew they'd shared more than just a friendly fuck.

"It meant – means, everything to me, Liberty. Okay?"

"You stink. Shower."

He chuckled. Then the door clicked.

With tears welling, Liberty rolled onto her back and listened to the faint sound of the shower. When the rattle of pipes — everything was noisy in this place — stopped, she gave him a few minutes then she too made her way toward the shared bathroom. She knocked softly on the door, received no answer and proceeded in. She didn't have her toiletries bag and had to use whatever was there. Cupcake, so thoughtful, had kept the bottles on the shower ledge, cap screwed off for shampoo and cap screwed partly for soap. Smiling, she activated the noisy shower, hissed when scalding hot water rained on her from somewhere above. It was too wide to be a single spigot. Dammit, where were the controls?

Tomorrow, I'm getting my eyes back. She couldn't wait.

A sigh of contentment left her. She was pleasantly sore all over. Cupcake was just as she'd imagined he'd be. Attentive, thoughtful and oh-so proportional. She laughed.

Chapter Four

After he dried his hair, using the smaller towel so Liberty would get the bath sheet, Cupcake checked his face in the mirror and quickly looked away. The grin he saw pulling at his mouth made him feel stupid and brutish. He had a broken nose, scar-covered eyebrows, and constantly looked as if he needed a shave, no matter how often he did. And his ear! There was a notch, a *notch*, missing from the shell. What the hell was he thinking getting anywhere near her? Christ. But sharing Liberty's bed...it'd been...

There was no word to describe it.

And she'd wanted him to come back to her side after his shower. Why had he said no? He *wanted* to go back to Liberty. There wasn't anything else he wanted more. But he'd been so habituated to staying clear of the classy lady, he'd blurted out "no" right away when he wanted nothing more than to curl up with her and go to sleep. But the mere thought of Dragana finding them in the same bed had just about killed it for him. She'd tease them mercilessly. And while Cupcake had never minded the loudmouth's teasing, he didn't think he could deal with it well if it involved Liberty. It was better this way. She'd have her eyes in a few hours. Everything would go back the way they were before.

"She's wrong, I *am* dumb."

He opened the door to his own room. The music was even louder here. He muttered as he closed it.

Cupcake never even saw them until something sharp was jammed in his lower back. He hit the floor convulsing and bit his tongue.

Another jolt of electricity forced his jaws together and for a second he feared he was going to crack his teeth or break something. Blood dribbled to his chin. He tried to roll onto his stomach but couldn't move. Something – a booted foot, he could recognize the feel of it easily – hit him in his side where his old wound sometimes flared. A grunt was kicked out of him.

"It's been a long time, Rickie," a man said behind him. "We missed you."

Cupcake was finally able to roll onto his front and bend an arm so he could lift himself up a bit. In front of his face stood a pair of shiny white shoes, gray dress pants, which creased when the wearer knelt. A face he remembered too well came down to his level.

Panic seized him. He had to keep them occupied. They couldn't be left to wander around and search his room. They would hear Liberty next door. She'd probably get a

shower too—he'd left things the way she'd shown him how to do in their other rented place so she could recognize what was what. What if they heard her?

"I didn't think I'd ever see you again, Rickie," Mr. Fargo, his old boss, said through a sad smile. "The girls missed you so much." He pinched Cupcake's chin and held it, despite the blood and spit. "You're looking well. Even got yourself a good-looking woman. And rich too."

Oh God, they know.

He held his former boss's gaze. Nothing had changed at all. The smirk, the pitted skin, the hard little eyes the color of ashes. His teeth were yellower but that was it.

"It hurts me to hurt you, Rickie. But a man's gotta know his place." He dropped Cupcake's chin, stood.

He barely had time to roll over and try to parry when two men—Mrs. McCutcheon's lycan sons Doug and Bo—raised their batons. Pain exploded behind Cupcake's eyelids. Someone else must have held the stun gun for another jolt ripped through him, incapacitated him while the two brothers let him have it. He couldn't even change. They hit his head, his face, his hands, when he tried to reach one of them, grab at whatever was close to him. Despite the music, he heard—and felt—something crack along his shoulder, which caused burning agony to lick down his back and arm.

"I spent months and thousands of credits trying to find you, Rickie," Mr. Fargo said while they beat him.

Cupcake grunted when one of the twins snapped him a vicious kick in the side. Just when he'd found the energy to reach out and grab at the offending ankle, he snarled a whimper while whoever held the stun gun zapped him repeatedly with it. His lower back felt like pudding. He couldn't even move one of his legs.

"Why did you leave?" Mr. Fargo demanded, sounding almost sad. "After all we did for you?"

He gagged up blood but still managed to finally close a hand over someone's knee. With a vicious yank, he buckled the leg and wrapped his other arm around it. A hail of hits fell on him. The stun gun repeatedly, mercilessly, digging in his side, his nape.

"Don't kill him, you idiot," he heard Fargo's voice snarl. It was coming from so far away.

Still, the hits didn't relent. He tried to stay conscious despite the agony but knew his body was shutting down.

And while they brutally beat him, all he could think about was Liberty.

* * * * *

Hot water drummed on her head as she rubbed soap over her belly, around her hips. She let water get into her mouth, remembered the type of establishment in which she was and hurriedly spat it back out. A pleasant tingle started at the base of her spine. Cupcake had kissed her there. She ran fingers along her lower back, enjoying the

memory of his tongue. She smiled then shook her head. Even with the shower's noise and the rattling of the pipes, she could still feel the music's bass thumping. Maybe she should've let Cupcake deal with them.

* * * * *

A hail of hits fell on him. The skin over his knuckles shredded when he wrapped one over his face to protect himself. Pain radiated all through his body. Blood blinded him. One of his teeth felt loose. Cupcake rolled onto his side, found the strength to climb to his knees and take a swipe at the closest aggressor. He caught something, brought it back to him. The strikes intensified. Someone snarled a curse. He was growing desperate now. What if they would go after her when they were finished with him?

They can't get to her. They just can't.

Drawing strength from the gut-wrenching fear his old life would cost Liberty her own, he floundered to one knee and punched Bo, who cursed and skipped back. The one with the stun gun jammed it in at the base of his skull. White-hot flashes stabbed at his brain. Before he could twist and get at the unseen attacker, the jolt floored him.

* * * * *

The soap smelled of lavender mixed with something else. She couldn't place it. She washed her hair, took a while rinsing it. Cupcake had left plenty of hot water for her, the sweetheart. On the spur of the moment, she caressed herself, circled her clit, which was still throbbing its little heart out. Cupcake's tongue had been there as well. It'd been everywhere. The man was good with his mouth. A tingle of pleasure rippled through her belly. Liberty shivered despite the hot water. Now that was quick.

* * * * *

Cupcake snarled when the agony in his body became too much. He could no longer feel his hands, his face. He collapsed onto his side and lay unmoving, the hits still raining and sounding like the arrhythmic beat of a felt drum. A booted foot kept kicking him in the belly. Doug? He couldn't see anything. He was close to puking and frantically kept his jaws clenched together to will the nausea away. Then the beating stopped. Or he could no longer feel anything.

Something gently rubbed at his eyelids. Cupcake forced an eye open. Mr. Fargo knelt right in front of his face, his ever-present handkerchief in hand. He dabbed Cupcake's ruined mouth with it. "I'm sorry about that, Rickie."

He heard panting behind him and had the small consolation of having at least winded them. If they hadn't stunned him right off the bat, he would've ripped them all apart. As it stood now, he could barely swallow his own spit.

Liberty.

"Now, you listen to me, and you listen well," Mr. Fargo said. He made a point with his handkerchief and dabbed at the corner of Cupcake's eye. It came away bright red. "Your lady friend next door is fine for now. We wouldn't want to mess with her unless we absolutely had to. She's a Silke, did you know? From Earth. The real deal."

Cupcake gagged and rolled onto his stomach, resting his forehead on a fist. Each breath was hell. Something was broken in his side. His old wounded side again. Damn.

"We'll take care of you when we're back home, Rickie. We always take care of our own." Mr. Fargo patted Cupcake's cheek. "I'll keep it simple so you'll understand, okay?" he offered condescendingly.

Cupcake had a sudden fit of laughter choking him. Liberty would have a field day with this. But she *was* wrong. Not often but in this case she was. Cupcake wasn't too bright. Mr. Fargo, well, he was right. He should've known he couldn't escape his old life. He should've been more careful, had stood guard at the door instead of... He sighed.

"You come back with us and we leave your lady friends alone. I'm even letting Miss Silke's courier land on Antioch and do whatever he's here to do. You don't come back to us and you watch the brothers take turns at her and that hot blonde. Hell, I might even have one too. They're fine-looking ladies. And when we're done, all three of you will die. But Miss Silke *first*."

A frisson tightened the nape of his throbbing neck. The McCutcheon sons were brutal, bestial lycans. The younger especially. Cupcake pulled his forehead from his fists and stared as best he could at his old boss. "Don't...touch..."

Mr. Fargo shook his head. "That's in your hands, Rickie. You can save them, save your special lady, or you can kill her."

"I'll go." He cringed when stabs of pain lanced in his jaw. "I'll go back with you."

Mr. Fargo smiled and stood. "I'm glad to hear it, Rickie. Welcome home."

* * * * *

Liberty was toweling her hair when a small sound alerted her. A door slamming. A door very close by. Had Cupcake left his room?

"Argh, get real."

The guy could come and go without checking on her first. Actually, if it were Cupcake, she was glad he'd done something for himself. But then again, his clothes were still in her room. Unless he'd gone through the bathroom while she showered, retrieved his clothes and discreetly returned to his own room. Could be. She wouldn't have heard Cupcake come through if he didn't want her to.

He'd always been very good at discretion and caution. She should know, after all the years she'd waited for him to make his move.

So with the music pounding still, Liberty returned to her room, pawed around the bed until her hands encountered his clothes. He hadn't left after all.

Plastifilm-thin walls. It was probably a door down the hall. Or three floors up!

She folded Cupcake's clothes neatly on a chair, followed by her own. On second thought, she blindly sifted through the pile, pulled his T-shirt and went to bed with it tucked under her elbow. She couldn't wait until tomorrow. Actually, tomorrow had probably already arrived. So it meant there wasn't much time until her guy showed up with the implant. She needed to be rested. As soon as this little detail was taken care of—a simple procedure even if it was illegal and cost a fortune—they'd find a way to contact Solomon again.

Liberty gathered Cupcake's T-shirt under her cheek and closed her eyes.

* * * * *

She could swear she woke not even five minutes later. No nightmare? Wow.

She had no idea what time it was except how it must have been morning for the music had stopped and sounds from the street market rose to her window. Smells from something cooking in oil tickled her nose. She yawned, climbed out of bed and rummaged around for the chair. She still had Cupcake's T-shirt with her and felt silly for having slept with the thing. Now it'd smell of morning breath. She hung it on the back of the chair and padded to the bathroom. Not a sound came from Cupcake's room. She ventured a small knock. They had to get things moving if they wanted to be at the spaceports to greet her "eyes". Nothing. She knocked again, a bit louder. He'd never been a sound sleeper. Hell, hadn't she caught him sleeping in a chair by her door?

"Cupcake?" she called against the door, tried the handle and found it unlocked. She cracked it open, repeated his name.

She pulled the door wider. "Cupcake? *Cupcake.*"

Her foot became tangled with something. She bent to pick it up. A towel? Still damp and lying on the floor? That wasn't like him.

"Cupcake!" she called, loud this time.

He obviously wasn't in his room. Feeling dumb for being such a worry-hen, she tentatively padded inside. Her toes met dampness on the floor. Something sticky too. Eek. She stepped aside. She must have been standing in a puddle of some old oil from the heater perhaps—she could hear it rattling in the corner—or something...or whatever else she'd rather not think about. Such a seedy building. She could tell just by smell. When would Solomon reply to the damn message so they could get the hell off this station?

Cupcake wasn't there, that much was obvious even to her. But she couldn't leave. Where could he be? He would've told her if he didn't plan on coming back until the next day. The guy didn't even want to go to a public bathroom if he hadn't made sure first that Dragana didn't plan on going as well!

Now, woman, don't start choking the guy and hovering around him or you'll push him away.

A faint metallic odor thickened her tongue, made her want to clear her throat. She angled her head this way and that, turned on herself. Her palms felt clammy when she rubbed them against her hips. Where could he have gone butt naked?! Maybe he'd gone upstairs to "talk" with the noisy neighbor and things had turned ugly? Damn. What if he'd been arrested? Oh goodness...what if they called for Iron Conclave interrogators? The local authorities wouldn't be allowed to deal with a GAN problem. They'd call for backup...

Great going, Liberty. Work yourself into a shrill little ball of nerves!

Cool down. Cooooool down. Go at this logically. First, you don't know –

Before she could ponder—she missed Solomon so much right now, he always teased her whenever she adopted The Pondering Look—loud banging rattled her own door and made her start. She heard Dragana's voice.

"Wait a moment!" she replied loud enough to be heard. She forced a few deep breaths in and out slowly, calmly. They'd start with upstairs. Just in case.

Closing the door behind her, she retraced her steps back to her room and opened to let the blonde whirlwind inside.

"Whoa, woman, put some clothes on, would you?" Dragana remarked as she shoved a bag of something into her hands. Smells of baked goods wafted up to her. Liberty's stomach growled, despite her state of mind.

Dragana chuckled. "Well, well, well."

"What?"

"Where did you hide him? Under the bed? And he fits?" Dragana replied, snorting one of her unladylike laughs. "You can come out, Cupcake. I won't tell a soul. *Promise.*"

"You can check next door but I don't think he's in his room," Liberty replied, choosing not to address the woman's comment. What she'd shared with Cupcake was special.

"Uh-uh." She snorted another laugh. "Hey, did you hurt your foot? It's bleeding."

Liberty rubbed her toes against the floor. "No. I don't think I did."

Fear suddenly reached inside her belly and squeezed her innards in a cold, clammy fist. She swallowed hard.

"Go check his room," she said through her teeth.

Please... Please let this be just me and my nerves.

"He'll smell the food. Let him –"

"Check his room," Liberty snapped. "Hurry."

She heard Dragana's heavy tread as she crossed into the bathroom. "Sure. And anyway, we need to get a move on, it's almost nine o'clock. I'll get his big ass outta bed, you just – Jesus fucking Christ, Liberty."

That sinking feeling people talked about...it was real. Liberty felt herself falling inward, shrinking, shriveling up. Fear became a palpable thing inside her, around her. She could barely breathe.

"What the hell happened?" Dragana went on. "Where's Cupcake?"

Liberty rushed to the bathroom, stubbed her toes against the jamb but didn't care about the small discomfort, not when her heart threatened to be pulled out through her navel.

"What do you see?"

"The place's been tossed, Liberty. It's... There's, er, signs of a fight." The woman's usually loud voice was subdued. She faltered at the word "fight", which instantly tightened the knot in Liberty's belly.

"What do you mean? Christ, Dragana, tell me what you see!"

"There's blood. It's everywhere. You got some on your feet."

Liberty nearly gagged. She'd been standing in what could possibly be Cupcake's blood?! She leaped, hit something with her shoulder and had to fan her arms to keep from tumbling back on her ass.

"Describe it to me," she heard her voice asking with a calm she didn't feel. "Details, Dragana." How could she be so calm outwardly when inside she wanted to scream and tear her hair out?

"There aren't any clothes," Dragana started, cursed and blew air through her teeth. It whistled and grated on Liberty's raw nerves. "I guess they're all on your side. But there's furniture all over the place, the table's cracked in half. Blood on the floor, in splatters, in a pool by your left foot. There's a broken piece of fake wood—I think it's a chair leg—and there's blood on one end. Christ, Liberty, something bad happened here."

"The door." Liberty cleared her throat. Her eyes stung. She felt tears welling but didn't care. "Did someone break in?"

"Yep. The lock's been jimmied." Her voice receded. She was in the corridor. "Blood here too, a thin line of it down the hall. And the carpet's rolled and wrinkled. Shit, I didn't even notice coming in."

"They dragged him out of here."

The door slamming. It hadn't been Cupcake. Not on his own steam anyway. And she'd done nothing. Too afraid to hover and nag. And now he was possibly lost to her. And worse, he'd been beaten, possibly killed, while she enjoyed a luxurious shower and went to sleep. She hadn't helped him. He might have died alone while she was next door, fucking her hands.

Pain hit hard. Searing stabs of light sliced through her brain. She clutched at her head.

"For Christ's sake, Liberty," Dragana snarled. Strong hands grabbed at Liberty's shoulders and shook her. "It's no damn time to change. You won't find him as a lycan. All you'll get is in trouble. Keep it cool, okay?"

The words tore the first shreds of the change away. Liberty nodded. She wouldn't find Cupcake if she changed. Dragana was right. She had to be strong for him. They wouldn't have killed him, otherwise he'd still be here. Why beat him and not kill him in the same location? It made no difference on a place such as Antioch. So they must have wanted to bring him back with them but *subdued*. For once, she was glad of not being able to see.

Cupcake's blood.

She rubbed her foot when she remembered she had some on her.

Dragana pushed something into her hands. Synthleather. Her clothes. "We have to get out of here."

Liberty agreed with a nod. "We get my eyes back," she said, surprised at the gentle tone of her voice. But fire raged under the surface. Lava flowed in her heart. They'd hurt Cupcake. There was going to be hell to pay. "Then we get Cupcake back."

"That's my girl." Dragana didn't sound convinced.

While Liberty dressed, she asked Dragana to roll Cupcake's clothes into a pillowcase, which she carried with her. He'd need his own clothes when she found him. He wouldn't want to walk around naked. Because she *was* going to find him. And he'd be all right. He would. Cupcake was tough.

Liberty choked back a sob. She was putting her goggles on when she remembered something. "The balm."

"What about it?"

"Get the jar. It's somewhere over there."

"Little glass jar? I got it."

"Is there a tag on it? Cupcake purchased it for me yesterday. Maybe we could go see the place where he got it?"

"I thought you said —"

"I *know* what I said," Liberty snapped, inhaled deeply. "Sorry. It has to be close. He was gone only a short time."

"No, no tag. But it's some Chinese stuff, so it has to come from Chinatown, right?"

Liberty hated holding Dragana's hand but had no choice. She missed Cupcake's muscled arm and silent companionship. They stood out in the crowded and smelly street and wandered for a few feet before Dragana squeezed her hand.

"There," she said, pulling Liberty with her. "There's some sort of apothecary or something."

They entered a place that felt and sounded tiny. Liberty couldn't hear any echo or sense much room around her.

"How can I help?" asked a woman. Old voice, frayed.

"A man came by yesterday, tall, dressed in black, he bought this." Dragana must have shown the jar.

"I don't remember."

Liar.

Liberty's hackles rose. "Don't lie to us," she snapped. "I know you remember. I can hear it."

A long silence greeted her words. Then the sound of shuffling feet. Dragana's hand squeezed hers tighter then Liberty felt a presence by her other side. "Young man. Large man. Gentle eyes. He comes and gets this for you. Headache, yes? They take him away last night. Four of them."

Liberty's heart pounded hard. "Do you know them?"

"Yes."

"Normally, I don't hit grannies," Dragana snarled. "But I'm willing to make an exception right now. Spill the goods, lady."

"Oh shush, child. You don't scare me," the woman snapped. "Mr. Fargo. He owns the fights. He takes your friend. Now go. I know nothing more."

Liberty bit down hard as she let Dragana lead her out and back into the street. "The spaceports?"

"Yes. Quickly. Then we have to start looking for that Mr. Fargo character."

The way to the spaceports felt almost like a dream. A nightmare more aptly. Smells of diesel and oil mixed with that of people, created a fog, which seeped into her brain, clouded her judgment. She'd let him down. He said he'd never let her fall, he'd always be there to catch her. And what did she do? The one time he needed her help. She failed him. Heat like a fever wafted out of her jacket. If they had killed him somewhere else, she'd find him, find *them*, and good fortune help them. But if they held him against his will, Liberty would make sure they remembered the name Silke when she was done with them.

Because of her white eyes, she was more memorable than anyone else and anonymity was of the essence these days with GAN on their tails. So while Liberty hunkered down in a recess between two buildings and waited, Dragana left for the port authorities—a fat credit note from Liberty as a bribe in return for the day's manifests. She returned not long after with the long-awaited news. A personal ship from Earth had docked an hour before under the name Abacan. Her connection's ship. Finally!

They walked what felt like the entire length of the spaceports, cursing when it became obvious Antioch didn't work in orderly fashion.

"I can't find the right mooring station. Can you believe this fucking place? Twenty-seven should come right before twenty-eight, the last I checked."

"That's because the guy who wrote the numbers hailed from here," a man said not far behind them. He had an accent that made certain syllables rise and dance from the rest. His voice sounded familiar.

Liberty felt Dragana whirl on the spot. "Sneaking up on me isn't a good idea, man. What the fuck do you want?"

"Miss Silke?" he asked, sounding annoyed.

Liberty nodded. "What gave me away? The stylish goggles?"

A short silence told her she'd made her point clear. She was in no mood for bitchy attitude.

"I have the cargo and a ship where we can have some peace and quiet."

"ID."

"Here."

She felt Dragana move by her side. "Rey Abacan. Watermark's raised. Let me see your thumb," she muttered. "Thumbprints match. Looks legit, Liberty."

"Good, then lead on."

His ship must have been at the farthest mooring station for it seemed as if they walked for hours. Or perhaps time slowed to Liberty, each second an eternity, each minute chipping away at Cupcake's life. If he still lived.

Finally, they reached the ship. It smelled nice inside and felt clean. "I arranged everything according to your uncle's directions. You have sterile eye drops, all kinds of gauze and cold compresses, some medication for infection and painkillers. The good kind."

As he talked, he took them deeper inside the ship. He must have cut the engines for she heard nothing but their boots on the deck. After a while, he apologized, had them turn around and head in another direction. Didn't the man know his own ship?

"Thank you," Liberty said frostily.

Undoubtedly knowing he'd just been dismissed, Rey told them he'd be on the bridge if they needed anything else.

"He's cute," Dragana commented when the hatch closed.

It occurred to Liberty only then how Rey hadn't offered help with the procedure. Cute but obviously a rude bastard. Cupcake would've offered.

"Come on, let's focus here."

While she removed her goggles and looped them on her arm, Liberty coached Dragana in setting up the place with gauzes ready and compresses squeezed so the cold would seep into the cloth right away. After the procedure, she wouldn't want to waste a precious minute.

"You know," Dragana said, cursing when she dropped something on the deck.

"Tell me it's not my eyes you just dropped."

"No, just some plastic cup. I was thinking, maybe Nolan would know who got Cupcake or at least who 'owns the fights' as that old woman said. And where this Mr. Fargo hangs out. It'd be worth paying Nolan a visit. Wherever he lives. That eatery where he saw us, I'll shake something down from the owner."

Liberty nodded slowly. There was hope. Faint but present. "I could kiss you right now."

"Don't."

When everything was ready, Liberty washed her hands, sat in the cold metal chair—were they in the galley?—and tipped the little container into her hand. A narrow tube slid out.

"Here, take the tube, break the end and squeeze it like an eye drop. The implant is in the saline solution."

"Then what?"

"Then we wait while the nanotechnology does its work and slides around my eyeball on its way to the optic nerve."

"Eek, man. That thing's going to crawl into your head?"

"Orbit. But yes, it's going to get inside and work its magic."

"When are you going to see?" Dragana rested her hand on Liberty's chin. "Hold still."

"In a few minutes."

"Okay, I have the thing over your left eye, I'm squeezing, right? Keep your eye opened wide."

Liberty fought the instinctive response to blink when she felt the tiny drop of saline solution landing on her eyeball and seeping under her lid.

"Don't wait, do the other," she said through her teeth.

Dragana did, showing surprising calm as she dropped the other implant into Liberty's right eye. She kept her head up in case the nanobot hadn't yet slipped under her eyelid. But she knew both had for fire started behind her eyeballs, spread to her nose. She coughed, swallowed some of the saline solution, which had trickled behind her nasal cavity and into her throat.

"You okay?" Dragana asked, pushing gauze into Liberty's hand.

"It hurts."

"Regular hurt or yo-bitch hurt?"

Liberty wanted to grin but grimaced instead. Then something felt as though it'd exploded inside her head. She would've leaned forward had Dragana not kept her put. Blinding light stabbed at her brain. She groaned, squeezed her eyes shut.

"Shit, it's bleeding. Is this normal?"

Her companion sounded worried.

"Yeah."

Oh the pain.

It hurt much more than the first time. She knew her eyes would be bloodshot for several days, despite her lycan nature's healing abilities. She coughed, blinked compulsively, her fists tight. A kaleidoscope of neon colors swirled in front of her. Firework colors, bursts of light, slashes of darkness. The sensation someone was pinching her optic nerve almost had her trying to scratch her eyes out. The bots must have been attaching themselves to the nerves now. She bit down hard.

Then something...*appeared.*

A tiny flicker of light caught her attention. She tried to keep her eyes loosely closed as the flicker intensified, as did the fire.

"It's bleeding a lot," Dragana said, patting gauzes against Liberty's eyes. "You look like you're crying blood."

Then as it'd begun, the fire burned down. The pain receded to a throbbing headache. She'd have this for days and so better get used to it now. She leaned back in the chair, slowly cracked open an eye.

She *had* to see. It *had* to have worked. If she wanted to help Cupcake, she had to have her eyes back. Without her sight, she'd be no use to him. He needed her.

Please, let this work.

A thin ray of light pierced the darkness that had been hers since the solar storm had fried her first implant, grew in intensity and breadth until it encompassed her whole vision. Colors and light came first. Then focus. Dragana stood right over her, looking worried and clutching a bloody compress in her hand.

Had she been a spiritual person, she would've thanked every deity in the books.

Liberty narrowed her eyes at her. "You're not so bad-looking when you don't talk."

"You're not bad either for a rich chick."

Liberty rubbed at her temples. Oh the headache. It was *bad*. "Painkillers."

The other woman dropped a pair of tiny yellow pills in her palm and held a plastic cup of water the color of kiwi flesh. Despite the raging migraine, everything was so brilliant. So crisp. So colorful. She looked down at herself and smiled. Her suit was nice. Dragana had a good eye.

She hated medication but hoped these would be strong and quick to work. Her head was about to bust in half. She swallowed with her eyes shut tight for she couldn't stand light well yet.

Dragana slipped the goggles from Liberty's arm. "Here."

"Thanks." She put them on. Much better.

Everything came to her blurred and distorted, as if she looked through a wet pane of blue glass. But it was still infinitely better than nothing at all.

She leaned on both armrests to peel her shaking frame out of the chair. "After I prepare another message for Solomon, we'll go see what Nolan looks like."

Chapter Five

He'd never felt more at home than in Liberty's arms. And even if snuggling up to her was divine in itself, he felt the first signs of arousal stir low in his belly. His balls constricted. Man, he was horny.

Cuddled against him with her slender back to him lay Liberty sleeping, her hair in an obsidian-colored fan around her head. He smelled her hair. Pure heaven.

Not to wake her too rapidly, Cupcake made his hand as light as could be and let the tips of his fingers graze her from shoulder down to narrow waist, back up her slim hip and if the feel of her skin didn't just trigger a shiver he couldn't control. Luckily, neither his hand nor his frisson woke his sleeping goddess. He smiled.

At the juncture of her legs, his cock grew by another measure. Aroused by her smooth breathing, her skin, her hair – it was so black he swore he saw blue highlights in there...just sublime – Cupcake curved his hand. Moist heat announced he neared her sex, and as skin turned to tender flesh, as dry warmth grew hotter and drenched, he found that he couldn't stop himself from slipping deeper between her legs. As if fireworks had suddenly gone off in his head, his fingers readily slipped inside Liberty's tender sex. He froze. His heart beat madly and he knew for sure he'd wake her with the pounding of it against her back.

How he loved her. So much. So, so much.

Faintly her breathing changed and he knew she'd woken. He wanted to apologize for disturbing her sleep. The whisper died in his throat when she arched her butt into him and took his fingers deep. A ribbon of moan floated from her.

So tender he wondered if she felt it at all, Cupcake slipped his fingers in and out gently, unhurriedly – they had the rest of eternity together, didn't they?

"Mmm," she murmured, turned her face to him. "Naughty boy who doesn't sleep."

Cupcake knew he smiled like a loon. Didn't really care if it completely destroyed his image. This was Liberty. She knew him as no one else did. Better than himself, he suspected.

"Do you want me to stop?"

Her throaty laugh made him close his eyes.

"You do that and see how fast I can turn into a nightmare."

Something crystallized in Cupcake. Liberty had never said anything like that.

She pulled away so she could straddle his waist. Closing his eyes against the malaise invading his happiness, Cupcake followed her thighs, hips and upward so he could caress her fine, fine breasts. But she must have had other plans for she scooted upward, higher, until he could smell her sex. Saliva seeped under his tongue. Oh he wanted some of that.

He let out a long "mmm" as he grabbed her hips and anchored her to his face. Juices coated her and he greedily sucked, produced more right away for which he was proud and thankful,

before targeting her clitoris and giving it all his attention. She rolled her hips for him, moved in figure eights.

Cupcake made love to her with his mouth, slowly at first then for some reason needing to speed up – they were on borrowed time. He could feel it now. Something would take her from him. He'd be alone. She'd be safe but he'd be so utterly alone. His chest constricted. Still he pleased his queen, his goddess, the love of his life.

"Take me, my Cupcake," he heard from above.

The next moment he was kneeling behind her raised butt, hands full of her hips. He hadn't even moved. What was going on?

Not that he was complaining!

Fisting himself, he rubbed her 'round and 'round. Then he took her. In one long penetration. He pulled out to the glans, sank back in.

Her sigh made him smile through the sadness. She wasn't his. Not anymore. Physically she was right there – damn, he could touch her, couldn't he? But she was lost to him. Cupcake pulled out, pushed back in.

"Again," she urged with a buck. "Again."

His large hands could wrap almost all the way around her slender waist. He retreated, closed his eyes then thrust. Profoundly, smoothly, right to the end. The end of her, the end of him. Her drenched flesh unfurled for him, accommodated his thickness, made him a home within its folds and he could've died the next second and done so a happy man.

She turned, smiled wide then produced a fortune cookie, proffered it to him.

What?

With a sinking feeling he couldn't understand, Cupcake realized he must be dreaming the whole thing. He took the cookie, tried even in his dream not to let his pain show so it wouldn't upset her. He knew she always had her vigilant gaze on him when he wasn't looking, or when she thought he wasn't looking. But Cupcake had always made sure she was never far out of his sight. How could he protect her otherwise?

"Crack it open," she urged with a grin. "Come on. What does it say?" She "mmm-ed" as she rolled her hips and continued the motion they'd begun.

After breaking the fragile thing in a shaking hand, Cupcake dropped the crumbs on the floor behind him, brought the tiny roll of plastifilm in front of his face – they used to be made of paper, he could remember it, back when he was a kid. He read the short message. Tears welled. He tried to blink them away but one escaped him and rolled down his cheek.

Liberty's grin slowly faded. "What does it say?"

His voice breaking, he murmured, "All good things must come to an end."

He woke with a splitting headache and the certainty he'd never see Liberty again. She was still with him in a way, in his heart and mind. They wouldn't be able to take her from him that way but it was a small consolation compared to the glorious night he'd spent sharing her bed and the hope that had filled him at a potential future by her side. Sharing Liberty Silke's bed. He sighed.

Cupcake quickly knuckled the leftover tears from his dream and sat in bed. His chest hurt.

They'd wasted no time getting him back into the routine. He looked around and realized he was back in his old place, more like a monk's cell only with three rooms. A few minutes later—they must have had him monitored in some way—that old charlatan they called a doctor entered his room and stood by his bedside. The man must have been a hundred years old by now. His skin was covered in liver spots. Cupcake ignored him as he swung his legs down and rolled his shoulders.

Without a word, the doc produced a dermal gun and motioned for Cupcake to show his arm. He was given something for the pain as his lycan part was already at work healing his poor body. His side burned still. The doc left. Everything felt the same. As though Cupcake had never left Fargo's fights.

Except for Liberty.

Cupcake stood and looked down at himself. He was naked, bruised and battered but no longer sore because of the meds. At least there was that. But with the pain gone, he felt numb inside and out, and that deadness of body was just one other measure of Liberty he could no longer feel. His sense of loss accentuated.

Get a grip, man. For your sanity.

He showered, returned to his bedroom. An exact copy of the suit he used to wear to fight had been laid on his bed. He pulled it up by a corner, sniffed then put the pants on. Black polymer, ribbed to offer some protection against slashing weapons. The top consisted of a mass of black polymer straps with which he fought for a few minutes before yanking them on and clipping them in place. Everything had elastic sections for when he'd change into lycan form. A pair of boots—his size too, which was hard to find. Mr. Fargo kept good records. With the amount of metal clips along the side, these could—and would—be used as weapons.

He sighed. He needed a shave. Again.

The story of his life. Although with Liberty gone, he no longer cared if he looked scruffy and unkempt. He'd shaved twice a day since meeting the classy lady all those years ago. He couldn't very well let her think he was a grungy ward of the state from some seedy space station, now could he? Of course not. Even if he'd never entertained any notion of trying to court her, he'd still wanted to look his best. Even on missions, he'd done his damndest to show his better side. If there was such a thing.

He missed her already and knew he always would.

The intercom by the door beeped on.

"Good morning, Rickie. How are the meds working? Are you in pain?" Mr. Fargo's voice caused a buzz in the speaker.

"I'm fine."

"Good. The fight starts in twenty minutes. Something nice and easy so you get back into things. Tonight, you'll fight Bo and Doug."

Twenty minutes? Damn.

"Both?"

The intercom beeped off.

Cupcake shook his head just as the door opened and in walked a pair of bouncers armed with what very much resembled cattle prods but in silver. There hadn't been anything like this back in the old days. They nodded at Cupcake, stepped back so he could pass.

"Hi, Rickie," said a woman waiting in the corridor. She wore an extremely revealing red dress, which glimmered and clung to her curvy frame by, well, magic probably. Ella, the one who'd begun the "Cupcake" thing.

"Ella."

"You remember me?" She smiled.

He nodded. "How's your little sister?"

Ella lowered her gaze and slipped her arm underneath his. "Overdosed three years ago."

Oh.

The gesture of her hand in his reminded him so much of Liberty he thought for a crazy second he'd start bawling his eyes out. The silly notion left right away when another woman joined their little group and took his other arm.

"You were right, Ella, he *is* cute," the chemically enhanced redhead said. "Hey, handsome. I'm Ruby."

He dipped his chin, looked away. Fake boobs had never been something he could appreciate or understand. What was wrong with real ones, even small? Guys didn't walk around with enhanced balls, did they? Made no sense.

They took one of Mr. Fargo's private shuttles to the arena. The portholes were tinted so no one would see inside. But he could *hear* them. The hordes.

Because of Antioch's size, the arena had been built underground. It resembled Earth's ancient arenas, those semicircular amphitheatres surrounded by seats carved in rock with a central stage and a backdrop stone wall. Tunnel entries had been dug to allow the fighters access. The house's fighter—Mr. Fargo's House, the name of the arena—always came in last and so Cupcake had to listen while the other "gladiators" were welcomed with much noise and foot stomping and dramatic music. He hated that part the most.

"Are you ready, sugar?" Redhead asked. He'd already forgotten her name. Something red and shiny.

Ella sent her a scowl. She knew Cupcake. Or she'd known him anyway. "Leave him alone. He needs to prepare."

Cupcake would've given her a nod of thanks but the announcer began the house fighter's routine, stoking the crowd, egging them on until Cupcake would have to feed the beasts, give them a hell of a show, shed blood so they could go back home and

dream they'd been tough and pitiless and whatever rocked their boat. He rolled his shoulders. The bouncers nodded. One of them must have been wearing an earpiece.

"Let's get to the gate," he said.

Flanked by the two women, Cupcake walked down the tunnel, the light at the end of it nothing divine or good. A strobe-lit, music-blaring, smoke-filled hell. His old home.

"Ladies and gentlemen," the announcer drawled in the mike. His voice took on scary proportions in the tunnel. "After an absence of ten years, we have the special privilege of welcoming back a man who for years terrorized other fighters! This modern-day gladiator never shows emotions! They say he has no heart, no soul! He is a predator, *a beast!*"

Cupcake cringed when the arena shook with the roar of the crowd. By his side, Redhead looked up at him—she barely came up to his chest—with a whole new light in her eyes. She was afraid. Cupcake could smell it on her. Smart woman.

His heart began to pump harder, faster. He didn't want to fight. He wanted to go back to Liberty and "share her bed". But he couldn't. Cupcake knew he'd never see her again. They'd stolen her from him.

No anger urged him on, swelled his veins, tightened his jaw. It was fear. He was afraid to his lycan core Liberty would be hurt because of him. And for this alone, he'd give those bloodthirsty little creeps the show of the century. If he did well here, Liberty would be safe.

"No one knows what became of him during those ten years, ladies and gentlemen, but one thing is sure..."

The announcer paused for dramatic effect.

"He's back! And he wants to reclaim his place at the top of pile! It'll be a dog-eat-dog fight today!"

Cupcake gritted his teeth.

"Let's not keep him waiting any longer. Please welcome the one fighter who makes them all tremble, the house's champion several years in a row, the only one left standing...let's hear it for THE HIT MAN!"

Cupcake swore a riot had just broken out. So they hadn't forgotten him. Unfortunately.

With the bouncers behind and the ladies at his arms, Cupcake waited for the grate to lift and walked out into the arena.

Bright lights stabbed at his brain. But he didn't cringe, didn't look around. He showed no emotion. His trademark.

Across from him stood a quartet of tattooed and pierced thugs Mr. Fargo had undoubtedly pulled right out of a gutter somewhere. Just as he had Cupcake. *Rickie*.

Richard Moriarty hadn't had a chance. With his size, he'd stood out. A little bit. And when he'd discovered—by accident while fighting off a band of thugs who looked

exactly like those facing him now – he was a lycan, well, Mr. Fargo had sent “scouts” to Cupcake’s school and recruited him right away. He had no parents. And the school authorities had been more than happy to get rid of a state ward and genetic deviant. Mr. Fargo had greased their paws and called it a “sports sponsorship”. Ha.

His old theme song, a sort of opera bit with mostly drums and voices, filled the arena. Thump-thump-thump. The beat resonated in his gut. The crowd chanted his name.

Hit Man, Hit Man. Like a heart-pounding word. A rhythmic, swelling, out-of-control heart.

He should’ve been comforted in a way they’d remember him after all that time. Except they didn’t remember him for the right reasons.

He gave a small nod to Ella, who returned it with a sad smile as she worked her stuff. Both she and Redhead left after going around the arena once, their long limbs gleaming with the glittery stuff women sometimes applied to their skin. Liberty didn’t wear any of that crap. She didn’t need it to glow.

After another bit of crowd tweaking, the announcer started the countdown. Cupcake spotted the scared expression on one of the thugs’ faces. Poor bugger. He’d make sure to get this one first. No use letting him suffer.

With a roar, the crowd welcomed the last three numbers. “Three...two...one. *Fight!*”

Cupcake charged right away.

Three of the four scattered while one remained rooted to the spot. He cringed when Cupcake took the last few steps. He made a half-hearted attempt to parry the punch Cupcake aimed for his jaw, managed to deflect it a bit. Using his greater reach, he wrapped an arm over the thug’s throat, reversed momentum and stood behind the smaller man. While his opponent’s companions regrouped, Cupcake brought his shoulder in a brusque downward twist. The telltale muffled crunch snapped along his biceps. Thug Number One, the one who’d looked scared, slumped against him. No pain. He let the man’s lifeless body roll off his thigh.

The crowd loved it and let Cupcake hear it.

His ears buzzed with the roar of applause and cheers while he stepped over the body and widened his stance, his hands hanging by his sides, his chin dipped slightly while he considered the quickest way to get at them. All three decided to pool their efforts and attacked. Fancy kicks aimed at his legs never hit the mark. He knew he moved fast for a man his size and must have surprised them when he sidestepped, pivoted and backhanded the closest guy. He whirled on the spot and crumpled like an old coat.

But despite his lack of fervor for these fights, the physical exertion alone triggered a spike of adrenaline. He bent over. His legs began to shake violently. Searing agony radiated along his jaw, his knuckles, and just as his vision began to sharpen, his hearing as well, a loud wave of cheer announced the crowd knew what was coming.

He was changing.

Three enemies.

Smell of fear. A stench thick like a fog.

Claws rent the closest. Flesh shredded, spilled warm blood. Howls and shrieks filled his ears. Too high-pitched. Had to make it stop. He did. Fangs and claws a deadly team, he slashed, tore, mangled. The last one tried getting away. He pounced, landed on its back, which he tore and tilled before bending over and clamping his jaws over the puny neck. Slight pressure sufficed. The screeching stopped. Then pain hit.

A groan left him as he collapsed onto a knee. After a split second silence, the horde let itself be heard. They chanted his name. Cupcake didn't look at what he'd done. He turned his back on the "show" and thankfully walked to the tunnel where a team of medics and the doc waited. He was briskly cleaned of the blood and given a shot. To relax him, he was told.

They "proclaimed" him the winner. He felt nothing, barely registered his surroundings. The bright light. The buzz of the crowd at the back of his mind. Noise. Music. The smell of smoke. The women walking him to the lounge for some after-fight "fun". He hurt. The pain in his side. The old ache. And through it all, in a place he kept hidden and that he jealously guarded, was Liberty and how good she'd felt as he made love to her. The satin of her skin under his hands. Her legs wrapped around his waist. Her smile when they were done. With her in his head—in his heart—he knew he could do it. He'd give them a show. He'd survive.

"You're bleeding from the nose, Rickie," Ella said, interrupting his happy-sad reminiscence.

Women always had a tissue tucked away somewhere, no matter the size of dress or how little fabric there was involved. Was it because men always made them cry?

Cupcake took it and dabbed his bleeding nose. "Thanks."

Redhead had her back to them as she prepared drinks from a low table between two red velvet settees. Everything still looked the same. Some fake antique Roman lounge or something. He could never place the period. Liberty would've known. She knew a lot.

"I'm glad you're back," Ella said under her breath. "I'm going with Bo and Doug tonight."

Cupcake tried not to let his disgust show. Those two had broken quite a few of Mr. Fargo's lady entertainers. Bestial sons of a bitch.

"You want to come with me instead?"

A spark of hope danced in her large chemically altered eyes. Now that he paid closer attention, one kept changing colors. Blue, green, black. Back to blue. The colors of bruises. "It's too soon. They'd make trouble. Next time?"

Cupcake nodded. Except with Liberty, there was always a next time at Mr. Fargo's.

As though speaking their names had made the real thing appear, the lycan brothers walked into the lounge and sprawled into the deep couches set around a low table made of actual stone. No glass or wood here. Not with the lively parties Mr. Fargo threw. A window cut into the stone wall proper allowed a perfect view of the amphitheater beyond and slightly below. Fargo must have felt a part of the show from here during the fights. Beyond the window, the place was emptying now, leaving behind a sea of beverage containers, stains on the stone seats.

"Come give me a bit of love," Bo said through a toothy grin. He hooked his finger at Redhead, who smiled and brought him a glass of something amber. Cupcake didn't know drinks for he never had any.

Bo downed it, set the glass on the table and while he leaned forward, scooped Redhead in an arm and brought her back over his lap. She straddled him, chuckling.

"You ready for our date tonight, Hit Man?" Doug asked. He threw Cupcake a venomous glare. "I have a thing I've been stewing over. Remember this?" He showed him his muscled forearm, where a tattoo didn't begin to hide the nasty claw marks.

Cupcake settled into a couch as he stared back at Doug. "I bet it hurts still."

Doug's face took on an interesting shade of red. His short blond hair was spiked nowadays and he'd grown a tuft of beard right below his bottom lip. And carefully combed downward too. Maybe he thought it made him less of a thug.

"I'm gonna have your ass diced up on a plate, Rickie. You shouldn't have come back to Antioch." He grabbed Ella's arm when she walked behind the settee and pulled her down in front of him so she'd sit on the table, facing him.

"Lemme see the good stuff," he snarled, lifting the front of her dress over her knees. "You're getting old, Ella. Look at that."

She smiled despite the barb, spread her knees and planted a stiletto on the table so he'd get a good view. From his position, Cupcake could only see the side of her, but he knew she'd rather chew bees than sit beside Doug. Her eyes fixed on something above Doug's head.

"Good idea," Bo said with a slap on Redhead's butt. He pushed her off, spread his knees and unbuckled his pants. "I need a bit of cunt too." He'd always been the least offensive of the two.

While Bo wrapped Redhead's dress over his head, his hands keeping her put against his face, Doug pushed against Ella's chest until she lay back on the table, her legs still wide. He dribbled a bit of his drink between her legs and licked it off.

With a deep sigh, Cupcake crossed his arms and pretended not to hear the two couples going at it. Wet sounds and the faint clicks of the women's jewelry floated to him. Redhead seemed to be having a good time though and would chuckle occasionally. Then whimpers forced him to look and he caught Doug fingering Ella and doing it hard too. He was pumping who knew how many fingers into her while she twitched and clutched at her dress. Her face was turned away.

"Doug," Cupcake said, making sure the warning was clear in his tone.

"What?" the other lycan replied, pumping fast. "That's how she likes it." He leaned over so he could grab her knee. "That's how you like it, uh, you old bitch? A nice fisting to set you right."

"You take your hands off her right now, Doug." Cupcake stood.

While Bo's head emerged from Redhead's dress – she was still smiling and Cupcake suspected she was either full of hard meds or seriously deranged – Doug released Ella, who rolled off the table and rearranged her dress with shaking hands.

"She's a whore, Rickie," Doug sneered through a menacing smile. "A cunt on heels. Just like they all are."

Cupcake balled his fists. He stood at least a head taller than Doug and quite a bit heavier. "You should shut up while you still can."

"Oh? You're letting your mouth run like that, and maybe it's your lady friend I'll go find instead, uh? Maybe fist her nice ass? I bet she'd like to get fu –"

Cupcake had never moved so quickly.

One moment he was standing on the other side of the table, glowering at the vicious brute and the next he had Doug dangling by the throat, his feet kicking frantically a good foot off the floor. Shaking from barely restrained fury, he brought Doug closer to his face. "You so much as *think* about her again and I'll rip your heart out."

"Rickie!"

Ella's warning came too late.

Pain exploded in his lower back. It didn't make him lose his grip on Doug but he stumbled sideways, lost his balance and collapsed against the back of a couch, taking the whole thing down with him. He landed on Doug, who grunted and futilely clawed at Cupcake's arm and neck, trying to make him loosen his grip. He failed. His face was turning purple with big veins popping up at the temples.

By the corner of his eye, Cupcake saw both women rush out of the lounge screaming.

Bo threw himself at him, punched and kicked with devastating strength. All three exchanged violent blows that would've killed normal humans. Cupcake kept his hand in a steel trap around the insolent jerk's throat. His lips were deep blue now.

"Boys!" Mr. Fargo yelled as soon as he stepped inside the lounge. Ella followed him. Fear flared her large eyes. A pair of bouncers rushed in as well. They carried those silver "cattle prods".

Cupcake snarled when one of them jammed the pointy end in his side and gave him a jolt. Just as they always had done and would continue to do, despite the changing technology. The old ache flared.

"Let him go, Rickie!"

He couldn't. He wouldn't. *That...that turd has insulted Liberty.*

Another jolt made him see stars. Someone yelled at him to let go. Doug was no longer fighting back although Bo continued to pummel away. Blood trickled down into one of Cupcake's eyes. He shook his head to clear his vision. When a third jolt from the electric baton nearly made him lose consciousness, he released the other lycan's throat. Doug wheezed pitifully as he rolled to his side.

"What did you do?" demanded Mr. Fargo as he bent over Doug.

Bo placed one last kick before standing. "He's the one who got all—"

"*Shut up!*" the older man yelled. "Rickie never loses his temper. What did you *do*?"

It was Ella who explained the situation to Mr. Fargo. She received a not-so-subtle glare from Doug as he gradually by *small* increments climbed to his feet. "You just wait," he managed to snarl. His eyes flashed murder in bright green.

"Shut your ass, Doug," snapped Mr. Fargo. "You don't taunt Rickie with his lady friend, understood? It'll mess everything up." After a look at Cupcake, he added, "You boys settle this during the fight. For now, you," he pointed at Ella, "you take Rickie home and make sure he's ready for tonight. Suck his dick, fuck him, rub his feet. I don't care. Now go."

After a last look at the pair—especially Doug—Cupcake followed Ella out of the lounge.

"I'm sorry," she murmured as Cupcake waited for her to sit in the private shuttle. "I didn't mean to get you in trouble."

"I'm sorry too," he replied, sinking into the seat. "I should've squeezed harder."

Chapter Six

Finding Nolan hadn't been hard at all. Because she had the look and deportment of money and couldn't be mistaken for a killer—and Dragana could—it'd been Liberty who'd inquired about him at the restaurant where they'd met the first time. Where Cupcake had become *Rickie*. The manager had been happy to tell her Nolan ate there every night with or without female companionship. "Oh he'll have female companionship *tonight*," she'd replied with a toothy smile. The manager had smiled conspiratorially and winked at her. Poor sucker.

Dragana and she waited at a small and crowded cook shop across the street and after she pointed him to Liberty—cracking her knuckles ominously—they stepped in not long afterward and aimed for the ladies' room. They took turns keeping an eye out for him. He was a suit all right. Expensive too. Either a gold watch or bracelet gleamed at his right wrist and created the perfect accessory to his indigo suit, impeccably tailored.

"Rey should've sent our message by now," Dragana murmured. She had no patience. Nothing killed her good cheer quicker than a stakeout. "I wish we would've brought him along." She bounced her eyebrows at Liberty. "He's cute. A little skinny but cute. Maybe he has a big brother, huh? One with a bit more meat?"

Liberty shook her head. "If things turn ugly, we can't implicate my family in this. It's better if he stays on the ship." Though the man hadn't looked too thrilled about that. Too bad. She called the shots.

When it didn't appear as though Nolan would meet anyone tonight, Liberty rearranged her synthleather jacket, made sure lots of cleavage showed—a diversionary tactic Dragana hated but effective just the same—and traversed the busy dining room, her eyes on her target. Everything came back pixelated and a bit distorted but it was a thousand times better than not seeing at all. Especially tonight. She'd want to see the expression on his face. He'd been the one to undoubtedly blab about Cupcake's comeback to Antioch. Whoever he'd told had taken him from her. Nolan would learn to keep his mouth shut and his fingers out of her affairs. She'd always hated tattletales.

"Good evening, Mr. Nolan," she said in her "oh but just you wait" voice.

His jaw dropped when he saw her *looking* at him. So his posse and he didn't know everything. Good.

"Miss Amanda," he replied, coming off his chair. "Or should I say Miss Silke?"

"Oh no, please stay seated." She wouldn't grace him with an answer about the fake name she'd given him. She surreptitiously grabbed him by the wrist, felt the bracelet crack under her fist. He cringed, sat back in a hurry. "And how are you tonight, Mr. Nolan? Buoyed with the knowledge of a job well done, I hope?"

He swallowed before offering her an oily smile. "I'm not sure I'm following you, my dear. Although I am delighted to see you again. And seeing is the right word here, isn't it?"

"It is," she conceded with a grin, shook her head at the waiter, who walked away. "And another word is also appropriate to our situation. Following. I would like you to follow me." She grinned wide, adding "please" through her teeth.

Now this grabbed his attention. He cocked his head. "As much as I'd love to—"

Liberty reached across the table and gripped his wrist again before he could pull it away. "Yes, Mr. Nolan, you will follow me. And you will look utterly delighted to. Because if you don't..."

She accentuated the pressure until it appeared as if his backside no longer touched the chair. He nodded twice quickly.

His wrist still in her hand, they stood. She led him down the corridor to the ladies' room where Dragana waited, her arms crossed and a booted foot propped against the wall. She sucked her teeth then greeted Nolan with a wolfish grin.

"This reminds me of the good old days in high school," she said, standing straight.

"What does, Miss—"

Nolan never had time to finish.

Dragana grabbed him by the shoulder, swung the door to the ladies' room wide and propelled him inside where he knocked against the wall and hung on to the hand-dryer. He wasn't smiling anymore. Not even pretending to. The scared squealer had replaced the oily politician.

"Mr. Nolan," Liberty started, leaned against the door as she locked it. "You have caused a good friend of mine a lot of grief. I want to know where Cup—Rickie is. You will tell me. You will do it now."

"He's back with Fargo," Nolan blurted out right away.

Dragana tut-tutted. "Well, that was quick. You party pooper."

"Is he safe? Has he been injured?"

Nolan shrugged, which drove Liberty's blood pressure up a few notches. She marched for him, fisted the front of his jacket, and when she hoisted him up by a few inches so his feet barely touched the floor, understanding dawned on his face. He paled. His nostrils dilated as did his pupils.

"Oh... You're one of *them*."

"Two of them actually," Dragana replied.

"I d-don't have details. He's alive, it's all I know because Fargo set him up for a fight. Tonight."

"What fight?" Liberty didn't much care for the sound of that. Fight what, whom?

"At the arena. Organized fights, you know. He's fighting the McCutcheon brothers tonight at eight. Both lycans. It's, er..."

Liberty dropped him back. "Yes?"

"To the death now. They didn't used to be, never amongst the house fighters anyway. But now most fights end in one or more fighters dying. Draws more people in. More profit for everyone."

"Except the fighters."

"Modern-day gladiators," Dragana murmured, shaking her head in disgust. "And Rickie is there?"

Nolan nodded. "He was there a long time ago, before he skipped town. He was the best. He used to do jobs for Fargo too...you know the kind...dirty jobs. Rickie had nerves of steel. And he was reliable, see? When he left, Fargo looked and looked. Oh and he was pissed. He never forgave him. And now that he's back..."

Liberty's heartbeat doubled abruptly while heat like a fever spread through her body. She barely had time to cringe. The change happened so quickly, she heard her jacket ripping at the shoulders.

Fire licked at her back, her legs, her arms. But her face...it was always the most painful aspect of the change to lycan form. A deep-throated snarl left her. Nolan squealed. The sound like a drill in her head. Stars exploded in her newfound vision, created a canvas of crazy bursts of light, fireworks, in her skull. Nolan's voice pierced her brain, made her ears buzz. It had to stop.

The stench of fear. Urine and vomit and blood. None of it hers. Claws and fangs rending. Hatred. Pure, seething rage. This...this *thing* had hurt someone dear to her. She fell on it with a vengeance and stopped only when it no longer moved. Something shiny gleamed at one of its limbs. She ripped it off. She had to keep it. To show it to someone else. Then *they* would die too.

Her surroundings dimmed as sounds and sights and smells became vaguer, fainter, more fitting her human half. Liberty knelt on the floor of the once white ceramic tiles. Dragana hadn't changed and kept her shoulder to the door. Loud pounding rattled it. She snarled a curse.

Liberty stood.

Around her, a scene of carnage. And with the implant back on, she could see it in even the faintest hues. Blood in splatters. Blood in rivulets in the grout between the floor tiles. Blood on her hands and forearms. A contrast of red and white. Her once close-fitting jacket was in tatters, barely hanging on her shoulders and back. She shrugged it off. The pants, because there was less stitching and fewer pieces involved, hadn't suffered too much and would still cover the essentials but her fine boots had busted open so she kicked out of them with a snarl. She spotted Nolan – what remained of him – slumped in a corner in a grotesque parody of a giant rag doll. Claw marks tore his suit and skin. She looked down at her fist and noticed his bracelet.

Dragana planted a foot by the jamb to keep at bay whoever hammered still. A voice rose then another. "He squealed like a pig, dammit!"

"He's not anymore," Liberty replied coldly. She'd no idea she could act so violently and with such little scruple. They'd hurt Cupcake and that was that.

"Now they'll know we're coming!" Dragana cursed, kicked at the door.

"Good."

"What do you mean 'good'? You're always the one for finesse. Fuck, Liberty, we need to get out of here!"

"And we are."

"You're barefoot and half naked, woman. Subtle, huh?" Despite her earlier hissy fit, Dragana must have thought the situation was turning for her characteristic smirk pulled at her cheek. "Want my jacket?"

"Denim? *Please*. I'll get something from them." Liberty hooked her thumb at the door.

After a quick look to "time" themselves, both women readied for the fight and when Dragana wrenched open the door—to the shock of three armed men standing outside, one of them stumbling into the room—Liberty charged.

While Liberty twisted the volter out of his hand and reversed momentum so she could conk him on the head with the butt of it, Dragana used her muscular bulk to tackle the other two. They crashed to the floor in a snarl of limbs. A shot was fired and hit the ceiling, melting whatever conductive substance the static-charged nickel bead struck and triggered an electric arc, which melted a nice big hole. That could've been someone's head.

While Dragana took care of the other two, Liberty yanked the jacket off the unconscious man and hurriedly slipped it on. Navy blue nylon bomber jacket and white synthleather pants. What would her family say!

To her credit, Dragana only incapacitated the two men, quick and dirty with a punch to the throat for each and took their weapons. She could've demolished them, which she usually did. It was a detail Liberty noticed despite the chaos. The other woman knew they had to be quick if they wanted to help Cupcake. Dragana wasn't the unmanageable, arrogant bitch Solomon kept calling her. Behind her back of course.

They crashed through the emergency door, triggering the alarm and high-tailed it out of the section altogether. With weapons hidden under her borrowed—stolen—jacket, or in Dragana's case, in the back of her pants, they left the "good" part of town. Antioch didn't have a "good" part of town as far as Liberty was concerned. One smelly hellhole.

Once in the poorer neighborhoods, she could now *see* what she'd *smelled* for close to five weeks—she wished she couldn't. Her feet were cold against the pavement. Good thing that in the bad part of town, no one would pay attention to a barefooted woman with an ill-matched outfit. Billboards plastered to comms booths or along buildings

caught her attention. Some of the newer signs flashed red along the edges. She hadn't seen such radiant red since the solar storm. It hurt her eyes but she forced herself to look anyway.

For staring back at her was Cupcake.

His mug shot anyway. And below his emotionless face were three words blinking in yellow. The Hit Man. A pair of snarling blond men, brutish and ugly, shared the poster with the impassive lycan, his pale eyes devoid of life. Liberty shivered. She'd never seen such an expression on Cupcake's face. So cold. So much a killer's. It scared her.

"That's the billboard for the fight. Goodness, Dragana, they have it set up like...like..." Her heart squeezed.

"A freak show," the other woman finished for her. "Because it's what we are to them. Freaks. Genetic deviants. And now that Earth passed more gene-purity laws, they can kill us without the benefit of a trial. Vonatos made sure of that." The politically engaged woman, who'd lost her beloved twin during their last mission, didn't start one of her rants. She just shook her head. "We better hurry."

Liberty walked by Cupcake's face, wondering if *this* was Rickie after all. A man she didn't know. Yet her heart ached for Cupcake, the man she *did* know and had come to care for quite a lot.

The next few hours were the longest of her life. She wanted to change and run like mad toward the arena. She didn't want to *walk*. Every precious minute counted. What if Cupcake were already dead? She gagged at the pain in her head.

"You okay?" Dragana asked.

Liberty shook her head. "If they touched him. I *swear*."

Dragana nodded. "I'll be right there with you. I like him too, the great lug." She patted the air. "Not 'like' him, like him, you know. He's yours. I can see that." She managed a crooked smile. "You never struck me as the type of chick who'd go for a man like him."

"A man like what exactly?"

"Oh come on, Liberty. Cupcake's had a *colorful* past, right? I mean, 'dirty jobs'." She made the motion of slitting her throat with her thumb. "He was the garbage man for that Fargo guy. A hit man."

"He did what he had to do," Liberty snapped. "We're wasting time. Come on."

She didn't much care for the knowing smirk on the other woman's face but wouldn't waste a second on it. With every step her heartbeat accentuated, her fear grew. What would she do? How would she go on if Cupcake were lost to her?

They reached the arena without attracting attention, a feat since Liberty, still without shoes, had blood on her hands, which she hadn't bothered to wash. The bracelet had stuck to her palm. This would have disgusted her any other time. She was a Silke, for goodness' sake! Member of the most powerful and connected family on

Earth, family who owned the mammoth media conglomerate, family who had access to precious long-range servers...

Long-range servers...

Liberty stopped dead in her tracks. She had it! She knew how to distribute the sensitive message on Solomon's data clip, the one they'd stolen from the murderous chancellor's clutches. All they had to do was get access to one of the servers. It'd be simple once they got inside. Not "plug and play" per se, more "plug and riot". She tucked the idea at the back of her mind for now. Cupcake needed her. Nothing else mattered tonight.

They located the underground arena and made their way there while trying to look as inconspicuous as possible amidst the rowdy, colorful crowd. Instead of using the main tunnels, jam-packed with people right now, Dragana found a service entrance, and after putting her foot to the door, they snuck inside, closed it behind them and propped a metal garbage can under the lever to keep it blocked. Muffled sounds of several thousand people reached Liberty's ears. An announcer spoke in the microphone. Her pulse quickened. She balled the fist holding Nolan's bracelet harder.

"Come on – argh!"

Shadows played with her sight. She blinked repeatedly when the pixels darkened, scattered and reassembled a second later.

"Your eyes?"

"Yes, I'm okay now. Hurry."

A headache of cosmic proportions pulled at her optic nerves. She hoped she hadn't contracted an infection on top of things. She rubbed her eye under the goggles and gave thanks to the semi-transparent blue tint. People wouldn't see her eyes bleed tears. Or not too clearly anyway unless they stopped to stare.

To their left and right were maintenance closets and locked doors. Finally, stairs leading down into what the placard called *Lounges – Employees Only*. They already were in an employees-only section, weren't they? Liberty shook her head.

Voices rose from the next landing down. Dragana, both volters in hand, froze with her foot on the first step. Liberty leaned over the handrail as far as she could go. If her companion's muscled build far surpassed hers, Dragana wasn't as tall as Liberty. Plus, she had supersensitive hearing, even among lycans. She'd hear trouble long before anyone would see them.

"Clear."

She felt as though they were on a mission, back with Solomon and the rest of the team. Now dead. Ivan, Dragana's ever-smiling twin. Harris, the blonde bombshell with a talent for starting bar fights. And Palmer. The two-faced, lying little shit. He'd pretended to be their comms tech guy when in fact, he'd been an insider for some shadow government entity. If Eva had once been a real spy of Vonatos—reformed but still—Palmer had been one hundred percent the perfidious mole. And the worst thing

was...they had no idea who'd hired him. Solomon had killed him before he'd gotten an answer out of the swine.

They climbed down to the next level where plush carpet in a violent shade of green replaced the concrete and stone.

"There," Dragana murmured, knowing whispers traveled much farther and could be heard better than a low tone of voice.

A brass plaque gleamed softly and announced they're reached *The Lounges*. There were only two doors, one ajar, where the sound of female laughter floated to Liberty's keen ears.

Just like that? Things are too easy.

Then a muffled roar shook the entire building and scattered her thoughts. Applause. Cheers. Dramatic music. Some kind of operatic piece with a multilayered choral in the background. She recognized an old twentieth century classic, Orff's *O Fortuna* from his *Carmina Burana*. She loved that piece.

"Shit, the fight's started."

"I'm done tiptoeing around." Liberty checked the gauge on her volter—she had plenty of nickel—and marched for the door.

She pushed the thick fake wood door wide with her bloody fist and stood in the embrasure. Dragana slipped past, both volters aimed at the lounge's occupants. A pair of scared-looking chicks.

"Fargo," Liberty said, the word tasting vulgar in her mouth. "I need to speak with him."

The redhead squealed and rushed for an access panel near the window. Dragana caught her by the back of the flimsy black dress. "You do that and I make a nice hole in your head. Not that you'd notice."

The other woman, slightly older and looking a whole lot smarter, raised her hands and stood from the red velvet settee. She kept glancing back at the door behind Liberty. "He's not here."

"Where is he?"

"Down there." Another furtive glance at the door. She shook her head side to side, almost too faintly to see but with the woman's intent stare on her, Liberty knew she was trying to tell her something.

Danger.

The fine hairs on her arms rose in alarm. "I knew it'd been too easy."

The woman shook her head, clearly too weary to care. "You're early. There's still time to get out."

"Not without him."

The woman smiled sadly as she turned what had once undoubtedly been a beautiful face toward the window. "It's too late for Rickie."

Saliva tasted sour at the back of Liberty's throat. "He's dead?"

"He will be."

Dragana was closer to the window and leaned sideways so she could take a peek. "Holy fuck, Liberty. He's down there. He's...*fuck*." The last word seemed to last the entirety of her breath.

As if in a dream, Liberty walked calmly across the room, the volter muzzle still pointed more or less at the tallish woman with the funky eyes and approached the window. Beyond, the semicircular amphitheater—some twenty-fourth century rendition of a Greco-Roman arena—flashed with a hundred narrow beams of light. All pointed downward at the stage. All pointed at the "show". All pointed down at *him*.

She barely heard them coming into the room behind her. And she cared even less.

For what she saw below her feet froze the blood in her veins.

Someone yelled. A blood-curdling scream that must have had its roots in the collective human psyche from the beginning of time. Horror, pain, fear, despair. One sound. One throat.

Hers.

* * * * *

Cupcake should've known they had a nasty surprise for him. He should've known Fargo would want to punish him for deserting all those years ago. But he hadn't realized it in time. It wasn't until the doc gave him a shot that Cupcake understood the trouble he was in. And the danger.

Man, I am dumb!

His vision vacillated, twisted, dimmed. He felt himself stumble sideways. The rock wall stopped him for he would've kept going and landed on his ass. What had they given him?

Mr. Fargo's face took his whole field of vision. "It's something to keep you a bit more manageable, Rickie. It won't kill you. Bo and Doug will."

Cupcake tried to focus on the pockmarked face but kept having to blink. "Why?"

"Because you disrespected me. After all I did for you, you turned around and bit my hand. I can't have that, Rickie. Makes me look bad." Turning to the half-dozen bouncers waiting behind him, he added, "Showtime, boys."

They grabbed him, wrangled him down a tunnel hewn in the bedrock proper. He'd never been here. Everything intermingled. Old memories. New ones.

Liberty's beautiful face a halo above it all.

He'd lost all that time. All those years he could've made a move, shown her how he felt but instead he'd looked from a distance, never daring to hope. All that time. Lost.

Something clipped around his neck. He tried to pull it away but realized a metallic wire kept him tied like a beast to a ring cemented into the floor between his feet. He

barely had a few feet of wire to move. The roar of the crowd pressed against his eardrums. They were underneath the stage, he realized.

Mr. Fargo adjusted his jacket. "Oh and Rickie," he pulled at the cuff of a sleeve. "Your lady friends killed Nolan earlier today. Well, 'killed' might be too light a word. Anyway, they're waiting in the lounge now. I'm sure they'll enjoy the show while they wait for Bo and Doug to join them. *That's* gonna be a show too. Never seen female lycans up close." He grinned, kissed the air and left.

His heart stopped. He could swear to it!

Cupcake only had time to sift through the words—he felt so disjointed—when the clamor of voices and "his" theme song dispersed his thoughts. He blinked when the ceiling separated right above his head. Two large slabs of look-alike rock slid under the rest to reveal the amphitheater and the chanting crowd. He shook when the portion of floor on which he stood detached and rose slowly, a ten-foot-wide dinner plate with him as the main course, bringing him up to the stage area amidst the crowd's thunderous greeting. It settled there and the gap closed.

His ears buzzed. He tried to swallow. The countdown started, ended. Then pain hit him hard. He tasted blood in his mouth. His side burned. A roar from the crowd punctuated each strike. Bo and Doug took turns. One would taunt him while the other would circle and take a shot from behind. He took impotent swipes at them. Cupcake tried to change but couldn't. Whatever they'd given him prevented his lycan form from manifesting itself. He couldn't seem to get his adrenaline level high enough to trigger the lycan in him. He'd be torn to shreds. Not a pretty way to die.

Then Fargo's words floated back into his dazed, stupefied-by-drugs mind. His "lady friends". Liberty and Dragana. They waited in the lounge. The brothers would "join them" after the fight.

His friends could defend themselves but only if Fargo hadn't given them the same drug affecting him right now. What if Liberty couldn't fight them off? What if... The brothers would do *things*...horrible things...one of them would touch Liberty. Both maybe.

A growl started in the pit of his stomach, rumbled upward, up through his chest, felt as though it'd spread to all his limbs, his skull too.

Fury.

Unlike anything he'd ever experienced. It swelled. A volcano about to erupt. He wasn't going to be the emotionless fighter anymore, Fargo's Hit Man, the mountain of muscle, all brawn and no brain. If these two brutes wanted to get their hands on Liberty, they'd have to get through him and, by God, he'd make them pay for the privilege. He wasn't Richard Moriarty. He wasn't Mr. Fargo's Rickie. He was Cupcake. Long-time teammate, fellow lycan and friend of Liberty's. And the man who loved her.

He'd walk through hell for her and he'd make damn sure to drag these two behind him the whole way.

Just as Bo was about to use Doug as a diversion while he circled him for a vicious punch to the lower back, Cupcake used his six-foot-eight wingspan and caught the other by the front of the harness. Before the younger brother could pummel his way out of Cupcake's grasp, he rammed his fist twice into the hated face, once in the belly then wrapped him in a bear hug.

Aside from the thunderous roar of the hordes watching from their seats, the fight was eerily quiet. Enough that Cupcake heard bones crunching against his arms as he squeezed the life out of the little shit. Despite the noose around his neck, he reversed his grip, slipped his hand in Bo's crotch and lifted him high over his head. Doug backpedaled but not quickly enough and received his brother, whom Cupcake had launched. A meat missile.

He fisted the wire between his feet and gave a violent tug. It lacerated his hand but gave just the same. When he stood, both lycans were picking themselves up off the rock floor. Then they saw him – freed.

Doug's mouth opened but no sound came out. He looked *terrified*.

Cupcake straightened to the earsplitting delight of the crowd and yanked the wire from his neck. The rub of metal against his skin burned but he didn't care.

"You shouldn't have messed with her," he said, taking a step forward. His black polymer suit creaked as did the harness.

Bo retreated by a pace.

"You should've kept her out of this." Cupcake stepped off the low dais and spread his feet. "'Cause now I have nothing left to lose."

He no longer needed a spike of adrenaline to change into the lycan form. All he needed – which he had plenty of – was his love for Liberty Silke.

All three changed simultaneously.

Sounds and smells and sights sharpened. A flurry of movements. Pain. He took it, he gave it. Red. Everywhere. On him. On the ground. Total silence. Then a roar like thunder, a storm that had cleaved the air and struck down. It filled his head. He grabbed at it, tried to tackle the monstrous horde but bowed under the tidal bore. He felt himself spinning. Faster.

He was still holding on to Doug's ruined harness when he changed back to human form. Blood was *everywhere*.

Scared-looking bouncers armed with silver cattle prods were spilling into the arena, charging for him. He sent the first two whirling away with barely a conscious thought. They flew back, broken dolls, took a number of colleagues down with them. One managed to get near enough to jam the end of the electric baton into Cupcake's side. He growled with the pain slicing through him. Blindly, he pawed behind him, closed his bear paw of a hand over the offending limb and snapped it at a perpendicular angle. A

long howl of pain fizzed in his ears. He tugged on the broken limb and propelled the man sideways to crash against the backdrop rock wall. The crowd roared its delight.

Three, maybe four, swarmed him. Dizziness forced him to worry about keeping his feet under him instead of the numerous attacks. They got him good, the jerks. They jammed their vicious batons in his armpit, his already-wounded side, his lower back. He sent one flying with a kick, low but powerful. The man dropped his baton, which Cupcake was quick to retrieve. He shoved the next man back with the tip of his newly acquired baton right in the chest. After a violent spasm, the bouncer collapsed right away. Now that Cupcake was armed, the rest of the crew didn't seem overly eager to approach him. He rolled another dropped baton closer with his foot, picked it up and keeping both weapons out and wide, he slowly made his way toward the tunnel. The crowd seemed to love every second of it.

Despite his stupor and dizziness, he spotted the telltale blue-white glow of volter shots flashing in the darkened tunnel. Whoever it was had their trigger finger squeezed hard and wasn't letting go.

Shaking his head to clear his vision, Cupcake stepped out of the spotlight and into the darkened tunnel where the crowd's thunder boomed grotesquely and filled his head with nightmarish visions of demonic faces and reaching, clawed limbs. His shoulder scraped against the rock wall as he fought the vertigo. The volter flashes approached. Voices raised in anger. Female voices. One he knew well. Dragana's accent made the word "fuck" sound like "fook". It'd always made him smile. But the other one, he couldn't recognize. It was deep and raw, as if the woman had screamed and screamed until she was hoarse then screamed some more.

His vision doubled. Cupcake stumbled down the corridor, knowing most of Fargo's men had recuperated and were tailing him, waiting for the bear to drop so they could skin it. Blood dribbled in his eye. Dammit, he couldn't see a thing!

Then a vision appeared before his eyes. He rubbed them with the back of his bloodied hand. It couldn't be her.

Liberty, a volter in one hand and a semi-upright Mr. Fargo in the other, left a steady stream of nickel behind her at some unseen enemy, also armed with volters for the beads created little eruptions along the rocky walls and floor. Barefoot, her white pants split on one leg, she wore some baggy dark jacket zipped up to her neck. She turned her head his way. And he *knew*. Liberty could see again.

She could *see*.

He wanted to drop to his knees and thank every single star in the galaxy. His precious Liberty could see again. She would no longer be so vulnerable.

As much as he wanted to wrap his arms around her and squeeze her tight, two things stopped him dead. One, they still had a dozen bad guys on their tails and two, he couldn't bring himself to approach her. He must've resembled a murderous beast. A monster. A killer. He looked down at his hands. Blood covered his arms, his chest and belly, which glistened red between the black harness. She could see him right now,

looking like this. He hadn't had time to prepare, to clean himself. She could see him for what he'd been, what he was still, and this more than anything else, more than bad timing and enemies breathing down their necks, brought him crashing back to his initial assessment.

She was too good for the likes of him. She was a lady. And he was a beast.

Chapter Seven

Liberty's heart nearly stopped when she spotted Cupcake staggering out of the corridor, his front and arms and hands covered in blood. His face too. He looked groggy, walked unsteadily and for a split second, she feared he'd collapse anytime now. Had he been wounded beyond help? Was she too late? She gave a rough shake to the man she held by the arm.

She put her face right against his. "If he dies..."

"You can stop all this," Fargo replied. Blood and snot dribbled from his nose. "Let me go and I'll call them all off."

A few feet away, Dragana snorted without turning around from her vantage point near the corner. She fired three shots to keep Fargo's boys at bay. "If you don't smarten up, I'll blow your feet off, you old buzzard."

Liberty turned back to Cupcake and tried to smile but suspected it came out as a grimace. At best.

Back in the lounge, when she'd seen him chained to the ground like a beast while two brutes savagely beat him had proven too much for her. She'd screamed and screamed. She hadn't been able to stop as she rained death on the handful of thugs spilling into the lounge. Then Fargo himself had showed up, the arrogant jerk, probably thinking his boys had already taken care of Dragana and her. The look on his face when the Valkyrie had kicked the door closed behind him! A look she'd added to by throwing Nolan's bloodied bracelet at Fargo's feet. He'd paled quite nicely.

One of the chicks, the redhead, had escaped but the other one had stayed, guided them down to where they'd find Cupcake, she'd said. She hadn't called him Rickie.

Cupcake presently looked at her, his heart in his eyes despite the state of him, the pain undoubtedly ripping through him and lowered his gaze to his feet. But she'd seen his eyes, those pale chips of ice. And she'd *known*. The realization washed over her, soothed her raw nerves, calmed her arrhythmic heartbeat. This man may have been Rickie to some, a hit man to others, but he'd always be Cupcake to her. A friend and colleague. The one who'd catch her if she fell. The man she loved.

"Cupcake," she began, couldn't find the proper words and clamped her mouth shut.

"No time to fuck around," Dragana announced as she rounded the corner, turned back for a few shots then ran up to Liberty. "Let's get out of here!"

A tiny burst not three feet away sent chips of rock flying. Nickel beads were getting too close for comfort. The bad guys might have been hiding in the staircase for now but they'd find another way.

"Dragana, give him one of the volters. Let's go."

She rushed to Cupcake's side, took a baton when he changed it for a volter. After a quick pat on the shoulder, she chuckled. "Hey, big guy. You look like shit."

"Rickie," Fargo said, trying to pull his arm out of Liberty's grip. She squeezed harder. "You can stop all this before your lady friend gets hurt."

Cupcake shook his head, blinked repeatedly, teetered back and forth. Dragana pushed against his shoulder until he took the hint and leaned against the wall. "Take it easy. And be careful where you point that volter, okay?" She snorted one of her typical laughs. Liberty thought it sounded strained.

"What did you do to him?" Liberty demanded. Another shake was in order, she thought.

Fargo sneered a curse. "You're gonna regret this, Miss Silke. I promise you."

Dragana whirled on the spot, fired. The nickel bead struck the tiny space between Fargo's feet. "I said, smarten up."

He squealed in fright and fell silent.

"This way," the tallish chick with the funky eyes announced. She'd removed her stilettos. "They have stuff in the shuttle bay. I think it's yours."

"Ella," Fargo snarled as he unbuttoned his pearl gray jacket. "Shut up, you stupid cunt."

She cocked her arm back and struck him across the face. It was a bitch slap at best, but it did shock him into silence. Liberty was starting to like that woman. She couldn't help wondering if Cupcake did too.

"You're never going to call me that again, you disgusting old bastard. You hear?" Turning to Liberty, she pointed with her chin. "This way."

After giving Ella the baton she'd taken from Cupcake, Dragana took position to provide her usual deadly cover. Ella took Cupcake's elbow to guide him. He kept his gaze on the ground a few feet in front.

They followed the corridor back the way they'd come, stayed well away from the elevator booth and emerged into a sort of underground garage where several pricey shuttles had been lined up against the rock wall. The sound of nickel beads—the rapid-fire *thunk-thunk-thunk* against the walls and floor—followed them around the corner. And there was more of it.

"Damn, we'll need more nickel soon," Dragana said from the doorway. She poked her head out, fired then plastered herself against the wall. "The roaches, they keep coming."

"You won't get off the station if I don't let you," Fargo announced.

He *humphed* when Liberty sent him waltzing against the closest shuttle, a gold and silver affair resembling an old Earth gangster car with thrusters at the back and a wicked-looking iron grille at the front. Custom-made no doubt. Liberty couldn't help

the tech geek in her from noticing the clever way the builders had disguised the antennas.

He leaned back against it, coughed and pulled the pink handkerchief from his breast pocket. "I own the port authorities. That's how we got your cruiser in the first place. You're all fucked."

"Who said we needed —"

Without taking her gaze from the doorway, Dragana straightened her arm at full extension and before Liberty could tell her to just mind the damn door, fired a single shot.

Fargo howled when the static-charged nickel bead hit his left foot, pierced the skin and released the electric arc, which neatly melted half of the appendage off. The smell of burnt flesh made Liberty crinkle her nose.

With a vicious grin, Dragana turned the gun back toward the doorway and fired twice. She cursed when her volter just clicked impotently. "Nickel!"

"Take mine," Cupcake said as he offered her the silvery gun handle first. "I can't even see straight." With a disgusted curl to his lips, he pulled the harness off his shoulders and when he couldn't manage the clasps, just tore it off him. Muscles bulged when he rubbed his face, smeared blood even worse.

Think of something, woman. Think. Think.

Ella pointed to a locker behind the row of shuttles. "I think that's where they keep your stuff. Guns. A big silver one, I saw it when the brothers came back with it."

"A big silver one?" Dragana demanded. "That'd be my Peanut. Why didn't you say anything? Cupcake, would you be a dear?"

Using shuttles to keep himself upright, he stumbled around the closest and wrenched the locker door wide. It rattled against the wall. He was coming back with the monster volter in hand, which gleamed like a mechanized silver squid with its tentacles grouped into a point. After dropping the empty volter to the floor, Dragana grabbed Peanut, gave it an affectionate peck then shoved the muzzle in the opening between the doors. Rapid-fire flashed for a good five seconds.

"Fuck, that felt good!"

Meanwhile, Liberty looked around at the parked shuttles, knowing Solomon would readily announce she had The Pondering Look. She could use his special brand of humor right about now.

I have shuttles. Work with that.

None of these were really fast, more luxury vessels meant to be seen, but it beat running all the way down to the spaceports to Rey's ship. With two of them barefoot and a limping old bastard. Not to mention Cupcake was in no condition to run anyway. Maybe she shouldn't have told Rey to wait in the ship. They could use some help right now.

"Keep them occupied," Liberty said after she pushed the moaning Fargo aside and pulled on the lever to open the hatch. "What's the launch code to this one?"

"I'm not...gonna tell. Bitch." He wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

Cupcake growled low in his chest and marched forward, and despite the obvious effort it took to focus, grabbed the older man by the front of the jacket and easily lifted him off the ground. "Don't you dare call her that—"

"I know what it is," Ella said. "I know one of the chauffeurs and he takes me on rides sometimes." She squeezed by Liberty and sat at the controls, electric baton tucked under her feet. "I can't pilot though."

So while Dragana gleefully kept the bad guys occupied with her newly recovered Peanut and a barrage of the vilest insults, Liberty sat beside the strange woman—Ella—and entered the code. At once, the shuttle whirred to life. She grinned despite their predicament.

"Fuck!"

Dragana pushed off the wall and rushed for the shuttle. "They're coming!"

Cupcake literally threw Fargo onto the backseat, waited with a foot inside and the other out while Dragana backpedaled furiously, giant volter blazing as she fired at the door opening. She climbed in. Cupcake closed the hatch.

"Go! Go!"

Liberty gunned the engines, lifted the gold and silver shuttle off by a few feet and spun it around so the thrusters would face the door. If anyone got any ideas, they'd get a nice tan first.

The wrong way on a one-way tunnel, she piloted the shuttle as a getaway robber would, taking corners fast and tight. The tunnel spiraled upward, black and yellow placards announcing each level in sequential order—a giant 4, then a 3, a 2, finally 1 flew past in a blur as she hurtled out of the underground parking, nearly collided with another shuttle hovering right in front of the entrance and swerved at the last moment. Behind her, she heard her passengers grunting with the effort of keeping themselves from falling over pell-mell in the backseat.

She pulled on the yoke, kicked the cold and sharp right pedal and sent the shuttle into a crazy spin aimed directly at the sky. Someone yelled. She wasn't sure who. After she cleared the lower strata of traffic under a cacophony of angry horns, she aimed for the spaceports with everything the pricey shuttle could give. Buildings and advertisements flew by, the spherical habitats built over the city skyline gleamed like giant silver grapes and when she spotted the first few larger space ships poking out behind the tallest buildings, Liberty aimed directly for that. Never mind traffic laws. Never mind how she seemed to be flying in the wrong corridor. Horns from other shuttles blared behind and around her. She didn't care. She had to get to that ship before Fargo's people reached Rey and prevented their ship from taking off.

When she thought she was close enough for the humble short-range comms system on the shuttle, she clicked in her connection's channel, waited.

After a bit of static—all looks and no substance this shuttle—a male voice with a sexy accent filled the cabin. “You better hurry. I think we’ll have company for dinner.” The word sounded like “dee-nAhr”.

“How wide is your cargo door?”

“Fifteen feet across. Why?”

“Open it wide and clear the deck.”

She heard Dragana cursing behind her. “Liberty, you’re not thinking—”

“Hang on!” Liberty interrupted, bending over the controls.

A pair of black shuttles bearing Antioch’s security logo on the tail hatches rose from between buildings and hovered right in front of her nose, barely two hundred feet away. Were they crazy?! She barely had time to veer off and fly underneath the one to the right.

“Level off,” she heard Cupcake’s warning.

Liberty spared a quick glance back and spotted Dragana opening the side door. She held on to the “holy shit” handle above her head while she leveled Peanut. Wind whipped at her hair and clothes. Like a Valkyrie dispensing death unto the masses. She could’ve been a blonde bombshell of a woman had she not been given the ability to speak. Whenever the team’s expert marksman opened her mouth, she burst whatever bubble there might have been.

Liberty shook her head. The woman was mad on top of things!

Keeping the shuttle leveled and even, she brought it alongside the closest security craft, also with its side door gaping and officers taking aim. Dragana fired once. Despite the movement, she’d showed her skill once again. Liberty couldn’t hear a thing but saw someone fall out of the security shuttle to plummet the five hundred feet to the ground. Poor bugger. No wonder Solomon had hired her after having seen Dragana shoot.

With a squeal only women could make, Ella clawed out of her seat. “Rickie!”

“Fuck!”

That’d been Dragana.

Liberty couldn’t spare but a second to look back as she navigated the treacherous course between the security cruisers—now probably pissed off and calling backup—and the first few ships moored along the most remote spaceports. She twisted back just in time to see Ella throwing herself at Cupcake. Whatever they’d given him must have been potent indeed for the woman succeeded in tackling the giant of a man back into the seat while Fargo, something shiny in his hand, went flying past. He collided against Ella, now standing where Cupcake had just been, and both went tumbling out of the shuttle and nearly took Dragana with them.

Cupcake roared. “Ella!”

No way in hell either could’ve survived the fall. They couldn’t afford to go back and check anyway.

The woman had saved Cupcake’s life and paid with her own.

"I'm sorry," she murmured, knowing he probably couldn't hear her. She really was.

Then she spotted Rey's ship. Finally! Liberty used both feet, which hurt from the cold metal wheel well, to slam the left pedal and sent the shuttle into a violent three-sixty spin. Once, twice, thrice. Dragana yelled. In glee or fright, Liberty couldn't be sure. After a last dizzying spin, she pushed on the yoke, angled the nose of her stolen shuttle directly at Rey's ship's tail hatch and dropped suddenly. Both security shuttles flew by, unable to match the sudden change of heading and speed. Firing the engines in small bursts, she leveled right along the narrow cargo door.

"Fuck!"

Dragana could always be counted on to emphasize action with vocal forms of punctuation.

Holding on to the yoke with both hands, Liberty fired the engines one last time and cringed. She could see the cargo bay's interior. The netting, the wires hanging on the bulkheads. The grille gangway suspended over the deck and how he'd closed all interior hatches. *Smart man.*

Twenty feet.

The hatch would be a tight fit.

She fired attitude jets on the right side. A small burst only.

Ten feet.

It'd be a *very* tight fit.

Five feet.

Oh shit.

She struck the tailgate first, bounced off by a foot or so. A bone-jarring, teeth-grating metal-on-metal sound accompanied the rude entry into Rey's ship. All twenty feet of gold and silver gangster car look-alike skimmed inside the cargo bay, the skids skating on the surface, catching something and tilting the craft forward with a long moan. Liberty bent over the controls due to the suddenly decreasing momentum.

"Get the hatch!"

Dragana tried to claw out, squeeze along the undoubtedly still burning-hot hull so she could close the cargo door but Cupcake had preceded her. Liberty could see him through the back porthole. He fisted the cargo bay access panel. At once, a shrill alarm announced the thick titanium tailgate was lifting, the hatch closing. Before she could get to the comms and warn Rey, she felt the deep vibration of the ship's boosters coming to life. Good man.

She took a deep breath, leaned back in the seat and closed her eyes. Poor Ella.

"Strap yourselves in," Rey's voice interrupted her dark musings. "We'll transition to FTL in thirty seconds."

Whoa.

She tore herself from the seat and came face to chest with Cupcake, who'd come back inside the shuttle. "Hurry," he said, giving her his hand. He must have spotted the blood on it, grimaced and quickly snatched it away.

She would've taken it anyway. Didn't he know?

Instead she followed the pair as they rushed out of the cargo bay, slammed the hatch behind them and each squeezed into an alcove so they could strap themselves in before the ship transitioned to faster-than-light travel. No one wanted to end as a smear of puree along the bulkheads.

Because the ship was fairly recent—only newer models could transition to FTL in less than a minute—Liberty immediately leaned her head back against the padded niche, knowing she had seconds. By her side, Cupcake was bracing his big feet wider, thickly muscled legs bulging with the effort under the black polymer. She angled her naked right foot so her toes would touch his boot. He poked his head out of the alcove, looked at her, tried for a valiant smile but the grin died on his face. He lowered his gaze, gently slid his foot away.

She felt as if someone had just stabbed her in the chest. *Cupcake.*

Just as a twinge of pain pinched her optic nerves, the ship must have moved away from the mooring station because she felt herself become heavier. The synthleather pants squeaked against the polymer seat, her feet felt riveted to the deck. She groaned when Rey—as crazy a pilot as herself, worse even—maneuvered their craft into a brutal left bank and displaying the sort of recklessness Solomon would've applauded, put his foot to the metal. With a great lurch, the ship accelerated. She could barely breathe. Her head felt heavy. Heavier. By her side, Cupcake and Dragana grunted.

A split second silence announced they'd transitioned to FTL travel. A violent heave tore gasps from all three. The ship stabilized. Her feet came off the deck.

The intercom fizzled. "Stand down," said Rey.

After she clawed out of the niche and showing uncommon courtesy and forethought, Dragana patted Cupcake's shoulder. "I'm glad you're okay, big guy. I missed your sense of humor." With a grin, she retrieved Peanut, left the pair and grumbled about debriefing Rey on his piloting skills.

Cupcake seemed to be feeling a bit better, even stood without leaning against anything. She wouldn't have minded his leaning on her for a change. She wouldn't have let him fall. Liberty reached out to touch his arm. He took a step backward, knocked his head against the anchoring niche's ledge and backed away by another pace.

"Cupcake," Liberty said, letting her hand fall by her side. "What's wrong?"

He shrugged, turned to leave, stopped. "Me."

Liberty was so shocked she just let him leave. Actually watched his wide V-shaped back and delicious tight butt disappear around the corner. Tears welled. She took a step to follow him. Stopped.

For Pete's sake, give him a moment. Let him sleep, eat something. Get cleaned up.

She pulled her fogging goggles up and wiped at her eyes. Her surroundings blurred behind the veil of unshed tears but she ordered herself not to cry. He was just tired. So was she.

Liberty avoided the upper deck where she knew the bridge would be and remained below, found a cabin with a piece of tape on it that read *Miss Silke*. She locked herself in, cleaned up, lay down and stared at the rivets along ceiling.

Sleep, woman.

She tossed and turned.

A migraine throbbed behind her eyeballs. She took two of the pills her uncle had sent along with the implant, hoping they'd knock her out or at least take the edge off. She splashed cold water on her face and throat, didn't care she made a mess on the deck. Her thoughts invariably turned back to Cupcake. Why was he avoiding her? Was it Ella? Had she meant something to him, something Liberty hadn't been supposed to know?

Jealousy, woman? That's not you.

Still.

He'd looked so ill at ease when Ella had rushed by Liberty back at the arena and grabbed at the man's arm. He'd lowered his gaze in... In what? Guilt?

Perhaps Cupcake thought she'd take this sitting down. Maybe she would have before they'd shared their bodies with one another, made tender love. She couldn't go back to when she only looked at him from a distance and waited for the shy giant to make his move. He'd *made* his move. He'd shown her how he felt.

And now he was slinking back into the shadows? *I think not.*

"Don't you dare," she snarled, marching up the passageway a second later, looking for the cabin he'd taken. She only wore a towel wrapped around herself and still dripped water but didn't care. She wanted answers and she wanted them now.

Just by the smell, she knew she'd found Cupcake's cabin. Without waiting for permission, she slammed the door into the bulkhead. He sat on his bunk, naked, obviously just showered, his head cradled in his raw-knuckled hands. He snapped to his feet when she barged in.

The door still rattled in its jamb a good two seconds after she'd slammed it shut. "We need to talk."

He shook his head, his pale gaze tracing her form then turning away. A five o'clock shadow clung to the bottom half of his face while water beaded his muscled chest, made gleaming curls of his hair between his pectorals and down the middle of his abs.

Liberty was transfixed. She hadn't *seen* him in a while, not in several weeks in fact, even if she'd felt and tasted him, and the fact he stood naked wasn't helping her resolve at all. And before she'd lost her first implant, she'd never seen Cupcake *this* way – naked, dripping wet. Goodness, he was handsome and masculine and –

Focus.

"Why are you avoiding me?"

A look of pain flashed across his square face. "I'm not avoiding you."

"You are. And if you think for a second you can weasel out of telling me why, you have another think coming, Cupcake. I *want* to know and I think I *deserve* to know what's going on."

"Nothing's going on," he said, swallowed hard then shook his head. Self-disgust twisted his features when he looked down and noticed his cock showed signs of alertness. "It's not anything anyone can fix."

"So there *is* something going on." She marched up to him, jabbed his wide chest with an index finger. "You think you can share my bed then pretend nothing happened?"

He couldn't have looked more shocked. "It's not that, Liberty. Please don't think that."

He would've turned away if she hadn't grabbed him by the shoulder and kept him put. For the first time since she'd known the towering lycan with the thoughtful eyes, he looked angry. At *her*. As delicately as he could make his bear paw of a hand, he pulled hers off him.

Liberty would have none of it. She was past caring if she offended him. She loved him, for Pete's sake, and was afraid to lose him. Again. "Tell me why."

"What?" he retorted. His pale eyes narrowed. "What do you want me to tell you?"

"The truth would be nice!"

"Truth? You already *know* the truth, right here in front of you. You saw what I am, what I did—do. Don't tell me you want anything to do with a guy who doesn't have a credit to his name, who can't even hold a real job if it doesn't involve his fists." He balled them, seemed to become engrossed with the raw knuckles before showing them to her as if to make his point clearer. "Those," he let his hands fall. "Those are all I have to give. And it's not good enough for you."

In all the years she'd known him, she'd never heard him link so many words together.

"You don't get to decide that."

"Yes, I do. I can't touch you with these hands. I *kill* people with these hands, Liberty. Folks on Antioch called me The Hit Man, it's not for nothing."

"You decide that *now*? After we had sex?"

"It was more than sex."

"Could've fooled me." She grabbed his wrist and pulled it in front of her. "I don't care what these hands have done. I know they can be gentle. I love how they feel when you touch me with them."

He tried to pull away but she wouldn't have it. Her heart beat madly now. Stars fizzed at the edges of her sight. A dull ache spread to her joints and jaw.

"You had no right —"

"Let go."

"I'm not *done!*" she yelled, her fist clutching his thick wrist with everything she had. She couldn't even wrap her hand, which was long, around it. "I thought you were dead, Cupcake! Dead! You could've told me *before* they got to you. I can't help if I don't know what's going on!"

"They would've killed you." He fisted his trapped hand. Muscles bulged along his biceps and wide chest. "I'm not a gambler. I don't take chances."

"Oh but you did gamble. With your life." The thought of him dying for her, nauseated her. She gritted her teeth. Damn...*man!*

"Let go, Liberty."

His mouth thinned. He clearly was getting pissed off. Perfect, she thought. Let the bear come out of his cave. Fresh air might do him some good.

"I have your attention now, don't I? You think I'm going to let you slink back into your hole?"

"Let my hand go," he warned through his teeth.

"Not until you put it back where it belongs. On me."

He gave a good yank, which only served to slam her against him. Their skin connected. Obsidian. Pink marble. A perfect combination.

Before Liberty's brain had fully registered the event, she felt the change coming over her.

And with shock she realized Cupcake was changing as well.

Chapter Eight

His heart in his throat, choking him, he held on to her as she changed. In fact, they each held on to the other as their bodies went through the short but agonizing transformation to lycan form. Two people drowning, clutching with desperate, numb fingers, eyes closed. He felt ripped outward in a thousand shreds and knew Liberty felt the same way too and this was why he held on to her, to minimize the grief as much as he could because if she hurt, he'd hurt even more.

Under his palms, Cupcake felt the bones snap and readjust, the tendons pop under the terrible strain, the muscles swell and elongate. She groaned, whimpered. So did he. And through the change, a heightened sensual awareness engulfed him, one that took him to heights of perception he didn't know existed. Instead of the lycan taking over, he felt for the first time, in a comfortable place between the two. Not quite human. But not a beast either.

Liberty seemed to have undergone the same half transformation for she stood against him, her hands not claws but human, which she kept around his neck, almost suspended against him, a desperate clutch. Even if he tried his damndest to not touch her, he could feel through the towel her breasts rubbing against his chest, her mons against his hip—he could smell her sex too—one of her legs jammed between his and Cupcake swore he'd just been dunked inside a volcano.

To think he'd considered a life without her! What a fool he'd been to even entertain the idea he could ever live apart from Liberty. To see her barge into his cabin, demand answers. She'd looked magnificent!

But couldn't she see what he was? Didn't she care? It would appear not. How he loved her. Losing her would drive him mad. Loving her would make him even more so.

He couldn't take it anymore. He had to taste her again, fill his hands with her body, his ears with her moans, mesh them both in the same person, the same flesh. One. Life would mean nothing without her. His Liberty. He crushed his mouth to hers. She moaned. He loved the sound of her desire for him and wanted to hear it. Louder.

Panting, he grabbed her shoulders and pushed her at arm's length so he could get his fill of her beauty. Adrenaline pumped his muscles as he devoured Liberty with his eyes, his sense of smell and soon would with his mouth, tongue. His cock. But he wanted to see her. Naked. All his.

Without a word, he fisted the towel around her torso and ripped it off. She held his gaze, those ghostly, milky eyes that could pierce a man's soul. His anyway. He'd rip apart anyone who disagreed too.

She stayed riveted to the spot under his implacable gaze. Cupcake felt powerful, loved, trusted. No longer afraid to hurt her, he pressed his palm against her sternum

and back-walked her to the bulkhead where he pinned her, still with one hand, his other a shaking fist. Liberty held his gaze. Unwavering.

Her breasts rose with her panting. Water beads still dotted her dark skin. Stars against a midnight sky. Diamonds sewn into black satin. The transformation had made her a statue of basalt, muscled and hard, as those he'd once seen on a show about some ancient civilization or other. Egypt? He couldn't remember. His fearsome queen, his idol, his goddess the color of inscrutable space, his reason for being. He wanted to lose himself in her, claim her, mark her. His animalistic response no longer frightened him for he knew Liberty wanted this from him, had wanted it all along only he'd been too afraid to damage her. Afraid even to love her.

No more.

While he held her still—her heart pounded against his palm—he curled his tongue and ran it along his sharpened teeth, which hadn't changed to fangs but almost. The sharp points created spikes of energy to jolt right down to his cock. She watched his mouth, seemingly mesmerized by it.

A growl rumbling low in his chest, he leaned into her and raked his teeth over her shoulder, down her twitching biceps, in the crook of an elbow. The smell of her honey filled his nostrils, his brain. He stood straight again. Then he used his free hand to cup her sex, index and middle fingers quickly finding her moist—drenched—folds. He penetrated her—deeply.

"This is mine," he said with a slight lift of the last syllable. It could've been a question or a statement.

She nodded. "Do it."

He fucked her with his fingers as he'd never dared fantasize before.

Liberty's eyes narrowed while her lips parted. A long ribbon of breath reached his face each time she exhaled. She licked her upper lip, showing pointy teeth and a tongue so pink it resembled candy.

"It's yours," she whispered. Her pussy milked his fingers. "Take it all."

Holding her pinned against the bulkhead still, he pulled his fingers out of her reluctantly—but he knew he was going back again and soon—brought them up so he could smell her nectar, which he licked in a long and wide pass of tongue. Then he plunged his fingers again, thrust deeper, tasted her juices. Then again. She gasped each time. But he wanted more.

Cupcake fell to his knees and forced her thighs wide with hands much rougher than he ever allowed himself to be with any woman, especially with her. But she was a lycan like him. She could take him. He knew it now.

So he fucked her with his mouth. Bit her flesh and licked the tiny bead of blood he drew from the inside of her thigh.

Her belly constricted. "Ooohh Cupcake...ohhh."

He sucked at her lips, thick petals of a flushed flower, stabbed his tongue in her, raked his teeth upward so he'd hear his name over and over. Her nectar he smeared everywhere he could reach. One finger, two, three. Inside her. Her pussy, her anus. He marked Liberty with his teeth, his hands. Her body undulated against his face. She pumped her hips with vigorous cadence and speed so he'd fuck her more deeply, which he did.

"Harder," she groaned. She crushed his face to her cunt with enough force to break an average human neck. But neither were average humans.

He sucked in her clitoris, curled his tongue and assaulted it, trapped, pulled and rolled it. Then with a pop he let it go. "It is all mine."

"Yes."

Her rhythm became violent, so did her hand against his nape. She dug her nails into his scalp. He was close to coming.

He bit her sex. Liberty responded by sparing a hand so she could fuck herself, feed him her drenched fingers then go back at it with a vengeance. Wet sounds accompanied her vigorous thrusts. She stabbed into her flesh. Over and over. He licked and bit her hand.

An inferno ravaged his body. He shivered as if in a fever. *Holy fuck.*

Cupcake growled and looked down at his cock where dribbled glistening semen. He'd come at the foot of his basalt goddess!

She must have felt his release or smelled it for she collapsed on her knees, licked his face, his chest and the hand with which he'd been fucking her then gathered with two fingers the fine thread of cum splattered on her foot. With her fingers in her mouth, she closed her eyes and sucked noisily.

The sights and sounds and smells drove him into a frenzy. She *was* all his now and he would claim it all.

Cupcake roughly pinned her against the bulkhead face first, still kneeling, and forced her hands up and wide over her head. He didn't wait for her to spread her knees for him and pried them wide with his own so he could kneel behind her and fill his eyes and nose and hands with her, their not-quite-lycan forms perfectly espoused. He couldn't wait anymore. He had to have her.

"Liberty," he growled under his breath.

Her back shimmered with sweat as he wrapped his hands in the crooks of her hips and angled her pelvis back, glistening cleft wide open to his hungry gaze. She couldn't move. He knew she couldn't. Not with the force he was using to anchor her before him, poised with his cock about to unfurl her around him. Her hot and wet flesh.

He used his thumbs to separate her cheeks. She was so wet, she must have melted from the inside. Honey trailed in long dribbles along her thighs. His hands unyielding, Cupcake knocked his hips against her ass and took her hard.

A long cry filled the room. At the back of his dazed mind, he realized it hadn't only been her voice.

She'd never known lycans could change halfway. It'd never happened before.

Not human. Not beast. All her faculties intact but with her every sense filed to a razor's edge. She could *sense* him with every fiber in her body. There kneeling against the bulkhead, her arms outstretched above her head and with Cupcake towering behind her, she felt he'd finally accepted the inevitable. They were made for each other. Lycans. Man and woman.

Then he took her. Harder and deeper than she'd ever had it done. His violence shocked and thrilled her. *Cupcake? Finally!*

Liberty swore he'd fuck her into unconsciousness. Cupcake's initial thrust penetrated her so fast and brutally she saw stars. He was large inside her, large and so thick. Fire licked at her pussy and ass.

"Take it all," she kept murmuring against the polymer surface. She scratched at it with her fingernails, broke a couple. She didn't care!

He pulled out, stabbed back in. She cried out. Again. Then again.

Her shoulder knocked against the bulkhead under his pounding. She planted her palms wider so she'd withstand his furious fucking but could barely move. His force was overwhelming. Liberty heard her voice—hoarse, guttural. It filled the small cabin. She encouraged him with vile words, dirty words she'd never considered using on a lover before—especially Cupcake.

Yes, she wanted him to plunder and storm and mark her body! *Bite me. Fuck me. Make me yours!* She demanded it. In her ass. In her cunt. She wanted him hard. Her lycan half wanted to be made his. Violently.

He fulfilled her every request. Went beyond her commands and impaled her with his girth and power. So hot. A cry tore out of her when he bit her shoulder. Merciless, his hand snaked around her and trapped her breast, his thumb and index finger rolling her nipple, rolling and pinching and pulling. Her bottom lip throbbing and tucked between her teeth, Liberty welcomed Cupcake's hammering and hoped he'd never again withhold this vigor from her.

He slowed slightly, leaned into her back. "On your elbows," he growled against the nape of her neck.

Liberty pushed off the wall and twisted so she could plant her elbows against the deck. Behind her, Cupcake anchored her hips to him and followed her. She moaned unabashedly when he pulled out, used his cock like a baton and slapped her throbbing cleft with it. Oh she loved her new Cupcake!

"That's...oh, that's right." She arched, bucked back.

She heard him spit, felt his wet palm pressing against her distended pussy and ass. And after he smacked her again with his heavy member and triggered a wave of

animalistic impulses—her flesh felt on fire!—Liberty was more than ready to receive him any which way he wanted to take her. And take her he did. Only not with his cock but with his hand. Four fingers, gathered in the middle for an uneven but rock-hard penetration. An affirmation. She was his.

She let out a keen and it made her ears ring.

Then his penis replaced his hand. Then everything at once. His cock in her pussy, his fingers in her anus. Both claims the culmination of years of longing. She'd waited so long for Cupcake to make his move.

Her voice a whip with which she urged him, Liberty bucked back against him so he'd take her even harder. And as the first signs of a violent orgasm tightened her flesh around him like a fist, she felt her lover—no, the man she *loved*—become even larger inside her. A towering wolf-god staking a claim in her body.

"Take it!" she growled. "Take it from me! It's yours!"

Cupcake's handling ripped a cry from her. Then it hit. Waves, not ripples. A kaleidoscope of reds and ambers and blinding suns. Cupcake's cock plunging one last time to wrest the last of her offering from her pulsating flesh.

He exhaled a long groan just as she climaxed. Sweat, her cum and his saliva linked them. He collapsed on top of her. Liberty couldn't withstand his great weight and crumpled as well.

Still inside her, he rolled onto his side and took her with him so they'd lie like spoons. Sticky, wet, panting spoons. And as their partial transformation had come, simultaneously they reverted to human form once more. No pain. She felt nothing but Cupcake sheathed inside her.

Fatigue, stress and their brutal coupling had drained her. A great languor deadened her body. Liberty closed her eyes. She could barely think.

"Liberty?"

She moaned, "*mmm?*" through her nose.

"I love you."

* * * * *

"That's all?" Dragana demanded through a grimace. She crossed her arms and leaned back against the console behind her. Lights from the overhead navigational vidscreens hit her blonde hair and made it look as though she had blue and red highlights. "It doesn't make sense."

Liberty shook her head as she listened to Solomon's deep, gravelly voice telling them where and when to meet. Even if he spoke in a normal tone of voice, it filled Rey's ship's tiny bridge. The message was cryptic at best—he'd been spending too much time with his sexy spy Eva—but Liberty knew he'd made it seemingly vague in case others listened in, all the while knowing she'd get it perfectly.

"Canine unit. First time. Julian sixty-nine," she repeated, turning off the digitex. "Han district Canine Unit in Seoul is where he was working when we met. He was a dog trainer for the Global Alliance of Nations military. It's abandoned now."

Dragana rolled her eyes. "An abandoned GAN base doesn't sound like a good meeting place to me. And Seoul? Fuck, that's where Vonatos and his goons hang out. It'd be a perfect place for a big cluster fuck. Ambush, you name it."

"You can wait on the ship if you're afraid of meeting Vonatos' 'goons'," Rey murmured. He held her stare, even smirked, and Liberty swore the Valkyrie would punch his lights out. What was up with him?

Dragana narrowed her eyes. "You do realize I'm bigger than you, right?"

He eyed her down, curled his upper lip. "Much."

Cupcake shrugged. "So what about the rest? First time. Julian sixty-nine?"

Liberty felt the air congeal between her family's connection and Dragana. Maybe Uncle Johnnie should've chosen someone else for the job, someone without Rey's talent at ruffling Dragana's feathers. He was a fine pilot but they had no time for this!

"First time we met was on a Friday night, after his shift. 'Julian sixty-nine' is a date. Remember before missions? You guys would go over the logistics and armaments while Solomon and I would do the tactical planning, timings, things like that? We always used to go with the old Julian calendar because he thought it made more sense with just a number."

"Sixty-nine, huh?" Dragana put in after another few seconds of staring contest with Rey. Liberty thought the woman had been right, he really was *cute*. He had the Mediterranean grace of movement. But he did look a bit of a snob. For some reason, she didn't much care for him and couldn't wait until they reached Earth so she could thank him for bringing her eyes and send him on his way. She wondered what he did for a living other than his work for the family. Not anything physical for his hands were perfectly manicured. A very handsome man.

A jab of pain made her cringe. Her head hurt despite the painkillers. She tried to ignore the worried glance Cupcake threw her way—he seemed to be trying hard to be discreet about it. He was learning.

He cleared his throat. "Julian date. So that's thirty-one, plus twenty-eight, plus ten. We're meeting Solomon this coming Friday."

Dragana's mouth fell open as she looked at the giant lycan.

He shrugged a massive shoulder. "What? I can count too."

So Rey set a course for Earth. Liberty knew they wouldn't be able to make contact with Solomon before they landed at the rendezvous point in case the Iron Conclave, GAN's secret enforcer and Eva's former bosses, was listening. They couldn't take the chance the data clip containing Vonatos' dark deed—he'd assassinated his predecessor, the charismatic N'Namdi—might fall into government hands and its message erased forever. She'd found a way to distribute the message to the masses using her family's

access to the mammoth video feeders but would need for Solomon and Eva to make sure they kept the data clip safe until then. Without the message, the genetic “cleansing” would continue. Deviants such as them wouldn’t have a chance. Already journalists were beginning to complain they weren’t allowed to accompany security forces during their “incursions into enemy territory”. Raids conducted in the poorer neighborhoods where most genetically abnormal people were forced to live. She was an anomaly herself with the Silkes standing behind her despite the growing calls for families to disclose the whereabouts of their defective members.

When at last a particularly bumpy transition to FTL took them barely a light-year from Earth, Liberty was ready to hang up her guns for good and retire from her mercenary profession. By her side, in her pixelated feedback, Cupcake’s face looked green. Even Dragana was quiet across from them in another anchoring niche. She unbuckled the harness and stood unsteadily.

“He’s a shitty pilot, lemme tell you,” she muttered. “Little prick.” Peanut gleamed when she picked it up, checked to see if the nickel gauge was marked *Full* – at least a fourth time that Liberty knew of – and cracked her neck.

Liberty was instantly reminded of Ivan, Dragana’s dead twin. She missed the man’s smile for his sister shared none of his good cheer if all of his intensity. It was all Palmer’s fault. The little turncoat. And whoever had hired him to steal the data clip and kill the team in the first place. If someone could get to the bottom of this though, it was Dragana. She wouldn’t rest until she’d emptied her nickel clips into the one responsible for her beloved twin’s death.

“We’re a bit early,” announced Rey over the intercom. “I’ll land the ship on the old firing range a mile or so outside the base proper. We’ll have to do the rest on foot.”

Looking both sexy and deadly in her freshly washed denim outfit, Dragana glowered up at the intercom panel. “Who died and put that fucker in charge?”

Liberty shook her head. “It only makes sense. Let’s go.”

By her side, Cupcake adjusted the black pants in which he’d fought in the arena. He’d run them three times in the dry-wash. They fit him perfectly, she had to admit, even if they reminded her of the way he’d looked when she’d joined him at Fargo’s. There hadn’t been a shirt large enough at the shoulders to fit him in Uncle Johnnie’s care package so he’d donned the bulletproof vest alone. She tore her gaze off him. If she wanted her mental faculties intact, she couldn’t glance at him not even in passing or she’d start drooling and forget everything else but his thick, muscled body and how he’d ridden her hard the night before. A sigh left her. After all this craziness was over and done with, she wanted some quality alone time with him. A deserted island would be perfect.

Under her coffee-colored, cinched faux suede jacket – fitted with clever stretch bands in case she changed – she’d have to thank Uncle Johnnie for the nice gift – her nipples hardened. One didn’t have to look like a guy to carry a volter and know how to use it too, right? She just wished her uncle had thought about underwear. Oh well.

Armed, equipped and ready, they squeezed along Fargo's gaudy shuttle and trooped to the end of the raised tailgate. An activator dangled from a thick electrical cord and Rey grabbed it, waited for a collective nod before pressing on the green button. Steam hissed out of the crack when the tail hatch opened, the rubber seal fizzing with condensation and the change in air pressure. Despite the inside of the ship being at one-atmosphere—normal pressure—her ears popped painfully when the hatch opened. She worked her jaw.

Night owned the windy firing range. Smells of grass filled her nostrils. It'd been a while since she'd been outside for real. Using his body as a shield, Cupcake cut in front of her and silently stalked down the lowering tailgate, volter scanning back and forth in smooth, practiced sweeps. Peanut in hand, Dragana jumped directly off the edge of the tailgate and provided cover. Even if they'd kept only the emergency amber light on in the cargo bay, they still made perfect targets. The quicker they got off the ship, the better. Rey motioned with his chin how she should go next, which would put him behind her. The back of her neck tensed but she nodded, kept her volter in a smooth grip as she padded down the metal gangway and stepped onto the dried and patchy tall grass.

"Clear," announced Dragana.

"So what's the plan anyway," Rey asked, passing her. He never looked at Liberty and kept his muzzle pointed outward. He'd done this sort of thing before. Good. Her family sometimes thought mental acumen could replace brawn in any situation. Uncle Johnnie knew better and had sent them a man who could use a gun.

"I have to get to a master feeder. No one will be able to cut the feed if we send the message from the source. Within seconds, half the planet will be able to listen to the message on direct feed and in a continuous loop. Vonatos should have a grand time trying to keep *that* under lid."

Rey nodded, still not taking his eyes off the darkened cluster of buildings to their left. Remnants of the base. "Which feeder then? Maybe I can help."

He'd definitely done this before. Aside from being an ace pilot, she wondered again what Rey did for a living. If he did anything else.

"We'll take care of that part later on," Liberty replied, adjusting her goggles. Man, she was having hot flashes or what? Something bugged her. She couldn't place it.

Hugged together as though they were cold, the buildings created a darker shade of black against the night. One of the observation turrets loomed to her right, its glass roof long gone. She'd met Solomon at the foot of it, more than a decade ago as he was giving an earful to some young recruit who'd kicked one of the dogs for not obeying him quickly enough. Solomon had kept the man dangling by the throat while he yelled at him. It'd taken several other guards to pry his hand off the recruit's throat. Solomon had a gift for interpersonal communication.

Liberty raised her chin, extended her keen hearing as far as she could while Dragana and Cupcake took position on either side, volters turned outward, eyes

narrowed and nostrils flared. They hadn't been gifted with the kind of hearing she had—part of being blind for so long—but they all shared the lycan sense of smell. She felt Rey tensing by her side.

“Hear something?” he whispered.

So he wasn't as good as he appeared to be. Didn't he know whispering could be heard much farther and clearer than keeping a low tone of voice? Fricatives and sibilants when whispered sliced the air like a blade through water, whereas a low tone of voice would keep one's timber even and difficult to detect from a distance.

She put her finger to her pursed lips.

Strangely, she heard the shot before she saw the blue-white glow.

A volter's muzzle flashed between buildings deep within the abandoned base. She even had time to gasp. What she didn't have time to do was warn her companions.

By her side, Rey jolted then collapsed to his knees.

Chapter Nine

“Fuck!” Dragana half snarled, half yelled.

Cupcake’s first instinct was to tackle Liberty to the ground and let everybody else fend for themselves. His muscles even twitched to do just that. But he quickly aborted the impulse and pushed the craziness under the surface. She didn’t need a testosterone-pumped, pigheaded, macho guy with a gun. She needed a testosterone-pumped *team member* who’d play his role and not stick his foot in the gears because he was deadly afraid to lose the single most precious thing in his life. Um. But he *was* her boyfriend. And he *had* a gun. So there.

Dragana must have been halfway through her first clip by the time he jumped sideways, hit the wall and returned fire. A gravelly male voice roared a string of the foulest curses possible. It came from above his head. Volter shots from their direction toward the enemy flashed as well. Cupcake looked up and spotted with each flash a head of impossibly red hair. Eva. So the cursing was Solomon’s. Cupcake grinned in spite of himself.

“Get inside!” Solomon yelled down at them.

By the corner of his eye, he spotted Liberty grabbing Rey’s inert form by the back of his collar and dragging him behind her as she returned fire and made her way to the steel door leading inside the tower. His heart swelled with pride. Now, *that* was a woman. A real one.

He joined Dragana a few feet in front as she knelt behind a decrepit staircase and with her typical deadly aim, breathed in and out slowly, pulling the trigger with each exhalation. She must have gone by volter flash because it was too dark to see anything. She still managed to cause some damage for Cupcake swore the returning fire was diminishing. He added his own to hers until Liberty was safely inside the doorjamb then pushed Dragana up and backward so she’d follow as well. Backpedaling, they joined Liberty inside the building, closed the door and barred it. Already the sound of someone thundering down the grille staircase made all three look up in time to see Solomon—the lithe and graceful and *stealthy* Eva on his heels—coming to meet them. He’d found another greatcoat similar to the one he’d owned and that gave him the look of a twentieth century Russian soldier. A collection of handheld volters and stun grenades were strapped to a thick utility belt. He jumped the last few steps and landed beside Liberty.

“Those motherfuckers outside must have been there since yesterday!” he snarled, shaking his dark blond head. “Eva and I landed here this morning and scoped the place for hours. Not a peep.”

Eva nodded at Liberty, tipped her head in Cupcake's direction and grinned — did they think he hadn't seen? The grin slid off her face when Dragana stared guns at the slender redhead. She still blamed her for her twin's death. It hadn't been Eva's fault, not really. Palmer had been someone's mole and there hadn't been anything Eva, the official spy, could've done about it. *Palmer* had wanted the data clip for himself or some other faction, *Palmer* had caused Ivan's death. But the guy was dead and Dragana must've thought blaming Eva was easier than cursing at some dead guy. Cupcake hoped she'd get over it soon. They needed their expert marksman with all her faculties intact. And truth be told, if it ever came to a physical confrontation, he suspected Eva would break Dragana's arm in three different places before the Valkyrie would even have time for a punch. He knew a lot about fighting and Eva was *dangerous*.

Her purple gaze settled on Rey and Cupcake swore he could hear the gears turning in that sharp brain of hers. She must have been wondering who he was and how to use him.

"So, how do we get out of here now?" Dragana asked with a smirk for Rey, who was slowly coming back to his senses.

Liberty helped him up, took a peek at his smoking shoulder and grinned. "Not too bad."

Rey put his hand against the concrete wall behind him and blew air through pursed lips. He said something in a language Cupcake didn't understand. He noticed the guy hadn't thanked Liberty for helping him up either and fought the urge to give the smallish man The Eye. Maybe even a Pec Twitch too.

"Who's Princess?" Solomon demanded, his eyes narrowed to slits as he clearly gauged Liberty's perfectly groomed connection.

Rey visibly bristled but said nothing as he adjusted his leather jacket and checked his shoulder. Under the humble emergency light bolted high on the wall, a patch of burnt skin glistened angry red through the tear. Luckily for him, it'd just been a scuff. If a nickel bead had hit him directly, it would've caused an electric arc that would've melted his shoulder, not just burn the skin. Cupcake cringed when he remembered how close Rey had stood to Liberty. She could've been the one to get nickel instead of the man.

"Where's your ship?" Liberty asked.

Solomon snapped his chin in a general direction, his gaze still on Rey. "Half a mile behind the old water tower. So who're you?"

"Uncle Johnnie sent him, Solomon," Liberty replied. "Rey helped us get off Antioch. Did you make copies?"

Cupcake's brain did a three-sixty to follow Liberty's quick thinking. *Ah, the data clip.*

"Yeah," their boss replied, fishing inside his utility belt and producing three data clips. "Here you go, kids, one each, don't fight over 'em."

Dragana, Liberty then he took the clips and pocketed them. Cupcake spotted Rey looking at the clip Liberty had just slipped in her back pocket. He wasn't sure what

bothered him. Was he pissed off because Rey must have been looking at her ass? Was he *jealous*?

Argh, no, this is just sad.

"If you give me a copy," Rey put in, "I could get you inside a feeder tonight."

"You look familiar—" Eva started, her voice quickly drowned by Solomon's.

"You're the *ride*, okay? The *donkey*," he snapped. "You get to drive us around and shut your trap. And if you're really nice and quiet, maybe I won't bust your pretty face."

Eva seemed to snap out of her inspection of Rey and cringed at her boyfriend's caustic remark. With a shake of her asymmetrically cut hair, she peeked out the door. "We'll need to move quickly before they set up a perimeter. Too bad we don't have something to hide behind."

A quick look at Solomon and Cupcake understood. He'd always loved the man's simple, no-bullshit and effective methods.

Gently, Cupcake moved the lithe redhead aside and after slipping his volter in the back of his pants, rolled his shoulders before widening his stance. "Ready?"

Dragana snorted a laugh. "I love it when Cupcake talks dirty."

Drawing on his lycan strength and the sheer brute force afforded by his size, Cupcake kicked the industrial-grade metal door right in the middle, near the hinge. It buckled then bent outward under the tremendous violence of his kick. A shiver spread inside the tower. Chips of paint and other debris fell from above. He barely had time to grab the lever to keep the door upright and use it as a shield. With nickel beads hitting the metal with little clicks, they shuffled out into the night single-file with Dragana bringing up the rear and using Peanut to rain death on anyone foolish enough not to take cover.

Then something strange happened.

Fire died out for a few seconds. Silence rang in the abandoned base. Voices rose in protest then screams were heard and for a few seconds afterward, twice as many volter flashes erupted all over—between buildings, over them, near the broken chain-link fence. Unsure where they should aim, Solomon had them running like mad in the opposite direction, back past the tower and on general path of Rey's ship. Cupcake let the door shield fall where it may and twisted his upper body so he could fire his volter at their pursuers. In the back of his mind, the notion that he'd be too far to help Liberty if she needed him gnawed at his focus.

"Wait!" a man yelled after them.

"Fucker must think we're dumb," Dragana snarled as she stopped, whirled and discharged a long volley of nickel.

Solomon stopped too and greeted their unseen pursuers with his characteristic two-volter salute.

After a few seconds silence, the same voice roared a couple of orders. To Cupcake's ears, he didn't sound military at all. More similar to street argot. He knew the kind. His hackles rose in alarm. Two factions! There was more going on here than a simple setup by GAN security forces. And to begin with, how had they known about this meeting? Surely no one had worked out Solomon's cryptic message. Julian sixty-nine would've made no sense to anyone.

"*Fuck! Wait!*" yelled the male voice. There was a slight trace of accent to it. Very similar to Rey's, Cupcake thought. The guy rolled his Rs like Nolan used to do.

With the chaos meter on "high", Cupcake dropped all pretense at following orders and charged to Liberty's side so he could provide cover. Before he could get close enough, he spotted Rey turning toward the front, toward *her*, and raising his volter.

What was he doing? The enemy was *behind* them, not in front. Stupid civilian didn't know where to aim?

Time slowed. Noise dimmed, voices became muffled. Despite the poor light afforded by the moon, he saw a new set of expressions on the man's face. Determination. Disgust. Deadly intent.

Liberty turned around and came face-to-volter with Rey. He held his arm at full extension, his muzzle barely an inch from the bridge of her nose. He extended his other hand, palm up. "The clip, freak."

Eva was the first to react. "Give it to him, Liberty. Quickly."

Then Cupcake reacted as well. The first signs of change rippled through him. His knuckles began to ache, so did his gums and jaw. A shiver shook him.

"Don't," Rey snarled as he pressed the gun right against Liberty's forehead. "I'll have time to make a nice hole in her head first. Just hand over the clip and be lucky you had friends waiting for mine."

"Friends?" Solomon snarled.

His wide chest rose and fell, and for a second, all Cupcake could think about was if Solomon changed, everything would turn to shit worse than it was now. No one could control Solomon when he changed. Not even himself.

Calm, Cupcake told himself. *She needs you with your brain on*. But there'd be hell to pay if he got his hand on the two-faced little shit.

Dragana seemed to share his sentiment as well as she fingered Peanut's gauge, occasionally glancing backward. The bad guys—or their friends, whoever they were—would catch up any second now that nickel had stopped raining.

"Liberty," Cupcake said with a calm he didn't feel. "Please, give him the clip."

Rey nodded. "Smarter than you look, big guy." He reached around Liberty's waist and roughly pulled the clip from her back pocket. "Too bad Palmer was such a bad choice for this mission. I should've known you can't trust a freak."

"Yeah, Reyes," the man who'd been yelling at them to stop said from the shadows. That same accent. "You should've known."

Everything happened at once.

Rey – Reyes – spun on his heels, volter leading. Liberty ducked out of the way. Cupcake charged. Dragana fired. Solomon cursed *and* fired.

By the time Cupcake got to Rey, he'd been shot twice – Cupcake had no idea by whom and didn't care – but he grabbed him anyway and hoisted him off the ground while simultaneously grinding the volter right *in* the man's hand, which broke in several places and felt like a bunch of sharp little twigs inside a leather pouch. The guy could keep the data clip he'd stolen from Liberty. It made no difference. He was dying anyway.

"Don't!" Liberty screamed.

Not a moment too soon for Cupcake had just cocked his elbow back and there was no way in hell an average human face would've kept normal consistency with the rock-hard fist about to crash into it. He kept his shaking fist poised though, adrenaline pumping and giving him a bad case of tunnel vision. He'd called Liberty a freak. A *freak!*

"Come on, you genetic deviant," Reyes snarled through bloodied lips. He coughed up blood on Cupcake's knuckles. "Finish it."

There was a long moment where nothing else mattered but what the guy had done – or tried to do – to Liberty. A gun to her beautiful face? Calling her names? A guy should die for a tenth of that shit. But she'd told him no. She was smart. She must have had her reasons. Finally, Cupcake lowered his fist and let Reyes' feet touch the ground.

"You were with Palmer?" Eva asked. Her face betrayed no emotion.

"Not with him, Serova. I *hired* him."

"You little shit," growled Dragana. "Palmer was *your* man?"

"That's because Reyes never takes a step unless he's sure to get dividends back." The mysterious man stepped closer to them, one monstrous volter that put even Peanut to shame gleaming in his hands.

Cupcake, for the first time in his life, didn't have to look down to stare a man in the eye. The guy must have been almost as thick around as him too, and wore a sleeveless fur vest showing muscular arms covered in claw marks.

Reyes only gurgled as he collapsed on the ground when Cupcake dropped him. But Dragana wouldn't let go of the subject and crouched by the man's side. Blood, dark and inky black, glistened on his jacket. She put her face right up to his. "Ivan died because of you," she growled. "Who do you work for?"

Reyes sneered, turned away.

"He works for his daddy," Scarred Man murmured. "Don't you, Reyes? Always for Daddy."

Dragana shook the bleeding man. His eyes rolled in the back of his head and he lay on his side, unmoving. "Who are you? Who the fuck are you?"

Behind her, the scarred man came closer. Strangely, he looked sad as he watched Reyes take his last breath.

"What fucked-up shit is this?" Solomon demanded. He pointed both volters at the new man. "You take another step and I'm gonna redo your portrait."

"I doubt that."

The sound of several volters' safety switches being flicked off and on—the accepted way of giving a person one last chance—erupted from the shadows. "Unless you prefer to deal with the GAN battle drones coming your way, you're going to follow us."

"Fuck if we are," Solomon growled through his teeth.

To everyone's surprise, Liberty nodded and took a step toward the scarred man, causing a painful twitch of alarm to squeeze Cupcake's chest. "You're a *lycan*," she said more than asked.

To put more credence to the man's warning, a loud screeching sound announced the battle drones' arrival. The "flying tanks" as they were known, resembled their monikers, only a hovering, nastier version on two supercharged boosters that added maneuverability to their long list of deadly capabilities.

"Hurry," Scarred Man threw over his shoulder as he turned his back on Liberty without answering her comment.

Cupcake sighed in relief and quickly joined her. After a quick squeeze on her shoulder—she turned and winked at him, bless her—they had no choice but to follow their new "friends", Solomon muttering the entire time.

* * * * *

It broke her heart how people could be forced to live this way. Like rats.

Rejects, genetic deviants, the undesirables. People like Cupcake and her. She'd been born blind. The implant she carried in her head was illegal, not because it hadn't been tested by GAN but under the Genetic Purity Law, no one was allowed to alter their biology or even their physiognomy. A fallout of a century of genetic tweaking, parents tinkering with their unborn children's traits, corporations performing tests, had created "deviants" left and right, half human, half something else, and had forced the government to take drastic action. As with every other drastic action, GAN had overreacted and tipped the scales to the opposite side. People like her, whose only crime was to have been born blind—and a lycan to top it off—weren't considered human under the law. Not allowed to vote, procreate, attend private schools, hold high-paying jobs.

As they followed their "friends"—clearly members of some organized resistance movement—she couldn't help the shudder of anger at such inequity. Little kids lived here underground. Kids, dammit! Huddled around a teenager who stopped giving her lecture as their strange group marched past.

The tall, scarred man led them deep underground and Liberty recognized old subway systems probably dating back to the twenty-third century. Misery bore down on her all at once. She walked closer to Cupcake for the sheer comfort his tall frame provided and when he clasped her hand in his—Solomon tripped on his feet when he turned and saw them holding hands—she returned the squeeze wholeheartedly. She needed his strength right now, his calm strength. As soon as she could, she'd bury her face in his chest and cling to him with all the energy she had.

They walked where the tracks had been, each platform holding a different role, until they came to a wide transfer station where several tunnels led in and out of the cavernous, dome-shaped room.

"Okay, mom," Solomon snapped, coming to a halt and slipping his thumbs in his utility belt. The familiar gesture warmed Liberty's heart. She'd missed her old, irascible friend. "I think that's far enough. Care to tell me who the fuck you are?"

When the scarred man turned to face Solomon, Liberty couldn't help a small gasp of recognition. She'd seen this face before, a narrower, more elegant version of it.

Reyes' face! But this man was older, taller, larger—*much* larger—and meaner-looking.

He nodded in her direction, probably acknowledging her realization. "I'm Cristoval, the oldest of the Vonatos sons," he said in a rich baritone that raised the hair on her arms. "And now the only one."

"Vonatos?" Eva breathed, cocking her head then nodding to herself. "That's why I thought Reyes looked familiar. Chancellor Vonatos...his—*your*—father?"

Cristoval sniggered. Despite the rage seething behind the black eyes, Liberty could tell he was hurting. "Only Reyes could ever call him that. For me he was 'sir'." Turning to Solomon, he crossed his muscular, scarred arms. "We got there in time. You didn't choose your day to come back."

"Any day is a good day to pump some nickel into GAN assholes. Starting with a Vonatos. Your dad killed N'Namdi so he could take the job."

"So it's true then. All I knew for certain was Reyes had sent a man on your team to get some clip back and make sure you stayed behind. Preferably dead."

"So you were tight enough with him to know that, did you?" Dragana put in, a hand going for Peanut. Several of Cristoval's colleagues shifted foot to foot, clearly unwilling to engage the seething Valkyrie.

"We weren't *that* close. You think I'd live here otherwise? Like a rat?" His Rs rolled on his tongue. He could've been a Greek statue to some god of war. Liberty thought he looked positively scary. And tormented. Not a good combination. "But Reyes enjoyed rubbing certain things in my face. Plus, we have ears inside the Iron Conclave."

"What?" Eva asked, obviously astounded. "Who?"

Liberty cleared her throat. "You said we hadn't chosen our day to come back. Why? What's going on?"

He cocked his head, shook it. "Yeah, you've been off-planet for a while. They've started conducting raids. Summary executions, martial law, the right to use any means to get intel. But more importantly, a rally is scheduled tomorrow in several major cities. People aren't taking this sitting down." He smiled darkly. "Not when it hits them so close to home."

Solomon snorted. "Riots? What good are those? Little old ladies coming out in droves, armed with frilly umbrellas."

Cristoval narrowed his eyes. "It's when little old ladies with frilly umbrellas take to the streets you know your cause is good. I'll take all the support I can get."

"So you're the resistance leader then?" Eva asked. "It's you the Iron Conclave has been after for years. A Vonatos. *Govno*."

"Yeah, and they almost got me tonight because of you."

"Riots," Liberty murmured, raising her chin slightly.

By her side, Solomon crossed his arms. "It's The Pondering Look, folks, so shut the fuck up and let her think."

The magnitude of Cristoval's words hit her. It'd be a perfect day to breach the feeder and upload the message. People would already be massed in the streets. With the number of advertisement billboards and giant screens on every other building tuned directly to the news—which took their signal from the source feeders—Vonatos' deed would immediately travel the globe. It'd be perfect. All they had to do was get to a feeder. Worse than breaching a bank. Ha.

"Solomon, we have to try to get at a feeder," she said, breathless. "The one in the old quarter would be perfect. Nice and close. I could get us inside."

"You want to upload whatever's on the clip to the source feeder?" Cristoval asked. He shook his head. "You won't be able to. They've set up perimeters around any and all public buildings."

"If Liberty says she can get us inside, she can get us inside." Cupcake's remark fell like a ton of brick.

Solomon rocked back and forth from heels to toes. "Don't worry about us getting inside. What we need is to get *there*."

Cristoval's smile was closer to a grimace and Liberty had the distinct impression the man never truly smiled.

"If your lady friend can upload the clip, then I can get you there. But it's going to cost you."

Solomon was already cursing when Liberty raised her hand. "How much?"

A look of pain and rage flashed in Cristoval's obsidian eyes. "I wasn't talking money. I meant *lives*."

Chapter Ten

When Cupcake removed the bulletproof vest, a whiff of soap floated to Liberty. He still smelled of the shower he'd taken earlier. The man always smelled so nice.

"That's serious business, about tomorrow, I mean." He sat on one of the two narrow bunks and cradled his chin in a palm to remove his boots. Such nice toes.

They'd been given a "room" for the night. In Cristoval's underground city, a transient room was half of a subway wagon, complete with sleeping berths and cabins. They'd been lucky to get a private cabin with two single bunks that folded down from the walls. Dragana had been forced to take one of the berths along the corridor in the next wagon—complaining hard and long—while Solomon and Eva had been given a place somewhere farther into one of the tunnels.

With some privacy, Liberty could finally stop pretending to be the cool Miss Techno Geek and shed the mask. She knelt in front of Cupcake's feet and rested her forehead on his knees.

"What's wrong?" he asked, his voice so gentle for a man his size. "Your head hurts?"

She nodded, closed her eyes.

"Do you still have painkillers?"

"They don't work."

Liberty's head felt as though it'd split clean down the middle and let her brain ooze right out. Her eyeballs burned, her lids were red and even the blue-tinted goggles couldn't hide her bloodshot eyes. Solomon hadn't commented but he'd looked as if he wanted to.

"We don't have the tiger thing but I still can rub your temples," Cupcake offered. His big hands framed her head, the tips of his fingers gently rubbing circles in her scalp.

"Mmm. That's good."

"You know what else would be good?"

Liberty looked up and caught the big grin on him. "Yeeesss?"

He chuckled. "Yeah, that too. But you're in pain so that's not fair. I was thinking about a nice back rub."

The thought alone gave her a frisson. "Oh it'd be sooo good."

"Here," he said with a pat to the mattress.

She took her goggles, boots and clothes off, placed them neatly on the next bunk and lay on her front. Cupcake's eyes followed her every move even if he didn't try to grab or even touch her. And by the swell in his pants, she knew he was dying to.

"Relax," he murmured, his hand taking almost the entire width of her waist.

She couldn't help the long sigh when he applied a bit of pressure to her lower back, rubbed upward along her spine then fanned his hands on either side of her shoulder blades for a deep massage. He obviously knew about muscles and how they worked for he managed to loosen hers quite admirably.

"Tell me," she began, sighed. "What's your real name? Apart from Richard."

"Moriarty. Richard Moriarty."

"Sounds nice. Why do I call you Cupcake then? Richard suits you."

"Richard is long gone. So is Rickie."

She wanted to know more, so much more but would wait. One didn't push Cupcake. For now, Liberty relished the fact Cupcake was here at all, rubbing the knots out of her. Damn, he was good. Yet a small sound kept intruding in her bliss.

Without turning around so he wouldn't see her smiling, she asked, "Are you grinding your teeth?"

"No." The word floated up in the end. A question.

"I think you are."

He sighed.

"What?" She rolled onto her back, kept a hand on his thick thigh. "What's going on?"

"Tomorrow," he replied, clamped his mouth shut, shook his head. "I don't want you to go."

"Excuse me?"

Icy blue eyes flared. "I didn't mean it that way, Liberty. It'd be dumb and wrong."

"I hope not. I'm a lycan too, and just as good a fighter as anyone on the team."

"You're the *best* on the team. You have brains. But I'm worried anyway. What if..."

She caressed his thigh from hip to knee. The black ribbed polymer did wonders to her libido. Although Cupcake could wear pink latex and to her still be the sexiest man on the planet. "What if...?"

Moisture gathered in the corners of his eyes. He set his gaze on her. And at that instant, Liberty felt the thread connecting them, felt how this giant of a man needed her, needed *them*, and how she in turn, felt the same. Her feelings for Cupcake, Rickie, whatever he chose to call himself, intensified, deepened. How she loved him.

"What if tonight is all we have left?" she offered in his stead.

He nodded.

She could've said something funny to lighten the mood. And it would've worked. He would've smiled. Liberty knew he'd smile for her through anything, even the sort of pain she saw in his pale eyes. So she didn't try to make him smile. To cheapen this moment into something they ought to fan away like a bad smell felt wrong.

"Tomorrow." He cleared his throat. "You could be dead."

"Tomorrow could be the end of our brothers and sisters—deviants—the start of a civil war. It could also be the birth of a new way for all of us. Doesn't that count?"

"No. *You* count. The rest will take care of itself with or without us."

"You want to quit and run away so we're safe?"

"So you're safe. Yes."

Liberty couldn't help a small smile. "If I weren't there, would you follow Solomon and Eva?"

He nodded. Still he hadn't looked away. Only blinked occasionally. In her pixelated feedback, a tear shaped into a tiny square spilled from the corner of his eye and traced a shiny path down the side of his broken nose to gather along the seal of his lips. He licked it away. "Sometimes I pray I'll die first so I won't see you go down."

Her own eyes welled. "But then I'd be alone. I don't want that."

"*Why* do you want to be with *me*?" he asked, looking as apologetic as he did sad. "You could have any guy you want."

Goodness, that again?

"Cupcake, no other 'guy' would make me happy the way you do. I can be myself with you. You respect my work, my skills. Me. Not many 'guys' would get what I am and do. I'm a *lycan*, Cupcake. When I get angry, I turn into a beast with fangs and claws and a bad hairdo. I hang around people who go to the firing range on Sunday afternoons and eat greasy food afterward. My girlfriend has a gun she calls *Peanut*!" Liberty smiled when Cupcake's mouth quivered. "But even if I didn't have any of that and weren't what I am, I'd never find another Cupcake. You're strong and you're honest and you're fun in your own quiet way, and those pants make me want to just chew them off."

Cupcake's hand was gentle when he cupped her chin. "I'm not good with words the way you are." He leaned over and brushed her lips with his. She tasted the salty tear. "But I can tell you this—I love you, and every day I'll find a new way to show it. Starting now."

They began slow and leisurely with Cupcake caressing her belly and breasts, kissing and licking her. But with each passing moment, she couldn't help but feel as though he were right. Tomorrow may well be all they'd ever have. Right now could be their last time alone together. A frenzy took her. She had to taste him, fill the void the mere thought of not having him by her side had created.

With a whimper, she crushed him to her, wrapped her arms and legs around him, dug her nails and teeth into his skin. He must have shared her despair—he'd told her he was afraid of losing her—for Cupcake returned her attention with just as much vigor.

His mouth landed on hers in a hurried, bruising kiss that tasted of tears and blood. Fingers shaking, he raided her body. She'd never been one for the missionary position,

but when Cupcake rolled on top of her, pants still partly on, she opened wide for him and tilted her hips so he'd take her right then and there. And he did.

She gasped when his initial thrust lifted her off the bunk. He drove in with a snarl muffled by his mouth still crushed against her shoulder, her hair spilling all over his face. He took her hard. Deep. Without gentleness or pause. And she received with likewise anguish. She cried his name. What if he died tomorrow? What if she didn't?

"Make me yours," she snarled against his cheek as he shoved himself in. Each violent thrust causing a thud and a creak underneath the narrow bunk. "Take me. Make it yours."

"Liberty," he panted, over and over.

Her legs twitched because she kept them clutched around his waist with everything she had. She felt his every shove, each of his retreats. She met them with whimpers and urgings and snarled words that made no sense. Unlike her usual tender lover, Cupcake pulled out, flipped her onto her stomach then sank back in before she'd positioned herself. A cry left her. She saw stars. Fire spread in circles from her distended sex.

"Everything. Take it all. Take it!"

Her panting filled the tiny cabin. *Ah. Ah. Ah. Ah.* His balls hit with every drive. With a growl, she pushed against the wall, must have made him lose his balance for he stumbled back, popped out of her before landing on his ass on the next bunk. She pounced. While she dug her nails into his scalp and forced his face to her sex, Cupcake encircled her waist, snaked a hand down low and found her drenched cleft, which he was quick to invade with frenetic fingers. He stabbed into her anus, pulled out to gather more juices, went back in. Liberty "*ahhed*" loudly and pumped herself against his mouth when he finally concentrated on eating her out. Teeth and lips and tongue, she got it all. With ever-increasing force and tempo, she undulated against his face. After a few seconds, even this deep claiming wasn't enough and she wrapped a leg over his shoulder, cramped her thigh and really mashed her pussy to his mouth.

"Mmm," he growled deep in his chest.

Before Liberty could change positions again, Cupcake gripped her wrists, gathered them in one of his large hands and pushed her back against the opposite wall. His teeth dug into her flesh. She cried his name. In the back of her mind, she knew everyone must have heard them. She didn't care. Time was precious.

Cupcake ate her hard and he ate her deep. Fingers soon joined his tongue for one hurried, disorderly penetration. She felt her sex being pulled and prodded and bitten. Her clit rubbed and sucked and rolled. Juices spilled from her. She was so wet. So desperately wet.

"Fuck me," she pushed through her teeth. "Fuck it. Come on."

Cupcake shook his face as a predator would after chomping down on a prey. A long whimper of bliss and shock left her. She bumped her head back. Still Cupcake kept her pinned to the wall, her leg trapped over his shoulder while he finger-fucked, tongue-fucked, even chin-fucked her. His perpetual five o'clock shadow rubbed and

chafed her tender flesh but she didn't give a shit. When he abandoned her pussy and stood, Liberty wanted to cry.

"Turn around," he growled low. She'd never heard him speak to her this way.

She did, rolled against the wall, almost in a drugged state. His hands both determined yet cautious, he spread her butt cheeks, plastered himself against her and while he stretched her with fingers drenched with her own cum, Cupcake licked her nape and lobe.

She felt him tilt his hips back and waited for the explosive fuck he seemed to have in mind for her. She was wrong neither in her expectations nor in her hopes for the scorching thrill it'd spark. Cupcake stabbed in.

"Ahhh!"

She wasn't sure which one of them cried out the loudest only how both their voices mixed. They rose and fell together. Tears of excitement, of grief at their desperate situation, of pure joy at being with him at all, filled her eyes.

That's it, my love, take me. I'm all yours. Always was.

Cupcake couldn't help himself. He'd never meant to touch her this way. Christ, he was pounding himself into Liberty with every shred of muscle he could muster. His back and thighs burned, so did his shoulders. But she wanted him to, didn't she? She bucked back against him with every thrust. His jaws about fused together, he rammed himself in violently. His hands shaking, he pinned her shoulders against the wall, plastered himself against her back and pushed. Pushed. Into her welcoming flesh. Into her. Deeper. His love.

She fisted him with her vagina. He couldn't believe how strong she was! He wasn't small by any standards and feared for a second he was too big for her or at least too thick. But she took him all in. She unfurled around him. She welcomed him. He was home.

And when she began to urge him to fuck her—*fuck* her—all the years of caution he'd shown to her, the prudence, the tiptoeing around, it was all gone. He gave her his all. Every inch and every ounce and every thought. He fucked Liberty Silke. Something he never thought he'd allow. And she fucked him in return, wrung him to the last shred of his being.

So when she pushed him back with her foot, Cupcake went stumbling backward, knocked his foot against the bunk and collapsed on it. It broke with a clunk and spilled him down to the floor where Liberty was quick to follow.

Cupcake had barely landed before she speared herself to him, facing his feet, working her delicious butt up and down. By the tight fit, Cupcake realized she'd taken him in the ass. A protest floated to his numb brain but he pushed it down. As if moved by some unseen force, his hands grabbed her hips, squeezed hard—painfully hard, he knew—and followed her furious cadence.

She growled stuff he couldn't understand. Didn't care either. All he wanted was to be with her in every manner possible. She was so wet, her juices transferred from one orifice to the other, rendered the penetration even more excruciatingly stimulating. Oh Christ, he was close to coming.

Then she pulled away and turned around. Cupcake didn't know what she'd planned but he just couldn't resist the sight of her glistening pussy stretched over his belly. He grabbed her by the waist and forced her upward until she sat on his face. There, he gave her his most enthusiastic attention yet. He knew why she was so frantic all of a sudden. She was afraid. So was he. Losing her would make him utterly, irrevocably mad.

While she rolled her hips, he used his thumbs to stretch her wide and sucked at her vulva, lipped and bit her folds. More juices rewarded him. He smeared her cleft front to back. A gasp left him when he felt her arch back. She fisted his cock and pumped him a couple of times.

"I'm gonna come if you keep this up," he growled.

Liberty crushed her cunt to his mouth. Was she trying to shut him up? "Then come."

She didn't look as if she meant to stop anytime soon. Her fist came up and down, up and down. Fire tingled in his balls. He spread his thighs, worked his own hips. *Man.*

After a forceful series of piston-like drives, he felt as if his dick would explode. His semen jetted out of him so hard and so damn vigorously he swore it'd hit the ceiling. A long "ah" deflated him. His heels dug in the floor.

Burning hot, his cum linked her hand to him and vice versa. Still she kept pumping until he had to reach down and still her hand with his.

"You're going to tear it off," he murmured against the inside of her thigh.

Her belly quivered. And Cupcake thought she was laughing but realized he'd been sorely mistaken when she scooted down and sat by his side. Tears streamed down her face. His heart skipped at least two beats. Probably more.

"Oh man," he whispered, snapping to his knees and wrapping her shoulder and head in his arms. "I've hurt you. Damn, Liberty. I'm so sorry."

He felt her shake her head against his chest. "No, you didn't. I'm just..." She sniffled then cleared her throat. "I'm scared."

Cupcake let out a sigh of relief. He'd been mortified he'd hurt her. "I'm scared too. But we'll be okay. We'll be together."

She nodded. He kissed the top of her head. And when she looked up into his face, when their gazes met, his whole world narrowed to a thin sliver occupied solely by her face. "I love you, Cupcake. I always have. I always will."

He smiled even if he wanted to cry like a big baby. "And that makes me the luckiest bastard in the galaxy."

Later that night, they made love again, then again still, but Liberty didn't ask him to "fuck" her. She told him to *make love* to her, which he did with a smile on his face, his head in the clouds and the whole while trying to ignore the wave of darkness threatening to swallow them up. He refused to acknowledge the fear, the threat. There'd be plenty of time for that tomorrow. And if the next day was all they'd ever have, then so be it. He had right now. And with Liberty Silke, right now was an eternity to him.

Chapter Eleven

The few hours of sleep hadn't dulled the monstrous headache corkscrewing into her brain and Liberty found she had to make a conscious effort not to cringe all the time. She wasn't overly worried for her first implant had caused discomfort as well. Still, it hurt. And Cupcake's worried face hurt even more.

They'd spent a few hours with Cristoval and his "team"—civilians, sadly well-versed in the art of combat and killing—getting ready and choosing their gear. Dragana had done her usual routine of commenting on each piece of equipment and argued with another for the right to use the lone grenade launcher. After she'd shared her firing marks, the guy had relinquished it to her. No one could place a shot the way Dragana could.

Their little ragtag army of freedom fighters presently stood on the surface in an alley that smelled like the back of a Chinese restaurant—a mix of old cabbage and fish. Not even a hundred of them in all, counting Solomon's team. But their side had an advantage GAN paid security forces didn't. They fought for the right to *live*. The rest, families and those unable to fight, hundreds by her quick guesstimate, would go to the rally and wait there. If all went well, the giant ad boards would relay to the crowd what Vonatos had done. There was sure to be trouble but by then, even those outside the resistance movement would demand answers. Vonatos wouldn't be able to quash *that*. His regime was still too new.

Far away, barely discernible except maybe to Liberty and a handful of others with as keen a sense of hearing as hers, the surf-like sound of a large crowd rumbled in the distance. The rallies had already begun despite the interdiction plastered on every advertisement and billboard flashing the red logo forbidding gatherings of more than ten persons. GAN was making a last-ditch effort to dissuade people from attending before the news would take over the publicity billboards as per freedom of press laws. Liberty suspected Vonatos would go after those legislations pretty soon and commandeer every major media on the planet. Her family included.

Flanked on either side by Solomon and Dragana, Cristoval looked right at home, if much less jubilant than the Valkyrie. As agreed, Eva, Cupcake, a handful of Cristoval's fighters and Liberty would follow at a safe distance until the rest had breached the mammoth building. Then once inside, Eva and she would upload the message into the feeder and send it out to the masses. That is, if everything went right. Liberty was starting to seriously doubt that possibility. But the alternative, not trying and dodging GAN the rest of their lives, would prove even more dangerous.

Solomon slipped his thumbs in his twentieth-century Russian army utility belt. He really resembled a soldier from that era. "You take us nice and close to the building," he

said to Cristoval then turning to Dragana he added, “then we’ll play a game of ‘knock-knock, who’s there? It’s the Asskicker Express, you shiteaters’ with our favorite chancellor’s battle drones.”

Cristoval shook his head. “Babel Media is a public building. He wouldn’t send battle drones against the general population. The news would lap that up and make him look bad. And to him, it’s all about appearances.”

Solomon barked a quick laugh. “Your old man no longer cares about looking bad. He’s desperate to get his hands on this.” He patted one of the little square pouches on his belt. “And there’s nothing he won’t do. Even send battle drones against little old ladies—”

“Armed with frilly umbrellas?” Cristoval put in, showing his sense of humor was just as caustic as Solomon’s.

Liberty smiled when her old friend scowled and opened his mouth to say something. Then he nodded, eyes narrowed. “Well sent. Now let’s kick these fuckers in the teeth so I can go back home and get a hamburger and a beer.”

Eva smiled wide. “Is that all you want to do once you get back home?”

The couple shared a carnal-charged look, which made Dragana roll her eyes and mutter as she checked Peanut’s gauge and slung the grenade launcher from her shoulder.

“Not many people around huh?” Dragana commented through her teeth. “Soldiers, ‘bots. Not a one.”

“Maybe they’re all at the rally,” someone said behind her. A low murmur of disbelief floated along the ranks.

“They’re expecting trouble is all,” Solomon replied. “Let’s not keep them waiting.”

The building that housed the communications feeder—a building that her family as one of the largest media conglomerates once owned—towered over the old southern gate, the Sungnyemun, and overshadowed everything else for several blocks with its concrete and glass asymmetrical spires. Because the rally was taking place farther south in the Reunification Square by the Han river, Solomon’s and Cristoval’s plan was to get close enough to let Liberty’s team walk right through the Sungnyemun while they kept the guards “occupied”. No sneaking in and backdoor approach for Solomon.

Despite the deserted streets and the looming feeling of an ambush clear in everyone’s mind, things started out well. They journeyed without trouble for a half mile or so. Liberty shared a hopeful look with Cupcake, who pretended the best he could, even managed a tight smile for her. But then Cristoval’s prediction about how public buildings would be guarded and how their endeavor would “cost them” materialized.

As they rounded a corner, the last before the old southern gate and its grassy terrace, one of the scouts stood in place, raised her hand to signal the rest could go but shuddered and collapsed.

All at once things turned ugly and chaotic.

From the rooftops nickel beads started raining, creating harmless scuffs when they hit concrete or brick but causing vicious damage whenever they pierced something conductive. For example human bodies. The static-charged beads triggered electric arcs that shredded flesh and burned right through the bones. Yelps and screams filled the alley. Cristoval barked orders so loud Liberty swore his already hoarse voice wouldn't take the strain. They took shelter the best they could – under eavestroughs, balconies, a few even kicking open doors and swarming inside buildings.

"Run!" Solomon roared.

Even if he lacked Cristoval's sheer magnitude, his voice carried much farther and shocked everyone into a mad rush across the street. Dragana stopped often, turning and delivering economical, well-placed shots that made GAN security forces drop like flies. Resistance fighters would stop and take the weapons and gear they could use. It was ugly. Liberty focused ahead and let Dragana and those less squeamish deal with the tail end of their advance.

While Eva and she sneaked forward, sheltered behind a veritable wall of muscle and volters, GAN forces could be seen rushing out in the open only long enough to take position between the ancient stone gate, probably suspecting what they intended to do. Even if her family didn't want to be overtly involved in her affairs – or any affairs for that matter – she wished she would've called on them anyway to see what they could do. But it was up to her now. Her and those she called friends.

Little by little, they made deadly and messy progress, managed to crawl up the grassy terrace, dodging enemy fire and returning it tenfold. By the corner of her eye, she spotted Solomon leaning over Eva and giving the slender redhead a deep kiss before turning around and aiming both his volters back down the way they'd come. He fired at will. His only method.

"Get ready," Eva said as she dashed past, all agility and nimbleness.

With a volter tucked back along her thigh, she slinked through the arch. A brilliant blue-white flash indicated someone had fired. Then a shock of red hair poked back out of the shadowy archway.

"Clear."

Cupcake providing ample cover, Cristoval's fighters and she charged through the ancient stone gate, emerged right at the foot of the building they wished to enter – nowadays called Babel Media in steel letters riveted to a black marble slab. A sudden stab of sunlight between two of the glass spires reduced her vision to a collection of tiny blue and purple coronas. Cringing, she ran on, followed Eva and Cupcake, his V-shaped back clad in only a bulletproof vest. Throbbing pulsed behind her eyeballs. But she forced herself to move through the ache.

Follow Cupcake. Don't let him out of your sight.

They reached the glass doors, which Cupcake disintegrated with a well-aimed shot a few paces ahead, took the frame right off its hinges when he shouldered through it and fired at the elevator panel so no one would sneak up to them through this means.

People came rushing out of the staircases, haggard, afraid, screaming. A din of voices, yelling, cursing. Cristoval's fighters urging everyone out.

"Control room," Liberty said through the clamor after a quick scan at the black and white visitor information display. Great contrast. Her implant picked up every nuance. "Fourth floor. Room B. Quickly."

Eva leading through the throngs of wide-eyed people rushing down the steps, they sprinted up toward the control room on the fourth floor. They kept to the right while those going down claimed the left and its handrail. A strangely organized panic. A stoical-but-intent takeover.

Below the ruckus of feet and subdued voices, a sound similar to nails on a blackboard perked her ears.

Goodness, no.

Liberty froze on the step, one hand on the rail, the other holding a volter. Sweat stung her eyes, fogged her goggles. But the faint sound made her forget everything else. A high-pitch screech. And it was intensifying.

"Shit!" someone said behind her. Others could probably hear it now. The people fleeing the building must not have known for their expressions didn't change.

Shit indeed.

"Battle drones!" she yelled.

A loud boom drowned everything else. The building shook. Sunlight spilled inside the staircase a few levels down. Glass and concrete rained on them. Smoke floated up.

"Oh my God!" a woman in a shiny black suit yelled then screamed incoherently when a volley of nickel ripped into her and those around her.

"Go! Go!" Cupcake roared as he planted his hand in the middle of Liberty's back and shoved her up a couple of steps as if she weighed nothing.

Only a handful now with the rest stuck on the other side of the gaping hole in the exterior wall, they reached the fourth floor, barreled through the emergency door, ripped the hydraulic closing system right out of the concrete wall and spilled onto a carpeted hallway. Another boom—the drones were firing into the building with little regard to, well, anything—chased them down farther into the corridor.

"There!" Liberty said, pointing at the control room, all glass enclosed and spilling its workers out through a single door. People fought to reach it first.

Cupcake took a run, leaped with one foot extended in front of him and made another "door" for them. With a violent crash and a fissure shaped into a spiderweb, the pane of clear thermoplastic crumbled into tiny diamonds. After a second of shocked silence, people in suits and nice shoes spilled out of that door as well.

Liberty slipped the data clip out of her back pocket, which one of Cristoval's men had retrieved from Reyes' dead fingers, and ran to the set of consoles on a raised dais. Eva sat and clicked at the keyboard with furious skill. In seconds they had the systems screen.

"Put it in."

After sitting at the next station, Liberty slipped the clip into the tiny groove. She turned back to look at Cupcake and smiled.

As if she'd been watching a movie where someone had hit the slow-motion button, she saw Cupcake, looking mighty fine in his black pants and volter sweeping the area. His budding grin turned downward. He spun on his heels. To his right, beyond the thermoplastic enclosure, a swell appeared in the concrete wall. Like a bubble. Only it was the size of a small shuttle. Plaster and paint flaked off. Carpet—so blue in her synthetic vision—ripped when the floor buckled. Sunlight stabbed into the corridor and silhouetted the muscular Cupcake, his V-shaped back, thick neck, his legs slightly widened and bent at the knees. The split second dragged for an eternity. Then everything fast-forwarded. Dizzying light. The roar of blood in her ears.

Glass panes and cinderblocks fell away to reveal the front end of a battle drone, cannon still smoking. Pointing at them. Pointing at *him*. Yet Cupcake stood there, between a one-eyed death and her, immobile, armed with a hand volter and his love.

She hated them just then. *Hated* them.

Blinding light made her gag. Eva screamed. The screech of the battle drone blanketed every other stimulus.

We were so close.

Heat from the battle drone buffeted Cupcake, pushed him back a step. Through squinted eyes, he saw how its thrusters created wavy lines of heat underneath its armored hull, how it distorted the outside peeking in around the gaping hole in the wall. The thing turned its blind face toward him. A cannon the thickness of his arm pointed at him and through him at Liberty. As Dragana said, they were fucked.

It was about to fire. He knew it was. So in a desperate attempt to save Liberty, he charged at it, volter blazing, leaped both feet together and ran over its pointed nose as one would run up the front of an incoming car. Maybe if he got to its soft—softer than the rest anyway—guidance unit, he could put some nickel into it and make the drone go away.

Two things happened almost simultaneously. A woman yelled something. It wasn't Liberty as it came from outside. He thought. Dragana?

Then an explosion ripped at Cupcake's skin like tiny claws—yet it hadn't come from the flying tank—and caused it to shudder and tilt sharply to the right. Someone outside had taken a shot at it! This high on the fourth floor?! A split second later, with its cannon pointing high toward the ceiling, the now smoking drone fired.

He never had time to look back. But she was dead. No one could survive a direct hit from such caliber. They'd killed her. Killed his Liberty.

Nothing holding me back now, is there? Nope.

Cupcake dropped to his knees on top of the drone, wedged his booted foot under a ledge and aimed his volter at the small turret protruding from the top. The damaged craft slipped below the ledge and back outside. Bricks and dust fell on Cupcake. But he didn't care. He gritted his teeth and squeezed the trigger. Smoke billowed from the damaged drone as it twirled like a mad top. A blur of sky-building-sky-building flashed in Cupcake's teary eyes. Wind whipped at him. Screeching, smoking, dropping, the drone was taking him down with it on its way toward the ground, which spun crazily. He wasn't free-falling but pretty damned close. Voices yelled warnings.

He couldn't die now. The thing was remote-controlled. Someone had pressed the button and fired at Liberty. It was that someone Cupcake wanted.

At the last possible second, he opened his eyes. Funny how in times like these one could notice a slew of details. Solomon barking orders, his eyes riveted to the plummeting drone. Dragana, still holding the smoking grenade launcher, appeared ready to fire again and kept waving him away. He could almost hear the Serbian accent. *"Get the fook away, you great loog!"*

Then real-time hit. Cupcake watched the ground flying up at him and using the last shred of muscle fiber in his legs, he leaped from the drone's top, flew a good fifteen feet in the air. Below and to his right, the drone went belly-up and crashed in a shower of sparks, smoke and twisted bits of metal. The sound was horrible. Like a dying beast. The resulting explosion seared a big bright spot in his eyesight.

He landed into a roll to absorb the violent impact. Somewhere in his legs, a bone snapped. The crunch made him snarl. Glass shards dug into his shoulders when he rolled completely over, landed kneeling precariously, volter aimed at the drone's blackened carcass.

"Holy fuck, Cupcake!" Solomon roared as he rushed to him. "Are you fucking mad?"

Others were coming up behind him, Dragana among them, a nasty gash running down her chest. She had the grenade launcher tucked under her arm as she limped to him. The loud screech of other battle drones drowned what she said. It didn't look friendly.

"It fired at the control room," Cupcake said, standing. His ankle burned as if he stood in molten metal. He felt strangely calm inside. He'd lost everything all at once. His past, present and future. Nothing else mattered. "They were inside and it fired right at them."

Solomon only stared at him. For three, four long seconds, Solomon and Cupcake shared their loss through their eyes, the grief there. A link. A single pain. A single fury. "The square," Solomon said at length. "Vonatos."

Cupcake agreed with a nod. He'd never wanted to hurt anyone. It'd always been all business for him. But now was different. He *wanted* to hurt Vonatos more than anything. *He* was behind it all. *He'd* pushed the button.

When Solomon began to shake, Cupcake put a hand over his friend's shoulder to force him to look at him in the eye. "Don't change now, Solomon. Wait until we're there. *Then* we'll change. *Then* we'll rip him apart. You and me."

Roaring orders, Cristoval rushed to them. "More drones! We have to get to the square and storm the building. It's our only chance now."

"A coup?" Dragana asked with a grimace.

Cristoval nodded. "He's hurt enough people. It's time someone dealt with him."

Cupcake didn't know how Solomon managed to abort the change. His friend had changed forms only twice before, and no one, not even Solomon himself had been able to control him. The carnage had been massive. But he must have understood Cupcake's motivations, and perhaps this, his thirst for vengeance for losing his beloved Eva, had forced him to fight the beast from taking over. But good fortune help Vonatos when Solomon would finally lose his self-control and allow the lycan form to take over.

Cupcake felt strangely light. He hadn't a care in the world. He could've stepped right into GAN HQ—hell, they were about to storm the parliament, just as good—and not break a sweat.

They met more and more people on their way. The screech of the battle drones, after diminishing for a few minutes, pierced the air. They started running. His busted ankle made his run clunky and awkward but the pain didn't slow him down.

The people they met on the streets, already alerted by the battle at Babel Media, ran for cover or stood there in shocked silence. Cupcake squeezed his volter hard as he devoured the ground, each step closer to Liberty's murderer. He changed his mind then. He wouldn't make it last. Each breath Vonatos took was an insult to Liberty's memory and what she stood for. His vegetarian friend who never wore real leather, even shoes, the one who had come up with a plan to get the team out when everyone else had given up that one time in New Delhi. The one woman on the planet or any other colony who could crunch numbers faster than a machine and still have enough brain cells to spare to offer a grin for a friend. A woman biologically blind but able to see through a man's soul and call a lie from a corner away. His reason for being.

His Liberty.

So he'd kill the man quickly, even if he would've wanted for the first time in his life to make someone *suffer*. A lot.

They reached the square where thousands and thousands of people were already gathered. Riot police stood on roofs around the large plaza. Giant news billboards showed aerial footage of Babel Media's destruction, to the vocal shock and disgust of everyone there. Cupcake could feel the electricity in the air, the riot waiting to happen. Man, his ankle hurt.

Some shoving and pushing began on one side. A few shots were fired. People screamed. Then when the battle drones' banshee screech filled the plaza, the riot Cupcake had seen exploded in sounds and smells and colors. People's clothes, so

colorful. The buildings' gray façades. The blue sky. Black dots in the sky from news videicopters. Yet nothing touched him. Nothing penetrated the numbness.

By his side, a perfect pair if he ever saw one, Dragana and Cristoval fired overhead to cleave a path to the parliament, followed by Solomon, Cupcake and the rest of their little army. Civilians made way but didn't leave the square. The ground shook when the first drone fired down at the crowd. Body parts, chunks of rock and dust blew up in wide arcs. Screams. Curses. Cupcake was limping badly now and pushing to get at the riot fence, which he kicked down. Stairs so smooth and glistening as they rushed up. GAN soldiers forming a line, which Solomon quickly mowed down with his volters. When one was empty, he dropped it without a backward glance, kept firing with the other. Cupcake too ran out of nickel.

Then the sound of a man's voice filled the square with the booming quality of an opera singer. When Cupcake and the rest turned to look, the giant billboards had turned black, but clearly the audio still worked.

"What do you mean you allowed the Iron Conclave to get someone on the Security Council? I didn't approve of this." N'Namdi's unmistakable voice thundered, so charismatic, the Afrikaans accent lifting syllables and making them dance.

"I no longer need your approval, sir," sneered another man. Cupcake's heart stopped. That was the message from the data clip playing. He threw a questioning look at Solomon, who had his eyes closed, silently mouthing something.

Could it mean...?

Had they survived and finished the job? Or perhaps one of Cristoval's people had come up behind the vanguard and managed to upload the message. As much as hope Liberty had survived a direct hit lifted him almost physically as well as emotionally, the improbability of it dragged him down once more. At least the job had been done. The women hadn't died for nothing.

People's voices died out. Even GAN soldiers looked taken aback and lowered their weapons. Thousands of faces turned toward the boards. An eerie silence blanketed the plaza.

A strangled sound from the message triggered a few gasps of shock from the crowd.

"What did...you do to...me?" N'Namdi sounded in pain.

"Farewell, Chancellor," Vonatos said. His voice had drawn closer to the receiver. It filled the square ominously until everyone could hear the man's quick breathing.

A moan made the speakers fizz. Someone cried.

"Finally," growled Vonatos.

Some noises were heard, magnified a hundred times in the Reunification Square, followed by a thud then nothing for a few seconds. People booed. Someone yelled for Vonatos to step outside. Someone else picked up the yell.

"Damn!"

Vonatos' voice again.

"Come on," Cristoval snarled as he pointed his gun above the soldiers' heads and fired.

If Cupcake had thought a riot had begun, then he was now sure. Suddenly the crowd reacted as one. Loudly, violently, a mass of living anger, it surged up the steps, pushed through the thin line of uniformed soldiers, who didn't fire back for the most part. Dragana, Cristoval, Solomon and Cupcake burst into the airy foyer where more GAN security stood. Now these were of a different stock. They wore a different uniform, all gray, and resembled thugs with government-issue guns. They opened fire.

"Iron Conclave," Dragana snarled as she shouldered the grenade launcher, jammed it against her hipbone and widened her stance. She aimed at the cathedral-like ceiling and fired.

The monstrous volter recoiled, forced her back a step as it launched a carbon fiber sphere the size of a walnut and filled with static-charged nickel beads. The pea-size beads ripped out in all directions. Iron Conclave soldiers scattered as large chunks of ceiling detached and rained down on them all, including Cupcake and his allies.

"Second floor!" Cristoval barked over the clamor of volter fire, voices and ceiling chunks landing. "The wing facing the river!"

Up the massive white marble stairs, reminiscent of some nineteenth-century museum, firing back at Iron Conclave soldiers—hired thugs. Dragana cried out and stumbled against the wall. Cursing in her native Serbian, she whirled around, let the men pass then stood in the middle of the landing so she could rain death on those foolish enough to try to stand up to the Valkyrie. She backed up the stairs, joined the rest on the second floor.

"Keep going, I'll keep these fuckers occupied," she growled, panting, bleeding from numerous gashes.

"We stay together," Solomon growled in reply. "Get your ass over here!"

She shuddered, smiled.

Cupcake winced when blood seeped out of her mouth and nose. She gurgled a word that sounded a lot like someone saying "fuck" while drinking something. A crimson stain spread rapidly on the front of her denim jacket.

"Shot me in the back, the sneaky asswipes," she wheezed, grinning and shaking her head. "Go." She made a shooing gesture of her hand.

She turned away and opened fire. Cupcake didn't think anyone could fire a grenade launcher while doing the same with Peanut, the woman's monstrous pet volter. But she could. And looked good doing it. Blood matted the back of her blonde head, her denim jacket and jeans. She disappeared around the corner and they all heard the cries of pain and yells of shock her arrival had caused. The woman really was—had been—a Valkyrie.

"That stubborn bitch." Solomon bent over, began to shake. Rips appeared over his felt greatcoat. He dropped his remaining volter.

A spike of adrenaline hit Cupcake as well. And he realized Cristoval too was changing. Liberty had been right. He was a lycan.

Agony drowned everything else. His body jolted, skin tore, muscles and tendons snapped, shredded. His face burned as did his gums and teeth as they pierced the flesh to protrude a good inch outside the seal of his lips. His vision doubled then sharpened. His hearing picked up subtle sounds he couldn't hear before. The stench of fear was overpowering. Despite his dimmed mental faculties brought on by the change to lycan, he heard Cristoval's mangled word, uttered through ruined lips.

"Father."

Pain. He inflicted it on others. It was inflicted on him. Colors and scents and sounds intermingled. Blood filled his hands and mouth. His own and others'. Many others'. Then a terrible battle ensued. He thought he recognized a man's voice, hoarse. The sound of volter fire. Many other voices. Then a terrible explosion and a rumble that spread through his body. He filled his hands and mouth with the enemy, those who had killed his love and taken his light. A black void swallowed him. At the limit of his keen senses, he thought he could smell a minty odor. Camphor, mint and eucalyptus. The image of a pouncing tiger appeared in his dazed mind. Cupcake let it go. Let everything go. Without Liberty, he had nothing to hold on to.

Chapter Twelve

"Are you all right?" Liberty asked as she helped Eva get back to her feet. Blood dribbled down her forehead right between her chemically enhanced purple eyes.

"*Govno*. Look at the mess."

Her body ached everywhere yet they were lucky to still be alive. Her last image before everything went black was of Cupcake standing protectively between a battle drone and her.

"Is it playing?" Eva asked as she wiped the digitex screen of the dust and concrete particles. "Do you think...oh there it is."

Liberty leaned over and grinned with dark satisfaction. The message had uploaded. And it was on a continuous loop. No use staying here. "Hurry," she said, stepping over debris toward the corridor. Through the gaping hole in the wall, she could see the street down below. But there was no one.

Dazed and stumbling, both women exited the battered building and went by sound. It was easy to guess where the crux of the action was taking place. The Reunification Square was filled with people when they emerged from between buildings and crossed the wide boulevard. A shot could be heard going off occasionally but for the most part, *people* were making the most noise. Yells and screams.

"It worked then," Eva murmured. She pulled a small volter from her pant leg and checked the gauge.

Liberty had lost hers back at the control room. She'd also lost her goggles. Rubbing her face, she followed Eva inside the square proper and along the wing facing the river. People were everywhere. News agencies must have had to share for airtime for the giant billboards had been partitioned to allow for coverage from many sources at once. They all showed the same thing. GAN soldiers standing by looking unsure and lost as a riot broke out and a mass of people stormed up the front steps of the parliament. Despite the angle and her own pixelated feedback, she recognized Cupcake, if only by size and the fact he was the only one bare-chested under a bulletproof vest.

"They're still inside," Eva breathed. With her gaze, she guided Liberty to another board showing inside the parliament proper. Bodies lay on the floor. Blood was everywhere. A giant hole gaped in the main entrance ceiling. And underneath the footage, a time reference. Liberty checked her watch and winced. Only ten minutes had elapsed since the riot had breached the building.

"Let's go. We'll start with the chancellor's office."

They followed some of the news crews, suspecting they had access to information and comms, and would know where the good stuff was happening. Stairs were slick

with blood, broken bodies of Iron Conclave-hired security and at the top of it, a lone woman, a blonde, sitting against the wall, unblinking blue eyes staring vacantly in front of her.

Liberty's throat squeezed. "Oh... No."

Without a word, Eva went to Dragana's lifeless form—she still held Peanut in her hands—and closed her eyes. "We should hurry. It's down the hall."

They did, with Liberty casting one last look at Dragana, who, for the first time since she'd lost her twin, looked at peace.

The trail was easy to follow. More dead bodies. More blood. Only these hadn't been killed by gunshot.

Liberty put her hand in front of her mouth. "They changed."

No news crews had made it this deep into the building yet and both women knew time was of the essence. They started running, poked their heads into gaping doorways, through holes in the walls big enough for small shuttles to fly through, walked around more dead Iron Conclave men. When a loud screech ripped through the air, both barely had time to hit the floor.

BOOM!

The building shook. More explosions. Smoke and debris raining down around them. And through it all, the screeching. Incessant screeching.

"No, please no," Liberty cried out as she stumbled to her feet and began running. Eva joined her just as they swerved around a corner.

A scene of devastation greeted them. Where there had been walls and a ceiling there was now open air. The awful noise from the battle drones receded as they flew off, a handful of them, in close formation. Liberty couldn't see well for the sunlight stabbing into her brain and reflected through the dust and debris still falling, but she thought she could make out a larger craft among the drones. Then her eyes filled with hot tears.

Two forms lay on the broken floor, one stirring while the other slowly sat.

"Cupcake!"

Liberty ran without care for the still raining pieces of construction and fragments of brick and mortar detaching from what was left of the wing. The river scintillated beyond the ruin. So calm.

She slid to her knees a few feet before she reached him and crawled the rest on all fours. With shaking hands, she patted Cupcake's bloody shoulders and arms. The bulletproof vest was gone. Cuts and dust covered his face. Yet two bright blue orbs stared at her then crinkled when he smiled.

He coughed. "Ouch."

Liberty began crying, laughing and shaking all at once. "You great lug," she murmured through her tears as she pressed his face to her chest. "You great *lug*."

By their side, Solomon flopped onto his back and cursed profusely. He was naked except for his boots and leather belt. Eva crouched by him, cupped his face and leaned her forehead against his. "If you ever scare me this way again, I'll kill you. A lot."

Solomon cursed again, started to pat Eva's hand away but had to lean on her to get back to his feet. He cupped his hips with bloodied hands and bent over. "We had him. The backstabbing asshole. We *had* him."

Slowly, punctuated with grunts of pain, Cupcake stood. "Cristoval."

"Cristoval?" Eva looked around. "He's not here."

Cupcake shook his head, looked down at his feet then into Liberty's face. She could've stared at that dusty face the rest of her life. "He's dead," she said more than asked.

Solomon spat blood then nodded. "We *had* his old man. Christ, we *had* him. He was right there at his desk. The smug jerk. But then some fucking moron with a bad comb-over comes in through the floor, man, the fucking *floor*."

Eva said something in her native Russian. "That's Killen, the Iron Conclave director."

"Whatever," Solomon snapped. "He says, all smiles 'long live the king' or some shit then blows Vonatos' brains out. Fucking shot him in the head."

"And Cristoval?" Liberty asked.

Cupcake shook his head. "He took off after Comb-over—Killen. That's when the drones started firing."

Liberty slipped her hand around his waist and supported him for the first few unsteady steps. He seemed to favor a leg.

Solomon barked a laugh. "Yeah. I got shot by a drone twice today. I'd say that calls for a beer."

Eva shook her head. "So you didn't *see* Killen die."

"No," Cupcake replied. He looked back at the smoking ruins behind them and shrugged. "I don't think it matters."

The former spy didn't look convinced. "That Briton would find a way to survive even in the dead of space."

"What?" Solomon asked. "Don't care for Brits?"

"I'm fine with them. It's him I don't like. He's..." She stopped, grimaced. "He's not the Iron Conclave director for nothing. Vonatos was a darling compared to Killen. He used to be an interrogator, back in the days. He's behind most defense research programs. The really hush-hush, experimental stuff. Reanimation, cryonics—"

"We should go," Cupcake cut in. He kissed the top of Liberty's head, which brought on a look of pure shock from Solomon. "I think I'll have a beer too. For Dragana."

"We'll search the rubble, see if we can't find Cristoval. Maybe he survived..." Liberty's words died in her throat when she surveyed the destruction. "The last Vonatos son."

Solomon barked a quick, mirthless laugh. "Good riddance." He cleared his throat and seemed to study his feet but Liberty could tell he was fighting back the tears. "I'll have one for Dragana too."

* * * * *

Uncle Johnnie studied Cupcake while the towering lycan, oblivious to the video camera—one of many in the Glass Palace—recorded his every move.

The "Glass Palace", Liberty's Uncle Johnnie's place. One of many. It resembled more a square of glass and steel beams than anything else as it occupied the most prominent spot among its similar but smaller neighbors. A neighborhood of rich houses perched along the bay where sky and sea mixed in a dark gray collection of pixels in her synthetic vision. She blinked.

"It's bothering you still?"

"A bit," she replied, turning away from the wall filled with view screens, one for each of the many rooms and some for the gardens, others for the shuttle bays, more for the road leading to the house itself. And on and on. Uncle Johnnie liked to know well in advance who came to visit. She was glad he'd let her borrow the house for a while, until Solomon and the rest of the team recuperated from their many, many bumps. The loss of Dragana among those. And Cristoval too, even if they hadn't had time to get to know the morose resistance leader well.

Still, her uncle stared at the screen showing the terrace overlooking the sea where sat Cupcake dressed only in a too-small white bathrobe. When he leaned back and crossed his ankles, the robe parted and allowed her a fine view of his muscled legs.

Uncle Johnnie grinned a lop-sided one for the cigar tucked between his teeth. He'd always reminded her of a cross between a banker and a gangster.

"He's a big boy," he commented between puffs. "Big boy. Could be one of those professional athletes, huh? Or even a pro fighter with a face like his."

"He was and drop it."

Her uncle nodded. "Ah. So you're okay with it. Good. I just wanted to make sure you were all right with your boyfriend's, er, *colorful* past."

"More colorful than being a lycan you mean?"

The handsome man laughed, his coffee-colored skin crinkling around the eyes. "That's something he was born with, but pro fighting, that's something he *chose*."

She shook her head. "He didn't. It chose him. Trapped him."

"But he got away, didn't he?"

Liberty nodded.

They shared a quiet moment as both watched Cupcake drink coffee from a cup that looked ridiculously small pinched between his fingers. He delicately held the saucer in his other hand. Looking at Cupcake's hands always made Liberty experience a frisson of arousal.

"Well," Uncle Johnnie put in after a while. "If you need anything else, just send a message."

"Like the message I sent to you, the one Reyes Vonatos intercepted?"

He cringed. "Yeah, that. I had no idea the Iron Conclave would have the guts to come play in the Silkes' sandbox. The real Abacan is fine, by the way. Embarrassed beyond words but fine. The younger Vonatos only incapacitated him, gave him some drug. Abacan barely remembers anything."

"I'll go in person if I need something from you," Liberty said, standing when in the screen Cupcake finished his coffee and rolled his shoulders.

Uncle Johnnie smiled knowingly then left. Not long afterward, she saw him in one of the many screens as he stepped into his private shuttle. The hatch rose and the craft slowly lifted off, turned then with its lone thruster blazing, flew off along the darkening coastline.

Liberty had to remind herself not to run as she navigated the large house and couldn't help the grin pulling at her when she finally stepped onto the terrace. Cupcake was still there, sitting back with his legs crossed at the knees. He'd put his cup and saucer on the floor underneath the chair. He looked relaxed. Despite the shower he'd obviously just had and the shaving gel's faint scent she could smell, he still looked as though he needed a shave. The permanent five o'clock shadow clung to the bottom half of his face and created quite the contrast to the expensive white robe barely covering him. He sat straight when he turned and spotted Liberty looking at him.

"I'll get you a coffee," he said, putting his hands on the armrests and leaning forward.

"No, no. Stay there."

She approached. Through the parted robe, his thigh muscles bulged when he sat back. The relaxed look was gone.

For the life of her, Cupcake must have thought he ought to stand every time she entered a room. In a way, she appreciated how he acknowledged her presence—very chivalrous—but it only served to remind her how he thought she was above him, in social status at least. She hated that.

She leaned back against the concrete ledge, listening to the sound of the sea behind her and how the wind whistled. They'd have a windstorm.

"Your uncle has a nice house."

Liberty nodded. "Does it make you uncomfortable?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Because it's perfect."

"And you're not?"

Cupcake grinned wide. "Not quite."

"You're perfect to me."

"And it beats me. You have such good taste for everything else."

Liberty laughed. "Come here, you great lug."

Cupcake's grin slid off his face, replaced by a carnal look. "No. *You* come *here*."

She nearly choked. Thrill tingled up her spine and spread to her shoulders and arms, her nipples, her belly. Her heart in her throat, breaths coming in shallow and quick, she peeled her back off the ledge and approached until she stood directly between his big feet. Such nice toes.

Cupcake raised a hand and caressed her hip. "I've been thinking..."

Cupcake's heart squeezed when no Dragana quickly retorted to not hurt himself. He sighed.

He'd been thinking a lot actually. For the last two days, since the Reunification Square riot and subsequent world affairs—GAN had had to convene an emergency meeting and appoint a committee to replace the dead chancellor. In other words, nothing would get done for several months. The raids had stopped. Eva and a reluctant Solomon had taken over Cristoval's work with the resistance. Now more the "official opposition" in parliament for lack of better term. They were in town right now actually, trying to make sense of the chaos. Cupcake didn't envy them. He preferred to be here with Liberty. The love of his life.

So yeah, he'd been thinking.

About how much this woman meant to him. How lost he'd felt without her. Lost and empty. As if nothing mattered. Hell, nothing *had* mattered. But it had all changed. He was a changed man. Better for it. And she should know.

"I'd like to marry you."

Oh jeez.

Good thing he hadn't thought before he blurted this one out. Otherwise, he would've chickened out of it for the nth time. He'd spent the morning practicing in his head. The intonation, the look, the position—one knee, both knees? He didn't even have a ring, dammit. He'd gone from the ole "would you marry me", which was so tacky for such a refined lady, to classics such as "please, marry me", "be mine" and last but not least "would you spend the rest of your life with me?" Ugh. But "I'd like to marry you" had not once popped up. For a reason. It was bad.

Damn. I blew it.

Liberty's face split in a wide smile. His basalt goddess. But a grin was a good sign, right?

Right?

"Me too."

Cupcake nodded. "Good." He shook his head. "I mean, great. That's *great*. Man, busting open doors is so much easier than this."

"But not as much fun," she replied, still smiling. She ran her hand over his skull, fingers splayed and rubbing back his buzz cut. His cock tightened painfully.

"I love you so much," he began, faltered. "I thought that thing had killed you. I couldn't even think. I was numb. Like a flag, you know, without wind. All limp."

"All limp, huh?"

Cupcake pulled her camisole up by an inch so he could kiss her waist. He was hard against her leg and knew she could feel it. "Not anymore."

"That's good," she murmured, teasing. "I mean, that's *great*."

She whooped when he knelt in front of her and kissed her mons through the exercise pants. The adjusted black things had been driving him nuts since he'd seen her that morning deep in talk with her uncle. So as not to bother her, he'd found something else to occupy him. Such as thinking of ways to ask her to marry him. Only to blurt out the first dumb thing that passed through his brain when the moment arrived. Man, he wasn't good at thinking. Dragana had been right. He *could* hurt himself!

He filled his face with her, her smell, her smooth skin, the sound of her heartbeat and the occasional gurgle in her belly. He loved everything about her. Belly sounds included.

A thought occurred to him. He had to tell her.

"Remember when we shared your bed for the first time? Back in Chinatown on Antioch?"

"Mmm."

"I wanted to go back after my shower. I wanted it like I've never wanted anything else. But I was afraid to mess everything up."

Liberty ran her fingernails in his scalp, front to back, and his ability to form coherent thoughts diminished accordingly. Man, he was getting turned on like nobody's business.

"I know."

"Can I make it up to you? The lost time I mean?" He looked up, met her gaze. Oh he'd piqued her interest there.

"You mean that particular night or the last, oh what, almost *ten* years of lost time?" She grinned a lopsided one that dissolved his mental focus more effectively than a stun grenade.

"Both. Every lost second. I'm making it up now." He rose, noticed how she looked flushed and thrilled and wondered at his ability to cause this reaction in the usually smooth lady he'd fallen in love with from day one.

With a smile he tried to keep gallant but was turning more primal by the second, he scooped her up behind the knees and shoulders and carried her off the balcony and into the room.

"My room or yours?" he asked.

"You choose."

"Mine."

Cupcake carried her up the concrete stairs and down the corridor lit by lights set along the ceiling in tiny grooves. The amber glow reflected on his woman's dark skin and made her look sculpted out of pure black marble. His woman. Man, he loved the sound of it.

"My woman," he murmured, repeated through a grin.

He dipped her feet low when he marched through the embrasure and into his room. It reminded him of a steel and glass cube, complete with an unobstructed view of the sea beyond, which crashed with mounting force against the rocky cliffs. Thunderstorm clouds darkened the horizon, blended with the churning sea. He loved the colors, blacks and grays and dark blues.

A dais bed throned in the center of the room, a black gleaming affair with only a base and dark sheets, and was the only visible piece of furniture with the rest a click away. He'd spent quite some time figuring out how certain decorative steel plaques on the floor would activate wall panels from behind which dressers and bureaus would advance. He'd left the pocket door slid partly in so he could find it again. The light in the bathroom beyond was lit, a faint blue glow stabbing into the dim room at an angle. He'd also occupied himself in other ways throughout the day. He'd hunted for candles. And robbed the kitchen counter of them when he'd finally found the stash. Square and gray, they'd fit perfectly.

"You go get a shower," he said to a clearly shocked Liberty. "I'll get some stuff ready."

"What stuff?" Her eyebrow was arched just the way he loved.

Cupcake crossed his arms and feared for a second he'd torn the bathrobe. But it held. "Stuff."

She left with a last quizzical look his way. He waited until he heard the water running then rushed about the room to prepare. Everything had to be perfect. Like she was.

For the first time in his life, Richard Moriarty, Rickie and Fargo's Hit Man disappeared, gave way to a new man. A better man. He was in love with the most wonderful woman in the history of humankind and would crush the skull of anyone who said otherwise.

Whistling, Cupcake untied the sash on his robe. He'd waited for his woman long enough. He was hers now. And she was his.

Chapter Thirteen

Liberty rushed through the shower, washed the most pressing spots and rinsed quickly before running out of the cubicle and squeaking to a stop in the doorway leading into the bedroom proper.

Cupcake stood in the middle of a veritable field of lit candles. He must have used every last one in the house. The robe was gone, discarded in a corner, and she could now admire her man's glorious body in all its maleness and strength, from thick shoulders and chest to solid waist and even more so legs. In her synthetic vision, his erection was massive, inviting and pointing directly at her. Liberty felt herself flush.

"My, my."

He hooked his index finger at her.

Water still dripped from her and pooled at her feet. Soles squeaking on the gleaming stone floor, she crossed the distance between them, circumvented the many candles, which trembled when she passed, just as her belly did, excitement mounting and coiling with every step leading to her man.

Cupcake watched her, never said a word. His pale gaze was riveted to her face and never once slid down the length of her naked body. It required some tremendous mental focus because she knew for a fact—easily assessed judging from the hard-on hanging heavy over his thighs—he wanted her.

"Cupcake," she began hesitantly, looking around. "It's beautiful."

"Not near enough for you," he murmured with a half grin. "I wish I could've gotten my hands on some real roses."

The genus had long been extinct and only drab, bioengineered versions remained, but it was the thought that counted. Someone wanting to give his lover the moon. They shared a smile.

She couldn't believe how much Cupcake had changed, warmed. He was still the towering lycan with the serious eyes to everyone else—Solomon must still be trying to reconcile the stoical Cupcake with the man he'd seen tenderly kissing the top of Liberty's head—but to her, he'd become the most attentive, loving man she could imagine. She'd spent years looking from a distance—wondering, hoping, fantasizing. And she hadn't even scratched the surface. A room full of candles? Wow.

She drew near, stopped when she stood right under his nose. "So," she asked, raising her face to his and getting caught in wonder at the way candlelight made his perfectly formed mouth glimmer. "What happens now?"

"This."

His kiss began slow and leisurely but quickly gathered momentum and force, just like the storm swelling outside. Hands demanding yet soft, he curved her spine so she'd be crushed to him. Liberty "ahhed" softly under Cupcake's ardent kissing. He seemed bent on meshing them into a single body, pressed at the camber of her back while his other hand cupped her nape and bent her backward. Pectorals bulged against her breasts, biceps against her shoulders while a muscled thigh found its way between her legs. Without a shred of awkwardness, she rolled her hips so she'd grind her pussy against him. He responded by lifting her up. Right off the floor!

Thus suspended on his thigh, Liberty had the leisure of wrapping her legs around his waist and squeezing to her heart's content. This was Cupcake, her six-foot-eight friend and lover, soon her husband. A mercenary and fellow lycan. He could take her love!

Cupcake transported her to the bed where he laid her on her back, kept himself suspended over her push-up like. Gradually, he kissed his way down her throat, her breasts, which he palmed and licked and rolled, then lower until his chin rubbed against her mons. A frisson cramped her legs. His pale gaze on her face, he dipped his head lower and gave her sex a quick flick.

She violently arched off the mattress as if something had poked her. "Ohh."

Cupcake licked her again, slower this time. A wave undulated her spine in response.

"Show me where," he murmured as he guided her hands down.

Liberty parted her lips, rubbed at her clitoris while he watched. "There. Mmm."

A small grin on his gorgeous lips, he dove for her pussy. Within seconds, Liberty was fisting the sheets and bowing off the bed, had to quash the impulse to kick him in the back so he'd eat her more deeply. After she wrapped her hands and laced her fingers at his nape, she tilted her hips up as hard as she could, squashed his face to her flesh.

"That's it," she whispered, head lolling. "That's it. That's good."

Deep sounds rumbled in his chest while he forced her sex wider and devoured it. Rapacious and loud, his mouth traveled front to back, side to side, bit and sucked and conquered every tiny fold so that when Cupcake looked up to watch her reaction, Liberty trapped him to her. Her ankles locked behind his strong neck. Showing incredible strength, he knelt on the bed, took her lower half with him and raised her to his face by force of arms alone. And there, he consumed her. Deeply. Without restraint.

Oh. Sweet, sweet. Ooohh!

She came. No warning. No building up to it. She came and she did it loudly.

His name still resounded in the room when he lowered her pelvis down to his waist, his cock nudging her folds and sinking in. Without meaning to, she kicked him behind the thighs. Both feet.

"Go, go, go," she snarled.

With her butt raised on his thighs, she pawed around for his hands, which he trapped in his and used as anchors for the tremendous thrusts rocking the bed. Rain began to hit the glass wall in torrents. The small clicks drowning the sound of their skin clacking. After he'd taken her this way, Cupcake pulled out and rolled her to her side so he could grab a leg, raise it and kneel behind her butt. He barely had time to angle his thick cock right when Liberty wrapped her bottom leg around his waist and cramped her burning muscles. He slid in all the way.

Another wave unfurled and triggered a million tiny bursts of light in her eyes, which she'd squeezed shut to better taste his furious lovemaking. Cupcake curled his hips back, thrust hard. Once, twice, thrice. Liberty bunched the sheets and heard stitching rip.

"From behind," she hiccupped between pushes. "I want you to take me from behind. Make it hard!"

She pulled away from him while the last words were coming out, twisted onto her front and climbed up to her elbows and knees. Behind her, a soft whimper caught her attention. She looked back and gasped. He was changing.

Before she could formulate a thought, Cupcake, his hands unyielding, his face not quite lycan, grabbed her hips and knocked them back against his for a profound and uncompromising dominance. A cry left her. Then she too changed. Only she realized she'd go all the way.

A hard male behind her. Claiming. Dominating. Claws and fangs and cock pinning her down in a mating ritual as old as the world. She growled her delight, her demand for more, which he gave. Like wet, heated steel, he took her. In her sex. Her mouth. Her ass. She bit him. Didn't know where. Didn't care. He bit her in reply, growled in her ear as he pounded into her flesh. *Make it yours. Take it.* His body changed again, expanded, grew even stronger, sharper, more potent still. The wall hit her back. Air left her in a great huff. Then again and again and again. Impalement. Animalistic abandon. The smell and taste of male essence, dribbling down her chin. Blood, hers when she bit her lip. Her male's when she bit *his* lip. He'd become all cock, all plunderer, taker, hunter. The burn of pleasure engulfed her. She came. He joined her. Their cry filled the room. Outside a storm pounded.

Liberty woke when the dull ache in her head flared. She sat in bed, looked in shock at the ransacked room, torn sheets, overturned and spilled candles. In her pixelated feedback, the darkened bedroom was plunged in grays and blues. By her side, she heard a soft rumble. Cupcake *snored*?!

Grinning in the darkness, Liberty lay back down so she could wrap her leg over his and rest her head against his arm, which he'd placed as if he meant just for that. She snuggled against his side and grinned widely when Cupcake smacked his lips. Even in

sleep, he managed to take less than his share of the bed so she'd have more room. Despite the gloom, she could see his cock pointing straight up.

"You delicious man you," she whispered against his shoulder. Her hand gentle and light, she grazed his belly and traced the length of his stiff penis up and down then his balls. Part of her wanted to wake him while another part meant to enjoy the quiet moment.

Liberty shook her head. She'd waited so damn long. She was done waiting.

Slowly because she wanted to wake him in a very special manner, she knelt by his hip, straddled him, raised herself high, then after licking her palm and fingers, she wet her sex – still throbbing happily – and made him all nice and glossy for her. It was when she sank around him Cupcake seemed to wake.

"Mmm?"

"Shhh. Just lie back and enjoy."

"Mm, I thought I was having another wet dream."

"With me in it I hope?"

Despite the gloom, she could see he regretted his words and coughed. His cock stirred when he did.

"You've been having wet dreams about me? For how long?"

He didn't reply, only mumbled something.

Liberty laughed, knowing her vaginal muscles would squeeze him pleasantly. "You think you're the only one to have wet dreams? I've been dreaming about you for years, asleep and otherwise. By the way, we have to go shopping."

"For what?"

"A dildo."

Cupcake's choked gasp made her laugh out loud. "What? Is that too shocking for a big boy like you?"

"Not shocking, just..." He shrugged. "It's for you, right? Not me."

Liberty squeezed herself around him. "We'll see. So, you were daydreaming about me, you said. Details, come on."

"You were a colleague. It wasn't right."

"It didn't stop me from having my own," she replied with a pronounced roll of hips that made him gasp. "You want to know my favorite one?"

"Do I?"

"Yes, you do." She pushed up and down a few times. "There was this one where we were on a mission and we'd become separated from the rest. I'd keep a lookout and then suddenly you'd be behind me, kissing my neck and caressing my butt. Then you'd make love to me standing while I'd still watch out for the bad guys."

Cupcake chuckled. "Sounds like mine."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," he said while his hands came up on her hips and trapped her breasts. "Only in mine, we were both naked and there weren't any bad guys to bother us."

Liberty accentuated her rolls, took him deeper into herself. He abandoned one breast so he could rub her clit with a thumb, slowly, gently, 'round and 'round.

"It doesn't sound at all like mine," she said.

"Sure it does. You were there and so was I."

"When did you start?"

"The very first time I met you," Cupcake replied with a sharp buck of hips. She gasped, sucked in her bottom lip. "I wanted to kiss you."

"So did I."

"You can now."

"I know."

Liberty bent over and kissed him. Nothing had ever been worth the wait the way Cupcake had.

Epilogue

A burning ache in his lower back woke him from his nightmare. Then he looked around at the small, damp cell around him, and realized he'd been awake the whole time.

The *drip-drip-drip* of water echoed in the distance while other sounds—scurrying sounds, little claws on concrete—sent a shiver up his naked back. Hell, he was naked period.

Despite the pain in his body, he rolled to his side, lifted his torso off the concrete floor and slowly, each muscle screaming, knelt. His head pounded. His heart beat arrhythmically. Something was wrong with him. Terribly wrong.

It was when he scratched his scalp that he noticed the little lump over his wrist, right where the face of his watch used to be. With mounting alarm, he realized his other wrist sported the strange bump as well, and so did his ankles. With a dirty fingernail he scratched at it and hissed. Damn. It hurt like a bitch.

The sound of footsteps made him plaster his back against the wall, away from the steel door where a splatter pattern reminded him a lot of blood. In a place such as this, it probably was. The footsteps stopped outside his cell.

A man's voice came to him, muffled, but the British accent unmistakable. "Do you want to know what they're for?"

Those bumps? No, he didn't. He really, *really* didn't.

Suddenly, a searing pain flashed in his wrists and ankles, tore a cry from him and knocked him to the floor in a heap, panting, choking on the bile bubbling up his throat. He could barely move. He rolled onto his back. Pain numbed his limbs. He felt paralyzed yet aware of everything and when the door opened and Killen stepped inside, a pair of Iron Conclave guards on his heels, he knew he was lost.

"Do you know where we are?" Killen asked, about to lean on the wall but he grimaced and crossed his hands behind his back instead. His impeccably tailored suit gleamed with the oily quality of wet ink under the sputtering light. "Outside of a few trusted souls in the Iron Conclave, no one knows about this place. No one at GAN, no one on the security council and no one from the resistance."

Pain still lanced to the rhythm of his heart in each of his paralyzed limbs. He felt as though someone sat on his chest. Panic squeezed his throat. He needed to cough but couldn't. He was passing out. Dots like black rain falling into his eyes. His cheeks going numb.

Killen crouched by his face, pulled a handkerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed the corner of his mouth. "Your father was a fool. I don't think we should kill genetic deviants. I think we should keep them alive. Very much alive." He smiled.

Killen's words accompanied him into oblivion. "I have big plans for you. Big plans indeed."

Cristoval felt his eyes rolling in the back of his head.

About the Author

I am a mother, spouse, older sister, writer, ex-soldier, high school drop-out, dog owner (or dog owned), half couch potato/half intermittent jogger, wannabe renovator and avid reader who watches too much television, sinks too much money in clothes, likes animals more than humans, recycles, wore braces, never downloads copyrighted stuff, was a nerd without the grades, has a belly laugh that turns heads in theaters, can't stand bullying, is mother hawk more than mother hen, votes even if candidates aren't that great and thinks formal education is highly overrated (probably because she has none).

Nathalie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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