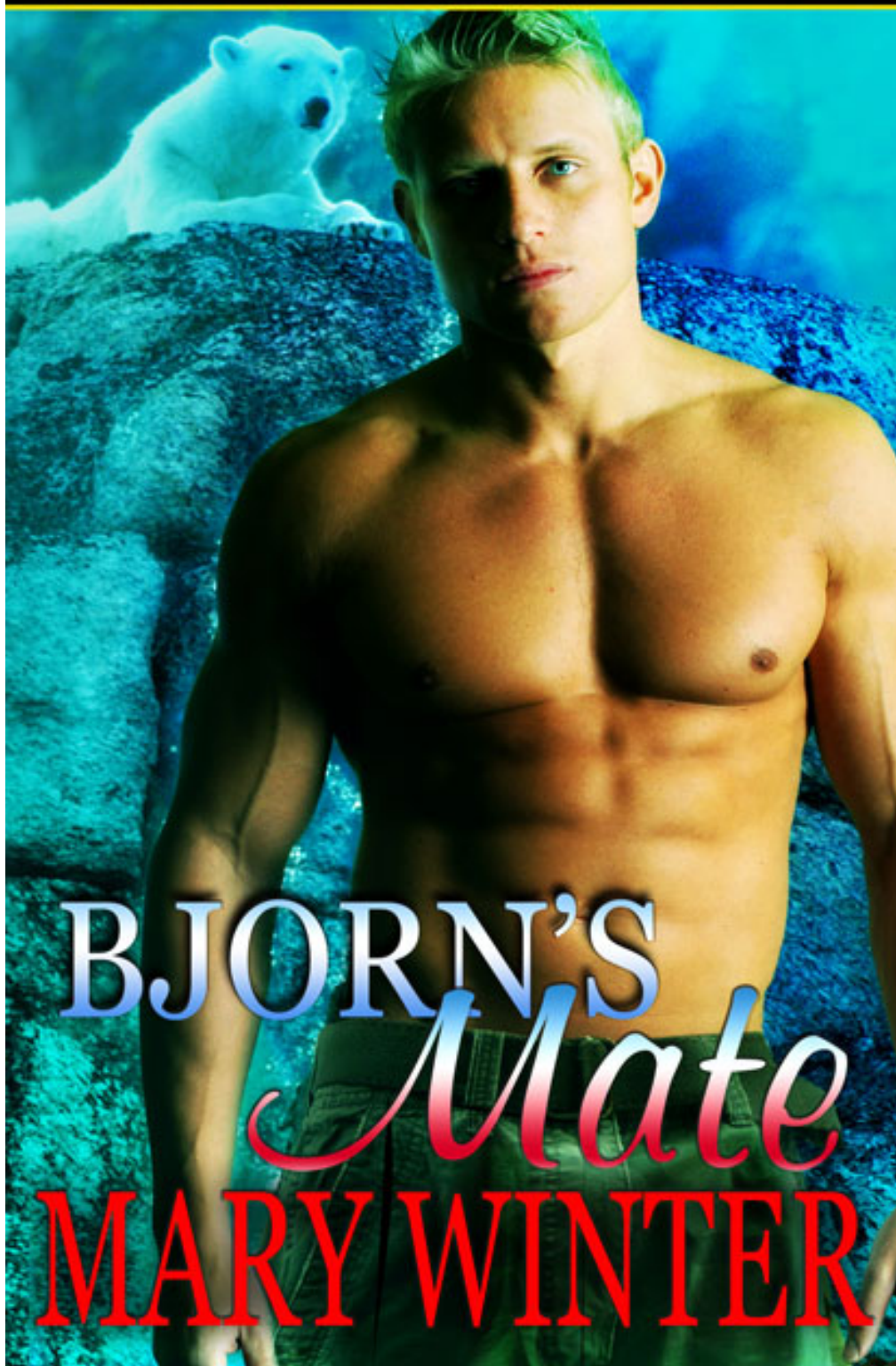


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Bjorn's Mate

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# ***BJORN'S MATE***

**Mary Winter**

*Dedication*

To Lorie O'Clare, for your support and friendship. Thank you for believing in me and my bears.

## Chapter One

Hunched over her mug of strong, black coffee, Sigrid Myrhe breathed in the pungent aroma as if it were the last warm scent on earth. From volcano slopes in latitudes far more southerly than she'd ever seen, the tiny beans made their way here to keep her warm. Although used to living and working in the Arctic, very few things erased the permanent chill from her body. The Arctic, even with several protective layers, chilled to the bones. She sipped and grinned at her sister's red-cheeked face.

"I still don't like the thought of you up here on your own," Aud said as she frowned at her younger sister. Her partner Svein sat next to her.

From the way Aud still acted like the overprotective older sister, more than two years should have separated them. As far as Sigrid was concerned, it was a damn good thing their middle sister Hilde hadn't decided to join them. But with Hilde working on research in Iceland, their schedules hadn't meshed. When Aud insisted on coming, it'd been all Sigrid could do to find time to see her sister and keep to the schedule she'd been given.

Of course, telling either of her overprotective siblings her the truth—that their baby sister worked undercover for the European Union Forces—would have made things worse. Let them believe Sigrid wanted nothing more than a chance to study Arctic seabirds. With the spring equinox just passed and the days growing longer, now would be the perfect time. And Bjorn's scientific unit offered a rare opportunity for her to do so.

"I'll be fine," Sigrid replied for what had to be the hundredth time. "We're talking scientists, not Neanderthals. I have my research. I'm sure Bjorn and his team have theirs. We're only sharing facilities for a while, nothing more." Mentioning that she'd also be sharing intel and information, as well as the fact that this mission would provide a chance to finally be seen as something other than just the youngest—and still "baby" at twenty-six—of her scientist-filled family, were all things not to be mentioned to her older sister.

The door swung open, admitting a blast of chilly air. Shivers raced down Sigrid's spine. All her life had been spent in the Arctic, from studying orcas with her father to her own work with seabirds and seals, but you don't get used to this kind of cold. A man stepped into the café, the door swinging closed behind him. Bundled in several layers, he looked like a bear of a man. A few scientists turned and gave brusque greetings as his eyes scanned the café.

The bustling sounds of dining stopped. Silverware clattered to plates. Coffee mugs hit tables with thuds and conversation silenced. A pall settled over the room until the man strode toward their table.

Sigrid's breath caught in her throat. Green eyes the color of the malachite chips in her earrings surveyed the room. The stranger towered over the seated patrons. His gray snowsuit with blue striping emphasized his powerfully built frame. Her gaze traveled over him, from his broad shoulders to his narrow hips and long legs. Behind the suit he had to be muscled, like mouth-watering, calendar-centerfold sexy. She suspected only one man's presence held this kind of command. Her contact. Bjorn Lunde.

Sigrid grinned. Vik, her commanding officer, had told her little about her mission, except that Bjorn's team needed her scientific expertise. Hungry for a chance to prove herself, she'd accepted. Looking the team leader in the eye as he approached, she wondered if this was what seals felt like before the hungry maw of a polar bear closed around them. Small. Vulnerable.

Sigrid rose to her feet and held out her hand. "Bjorn Lunde?" she asked, her voice warm. "Sigrid Myrhe. I'm glad to finally meet you."

Bjorn glanced down at her offered, ungloved hand then back at her face. An angry scowl marred his features. He took her hand, his gloved fingers engulfing her smaller digits. A quick, firm shake before he released her hand as if she had stung him. "Yeah, I'm Bjorn." He turned toward the table. "Svein," he said. "Long time no see."

Sigrid slid into the booth, sliding over to make room for Bjorn, though how he'd fit into the small space she didn't know. The thought of being pressed against his muscled body had a flush rising to her cheeks. She cursed her fair complexion and tipped the mug to her lips. Bitter, the coffee tasted like Bjorn's welcome.

As she'd guessed, Bjorn slid his bulk into the booth beside her. Through the snowsuit she felt his strength. Of course he wouldn't be soft. Living in the Arctic quickly weeded out the weak, and as the leader of his elite team, Bjorn had to be in prime condition. She suspected without his suit, he'd look even more choice. Vik's men, all hardened European Union Forces soldiers, formed a covert group. They went on missions no one else dared. Sigrid considered it an honor to be on the same team, even if her work would likely be purely scientific.

"We've been busy finishing up some work you might be interested in, on pre- and post-natal polar bears," Svein said. "You can see some of our preliminary findings published in *Nature* in a couple months."

"Congratulations. Most scientists go years without seeing anything published, and this is what, your third article in as many years?" Bjorn asked, pointedly ignoring Sigrid beside him.

The waitress hurried over and brought another mug of coffee, refilling their drinks before rushing away to wait on other patrons.

"Aud's responsible for most of it. She keeps her team on their toes." Svein smiled affectionately at her.

Sigrid watched the interplay and fought to keep the scared shitless look off her face. When she had a chance to speak with Vik, she'd give their leader a piece of his mind. He'd apparently sent her off on a mission with a seasoned EUFOR team and a leader

who seemed to resent her presence. Par for the course, but he could have prepared her a bit better. Her orders remained concealed in her pack, and in present company she was prevented from showing them to Bjorn and educating him. Now, from across the table, she sensed the worried-sister vibes about to head in her direction.

"Father taught his girls how to be top-notch scientists," Sigrid said as a way to slide back into the conversation. "One thing we all learned was how to hold our own on a team." As soon as she got Bjorn alone, she'd assure him she had adequate credentials for whatever his team required. Vik told her he needed her services. If she was good enough for the senior officer, then she was more than good enough for Bjorn. He'd probably thought he was getting a *male* scientist, perhaps an officer, instead of her.

Her knuckles brushed his as they both reached for their coffee at the same time. Bolts of heat shot up her arm, straight to her nipples. She dismissed them. In an all-male company her hormones would only get her into trouble. *But what delicious trouble it would be.*

Sigrid willed her focus to return. Making Bjorn understand she was more than just a civilian scientist ranked higher on her priority list than sex. *If that's so, then why does a glance at his hands make me wonder if everything is as big?* Maybe she should have stopped off somewhere before coming straight here. Maybe she should have gotten laid. Then she wouldn't have this pussy-weeping response to the man to whom she'd be reporting for the next several weeks.

With Sigrid squeezed into the corner of the booth, Bjorn couldn't help but feel her slender body pressed against him. The lush curve of a breast hidden behind layers of winter clothing tantalized him. And her eyes—dear god, her eyes were the color of lush grass the likes of which he hadn't seen since his work in Oslo four years ago. Pouty lips with that bee-stung look that made him want to suck and nibble on her mouth and the silken tendrils of honey blonde hair made her look like a centerfold.

Fuck. His men didn't need the temptation she offered. Vik had assured him he'd be sending a competent scientist, someone who could hold his own not only in the Arctic but also against the threat they faced. Sigrid, in all her beauty, looked like one more civilian in need of protection. And she most definitely wasn't male.

He listened to Aud and Svein talk about their research and thought about his own cover. To the outside world, his team was a motley group of scientists living well beyond the limits of one of the northernmost cities in Norway, Ny-Alesund. The city provided a haven for research of all types.

"I'd feel better if you were staying in Ny-Alesund," Aud admitted as she drained the last of her coffee. "But I know you'll take good care of my sister."

*An overprotective older sister. Great.* Bjorn glanced at Sigrid. She sat next to him, an almost forced smile on her face.

"I can take care of—"

"I'll take care of her. You don't have to worry about a thing," Bjorn interrupted, tamping down his worry. He'd get back to camp and give Vik a piece of his mind. Sending along a female scientist when what they really needed was a couple of seasoned EUFOR teams had to be the most foolhardy thing he'd ever seen Vik do. She couldn't make a difference, not against what they were fighting.

Sigrid lifted her chin defiantly, and he couldn't help but admire the long swanlike sweep of her neck. Partially unzipped, her parka revealed a light-blue sweater and the white collar of a turtleneck poking out from underneath. What would she look like under all those clothes? Tall and willowy with slight, graceful sweeps, or voluptuous with breasts promising a generous handful and a rounded ass?

His cock tightened. Bjorn forced his attention back to Sigrid's question about his men, and he decided it was time to leave. The less people knew about his mission, the better.

"It's time to go," he said. "Thank you for making sure Sigrid arrived safely. I can take care of things from here." And the first item on his list was making sure the four horny soldiers back at the compound thought of her *only* as a colleague. He stood.

Sigrid reached into a zippered pocket on her parka only to have Aud shake her head. "I'll pay. My treat since I'm seeing my sister off into the wilds of the Arctic." She grinned. "And before you say anything, remember you and Hilde did the same thing when I left, so don't get all uppity about how you can take care of yourself."

"All right."

If there was indignation in Sigrid's voice, there was love too, and like a knife in his gut, it reminded Bjorn that now they had a noncombatant in their midst.

She rose to her feet beside him and a soft vanilla scent teased his nose. Perfume. Out here. He'd no doubt she'd scare away the polar bears and hoped she wouldn't wear it when they were working in the field. One more reason not to like her.

"Ready?" Sigrid looked up at him.

As he glanced down into her meadow-green eyes, Bjorn forced himself to build a wall between them. Take her to their camp. Keep her safe. The directive was clear. The mission accomplishable, but only if he kept his focus. He nodded to Aud and Svein. "Thank you again for the coffee." Without another glance in Sigrid's direction, he strode toward the front of the café. The battle-hardened, trained warrior inside him knew he should keep his distance.

He'd get Miss Scientist into the hostel, explain a couple things, and if she wanted to leave, he hoped like hell her sister and his cousin could haul her sexy little ass back from where it came. That he even noticed her curves told him he'd wavered from the mission more than he'd intended already.

Inside, his bear saw only a potential mate.

Sigrid watched Bjorn's broad back lead the way through the café. "I'll get my bags," she said before wrapping her scarf around her face. They stepped into the frigid embrace of Arctic spring and she opened the back door of Bjorn's rented vehicle. Two bags, just enough for her gear and some scientific notes, and her laptop were all she tossed into the back of the vehicle, but from the look he gave her, he made them seem like fifteen suitcases packed to the hilt for a vacation getaway.

She resented his attitude. Not knowing what Vik had said made it hard to hate him for his coolness. If he didn't know of her EUFOR rank, then undoubtedly he thought her an untrained, foolish scientist—and a civilian at that. It bothered her. Too many people had dismissed her because of her looks. Too many people had taken advantage of that image, and frankly, she was tired of being the token female.

Bjorn opened the door for her, an unexpected courtesy. She thanked him and slid into the passenger seat. He strode around the vehicle, slipping behind the driver's seat and starting the engine.

"I don't know what—"

Bjorn held up his hand. "We'll talk at the hostel. There are some ground rules we need to discuss."

"Of course, but I'll have you know I'm more than competent. I'll not hinder your work in any way."

"You'd better not, because truth to tell I have to watch over more people than I'd like at the moment. I don't need to worry about some coddled scientist."

"Coddled?" Sigrid fought to keep the shriek from her voice. "You think I'm coddled?" She pressed her lips together. "We will most definitely talk about this at the hostel." She crossed her arms over her breasts and glared out the windshield at the endless white of the Arctic landscape. Buildings rose, their near-colorless construction blending them into a landscape dotted by satellite dishes and antennae.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Bjorn steer the vehicle along the street, thankful at least it wasn't snowing. Fifteen silent minutes later he parked in front of the hostel used for traveling scientists. He helped her inside then accepted the keys for two rooms.

Sigrid watched Bjorn unlock the door to the small cell that would be her room. A twin bed and a dresser filled most of the space, with a rickety desk squeezed in at the foot of the bed. The room, like the five others on this floor, shared a bathroom. Instead of leaving her alone as soon as he'd seen her safely inside, Bjorn followed her. He closed and locked the door.

"You're not going to scare me away." Sigrid dropped her bag to the floor, gently laid her laptop case on the bed and then turned to face Bjorn. She'd dealt with his type before. "I'm sure you received a copy of my orders, and if you didn't then I'm going to have one hell of a long talk with Vik."

"You're going to have a long talk with Vik?" Bjorn arched an eyebrow and crossed his arms over his massive chest. "I assure you Vik told me all I needed to know." He growled and shook his head.

Sigrid might have laughed under any other circumstances. Vik's reluctance to reveal information combined with Bjorn's bullheadedness made an awkward meeting even more so. "I don't think you know everything." She spat a string of Norwegian curses strong enough to make a sailor blush. "You think I'm a blonde scientist intent on crashing your little EUFOR party. Well I hate to tell you buddy, I might not outrank you, but Vik said you needed my scientific expertise to track the polychlorinated biphenyl contamination. He said you'd fill me in once I got here." She pulled open the zipper of her laptop bag and handed over the paper copy of her orders that she'd kept hidden from her sister.

He took them and read with a stony expression on his face before handing them back. "Honey, out here we don't have time for the big words. We just call them PCBs like everybody else. I see Vik left a few things out. However, that doesn't mitigate the fact that you're under my command. You're to do what I say, when I say. This isn't a place for noncombatants. I'll fill you in once I can be certain we're in a completely safe location. Just keep those orders hidden. I trust your sister doesn't know."

"No, Sir," Sigrid confirmed. His blunt words didn't bother her. At least now he treated her like any other soldier under his command and not some bimbo scientist.

"Very good. She can't know. The men will fill you in on the current status of our project. From our initial findings it appears the PCBs coincide with the attacks we've been tracking and trying to prevent. What the higher levels of PCBs mean, it's up to you to figure out. If Vik thinks you'll be helpful then I trust his judgment. But I'm the commanding officer on this mission, and what I say goes."

"Yes, Sir." She saluted sharply. An image of him ordering her to disrobe and get on her knees filled her mind, and she struggled to keep from cracking a smile. Some orders she'd follow gladly. Sigrid gave herself a mental slap. If she wanted to be seen as a professional then she needed to act like it, and salivating over her commanding officer would not be advised.

"Get some sleep. We'll leave early in the morning." Bjorn turned and opened the door. He strode through it, giving her a look at his broad back and narrow hips before the door closed.

Sigrid remained standing. So she'd passed muster, at least for now. She was sure that once she arrived at their base she'd have to go through this all over again with the other members of the team. She pulled a portfolio from her laptop bag, which contained the dossiers on all the team members, and plopped it on the blanket. Pulling her sweater over her head, she let it fall before sprawling on the bed. No time like the present to start her homework. She had no doubt she'd need to be on her toes when Bjorn introduced her to his team.

On the other side of the wall from Sigrid, Bjorn sat on the edge of the bed. He dragged his fingers through his short hair and released a sigh. His cock pounded, an insistent beat that told him unless he'd completely misread the signs, she wanted him. He could make her strip and spread her legs so he could sink into her warm, wet cunt... Bjorn groaned.

He had attacks to stop, lives to save, and he couldn't do it with a raging hard-on. And what about the rest of his team? They'd leave her alone because he ordered it, but her presence could sow dissension in the ranks. He was the captain. By title alone, he ran the mission. And he'd need every ounce of his authority to keep his men from devouring Sigrid Myrhe, no matter her rank.

Through the wall he heard rustling on the bed and his balls tightened. Was she stripping down, sliding under the covers to get some sleep as he'd ordered? The question brought images of what she wore to bed. No old T-shirts for his imagination. He imagined the blonde goddess in silk tap pants and a matching camisole. Her pale breasts would rise from behind lace, her nipples hard and begging for his mouth...

Taking a deep breath, Bjorn bolted to his feet. Any other time he'd go out for a run, but around here, a male polar bear might get noticed. He inhaled and exhaled several times before opening the door to his room. He might not be able to run, but a walk in the below-zero weather would help to clear his head. Right now, he needed all the help he could get.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time they were halfway to the compound the next morning, Bjorn knew exactly what he had to do. It flew in the face of everything he knew professionally and personally, and he doubted Sigrid would like it one bit. Then again, maybe the scientist would like it *too* much. He sensed a passionate core beneath her stern exterior. Sitting next to him, Sigrid stared out the windows at the bleak landscape. What thoughts ran through her mind, he didn't know, and frankly, right now he didn't *want* to know. In less than an hour she'd meet his team. They'd check in with Vik and then the mission would continue in earnest. He suspected she'd want time to settle in and prepare, time the mission wouldn't give them.

Bjorn halted the vehicle. He unbuckled his seat belt and turned toward her.

"What are we doing? Isn't the compound still a ways ahead?" she asked, reaching for her own seat belt. The lock released with a snick. The nylon strap buzzed as it rolled back into the side of the vehicle.

"There's something I need to do before we approach." He slid across the bench seat toward her. "Before we become commanding officer and subordinate, before your mission begins, there's something I need to do." Bjorn stared into her green eyes trying to find some hint of revulsion, some sign she didn't want him.

Sigrid parted her lips. Her breathing hitched, an expectant note within the steady pounding of her heart. Just thinking about tasting her, taking that plump lower lip

between his and suckling, had his body throbbing. *Do it. Mark her and get it over with.* He struggled to remain unaffected by the vanilla scent surrounding him or think of the honey blonde waves of her hair sliding over his skin, his abs, shielding his cock as she –

Dear god, if he didn't stop he'd fuck her right now.

Bjorn cupped her cheek. Her smooth, porcelain skin gave her an ethereal look, like a snow ghost of some dearly departed soul. He clung to that image. Perhaps if he thought about the civilian scientists dying under his protection, he could forget about his lust for Sigrid and simply do what had to be done.

"Bjorn?" His name rolled off her lips in a question.

Bjorn pressed his lips to hers. A gentle touch, restraining the bear's urge to claim a mate, brand her, take her, make sure her cubs held his DNA. Sigrid couldn't be his mate. His life held no room for such domestic things. He could mark her as his just the same, and his scent would keep the rest of the team away. But the bear had never expressed interest in a mate before. Bjorn knew he'd have to work to keep it that way.

Sigrid leaned into him. Her fingers closed around his shoulder, her other hand reaching for the back of the seat. Her breasts brushed against his chest. She tasted of strong coffee and sticky sweet rolls. Against his cheek, her warm exhalations teased his skin.

Sliding his hand to cup the back of her neck, Bjorn deepened the kiss. More pressure, more heat, until like a volcano her passionate nature erupted on a needy moan. He stroked her lower lip with his tongue before sliding it inside her mouth to taste her warm depths. His other hand slid around to her back to haul her against him.

Sigrid sprawled in his lap. His cock, as hard as steel, pressed through several layers of clothing. An animal growl rose within his chest as he plunged his tongue into her mouth again and again. He claimed her with his mouth, an intense mating that would leave his scent all over her. Bjorn inhaled deeply, smelling the musk of his possession over her soft vanilla fragrance. *Mine.* His scent marked her as belonging to him, and none of the men in the team would deny him his prize.

Sigrid pulled back. Eyes wide as saucers, she stared at him. Her tiny pink tongue darted out to lick her lips, as if to taste him, and Bjorn bit back another groan. He released her, fingers lingering against the knit cap on her head, the snowsuit covering her torso. He watched as she scooted into place and clicked the seat belt around her. She sat ramrod straight, eyes staring ahead, lips parted, her panting breaths the only visible sign of arousal.

He smelled her hot female juices soaking her panties. Bjorn stared outside at the ice and snow. Images of the unfeeling landscape couldn't leach the arousal from his veins. He straightened in the seat and fastened his seat belt, then pulled onto the road once more.

"You don't know what you signed up for," Bjorn said a short time later as the building that housed his team came into view. He tried to see the compound through her eyes and wondered what she'd make of the sturdy, utilitarian construction. A high

fence surrounded the structure, and he saw the two military vehicles parked around the side of the building. As a member of EUFOR she'd probably seen and been in worse.

"I didn't sign up to be mauled, no matter how well you kiss." Sigrid turned to face him. Spots of color high on her cheeks, eyes sparking with lustful frustration, she stared unashamedly at him.

"So you think I kiss well?" His male ego swelled, as did something a bit more practical. "Look, there are five guys out here. You might be EUFOR and you might have been sent out here to aid our mission, but you're a woman. A very desirable woman. I am the commanding officer. You have to be seen as under my protection."

"By arriving looking like I've had a good tumble? That's how you hope to protect me."

"By claiming you as mine." He parked in front of the closed gates.

A shiver raced through her and she wrapped her arms around herself. "Yours?" She shook her head. "I don't belong to anyone but myself."

"Not anymore, honey." He fixed her with an appraising glare that sent shivers of heat through her body, her pussy contracting, her nipples hard and aching. "From now on, you're mine."

He opened the door and stepped out, slamming it behind him.

## Chapter Two

For all of Bjorn's bluster about her belonging to him, which Sigrid suspected was simply a way to kiss her, the men acted professionally. Bjorn's second, Lieutenant Kjell Tveit, let brothers Hans and Marc Svetter bring in her luggage while he showed her to her room. Canadian member Trent Majors was out, with no mention of where he was or when he'd return. As a lower-ranking officer, Sigrid figured she had no need to know the information.

She'd gotten settled then promptly checked in with Bjorn to share what she knew of the assignment. Together they'd gone over Vik's notes and it had been as if the kiss hadn't happened. He left her with contamination reports based on samples taken from everything from seals and polar bears to the surrounding environment, told her she'd better make heads or tails out of it, and then cloistered himself with Kjell while they discussed something of utmost importance.

Probably her.

In the main living room, Sigrid stared at the glow of the moon outside the window. True night was a fleeting thing, and she enjoyed the moonlight reflecting off the snow. In a cloudless sky, meteor showers and the northern lights shone like beacons of hope. If man could discover such richness in the universe, then surely he had the ability to fix the problems here on Earth. Sigrid hoped so. She flipped through the charts listing PCB contamination. Spikes of unknown origin dotted the charts, and Sigrid knew this was why she had been sent here. Her work identifying and isolating environmental pollutions would prove invaluable to whatever Bjorn and his men were doing out here. He still hadn't leveled with her, and her orders addressed only her work on the contamination. How it all fit into a larger picture, she didn't know.

Mentally she ran through what she *did* know. The U.S. had stopped using the chemicals in the late seventies. Eastern European countries and the former USSR were the most likely sources of contamination, as their industries struggled to move forward and their regulations and business practices remained mired in the past. Old chemicals. Old ways of dealing with problems. Combined, the two made the former USSR the likeliest suspect. Even worse, the contamination remained in the environment—in places like rivers and dump sites—until removed, making it a lucrative business for companies to filter out the material and dispose of it. But right now, the spikes could come from any number of things, the easiest explanation being that atmospheric patterns carried the chemicals from the industrial world to the Arctic, where they simply dropped into the environment. Sigrid didn't think it would be that simple.

She exhaled. Bjorn's kiss played through her mind. Hot and hard, the touch of his lips against hers had flared heat straight to her pussy. Through his snowsuit the thick

ridge of his cock had pressed against her, and she imagined it stuffing her. He'd fill her. Stuff her so full she probably could taste him, and if he fucked half as well as he kissed, it'd probably blow her to pieces.

Sigrid closed her eyes and shook her head. Didn't matter. Not when Bjorn Lunde was her commanding officer and in charge of this mission. One wrong step and she had no doubt she'd be sent back to Oslo so fast it'd make her head spin. He obviously didn't want her here. Probably had kissed her in a feeble attempt to scare her away. Except, she suspected Bjorn didn't do anything in half measures, and had he wanted to send her away he could have. No questions asked.

Thumbing through the reports, she focused on the task at hand, looking for some correlation between the PCB reports and the locations, the time of year, anything to tie them together. The seemingly random numbers and facts swirled through her mind. She reached for the pencil perennially tucked behind her ear and tapped it against the papers. Nibbling on her lower lip, she jotted notes on the pad beside the reports. She'd have something for Bjorn by morning. She was certain of it.

Outside the window the northern lights flared. Sigrid watched them for a moment, correlating the swirling gasses in the atmosphere to the creatures of the Arctic. So beautiful and strange, completely beyond reach of most people and yet, destined to fade away. She curled her fingers into a fist to keep from reaching toward the window and futilely trying to capture the elusive colors. Like her mother, her father and her sisters, she devoted herself to protecting the Arctic ecosystem. She wouldn't let any of them down.

From the entranceway, Bjorn watched the woman Vik had brought into their team. He'd spent most of the afternoon in discussions with Kjell, most of them about Sigrid. And then he'd spent another hour on a secure line with General Viktor Targent, the British leader of their small division of EUFOR. Most of them called him Vik to his face, but today he was General Targent, and mostly "Sir, yes Sir".

In spite of Bjorn's objections, Vik assured him he preferred having on-site personnel explain everything to Corporal Myrhe.

"Don't let her low rank fool you," Vik had said. "She's a bloody smart scientist and will help you find the missing key. Just concentrate on keeping everyone alive and give Sigrid time to find the connection. She won't let you down."

So it fell to him to tell her about the mission, and by the time he'd completed his meetings, dinner had passed and Sigrid had retreated into her bedroom. Already Kjell mentioned noticing Bjorn's smell on her, and the fact that it seemed an awfully barbaric way to keep the other men away. Bjorn shrugged. He'd done what needed to be done in the most expedient way possible. Hormones didn't always obey rank.

And didn't he know that? He watched her nibble on the pencil eraser, then pull her lower lip into her mouth and chew at it in thought. She stared out the window at the dazzling show of the northern lights, and for a moment he thought she might press her

fingers to the glass as if she could reach out and touch the streaks and bands of color. Instead, she returned her attention to her notes and began to read.

Images of her had pulled him from his bed. He'd lain there, legs tangled in layers of blankets in spite of the whirring of the heater keeping the compound at a balmy sixty-eight degrees. His cock throbbing, he'd nearly wrapped his fingers around it and stroked himself to completion. But then she'd have won. He'd have let down his hard-fought-for control and given in to his body's urges. Focus—and reciting the first twenty-five elements of the periodic table—brought him to a state of half hardness that allowed him to slip on a pair of sweatpants and pad barefoot out to the main living area, where he hoped he could sit and think. Alone. And instead, he'd found her.

He stepped forward. His body leapt to eagerness at the prospect of approaching her. In the dim light she looked less like an ice queen and more approachable. Perhaps it was the soft pajamas clinging to her curves or the way her hair tumbled around her shoulders. Bjorn didn't know the reason. He curled his fingers into a fist to keep from touching her.

The floor creaked.

Sigrid looked behind her, mouth forming a perfect oval at his presence. She set the pencil on the table and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "I didn't know you were there. I'm sorry if I disturbed you," she said.

"Disturbed" wasn't a strong enough word for the thoughts that intruded on his mind and made him think of her in less-than-military terms. "It's all right." He pulled a chair out from the side of the table and sat down. "I meant to catch up with you all day and time just got away. Too many things to handle with my return. We need to discuss why you're here."

"About damn time," Sigrid muttered. "Sorry, Sir. I had hoped that you would fill in the blanks Vik left." She pursed her lips and frowned.

Vik. Good. Staring there would give them both common ground and refocus his attention on the mission. "So what did Vik tell you?" He'd let her tell him what she knows, and then he'd decide just how much he was ready to explain.

At last, a chance to sit down with Bjorn and figure out the damn mission. Sigrid suppressed the urge to leap from her chair and dance for joy. Breathing deeply, she formulated a plan in her mind. No use going into this discussion half-cocked. She'd only reinforce Bjorn's image of her as a young, untried scientist of low military rank.

"Vik told me you needed a scientist to piece together these PCB contamination readings. Because of my work with Arctic mammals, and the fact that I'm a corporal with EUFOR, he told me that I was the best candidate and gave me the orders that you've seen. Vik told me I'd be freeing up the other team members to focus on their primary objective—and that is the extent of my knowledge." Sigrid looked Bjorn in the eyes, searching for some sign of acceptance. "I trust you'll tell me as much about your mission as you can and provide information to help me better filter these readings."

"That's all Vik told you?"

"Yes, Sir." Bjorn's disbelief made her uneasy. She reached for the pencil, pulling her fingers away at the last moment. She'd been on missions like this before, mostly when EUFOR needed someone to mingle with the scientists or provide military insight into a research project. She sensed Bjorn's team's mission went beyond such ambassadorial work.

"My team was sent here to discover the source of attacks on visiting scientists. We've found increased PCB contamination in several polar bears, many of which appear to have been victims of the same attacks. There seems to be some correlation between the pollution readings and the attacks but frankly, we're soldiers, and haven't the time to devote to ferreting out the scientific side. Our time has been spent tracking the attacks and trying to prevent more." Bjorn paused. "Regarding the attacks...as crazy as it sounds, locals speak of night demons that fall to the Earth from the northern lights to ravage their people."

"Night demons." Sigrid gave a little laugh and glanced out the window but the spectacular light show of the aurora borealis had faded. She wrapped her arms around herself. "You don't actually believe that, do you, Sir?" If she kept his title between them, then perhaps she could ignore the broad planes of his chest, or the dusting of blond hair that bisected his abs and disappeared behind the waistband of his sweatpants. Her mouth watered as she imagined following that line with her tongue. *Damn it, girl, behave. It's not like I haven't been around EUFOR hunks before. Something about military men...*

"Belief is not required for the mission." He kept his gaze fastened on her face. Just a little lower and she knew he'd see her nipples pressing against the cotton of her nightshirt. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

"And trained scientists don't believe in them either. I trust I'll be able to meet with those who claim to have seen the...*demons*, and perhaps take some blood samples if they'll let me. You do have a complete scientific facility here. This isn't just for show, is it?" She waved her hand at the compound.

"If you require anything beyond what we have, we'll acquire it. I'm sure you'll find the lab facilities more than adequate."

"Is there anything else about the mission you feel I need to know?" Night demons and strange attacks weren't enough information. It wasn't even credible information. "Why was your team selected to find out more? I know why I'm here. But...why are you?"

"Because we're the best team for the job." Bjorn rose to his feet. "I suggest you get a good night's sleep. I want you in the lab bright and early."

Sigrid stood. "Yes, Sir." She closed her hand around his biceps. The rock-hard muscle made her conscious of her own softness. Standing before her, Bjorn looked like a wall.

He glanced down at her hand but made no move to remove it.

"You're not telling me everything. I want your word that you'll answer all my questions to the best of your ability. I may only have been brought here for my scientific knowledge, but if you'll excuse me, Sir, this 'need to know' shit is exactly that. I can't do my job if I don't have all the information. I won't tolerate your holding back because I'm of lesser rank." *And because I'm a woman.* Accusing superior officers of sexism didn't bode well for good relations. She was already pushing it, but she wouldn't go there. Still, she'd had quite enough of being coddled.

"I will answer your questions as much as I am allowed. If you wish to speak with Vik, we have a secure line here."

"I may do that." She released his arm. "Thank you, Sir. Good night, Sir."

Bjorn nodded. He turned to leave before stopping and drawing a deep breath. "There's one more thing before I go." He returned to her, stopping so close his chest nearly brushed against her breasts. "There can't be anything between us. I don't need you distracting me."

"Distracting? I could say the same thing, Captain. I'm not the one who initiated that kiss. I need to focus on my work." Sigrid boldly met his gaze, a smile playing around the corners of her mouth. Tiny electrical charges zinged through her veins. She swayed toward him just a little bit, her hormones overriding her good sense.

"And I have to focus on the mission..."

His head dipped until he ended the sentence with his lips settling firmly on hers. The warm pressure sent her swaying against him, her breasts crushing against his pecs. Her nipples turned into tiny points and she inhaled his musky aroma. Her fingers curled around his biceps more to steady herself than to feel his hard muscles, but as his arm wound around her waist, she clenched her fingers. The thin material of his sweatpants did little to hide his erection.

Her pussy clenched. Deep inside something sparked to life, a fire she'd ignored for too long in favor of her studies. It felt so good, so right. Her body fit against Bjorn's as if it were made for him. His close-cut hair chafed against her palm as she curled her fingers against the back of his neck, and when his tongue swiped against her lower lip, her toes curled.

Kissing Bjorn reminded her of sinking into a hot pool after a day spent tromping through the snow and ice. Starting with her toes and working its way upward, warmth flared to life inside her. His tongue made an exploratory dip into her mouth and she whimpered against his lips. Heat filled her pussy.

Bjorn rocked his hips against hers, the thick length of his cock telling her that he'd love to sink into her. His hands slid underneath her buttocks and pulled her up and against him.

Instinctively she wrapped her legs around his narrow hips. She stroked the length of his tongue with her own, drawing it deeper into her mouth. Her arms wrapped around his neck and when he pulled his lips from hers to trail a fiery line down her throat, she breathed, "Bjorn..."

He carried her two steps to the table. Papers slid as he settled her on the hard wooden surface. Standing between her spread thighs, he grabbed the hem of her shirt and yanked it from the waistband of her pants. His big hands splayed against her ribs, each fingertip branding itself into her flesh. Hot, so hot...like a furnace. She wanted him to fill her so she'd never be cold again.

His fingers brushed the undersides of her breasts. Nuzzling her collarbone, he laved her skin with small licks of his tongue as he moved down. Masculine groans filled her ears as she skimmed her fingers along the flesh she'd longed to touch. Each ridge of his abs tempted her, tormented her with lurid thoughts of the muscled man above her.

Bjorn closed his lips around her nipple. Through the cotton fabric of her sleepshirt, the wet suction of his mouth wrung a cry from her throat. She managed to stifle it, but not enough.

"Shhh," he crooned.

Heat suffused her cheeks to think they had to be quiet, like a couple teenagers afraid of getting caught, and then he tongued her nipple and she couldn't think at all. Cupping the back of his head, she held him to her breast, writhing against the table as he toyed with her nipple. The graze of his teeth, the stroke of his tongue...then he turned his attention to her other breast and the air chilled the wet spot on her shirt. He pulled the hem of her shirt up, freeing her breasts and licking her skin.

Feeling him, skin against skin, conjured all the fantasies she'd harbored since meeting him in Ny-Alesund. She pressed her ankles into the backs of his thighs, wishing he'd turn his attention south. Her hand stilled against his abs and beneath her touch, his muscles fluttered. Just a few more inches and she'd be able to cup his length, to test his size in the palm of her hand. Her cunt tightened at the thought.

"Please," she whispered.

His lips trailed lower. Pressing open-mouthed kisses to her abdomen, he followed each rib until he met the waistband of her pants. Although it was mere elastic, he treated it as a barrier he couldn't cross, licking and nibbling along the fabric.

With her juices flooding her panties and his lips playing along her waist, he had to smell how wet he made her. She spread her legs wider.

Bjorn dropped to one knee.

Looking down at his bent head, the way he focused his attention on her pussy, made Sigrid's breath catch in her throat. She spread her legs wider still, wishing she could just rip off her pants. "Touch me," she moaned, ignoring his directive for silence.

Bjorn looked up. Eyes the darkest green she'd ever seen, lips parted, desire etched into every line of his face—he stole her breath. Kneeling between her legs, he looked every inch a man bent on pleasuring a woman. Rank, service, mission, none of it mattered. All she wanted at that moment was his lips, his fingers, hell his face, she didn't care, buried against her clit and labia.

A throat cleared behind them.

Bjorn bolted to his feet, turning to shield her from view. "Lieutenant, this had better be good," he snarled.

Sigrid drew a shaky breath and pulled down her shirt. Her body thrummed from Bjorn's seduction. Her pussy ached and she wanted nothing more than to slide from the table, wrap her arms around his waist and stroke his cock. Kjell's stern countenance as he stared at them and Bjorn's barking voice stilled her.

Heat filled her cheeks. To be caught making out with Bjorn like a horny teenager undermined her professionalism. She scowled. Accepting this mission meant a chance to put her scientific mark on the map. Groping Bjorn did nothing to help that cause. So why, as she stared at his broad, bare back and followed the line of his spine down to the taut buttocks behind gray sweatpants, did she still find her thoughts wandering?

Bjorn stepped forward.

The motion pulled her attention from him to his second, Kjell, standing in the doorway wearing a gray T-shirt with camouflage pants in a mottled black, gray and white. He looked over Bjorn's shoulder at her and frowned.

"There's been another attack."

"What kind of attack?" Bjorn asked.

Her blood ran cold thinking about the scientists who'd died in previous attacks. She tried to imagine creatures that came down from the northern lights and failed. There ultimately *had* to be a simple explanation for the attacks. Maybe the scientists had left food out and attracted bears. There had certainly been the occasional report of polar bears attacking humans.

Kjell now ignored Sigrid entirely. "Get your gear and let's go. I'll give you details on the way."

"Trent all right?" Bjorn asked. He turned back to her. "Get dressed and get in bed. Once we leave I don't want you to go outside the compound."

Sigrid slid from the table. "I want to go with you to see what we're up against. I'm a member of this team too. I'll stay back, I promise." All her life someone had been busy wrapping her in wool. As a member of EUFOR, and as the scientist who needed to put the pieces of the puzzle together, she balked at the idea of Bjorn tucking her in bed to protect her. "I'll be dressed and ready in five."

"No you won't." He snagged her arm, his grip just shy of painful. "I'm the captain, and I say who goes."

"We don't have time for this. Leave her here." Kjell shook his head. "We have work to do."

"Work I was brought here to do! If I can't see the attack site or collect samples, then how am I supposed to search for this link?" Ignoring the wet spot over her breast, she stepped out from behind Bjorn.

Kjell glanced to her breast, at her erect nipple poking through the wet fabric and then back to Bjorn. "Captain, let's go." His scowl spoke volumes.

Bjorn marched forward and Sigrid fell into step beside him. No matter what happened she wasn't missing this, and when they returned, she'd have a nice long talk with Vik. She was damn sick and tired of being treated like a second-class civilian.

"Captain, I think you'll want to look over the surveillance photos we took of the area before we head out. I'll muster Marc and Hans."

"Thank you, Kjell. And you'll keep what you saw back there between us, right?"

"Yes, Sir."

Neither man looked over his shoulder at Sigrid. "Do you have other surveillance photos that might help me make sense of those readings? I haven't seen the other attacks and a comparison would be helpful," she suggested.

Both men stopped. Bjorn glanced over his shoulder, eyes wide as if he'd forgotten she'd been following them. Apparently they'd both forgotten she'd been assigned quarters at the end of the hall, with the entire team between her and the outside world.

"That can be arranged." He reached for a doorknob and opened it. "If you want to be part of this mission, I suggest you're dressed and ready in two minutes."

"Yes, Sir." She nodded her head and rushed past Kjell, not caring what the other man thought of her. Since he acted as Bjorn's second, he followed orders. She'd show both men that she could be counted on. She opened her door and scurried inside.

She ran a brush through her hair and tied it back with an elastic band, tucking it under a stocking cap with earflaps. Trading her pajamas for long underwear, fleece clothing, bibbed snow pants and a parka took a minute, and she laced her boots to the sound of men running down the hall. She opened her door and fell in line.

Adrenaline pounded through her veins. So this was what it was like being part of a team heading for a mission! Her other assignments seemed tepid in comparison. She struggled to suppress the grin on her face, afraid the men might take it the wrong way. The four men surrounded a table in the living area, with Bjorn at its head. She stepped in beside Hans, who barely noticed her.

Large topography maps lay spread open before them. Sigrid recognized the flat plain on which the compound sat and the rugged terrain to the northwest. Bjorn pointed beyond there to a small peak.

"The attack happened here," he said. "We'll be able to make it in one of the snow transports, but it's going to be tough. We'll go in one vehicle. I want to make a cursory sweep and then get out of there. Sigrid, get your readings fast. We're not staying long. We'll do other reconnaissance later. We are not moving offensively."

Sigrid bit her lip to keep from asking about the other reconnaissance. It seemed once the team got out there, they'd want to spend as much time as possible while the site was still fresh. She didn't question Bjorn.

Less than ten minutes later Sigrid found herself riding in the tracked vehicle heading toward the attack site. She stared at the icy landscape, searching as she always did for polar bears. Of course, this time of year they'd be en route to slowly thawing ice

to fatten up on whatever they could find. Thoughts of the night demons swirled in her mind. It was far too fanciful—like an Inuit legend come to life—to think of demons stalking across the snow slaying people. And why the scientists? They worked to save the Arctic ecosystem. Their research into global warming, geothermal heating patterns and pollution would only help people, not harm them.

The men rode quietly, no gentle camaraderie, no jokes. They all focused on the landscape just as she did, except Sigrid sensed they watched it with different views. She hated coming into this group as an outsider, hated not having all the information she thought they had. And right now, on their way to another attack site, was certainly the time to get it.

“What kind of reconnaissance do you do?” she asked Marc in an attempt to break the silence.

He shrugged. “Check for tracks, see if we can find any obvious direction of attack. Watch over you while you pull out the ice cores and samples.”

Sigrid nodded and knew he wouldn’t reveal any information without Bjorn’s say-so. She contented herself with staring out the window and knew once the vehicle stopped, she’d do her best to get her readings and stay out of their way.

## Chapter Three

Bjorn listened to Sigrid questioning Marc, and when the junior member of their team answered tersely, he nodded to himself. Vik may have provided sketchy details, but there were a few things he was certain Vik hadn't told her. His team's special abilities had to remain a secret. He scanned the horizon looking for signs of an imminent attack. Although no northern lights flickered across the sky it didn't mean they were in the all clear. Whatever these creatures were—they acted more like savages than demons—they attacked at all hours. Even this time of year, when the ever-present Arctic day pressed aside the night, they still attacked. They needed to find out what drove them. They needed to *stop* them. Bjorn pressed the gas a little more aggressively, thinking about the demons taking out another scientist.

His people. His job to protect them. The bear roared to life inside him, a driving need to swipe claws at anything that threatened those under his protection. From his team to the scientists to the locals, he considered everyone under his protection. This was a different kind of war, one without guns and mortar fire, but a battle nonetheless, and Bjorn didn't intend to lose.

He slowed as he approached the ridge. Normally he'd stop the vehicle and let Marc and Kjell out to scour the area in their other forms. As polar bears, their keen senses would pick up any trace of the intruders. Sigrid's presence prevented their shifting and required a second trip back out here.

Kjell glanced at him and Bjorn shook his head. "We're going in. I want someone watching Sigrid while she takes those samples. Two others can flank out and see if we can find any traces. Trent's on site and will give us what information he can. Let's make it no more than an hour, two tops. All right, people?"

Silent nods all around signified ascent.

Bjorn maneuvered the vehicle through the rocky terrain, emerging into a bowl-shaped depression. Around the circular valley stood icy glaciers three meters high, ridges broken off and great chunks of ice piled at their bases. Red slashes cut across the snowy ground.

Bjorn swallowed hard. Trent stood guard over the body, a lone scientist, his navy blue snow pants and parka looking out of place amid the sea of blood and snow. Equipment lay toppled on its side and tracks from the scientists' vehicle were crossed over by those made by Trent's vehicle. There was one way in and one out.

Unless you were a snow demon.

Automatically he scanned the ridges of snow, looking for signs of them. Though he'd only seen them twice—black humanoid shapes with long arms and legs, fingers shaped like claws and mouths like great open maws from which a fetid smell

emerged—he didn't want to run into them again, and certainly not with Sigrid among them. Previously the team had shifted into their polar bear forms, using strength and skill to rend the creatures apart. Once their heads were separated from their bodies they dissipated into thin air. Alive or dead they left no physical trace, only the mutilated bodies of their victims.

"You have your missions." Bjorn's low voice rumbled from his chest. "Move it!"

His team moved like the well-trained unit it was. Doors flew open and men stepped into the snow, Sigrid among them.

She slung her pack over her shoulder and gestured to Marc. "I want five samples, one at each cardinal direction and one from the body site. We'll start here." She surveyed the depression, moving about a meter to the left of the vehicle and dropping to one knee. She rummaged in her pack as Marc stood over her.

Satisfied that the young officer would keep Sigrid out of trouble, Bjorn hurried over to where Kjell and Trent stood by the body. Gashes rent the corpse nearly in two. Blood and intestines spilled out onto the snow. A large slash mark split the man's throat, his blood frozen into a nearly black congealed mass on his snowsuit. Agony twisted his face.

"Adam Causworth. American scientist. I tracked down and spoke to his partner, who hurried to their vehicle when the attack happened, fired his rifle at the attacker, which didn't hurt it, and when it became obvious that Adam wasn't going to survive, took off fast. I sent him on to Ny-Alesund and told him we'd talk to him later. He's claiming it was a polar bear attack. It's safer that way, though there aren't any nearby ice floes to support that story. Most of the bears are on the water hunting seals. But people will still believe polar bears over demons." Trent glanced down at the corpse. "Looks like the poor bastard didn't even have a chance."

Bjorn nodded. Even after seeing half a dozen of these corpses, the sight of blood and guts spread across the pristine snow never ceased to startle him. He treated each dead body as a personal affront to his sensibilities. *I promised to keep them safe.* "Damn it," he growled.

Squatting next to the body, he inhaled deeply. The man's scent filled the air. No traces of the attacker. "No trail?"

Trent shook his head. "None. It's like they don't exist."

"Except they do." Bjorn gestured to the mutilated corpse. He glanced over his shoulder to where Sigrid knelt on the ice, using a hand drill to pull a low-level ice core sample. "If they leave a trail of any kind, she'll find it."

Trent followed Bjorn's gaze. "Think so?"

Bjorn nodded. "Vik has faith in her. We should too." He rose to his feet to return to the vehicle. Moments later, he started snapping pictures.

An inhuman howl rose on the wind.

Bjorn stopped, camera held in still hands. The wind picked up, swirling small eddies of snow around the body. "Get Sigrid," he hissed.

Trent bolted toward her.

Bjorn dropped the camera in the snow, the hair on the back of his neck rising. Clouds boiled in the sky, tendrils of fog reaching toward the ground. Long forms fell from the clouds, easily seven feet tall, standing on stick-thin legs ending in sharp talons. Their clawed fingers hung on long arms dangling to their knees, their mouths great black holes.

"Attack!" he bellowed. Inside him, the bear roared to life. Muscles bunched, twisted and burned with the need to shift forms. Their bear forms gave them the best chance of injuring the creatures, the power and strength of the bear far outweighing their own. With the woman among them they couldn't shift, but he'd be damned if she was hurt on his watch. He launched himself at the nearest creature.

Clawed fingers ripped through the air just millimeters from his face, the demon snarling like a feral cat.

Bjorn hit it firmly in the stomach. So long as the creatures touched the ground, they felt solid and could be hit, apparently feeling pain. The beast toppled back, more forms dropping to the ground near it. Beside Bjorn, Marc and Hans took up their positions. Six against three. Not good odds for a team that couldn't release their greatest weapons. He shoved thoughts of Sigrid from his mind.

Though seemingly formed of smoke and fog, the creatures felt solid as he pummeled them. Fists and feet flying, they drove the six creatures back, away from the body and Sigrid. Large glacial rocks formed a wall behind them. Pinned, the creatures fought viciously.

A claw caught Bjorn on the cheek. Blood welled against the cut, burning in the frigid air. He ducked, sent a roundhouse into the creature's stomach and sideswiped with his feet to knock the demon to the ground. It fell with a muffled thump.

Adrenaline pulsed through his veins. Bending over the demon, he flung off his glove, right hand twisting, changing into a bear paw. One vicious swipe across the creature's throat and a strangled cry filled the air. A puff of smoke—and the demon vanished.

No time to savor his victory. Bjorn turned, a second demon flanking him, somehow getting between him and Hans. Embroiled in the battle, the other man drove the beast into a corner. A roar ripped from his throat and like Bjorn, he'd lost his gloves. A swipe, another, and a tendril of smoke announced the demon's demise.

Sharp claws ripped through Bjorn's snowsuit and he bit back his howl of pain. He shouldered the demon aside. Narrowly missing another swipe of the claws, he turned and found himself caught between two demons. Another demon closed in on one side. Nearly shoulder-to-shoulder with Marc, the two men fought in unison. Nearby, Hans held his own against a single demon. He dared not look for Sigrid or Trent.

A feint and a backhanded claw from Bjorn caught a demon on the shoulder, ripping a slash from neck to waist, across the demon's torso. The demon roared but didn't dissipate. As soon as the wound appeared, the creature rose toward the sky and the slash dissipated, the churning smoke within its form replacing whatever might have been lost. The creature dropped to the ground and resumed the battle.

Bjorn stepped aside, the wash of fetid breath against his face sickening. The injury to his cheek burned, his side ached and he feared the claws had caught more than fabric. Sigrid. He had to keep them away from her.

A rock turned under his foot. His ankle twisted and he stumbled. A quick right-left narrowly missed him and when he turned, the demon loomed above him, its comrade ducking in beside.

Bjorn blocked, the impact of the blow reverberating through his entire body. Feint. Swipe. Block. The rhythm of the fight burned through him until his focus narrowed down to nothing but the three demons facing them down. *Get away from here, bastard!* He dared not waste time on words.

Muscles burned with exertion. A lucky blow and one of the creatures evaporated. Another shriek announced Marc had finally gotten his victim and he closed in to help Hans, each engaging a demon.

The remaining creature spun on Bjorn. With the cold wall of the rocks at his back, he glanced around the creature to try to see the vehicle. Neither Trent nor Sigrid were in sight. Good. Bjorn tucked away the distracting thoughts and bellowed, allowing his face to shift, muzzle erupting from nose and lips. Snarling, he nipped at the demon.

The bear inside him took over. It didn't drop him to all fours but instead stood upright like an alpha male surveying his territory. *Snap...swipe...swipe!* The tips of his claws caught the demon across the neck.

Close, but not enough. Bjorn charged. Head lifted, jaws parted, he lunged at the demon. He closed his teeth around the creature's neck and twisted. Through its smoky flesh, his teeth met. Bjorn tossed his muzzle from side to side, seeking to split the spinal cord from the skull. He didn't know the anatomy of these beasts, but they died like anything else. A snap filled the air, followed by a wail, and Bjorn fell to his hands and knees in the snow.

Bjorn glanced around, conscious of Marc and Hans standing before him, shielding him from view of anyone in the vehicle. He closed his eyes, the man exerting control over the bear. His face changed first, features melding until he appeared human once more. His paws curled into the snow, changing, fading until the icy crust burned his fingers. Someone dropped his gloves by his side and Bjorn slid his fingers into the warmth.

His side burned. His jaw ached. Sitting back on his haunches, he looked up at the two men. "They're gone."

They nodded.

"Sigrid? Trent?"

"Safe in the vehicle," Marc said. "Trent assures me she saw nothing but three men fighting the demons."

"She didn't see the partial shifts?" He tensed as he waited for the answer.

"Negative, Sir. Just us battling the demons," Marc replied.

"Good." He stood and relaxed, knowing their secret remained safe. "Let's see how many more cores she needs to drill and get the hell out of here. I don't want to wait to see if they come back."

Marc and Hans nodded and they returned to the vehicle. Trent emerged with a shaken Sigrid and handed Bjorn the snowy camera, and all five men stood guard while Sigrid obtained the last three cores.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sigrid whirled to stare at the two men standing beside her. They were back inside the compound and she doubted she was in any danger here, unless the too-close-for-comfort men counted. "Will you two back up?" she snarled. The entire time she had drilled her remaining cores after the attack by the whateverthelltheywere, all five men had hovered too close for comfort. Now, finishing up her meal, Hans and Kjell stood on her five and seven o'clock so close she could have elbowed either one of them. Across from her Trent ate, and Marc sat at her nine o'clock. Bjorn had risen to take his dishes to the sink, and Sigrid thanked that small mercy.

Neither man took a step back.

"Lieutenant. Sergeant." Bjorn's voice ripped through the room. "At ease."

Both men took a baby step away.

"Okay." Her gaze took in all five men. "So what the hell happened out there? What attacked you?" All the men had fought like they were possessed, and while she appreciated and understood top-notch military training, something about them seemed more than human. The snarls and growls she'd heard couldn't have come from human throats, and none of the men had gone for their sidearms. When she had reached for the military-issued gun at her side, Trent's hand on her arm stopped her. "Why wouldn't you let me fire?" she asked the man sitting across from her.

"Bullets don't work on those things. Most likely you would have hit one of the team instead."

"So you're saying bullets pass through them? Like they're smoke or something." She shook her head. "I don't buy it. If you doubt my marksmanship, say so. Take me out to the range. I'd be happy to prove you have no need to doubt my skill."

"We don't doubt your skill," Bjorn said, rejoining the group. "Trent's right."

Sigrid shoved back her chair and turned to face him. "Really. Then what the hell attacked you? Were those things the 'night demons' you mentioned? Because demons aren't supposed to exist! But I know what I saw, and they sure as hell weren't polar bears."

"More things than you realize exist." Bjorn dismissed the men with a wave of his hand.

Chairs scraped against the floor. Booted feet echoed as the men left the room and suddenly she sat alone with Bjorn. He walked around the table and took the seat Trent had vacated.

"That man didn't die of a polar bear attack. There weren't any teeth marks on him. Just nice, neat cuts as if he were flayed with razors. Organs intact. A polar bear might have taken something, eaten part of the corpse. They don't just leave fresh meat lying around." She braced her elbows on the table, hands clasped. Leaning forward, she stared at him. "You mentioned the demons last night. Those were it, weren't they?" She shuddered.

Bjorn nodded.

"Windigos."

"What?" Bjorn's brow raised in surprise.

"Windigos. They look exactly like I'd imagine a Windigo to look. But they're legend, folklore. They don't exist."

"So tell me, Corporal Myrhe, what did you see?"

Sigrid sucked in a deep breath. Her scientific mind refused to allow her to believe in the existence of something out of legend. "Whatever attacked you was tall. Long-limbed, almost skeletal in appearance. I saw no facial features, no distinguishing characteristics. Black, the color of shadows." She closed her eyes, not liking the picture her words painted. "I saw a book once that mentioned Windigos. The demons look...oh fuck. They look exactly like the drawings in that book." She swallowed hard.

"And now you see."

"I don't see anything." Her eyes widened. "You think the PCB contamination is a clue?" She shook her head. "But that's silly. I mean, *legends* leaving PCB contamination behind? Or tracking them through it? The scientist in me is telling you that you're crazy."

"And the woman? The part that isn't a scientist?" As he spoke his voice dripped to a husky growl.

Sigrid pressed her lips together. The woman in her wanted to leap across the table, drape herself across his lap and fuck him senseless. However, she was a military officer and scientist first, and neither one of them approved of the woman's hedonistic fantasies. "She's not welcome here," Sigrid replied. "I'm working in a man's world. I learned long ago to keep the woman under wraps."

"That's not what happened last night." Bjorn dragged his fingers through his hair and shoved his chair back. "I think you let the woman inside you take the lead." He stalked her around the table and stopped beside her, leaning his hip against the wood. "I think you let the woman out to play."

"And it can't happen again." She rose to her feet, not liking to have to look up at him. Staring at his hips, at the bulge behind the fly of his camouflage pants, across his muscled chest to his broad shoulders, she felt small and feminine. A woman in a man's world. She'd long been used to living like that, hiding her curves, her desires. With Bjorn, it was almost impossible to hide. And she knew if she let the woman out, she'd jeopardize her standing in the team. She'd be the one fucking the captain, not the scientist putting all the facts together. Sigrid stepped back, arms folded across her chest.

"You can't hide the fact that you're a woman." He gaze caressed the curve of her breasts, the flare of her hips. "The men want you. *I* want you."

"You're the captain of this team. Having sex with you wouldn't be professional. It wouldn't be in my best interests."

"Really?" Arms dropped to his sides, he moved closer. Desire darkened his eyes. Masculine confidence radiated from each step.

She knew intimately the muscles in his legs, each ripple of his muscled abdomen, the feel of his flat pectorals against her breasts. Her pussy clenched, wept at the thought of finally being filled by his cock. If her explorations last night were any indication, she'd bet it was thicker and longer than any she'd had before. Sigrid bit back a whimper. "Bjorn, no."

"Yes." He backed her to the wall and braced his hand next to her head. He dipped his own, his warm breath teasing strands of her hair as his nostrils flared and he sniffed her. "You're wet."

His statement should have embarrassed her. Instead, moisture filled her channel. Yeah, she was wet, soaked, ready for him. "You're a military officer. You can't take me against my will." She stood stiffly against the wall, felt the cool barrier through her clothing.

Heat radiated from Bjorn. It filled her, battled with the chill of the wall until she wanted to sink into his warmth, let it penetrate her. "I don't think it would be against your will. You're in the Arctic with five men, Sigrid. What did you think would happen?"

She ducked underneath his arm, his assumption that she'd fuck one of them, all of them, churning in her stomach. She stepped aside, bumping into a chair. Reaching out, she steadied herself. "Captain, this isn't advisable."

He whirled to face her. Raw hunger shone on his face. She'd seen the look before—when a polar bear waited on an ice floe, ready to tackle the first fat seal that came along. Her lips parted. "Bjorn," she breathed. A knot formed in her throat.

She'd fuck him. Deep in her bones she knew it, and the military officer in her hated the lack of willpower. The scientist in her feared it'd ruin her work, that the team would no longer take her seriously once she spread her legs for their captain. But the woman—oh, the woman inside her remembered how long it'd been since a real cock had filled her slick channel. The woman ached to touch his skin, to feel the play of muscles, to feel his lips hot and demanding on hers.

"Sigrid. You can't fight this."

"Yeah," she said, turning to run away. "I can." Without waiting for a reply, she bolted to her room.

*Prey. Run. Chase. Capture. Fuck.* The bear dominated his thoughts. His cock throbbed, a demanding beat that echoed the bear's desires. Objectively, Bjorn knew he had to control the bear, had to maintain professional distance between himself and Sigrid. But he'd sensed the men sniffing around. Trent had protected her. The Canadian had already made half a claim on her, and Marc and Kjell hovered in close, ready to take on all comers for this female should Bjorn's control slip. No. They couldn't have her, and he'd marked her to make his claim crystal clear. She belonged to him. His men had damned well better obey.

Vik already knew military protocol in several matters didn't apply to Bjorn's team. They were part bear. Different rules applied to them, and the rest of EUFOR didn't need to know about their abilities or their special preternatural unit.

He sprinted after her.

Bjorn held back, knowing he could overtake her at any time. Instead, he stayed a couple steps behind, following her in her mad flight to her room. When she was even with his bedroom door, he poured on a burst of speed. Grabbing her around the waist with one arm, he reached for the door with the other. Opening it, he hauled her inside, before closing the door behind him. Whirling them around, he pinned her between the door and his body. His hands on her wrists held her pressed to the gray metal.

The scent of her arousal filled the air. Damn, she was ready for him. Eyes flashing, lips parted, breasts heaving with each breath, she wanted him. And her cunt...he smelled her juices on the air, the rich, creamy scent that told him he could bury himself to the hilt right now and there'd be nothing but pleasure for both of them.

"You don't know everything about our unit," he said. "Normal military orders don't apply to us."

"The hell they don't—"

He silenced her objection with a kiss. No gentle exploration, his lips pressed down on hers, pinning her to the door with the strength of his kiss alone. His tongue delved into her mouth, a bold claiming that marked her as his own. Already their scents mingled, his overlaying hers, and he had never inhaled a more addictive aroma.

Her fingers clenched, her stance widening, hips lifting, searching for his cock. She leaned against him, her tiny body rubbing against his. Her tongue stroked the length of his and he groaned into her mouth, imaging what it would feel like on his cock. Balls tightening, he leaned into her.

*His.* If any of the other men touched her like this he'd personally rip out their throats. He lifted her hands, bringing them together above her head. The motion caused her to arch her back and crush her breasts against his chest.

Bjorn pulled his mouth away. "If you don't want this, you'd better tell me now. Because one more moment and I won't be able to stop." His bear demanded he not wait but he held it back by his strength of will alone. What was about to happen would change the dynamics of his team. It had to be her choice.

## Chapter Four

Sigrid's eyes fluttered closed as she exhaled. When she opened her eyes, she looked up at him. She wanted to ask him if this would change everything, if it would make the men not trust her scientific background all the more. She didn't. Any concerns she had stayed bottled inside.

With Bjorn pinning her against the wall, her body taut with anticipation, she ceded to the truth. She wanted him. In her body, any way she could get him. Sex with Bjorn had been on her mind since the first time she'd seen him. Maybe if they screwed now, she could get him out her system.

"Yes." She spoke in a rush of air, half afraid he'd change his mind. One glance at the tent his erection made in his pants and she knew the foolishness of that notion. "Yes," she repeated, her voice stronger.

"Thank god," he whispered an instant before his lips claimed hers.

In that instant, Sigrid realized the power she held over this big, strong man. She grinned as he kissed her.

Gentler this time, he stroked her lower lip with his tongue. The action curled her toes. He still held her wrists and trapped as she was, she let him have his way with her. She ached to touch him, needed to feel his fingers, his tongue, anything against her skin. She wore too many clothes.

He was hers. From the way he tasted her, tongue sliding into her mouth to coax hers to play against his, gentle licks and sucks, heady feminine power filled her.

His fingers released hers and skimmed down to grab a fistful of her shirt. Yanking it from her pants, he slid his hands underneath, splaying his palms against her ribs as she reached for the buttons on his shirt.

One by one she released them until she could place her palms flat against his chest. Warmth from his skin permeated her chilled fingers. She circled her fingers around his nipples, brushing them into hard nubs with her thumbs. The bold sweep of his tongue into her mouth told her he enjoyed what she did. One hand slid over his collarbone, around his shoulder to cup the back of his neck and hold him against her mouth. The other followed the valley bisecting his abs to his navel, then lower, to the waistband of his pants. Her thumb rested on the button holding them closed.

Her fingers flexed with the need to release the button, roll down the zipper and cup the length of him in her hands. Not yet. She wanted to savor this. It might be the only time the two of them came together.

Bjorn reached around her back and unhooked her utilitarian bra. How or when her shirt had been opened, she didn't know, only felt the gape of the fabric against her skin, the tender caress of his fingers against her flesh.

She pulled her lips from his and sucked in a ragged breath. Her hands fell away, shirt falling to her elbows, and she shrugged it off, followed by her bra. She lifted her arms above her head and offered her breasts to him. "Touch them," she said, emboldened by her lust for him. "Taste them."

Bjorn lowered his lips to her shoulder. He placed open-mouthed kisses at the junction of her neck and shoulder, laving it with his tongue. Reaching behind her, he cupped her ass and lifted.

Sigrid wrapped her arms around his neck as he carried her to the bed. He set her down before feathering kisses across her stomach. At the waistband of her pants he unfastened the buttons and she lifted her hips to assist as he swept her pants away, taking her panties with them. At her boots, he paused long enough to unlace and pull them off. One by one he removed her socks.

She lay naked on his bed. Legs partially spread to reveal her vulva, glistening with her juices, she crooked a finger at him.

"Anxious aren't you?" His hands fell to his pants.

"I just want to see you naked." From where this inner vixen came Sigrid didn't know, but as she rose onto her elbows to get a better look at him, she liked her.

Bjorn unfastened the button then cupped his palm over his fly and stroked. "Are you sure you can handle me naked?"

"I can handle anything you got." She sat up and reached for him. Closing her hands around his hips, she pressed a kiss to his lower abdomen.

Bjorn moved his hands, giving her full access to him.

Through the material she stroked him with her knuckles. Lowering the zipper slowly, she freed him.

The head of his cock popped free. It emerged from the foreskin, the single eye enticing her to stroke her thumb across the smooth skin. Bjorn groaned.

Sigrid circled her fingers around his girth. They barely met, the heft of him filling her palm. A magnificent cock, thick and long, roped with purple veins. His balls hung in lightly furred sacs full and low between his legs. In all sense of the word, Bjorn was a virile, mouth-watering specimen of a man.

He stepped out of his pants, bending to unlace his boots and toe them off. Sigrid watched, admiring the long line of his back, the way his muscles flexed as he bent over. From what she saw of his ass it was rounded, tight, and Sigrid couldn't wait to flex her fingers into it as he pounded into her. Straightening, Bjorn strode toward the bed.

Sigrid scooted back. She spread her legs, giving him a full view of her cunt. Cupping her breasts, she lifted them, fingers playing across her turgid nipples. Her

channel clenched thinking about his body above her, his cock inside her. To be filled by him, fucked by him...her eyelids fluttered closed at the thought.

The bed dipped beneath his weight. And then he was there, over her, weight braced on his arms, his knees nudging her thighs apart. Bjorn leaned forward. Holding his lower body away from her, he kissed her shoulder. A love bite, and then he laved away the sting with his tongue. She shivered.

The need to be penetrated, stuffed full with his cock, forced her to lift her hips as she sought his shaft. His rough cheek brushed against the tender skin of her breasts before he closed his lips around her nipple and sucked. Back bowed, Sigrid gasped at the pleasure washing through her body. She cried out, a breathy cry of needy desire. She reached for him, one hand clenching on the back of his head, the other fisting in the blankets. Her thighs spread wide, she urged him closer.

Still he held his distance. The air separating their bodies tormented her. Bjorn gave no indication of letting her set the pace, and frankly she doubted she could string two synapses together to move her muscles to change their positions. Not with his tongue swirling around her nipples and the suction of his mouth pulling straight to her clit.

He released her nipple, the chill air making it harden even more. Pulling away from her, he reached for his nightstand and stopped. "Oh shit."

"Huh?" Sigrid followed his movement and realized he stared at an empty drawer. "Don't worry about it." If he was fishing for condoms he needn't have bothered. She took the Pill religiously and had brought several months' supply with her, afraid that she might not be able to get to a pharmacy this far north. She rolled to her side and skimmed his spine.

Oh, his muscled back! She could splay her hands against it and lick the indentations of his spine, from the base of his neck down, between shoulder blades and obliques that would do a weightlifter proud. She curled her fingers against the top of his thigh.

She leaned back and spread her legs. "Fuck me. Eat me."

Nostrils flared, he stared at her glistening labia. He turned, half crawling across her legs to rest his shoulders between her thighs. His warm breath caressed her heated skin, and she reached down to grab the back of his head and pull him into her pussy.

A hand reached up and snatched her wrists. "If you want a good fucking, we'll do this my way."

"Then hurry," Sigrid growled. If he laid his lips on her and started sucking she wasn't sure the entire compound wouldn't hear her scream. The thought of four men listening in on their sex had shivers dancing down her spine.

With his thumbs he spread her labia. A quick lick, barely enough to touch her, had her hips bucking off the bed, a strangled cry in her throat.

"You taste like honey," he whispered, and then made a low, leisurely pass along her labia. From bottom to top, he caressed her with his tongue. He licked her, nibbled her, savored her...and Sigrid could only gasp and try to hold back her cries.

Bjorn ate pussy like a god, and she never wanted him to stop. When he thrust his tongue oh-so gently inside her, she moaned long and low. He wrapped his lips around her clit, a quick kiss. His name became a whispered litany and when he finally tongued her clit, her pussy clenched.

She wanted to come. Juices flowed from her. Her nipples were so hard they were almost painful. When Bjorn walked his fingers over her stomach to cup her right breast it seemed like heaven.

And then she was there. Like the aurora borealis exploding across the sky, Sigrid came. She cried out, the haunting, keening wail echoing in the room. Between her thighs Bjorn moaned, and she could do nothing but lie there and feel her body contract and ripple over and over again.

He pulled away but not for long, moving to crawl over her body. The head of his penis nudged her opening, and grabbing his ass, Sigrid led him inside. The silken glide of him nearly had her coming again. She crossed her ankles behind his buttocks.

Bjorn thrust, burying himself balls-deep inside her. For long moments he rested there, bare skin against bare skin, his chest against her breasts. Leaning down, he kissed her, a claiming kiss that left no doubt that he wanted to possess her, body and soul. Hands pressed against his back, her fingers curled into his flesh, heels in his buttocks, she grabbed him, held on and never, ever wanted to let go.

He began to thrust, his restraint evident in his taut muscles. One hand on her hip held her still, the other holding his weight as he plunged into her tight channel over and over again.

Her tongue dueled with his, demanding more. She added a swivel to her hips that had his pace quickening and then there was nothing but the savage meeting of bodies, the desire for fulfillment.

Sigrid tore her lips from his. Her moans filled the room, growing louder and louder, not caring who heard her. The sounds of his rutting, his masculine grunts and groans of pleasure, filled her ears. This was Bjorn, her captain, and damn if she didn't want him fucking her harder, faster.

Behind her closed eyelids lights exploded. Her breath caught in her throat. Muscles clenching, her pussy milked his cock. Looking up, she saw his broad chest and buried her face against his hot skin, the light dusting of chest hair tickling her nose.

Above her, Bjorn grunted. He stiffened as his cock erupted inside her, hot jets of seed filling her, triggering another orgasm, and she whimpered as pleasure ripped her body apart. They stayed locked together in a tight embrace.

Eventually, Bjorn rolled them to their sides, his cock still half hard inside her. Nestled against his chest, Sigrid realized that she had no idea how different this military unit was—and right now, she didn't care. Bjorn had claimed her in a primal way, and without a doubt, she knew the other men would see her as his.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days later, with the body removed from the murder site and the second scientist suddenly disappeared, Sigrid hunched her shoulders against the biting wind. They'd gone back to the other attack sites, and although she detected no pattern in their locations, she'd pulled ice cores from each one. Perhaps the snow would tell what geography couldn't.

They were collecting the last of the cores, this time from the first attack site in the opposite direction of their compound. The other attacks had occurred in the same general area, but not this one. It had taken place between Ny-Alesund and the compound, yet still well off the beaten track. Kjell informed her it had been a single scientist, trying to make it back to Ny-Alesund from his position near the coast. The lone scientist wasn't the first odd thing Sigrid had discovered on this mission, and she guessed it certainly wouldn't be the last.

She glanced over her shoulder at Kjell, wondering at the sudden deference with which he treated her. Almost as if once word got out – and Sigrid had no doubt it had – about her and Bjorn having sex, the men suddenly gave her respect. She frowned as she knelt three meters north of where the body was found and got out her hand drill. Behind her, Kjell stood guard. Trent stood next to her, also guarding, having taken Bjorn's place. He remained behind at the compound, presumably in deep discussions with Vik.

The whirl of the drill drowned out the howling wind. Although the sun had returned a month ago, this March day harkened back to the endless night of winter. In her snowsuit, Sigrid shivered.

"About done?" Kjell called. If the cold bothered him, he showed no signs. Neither did Trent, though he looked over his shoulder at her.

"I want two more cores from this site then we can go back. I'll have plenty to analyze." She extracted the core, slid it into a plastic bag and then dropped it into an insulated cooler to stay frozen during the trip back to the compound. She stood. "I want to go over there." She crossed the attack scene and knelt down in the corresponding place across the circle.

Four cores – one from the general direction of approach, two in a diameter across the circle and one core from the site of death. By comparing the information inside the cores to standards taken from random places around the Arctic, she should be able to find out, at least, if the levels of contamination were higher at the attack sites, or what chemical history the areas shared. She frowned as she pulled out the slender column of ice.

The thin spire of frozen water held so much information in the tiny crystal cells. It never ceased to amaze her, the history the Arctic held, and how so much of that history affected those living here now. Polar bears. Seals. Arctic birds. Humans. All of them intertwined in a dance of nature and change that constantly evolved. A part of her feared what she might find even as her scientific mind relished the joy of discovering something new.

With this information, she'd prove her scientific worth. She had no doubt of that. Among these men, with their drive and devotion to the Arctic, she'd be able to correlate this information, find out what these "night demons" were, and publish her findings. Then she'd be seen as a scientist in her own right, no longer in her family's shadow.

The corner of her mouth twitched as she extracted the last ice core. EUFOR might need to review the paper first, even doctor a few facts, but she had no doubt when she made a major breakthrough in PCB contamination, her paper would be published. Scientists around the world would be reading her information. Her name would appear in a scientific journal. Her family wouldn't feel a need to coddle her.

She secured the last ice core and stood. "I'm done," she said to Kjell. He led her back to the vehicle, which they had parked far enough away so as not to contaminate the site further. Trent followed behind her like a guard.

She let Kjell help her secure the insulated box of ice cores in the back of the vehicle. Then, ignoring his offered hand, she stepped inside and sat down on the bench seat—the *front* seat, though she and Trent had argued over that until he relented, taking the backseat as Kjell drove.

As the wide tracks rolled back to the compound, the vehicle lurched and shook. Not a smooth ride, not by any means, but then again there were no roads here. They made their own roads each and every time they went out. The drive gave her time to think. Bjorn wouldn't want her to publish her findings. Already they'd had conversations about the mission, about what they might find and how it all must be kept among them and Vik. Only their superior would decide how far the information would spread. Once she finished her paper, however, she was sure Vik would let her publish it. After all, it'd been her scientific work that had attracted EUFOR.

Smiling and thinking of the research ahead, she rode back to the compound in silence.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sigrid rubbed her bleary eyes. Two days had passed since she'd brought back the ice cores and she'd spent them nonstop in the lab. The chemical analysis told an unbelievable story. Frowning, she glanced again at her samples. Trace minerals looked normal, as did the microbes found in the snow. The level of PCB contamination, however, soared off the charts.

She frowned. Having come to the Arctic previously to study PCB contamination and discovered a correlation between that and seabird chick deaths, she knew all about the baseline levels and what anything over meant for the life that flourished in the frozen north. With levels like this, the scientists should have been feeling the effects.

And maybe they had. Her memory flashed to an image of the scientist, his guts torn open by the creatures Bjorn had dubbed "night demons". Could the two be related? Was it possible the demons were some mass hallucination caused by the pollution?

She shook her head. She'd seen the demons too, and she hadn't been here long enough to start feeling any effects. They couldn't be related, though so far the pollution levels were the only connection she'd found between the ice cores. But what had seemingly dumped tons of PCB across various sites in the Arctic? It made absolutely no sense that the dumping and the attacks were caused by the same creatures, and her scientific mind wasn't going to accept an easy answer.

Sighing, she stepped back from the bench. Her stomach rumbled, reminding her she'd missed breakfast, lunch, and was on the verge of missing dinner. Though the closed circulation system kept the smells from the rest of the compound from mingling in the lab, she imagined the evening meal filling the halls with mouth-watering aromas.

But before she could eat, she had to relay what she had found to Bjorn and Vik, and went in search of the former. Thinking of Bjorn sent heat stabbing into her pussy. He'd fucked her, stolen her breath, and then went out on a mission. She grinned and shook her head. With Bjorn's assurances that their attraction didn't violate any military rules and that their team operated differently, she had more questions than answers. The only thing she knew with any certainty was that if she had a chance, she'd fuck Captain Bjorn Lunde again. And again.

As if her thoughts conjured him, she rounded the corner to the mess and nearly ran into him. He held out a tray filled with a steaming plate of food.

"Oh, that smells wonderful." She inhaled the aroma of mashed potatoes and some kind of roast in rich, thick gravy. At least in the compound she didn't have to rely on MREs. One of the men was a damn good cook.

"You missed lunch. Make any headway?"

"You were bringing me dinner?" She glanced from the food up to his face. His thoughtful gesture touched her. "I have some findings that I need to discuss with you and Vik, but I don't know what they mean."

"Then come on out and eat. We'll discuss them once you're fed. I needed to call Vik anyway." Expecting his order to be obeyed, he turned and carried the food back to the mess.

Sigrid followed. She sat at the table and took the tray Bjorn offered, smiling at him in thanks before digging into the food. Gulping it down, she barely tasted the succulently roasted meat or the vegetables steamed to perfection. Yeah, someone on the team cooked better than Emeril. Throughout the meal Bjorn sat silently, his gaze fixed on her and never wavering. When she pushed her plate away, he pushed the tray down the table and Hans took it to the sink.

"We have to talk." Sigrid wiped her mouth with her napkin. "The PCB levels I took from those cores around the attack sites are off the charts. I want to know why."

"That's why we brought you in on this." Bjorn shrugged. "You tell me."

"There has to be some obvious source of contamination. It's almost like someone took a toxic dump and simply spread it around where the attacks happened. Nothing natural could have caused those readings. Nothing the scientists were doing would

have caused those readings either. I'm getting similar readings from all the locations and I don't know anything for sure yet, but I understand why Vik called me in."

"Let's get him on the line. He can do some researching on his end, see if something turns up."

Sigrid nodded. "Good." She exhaled. "I wanted to bring him in the loop. Let me grab my numbers from the lab and I'll meet you by the phone. I don't suppose we can get some data from other researchers in the area?"

Bjorn shook his head. "I don't think so but we can ask Vik."

Ten minutes later, a sheaf of papers tucked in one hand, she stepped into the office. One large desk dominated the room, a laptop sitting on the nearly bare surface. On the other side of the room, two smaller desks sat side by side, also with computers. No ornaments, just a large map of the Arctic with pins marking attack sites, and a secure phone line. As sterile an office as any she had visited.

Bjorn leaned against the desk, Vik's voices coming through the speaker. "What you're telling me correlates some information I'm finding on my end."

"What information?" Sigrid asked, setting her papers down beside Bjorn's lean hip. She tried to ignore the closeness, the fact that if she moved her fingers six inches she could brush them against his cock.

"That something's going on with PCB reduction rates and the Arctic. Right now it looks like political maneuvering, but it merits closer attention. Corporal Myrhe, what findings do you have for me?" Vik asked, smoothly deflected any further questions they might have.

Sigrid outlined her findings, from the readings taken from each of the cores to the baseline surrounding readings, and how far off the charts they were. "The interesting thing is that I'm only seeing these readings at the attack sites. Nowhere else even comes close, though many of the readings *are* higher than normal. It's almost like the attacks are concentrated at sites with the greatest PCB contamination..."

With those words, Sigrid realized she'd contributed greatly to the team's mission. The question was—what would the military men do with her data?

## Chapter Five

Quite a bit, Sigrid quickly realized. No sooner had she relayed her findings than Vik and Bjorn put a plan in place and in the morning, the latter went out to search for sources of PCB contamination. Sigrid had returned to the lab but now, dragging her fingers through her hair and feeling tendrils escape from the band in which she'd attempted to secure it, she knew if she stared at these four walls any longer she'd go stir crazy. She had to get out of the building.

The outdoors called to her, big and expansive, with sheets of snow and ice still not quite ready to release their grip on the world. Polar bear mothers would emerge from their dens any day now, and a part of her missed the thrill of tracking the cubs and their overprotective sows. Snow geese sat on eggs, afraid to move away lest the embryos inside freeze to death. Spring represented a tenuous phase between the dead of winter and the life of summer, and Sigrid needed to stand out in the middle of it.

She sighed. A light knocking on the doorframe interrupted her thoughts. *Bjorn*, she wondered, and turned to see if he'd returned.

Kjell stood in the opening. "Do you need anything? Bjorn asked us to check in on you."

Sigrid shook her head. "You don't approve of my being here," she blurted out, verbalizing her thoughts.

"No, Corporal Myrhe, I don't." He frowned. "Bjorn's told you we're not a normal EUFOR team. It's my opinion that you've disrupted the balance and put the mission in jeopardy."

"How have I done that?" She clenched and unclenched her fingers. Standing to face him, she stepped forward. "I've done nothing but focus on my research. Exactly what Captain Lunde wants me to do."

"You fucked him," Kjell said bluntly.

The raw anger rolling from the lieutenant forced Sigrid to step back. She reached behind her, hating the need to steady herself with her fingers around the edge of the table. "What I've done or haven't done on a personal level is none of your concern, *Lieutenant Tveit*." Let him lash her with her lower rank. She could do exactly the same by reminding him they were *both* beneath Bjorn.

"Do you know what you've done?"

Sigrid released the table. Used to having overbearing family members censor her personal life, she was well used to explaining herself. But Kjell's anger came unexpectedly. "My personal life is none of your business. Now I suggest if there's

nothing further that you please let me get back to my work. You may outrank me, but this isn't a military concern."

"You're his. He claimed you as his woman. And because we're a team, because Bjorn is our captain, we'll accept that. But you have to understand the disruption you've caused." Kjell's arms hung loosely at his sides. He strode forward and closed the door behind him.

"Lieutenant, I asked you to leave." Sigrid moved to intercept him. She glanced around for anything she might use as a weapon and saw nothing but her sensitive scientific equipment. A tendril of fear snaked through her. If he should get out of line...

"Bjorn ordered me to stay."

"And did he order you to question our relationship? He's your superior as much as mine. We both obey his orders." She stopped less than a meter from him. They stood between the tables, the door marking a narrow corridor between workstations. "I am not your enemy."

"Bjorn marked you."

Sigrid paused at the word choice. Kjell spoke as if Bjorn were a wild animal marking territory. "I had sex with Bjorn. Not that it's any of your concern. If you're jealous, be jealous. But don't take it out on me."

"It wasn't just sex," Kjell said, deadly serious.

The four words every woman wanted to hear, and listening to them coming from Kjell, Sigrid struggled not to put too much meaning into them. "I'll let Bjorn tell me that, thank you. You can't speak for him." She sucked in a breath.

Sex with Bjorn. The thought that haunted her mind, kept her pussy wet and hardened her nipples, and now she discussed it with his second-in-command. His very unhappy second-in-command.

Kjell shook his head. "I can't explain it to you, but ask Bjorn. Ask him what it means to be marked...and if he marked you."

Sigrid studied him. "He told me you weren't a normal military unit. Is this just another part of that? There's some kind of ritual where you 'mark' your women? I'll ask him. It sounds barbaric as hell, but I'll ask. Does that make you happy?"

"No, but it's a start." He opened his mouth to speak again but the pounding of boots in the hall outside stopped him.

Kjell whirled toward the door. Another time, another place, Sigrid might have looked twice at him. Nearly as tall as Bjorn, same broad-shouldered, narrow-waisted build, Kjell was all military precision and regulation, almost as if he used the rules as a shield behind which he could hide. He opened the door and peered outside.

"Trent? What's up?"

"Night demon attack. Hans and Marc are holding them off, but not for long. Get Sigrid into the safe room and get out here," Trent panted.

"Go. I'll get her to safety." He reached out a hand and snagged her arm. "Come on." Without waiting for a reply, he pulled her out the door and down the hall.

Sigrid stumbled along behind him, his strange words and now this attack whirling in her mind. The safe room. For a moment she railed against being put away like a porcelain doll until her common sense prevailed. She worked better in a lab than on a battlefield.

"Why the safe room? Are the demons *here*?" Sigrid asked as she raced along behind Kjell.

"Just a precaution to keep you safe while we're gone. The demons have never come this close but you never know." With his hand still firmly clutching her arm, Kjell propelled her down the hall and to a steel door. He opened it and shoved her inside. "Stay in here. Don't come out. As soon as we return we'll let you out."

Before she could turn around and ask why he felt the compound wasn't safe, with its alarms and fence and security, he stepped back into the hall. The door closed with a metallic clang followed by the mechanical beeps of an activated alarm.

Sigrid's breath puffed out in tiny plumes. As far as prisons went, she supposed it could be worse. A table with five chairs sat in the middle of the room, and a utilitarian bookcase sat in the corner. No computers or monitors allowed her access to the outside world, and above her head, she heard the whirring of an air circulation system. She suspected from the look of the sturdy gray walls that the entire building could come down around this room and it would remain intact. Shivers danced through her and she rubbed her arms to keep them at bay.

Somewhere, beyond the compound's walls, the night demons attacked.

Too wound up to sit, she paced the length of the room. When she checked her watch, it told her fifteen minutes had passed. Kjell hadn't even given her time to secure her samples. If she could just return to her lab long enough to replace the cores in the freezer, she'd be more at ease. Every minute she lingered here, even for her own safety, was a minute more the samples had to melt. She stopped by the wall and pounded on it. The hard, unyielding surface was exactly like the Arctic ice. The cores sat on specialized trays, but they wouldn't stay frozen for more than a couple hours. She hated leaving them for even a moment.

"Fuck it," she growled. She stopped at the door, closed her hand around the knob and tried to turn it. Of course the door didn't budge. A small closed panel next to the door blinked at her with a steady red light.

She grinned. While the instructions weren't taped to the wall—now *that* would have been damn helpful—she suspected this panel connected the room to the rest of the building. Assuming there must be a keypad, she debated about randomly punching in numbers. The last things she wanted was to engage some intrusion countermeasures, but even if she did, she doubted that they'd be applied inside the safe room. If Kjell put her where she could hurt herself, she doubted Bjorn would be happy. With a grin, she flipped up the panel's faceplate.

An intercom button. Sigrid pressed the tiny beige button with a megaphone icon on it and hoped the men were still in the building. "If you don't let me out of here, I'm going to start randomly pushing buttons. Just thought I'd let you know." She released the button, hoping that her message had been broadcast.

While she waited for a response from the men—not that she expected any—she ransacked the bookcase, finding a small book that held procedures for the room. She flipped through the pages devoid of the access codes. *The access code is provided by the Commanding Officer. Bjorn. Shit.*

Her research was literally melting away. All bets were fucking off.

She stormed back to the panel. When Kjell exited, she'd heard six distinct tones. A five-digit combination and the send button, she guessed. A number for each team member? Maybe birthdays or the start of identification numbers? She frowned, suddenly realizing how little she knew about her teammates.

Outside the room, she listened for the sound of anyone in the hall. She'd now been in here just over thirty minutes. The whirring of the air unit in the ceiling filled her ears, the distant hum of white noise making it hard for her to concentrate.

The longer she stared at the panel the more she realized she had nothing to lose, and any problems she brought down on the team, well...they would deserve it for withholding the information she needed to free herself. It wasn't like she was going to run after them to try to play superhero. Just get to the lab, secure her samples, get back. If Vik didn't think she could do her job he wouldn't have sent her here. And frankly, that Bjorn and Kjell thought it best to lock her away didn't bode well for their trust in the general *or* their security measures.

She punched in five random buttons and hit the green send key.

The panel beeped twice.

Sigrid tried the door, growling when the doorknob refused to budge. She tapped in five different numbers and tried again. Still the same beeping.

The four walls pressed in on her. Taking a deep breath, she imagined herself anywhere but here. With grayness surrounding her, the whirring of air ducts above her and no way to see the outside world, claustrophobia was beginning to set in. Her foot tapped with the need to pace, to try to flee the room by sheer movement alone.

"Think, damn you, think!" Her voice sounded shrill when it bounced back to her and she closed her eyes, pressing her fingers to her temples. Focusing on breathing in through her nose, out through her mouth, she willed her racing heartbeat to slow. Clammy sweat broke out on her palms and beaded on her forehead.

Her hand began to shake as she punched in different numbers and pressed send again and again. Two atonal beeps filled the air each time and she continued to pound numbers into the pad, her scientific mind creating combinations as she tried to hit the high, middle and low ends of the spectrum. She hammered at the panel, her mind narrowing down to the five single digits that might make up the combination.

Cursing under her breath did little good. Neither did wishing to see Bjorn's head on a pike or, better yet, have him confined in *here*. The thought of her slowly thawing ice cores had her redoubling her efforts.

The door slid open. Hand paused in mid-air, she stared at Bjorn.

"Corporal Myrhe, what did you think you were doing?"

His harsh words cut through her fog of concentration. "Trying to save my research," she growled then added, "*Captain*." And without waiting for orders or instructions, she brushed past him and hurried down the hall, Bjorn following right on her heels.

She opened the door to her lab, thankful to see nothing had been disturbed. She'd been gone maybe a hundred minutes, and on their chilled racks the ice cores were still more or less intact. Wrapping them up, she returned them to the freezer, not even caring that Bjorn stood in the doorway watching her.

With the last ice core secured, she faced him. "What the hell did you think you were doing shoving me in that cell? I'm a EUFOR officer just the same as the rest of you. Kjell should have given me time to secure my research then I would have willingly went to the safe room. Though I *do* wonder why you don't trust your own security measures."

"We were keeping you safe. Vik would have my head if anything happened to you," Bjorn said. He strode forward. "And you disobeyed a direct order by trying to get out of there. You could have—"

Sigrid held up her hand. "Yeah, I could have, but if your Neanderthal of a second hadn't locked me in there before I could secure my work, I might have been more predisposed to wait for orders. As it was, he pushed me in there without even giving me the code to free myself. What would have happened if you were all killed? I probably would have died in there. I saw nothing that might have been helpful in escaping. And I only wished to ensure we lost no time with the research. Either you trust me to do my job or you don't."

Her chest heaved. Her breath emerged in tiny pants. With her fingers curled into fists, her nails bit into her palms. If she her gun on her, she had no doubt it'd be in her hands and pointed right at Bjorn.

"I understand why you might be upset," Bjorn started to say.

"Saying I'm upset is putting it a bit mildly, Captain." She sputtered for words and shook her head. This damn man didn't know anything. She heaved a sigh.

Bjorn crossed the space separating them. He curled his fingers around her shoulders, holding her still. "I won't let anything happen to you. You're a member of EUFOR, but have you been in battle? Have you looked a man in the eyes as you shot him dead? Have you killed?"

He stared at her, the look in his eyes so intense it should have scared her. Sigrid met his bold gaze with her own. "No," she said, his questions deflating her fight. "But I had no intentions of entering the battle. I know my limitations."

"Not against these things you don't."

His soft words forced her to look at him, *really* look at him, from the half-healed cut along his cheek to a new one on his forehead. Worry lines bracketed eyes that shone with steely determination. He looked bone-deep tired.

"Make me see," she pleaded. "Show me what to do when these things attack. Don't lock me away again. If the ice cores had melted, we would have had to re-collect the samples. The composition would have been different from the originals and I would have had to start from scratch. Talk to me. I'm not stupid. I will understand where you're coming from, but only if you tell me."

Bjorn released her but kept his place, so close her breasts nearly brushed against his chest with each breath. Shaking his head, he raised his hand before dropping it by his side. "No. There are some things you can't know."

"What?" No longer furious, Sigrid cupped his cheek. She knew Bjorn understood her scientific drive and felt constrained by the information he couldn't reveal. "What can't I know? What can't you tell me?" She stroked the line of his jaw.

His arm wrapped around her waist, holding her against him. The steel-corded strength of his body filled her with heat. Strong, solid, like the greatest of glaciers that stood for millennia, Bjorn provided a steadfast harbor for her. He'd let her rail against him, understanding her need to burn her frustration away against his cool façade. And now, pressed close to him, she saw the worry in his eyes. Worry for her, for the mission, for his team. Underneath it all ran a current of sadness.

Sigrid brushed her thumb across his lower lip. "I'm a full member of this team, a corporal with EUFOR and a trained scientist. You don't have to worry about me." If she could ease the burden from his shoulders, she would.

Bjorn's eyelids fluttered closed. "I wish..." He shook his head.

She placed her hand on his biceps, the fingers that traced his mouth now cupping the back of his head. "You asked if me if I'd killed. I've not killed in battle, but that doesn't mean I can't. I joined EUFOR knowing exactly what was expected of me, and I intend to do whatever it takes to fulfill my mission. If it makes you feel better, show me the security system, let me know what do when you guys leave again. I don't mind staying behind as long as I'm armed with knowledge." She slid her hand over his chest to where his heart pounded against her palm.

"It's not *you* I have doubts about." Bjorn released her and pulled away. "It's not you at all."

Sigrid pursued him. "If it's not me, then who is it?" She couldn't imagine Bjorn doubted anyone on the team, not when they all moved with such brisk efficiency. Each time the demons attacked, they fought them off and all of them were still here to fight another day.

Bjorn stopped. "It's me."

His words punched her in the solar plexus. "Oh," she gasped, realizing that he'd just told her something far more intimate than the sex they'd shared. "I don't doubt you."

"And I don't either, so long as I'm not distracted. I'm sorry Lieutenant Tveit didn't give you time to do what you needed to do. I'll make sure you have the information you need." He pulled out a chair and sank onto it. Rubbing his hands across his face, he rested his elbows on his knees.

Sigrid pulled out a chair and sat in front of him, reaching across the space separating them to cup his shoulder. "Thank you. But also know that when I entered the military, I knew I would put my life on the line for my country. I don't ask my commanders to swaddle me in blankets and keep me safe. I know my job and I'm good at it. If the night demons attack again, I'll do what I need to do before I seek safety, Bjorn, and nothing you can say or do will change that."

"But if something happens to you —"

Sigrid pressed her fingers to her lips. "It will happen. If I am fated to be hurt, or heaven forbid die, then it will happen. You can't stop what may be. All you can do is give me the tools to stand beside you, even if it's just in the lab. I won't blame you if something happens and neither will Vik."

Bjorn spread his knees wider and Sigrid moved into the opening he created. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she lifted her face to his.

"All we can do is take each day as it comes. Moment by moment," Sigrid breathed.

"I've never met anyone like you. When I first met you, damn...I'll admit I thought you were a weak civilian scientist. But now, you're like a flash fire in my blood." He pulled her hair free of the elastic holding it back and speared his fingers through the silken strands.

## Chapter Six

With Sigrid's warm breath caressing his cheek and her eyes so full of compassion, Bjorn struggled with the realization that he held a strong woman in his arms. He'd thought her a coddled scientist, and how wrong he had been. Bjorn stroked his hands along her arms, down to her wrists then back up to her shoulders, featherlight caresses meant to soothe. What he wanted to do was tuck her against his body but if he did so, he knew neither one of them would do any more talking. And maybe that was for the best. His cock jerked, balls tightening just thinking about her curves pressed against him.

"Come here." Bjorn hauled Sigrid onto his lap. She straddled his legs, her arms braced on his shoulders, her face scant millimeters from his. Reaching up, he brushed back a lock of hair and summoned control. With her ass on his lap, her breasts against his chest, the bear reared its head. *Mate. Fuck.*

Tamping down the bear sent shivers through him. Right now the man controlled the beast, not the other way around.

"I can't stop my need to be the best damn scientist possible. We have to find out more about the contamination. We have to discover the source."

He understood the drive inside her. Where his forced him to be the best damn soldier he could be, to use all his abilities to their fullest, hers made her spend long hours in the lab finding answers. "We will. Tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? But we need to go now."

"No. We've both been through a lot. Tomorrow we will hunt for the source of the contamination. I want to muster the men, make a thorough plan—and I have plans for right now. I don't know about you, but I think we need to take care of each other first." Bjorn reached beneath the hem of her sweater to stroke her lower back.

Adrenaline, desire...Bjorn didn't care what it was called. As Sigrid melted against him, he stilled his body. His cock raged to life, making his pants suddenly too tight. The bear refused to submit and the need to take Sigrid as his mate, to brand her with his scent and fill her with his seed, became too much to handle.

She lifted her arms as he tugged her sweater off, leaving her dressed only in a satin bra, which he quickly removed. Perfect. No other word described the round fullness of her breasts with their wide nipples. Cupping her breasts in his hands, he tested their weight before lowering his lips to one turgid peak. A single lick of his tongue had her fingers clenching on his shoulders and the back of his neck. When he pulled the entire nub into his mouth, she bowed her back. Her moan filled the room.

He palmed her other breast, not wanting either one to feel left out in the cold. Mmm...he could taste her all day. The sweetness of her skin filled his mouth like a delicate pastry. A growl rumbled through his chest and vibrated against her skin.

Sigrid squirmed on his lap. His nostrils flared as the aroma of her drenched folds reached him. His fingers curled into her breast as he thought of sliding through the wetness and stroking her nub. Without releasing his lips, he grasped the waistband of her pants and ripped them open. A button pinged across the floor.

The sight of her matching pale pink panties nearly had him coming in his pants. Slipping a finger beneath the elastic, he stroked her mons.

"Bjorn," she breathed. "Please."

His finger slid easily past her slick labia. The button of her clit called to him but he ignored it for now. Instead, he worked his finger up and down her slit. Vocal in her pleasure, her moans echoed in the room, and Bjorn knew the others probably heard. Masculine pride filled him thinking of the other men knowing she belonged to him.

*Mine.* The bear chuffed its chest with triumph and paced in the back of his consciousness. *Take her.*

Sigrid's fingers moved over his shoulders, down to his sternum and the buttons of his uniform shirt. She worked the first few free then splayed her hands against his skin. Her delicate touches aroused him more than he would have believed. When she flicked her fingers against his nipples, he shuddered and turned his attention to her other breast.

He removed his hands from her for a moment to finish unbuttoning his shirt and slide it over his shoulders. Damn, her touch boiled his blood in his veins. Never had he been so hard so fast with anyone else. His bear's possessiveness worried him, though he couldn't think about it at the moment. Right now his cock demanded freedom, and he unbuttoned his pants.

"Yes," Sigrid hissed, leaning forward to slide her knuckles across his navel. She slipped her hands down and finished unfastening his pants. As she bent forward, Bjorn released her breasts in favor of raining kisses over her neck, her shoulders.

Bjorn stilled her wandering hands. "I think we have too many clothes on," he said.

She bit her lip as she stepped from his lap. She bent at the waist, her breasts swinging free, and Bjorn focused on the task at hand—removing his own clothing. Only when he stood naked did he enjoy the show of her breasts and wriggling hips as she finished removing her boots to kick off her pants.

Then, as she straightened, he pulled her toward him, sitting back down and placing her once again on his lap.

"Much better." He reached between her legs and gathered her juices on his fingers, bringing his digits to his lips and making a show of licking them clean. "You taste like the sweetest candy."

Her pussy contracted against his leg. Between them his cock jerked and Bjorn ceded to the demands of his bear. He wrapped his fingers around her waist and lifted her over his rod.

"Fuck me, Bjorn," Sigrid whispered an instant before she leaned forward and claimed his mouth with hers. She drank from him, her lips hungry against his, her tongue spearing into his mouth.

Bjorn lowered her onto his cock.

Flesh against flesh, he penetrated her. In the far corners of his mind he lamented the lack of foreplay but inside his bear roared with delight. Like a hot, tight glove, her pussy sheathed him, her muscles rippling along his length until his head rested deep inside her, her buttocks flush against his thighs.

Sigrid draped her arms around his shoulders, her lips never leaving his as she rubbed her breasts against his chest.

The need to fully penetrate her brought his hand to her ass. Her juices soaked his fingertips and he smeared her moisture around the puckered rosebud of her anus. He pressed his finger against the tight ring and felt her lean against him, her pussy contracting around his shaft.

Keeping his index finger against her rear, Bjorn grabbed her waist. He surged into her, lifting her. A guttural cry wrenched from his throat.

Sigrid curled her fingers around his shoulders. Her thigh muscles flexed as she raised and lowered herself on his cock. Tipping her head back, she closed her eyes, her neck corded as she rode the growing waves of pleasure inside her.

His finger penetrated her anus to the first knuckle. He watched the woman on his lap, stretching out his legs as he held her balanced with one hand while his finger moved minutely inside her. She belonged to him. From the blonde hair streaming down her back to the breasts that rose and fell in front of his face to the pussy clenching his dick, Sigrid belonged to him. His bear sighed and let the man take his enjoyment.

This time he allowed Sigrid to take the lead. He felt the ripples in her pussy, heard her breathing quicken, her cries grow higher. Close, so close...he trailed his hand from her hip to her clit and stroked the hard nub.

Sigrid came with a scream. Around his cock, her pussy milked him, the heavy contractions bringing him nearly to the edge. Not yet, for he wanted to watch her come down from the peak. Her open-mouthed breathing matched his own, her lust-glazed gaze resting on his face.

He inched the finger in deeper.

She swiveled her hips, a naughty smile on her lips. Leaning closely, she licked his lips. "I think it's your turn," she whispered, and grabbing both of his shoulders, seated him even deeper inside her.

"Oh god," Bjorn moaned. His finger slid from her ass, both hands going around her hips. Balls drawn tight against his body, he thrust into her. He sucked in a breath, all his attention focused on the head of his cock as it plowed into her tight channel.

"Oh yeah..." Sigrid's whispered encouragement drove him on.

She belonged to him. He claimed her. He marked her. He mated with her. The primal call of the wild rose within him. His bear roared. It had no need to stalk the tundra looking for females, not when Sigrid's whimpering cries drove him to the edge.

Their mingled scents hung in the air, heavy with desire. He reached between their bodies and smashed his finger against her clit. Her hips bucked as she rode him. Bjorn relied on Sigrid to do most of the movement, and with the swivel of her hips on the downstroke and the way she leaned forward to claim his lips once more, she did a damn fine job.

He kissed her, all lips and tongue, teeth and taste. Mimicking his cock, he thrust his tongue into her mouth. With all her movement he couldn't penetrate her anus again but as he swallowed her cries, he knew she didn't need it. He sure as hell didn't. Not when it felt as if the top of his head was going to explode at any moment.

Bjorn grabbed her hips. His cock slipped from her wet depths as he pushed her away from him to stand and kick the chair away. "Turn around," he growled, marching her forward to the table.

Sigrid complied, thrusting her ass at him like a taunt as he clasped his hands over her hips, rubbing the head of his shaft against her wet slit.

"Fuck me," she whimpered. She tried to thrust against him yet he held himself just shy of filling her.

"In good time." He leaned forward, laving her spine with licks and kisses. He nipped at her shoulders then moved closer, his cock slipping into her opening. With a thrust of his hips, he filled her.

Sigrid screamed.

Bent over her, he fought to quiet his animalistic growls. Yeah, this was what it was supposed to be like, balls drawn tight against his body, his cock wrapped over and over again by her sweet cunt. He kept his hands on her hips, holding her still for his hard thrusts. The sound of their bodies slapping together filled the room.

"Give it to me," Sigrid moaned.

That she begged for his cock fanned his need. Unable to last much longer, he pulled back slowly enough to feel the vacuum of her empty pussy tighten against him.

He reached for her breasts and pinched her nipples. His teeth grazed her shoulder blades, leaving red marks he laved with his tongue. No one fired him up like this. No female had the power to bring his bear to its knees.

Sigrid held the power. With the heat of her cunt around his cock, her breasts filling his palms and her cries of desire, she caught him in her willowy body like a vise. The

mission be damned. Bringing Sigrid pleasure mattered now, and as her voice broke, he closed his eyes and savored the woman coming apart in his arms.

Ripples fluttered through her body, her pussy. Her cries built to a crescendo, ending on a scream that tore his breath from his throat.

Shit. Shit! He wasn't going to last... One more thrust and he came. His cock pumped, pressing against her cervix as he released jet after jet of his warm seed. Slumped against her back, he tasted her salty-sweet skin as he licked her. His shout of triumph mingled with her whimpers as he felt her come again from the force of his release.

He panted, chest rising and falling with his exertions. Surely Sigrid felt crushed under his weight, but if she did she said nothing. Her fingers curled and released around the edge of the table and he felt their juices running down his leg.

Slowly he straightened. His inner bear had grown quiet, as sated as the man. His cock slid out of her as he pulled her back to the chair and sat down, draping her across his lap to snuggle into his chest.

He rested his chin against her head, the vanilla scent of her filling his nose. Warm puffs of breath teased his hardened nipples. He struggled against the yawn rising in his throat. Right now he didn't want to think about the mission, about going out into the Arctic to find the source of contamination.

A soft snore emanated from the woman sitting on his lap and he grinned to think he'd worn her out so much she'd fallen asleep. Adjusting her in his arms, careful not to wake her, he rose to his feet. A glance at his fallen clothes made the decision that they'd stay there. Naked, he went to the door, managing to open it.

Sigrid made a tiny noise but didn't awaken.

Bjorn carried her down the hall, not caring if he ran into the men. Surely they'd heard—probably even smelled—what had happened between them. Frankly, words with Kjell or any of them wouldn't be very cordial at the moment. Not when he had his woman in his arms, his need to protect her fierce.

He frowned, thinking of the long hours she must have put in and the sleep she'd been missing. With a glance at the honey blonde hair resting against his chest, he vowed he'd keep better watch over her. A grin tilted his lips. He doubted she'd agree with his decision.

He paused by his bedroom door and opened it. A tap of his foot had it closing behind them as he carried her to the bed.

She stirred. Her eyelids fluttered then opened, a satisfied smile covering her mouth, her rosebud lips swollen from his attention and aching to be kissed even more.

"Bjorn?" she whispered.

"I'm here, baby." He pulled back the covers then deposited her on one side of his double bed before slipping in beside her and pulling her against his body.

She wriggled in his arms, her ass brushing against his hardening cock. "I must have fallen asleep."

"Yeah, you did. I'm sure you needed it." Bjorn angled his erection away from her, though he figured she'd needed the sex too. He sure as hell had.

Sigrid grabbed the covers. "I should get back to the lab."

"No. Sleep. You need it."

"But my research—"

Bjorn leaned over and pressed his lips to hers. "Sleep," he ordered, surprised that for once she complied.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wrapped in her snowsuit, face shielded by a ski mask and eyes encased in goggles, Sigrid kept pace behind Bjorn. Kjell and the rest of the team followed, and from the scowl he'd sent in her direction, she figured he resented her spot behind Bjorn. Truth be told it startled her too. But when Bjorn ordered her to stay right behind him, she refused to argue. After all, he was her captain.

They saw no night demons, though gray clouds scudded close to the ground. If the sun hung in the sky it presented itself as little more than a slightly lighter-colored ball and the temperature hovered well below zero, a sharp wind cutting through the layers of clothing. Sigrid shivered. The muscles of her thighs burned from keeping up with Bjorn's long strides but he waited for no one, not even her. They'd parked the vehicle some distance back and proceeded along the trail on foot, skirting two attack sites.

Night demons. Sigrid still couldn't believe in them, even after seeing them with her own eyes. She had no answers for what had attacked the men. But demons? That was like saying Santa Claus lived in a gingerbread house at the North Pole. Fanciful notions, nothing more, and she struggled to reconcile what she'd seen with the reality she used to know. Several cultures spoke of Windigos, the closest thing to the night demons Sigrid could find. Except Windigos preyed on humans, ate them, and these creatures seemed bent only on destruction. Whatever they fed on, it hadn't been the corpses of the men they'd found.

A new beast maybe, a mutation—now *that* Sigrid could believe. Except the claw marks revealed no trace of DNA and excessive amounts of PCBs. Somehow the pollution was linked to the attacks. But with those kinds of levels nothing should have been able to live, let alone hunt and kill.

Bjorn stopped. He unwrapped his face and sniffed the three directions. Odd behavior, but he had an uncanny way of keeping them on track, and who was she to argue, so long as it worked. A glance behind her confirmed the other men were doing the same. She pulled her nose out from her wrap and inhaled.

Icy cold shot through her nostrils, making her even colder. Her fingers numb, she wrapped up her face again and rubbed the aching cartilage of her nose. Didn't these

men get cold? They'd walked maybe thirty minutes and she doubted she'd ever be warm again.

Bjorn pointed to the northwest and veered off their current track. Talking to him proved useless in the wind and the bleak, colorless landscape offered few landmarks. Finding her way back without them would be a lost cause. So she focused on the one thing she could, Bjorn's back.

The sight of his broad shoulders reminded her of the way his muscles felt beneath her fingertips. Her memory conjured images of smooth skin and taut flesh that had her body humming. Her pussy still held the faintest of aches from his lovemaking from the night before. Sigrid frowned. Calling it sex would be like calling rich Swiss chocolate a mere candy bar. They'd done more than fucked. Hadn't they?

Even now, freezing her ass off, her pussy clenched thinking about his thick penis. The thought of his big hands on her breasts had her nipples hardening. They were outside in temperatures that could kill an unprotected human in no time, and she still thought about screwing him. Sigrid cursed herself as she stepped from big footprint to big footprint, finding it intimate to place her feet exactly where his had been.

Bjorn stopped. He knelt in the snow, reaching down and brushing flakes away from a white canister. The size of a portable oxygen tank, it was a mottled gray and white, blending perfectly with the landscape. Deep claw gouges scored the tank, opening it to the environment. Frozen liquid trickled from the metal canister. Partially obscured by the liquid, a logo of some kind covered the side of the container.

Sigrid squatted on her haunches and studied the murky, frozen liquid. She reached for the canister and then stopped short, her hand hovering over its surface. "I don't know what it is," she yelled.

"Don't touch it," Bjorn ordered.

Wind swirled around them, creating little eddies in the snow. The gusts revealed more of the canister and Sigrid pointed to the warning sign painted on the bottom. She rose to her feet and pulled a small digital camera from her pocket. She snapped pictures, making sure to zoom in on the logo and the score marks. When she'd taken a dozen photos, she tucked the camera away.

"We're going to want to get these pictures to Vik. Damn, I want to study this thing, maybe get some samples and readings, but I don't think we have anything safe enough to transport it." Sigrid backed away from the find.

A howl rose on the wind.

Her head snapped up and she saw the men, suddenly alert, hands on gloves as if to pull them off. They'd closed ranks around her until she saw nothing but the broad backs of Bjorn's team. Looking toward the horizon, she thought she saw movement.

"Tactical retreat. Let's go!" Bjorn's barking words sent the men wheeling.

Before Sigrid could see what approached, she found herself in the center of five men racing back to the vehicle. She glanced behind her shoulder and saw Trent's stern visage. He shook his head, shooing her forward. The pace increased. When she looked

over her shoulder she no longer saw movement. But something had been back there — something that had sent an entire EUFOR team running.

## Chapter Seven

Staring at the computer screen so hard it blurred, Sigrid compared the logos in front of her to the pictures she'd taken of their discovery. A company. Dumping their waste in the Arctic. Deep in her gut, she knew that's what the canister was, some kind of industrial toxic waste that some corporation somewhere thought they could dump where it wouldn't be found. From the looks of the gouges in the metal, something had found it.

She frowned and rubbed the bridge of her nose. The closest she'd come to identifying it was a similar logo from Russia and some of the smaller former Russian states. The logo matched several companies, some of which had contracts with European Union countries to remove waste. A start, but not a promising one. She twisted her hair back, securing it with a pencil before pulling up the photo of the gouges in the metal canister.

No animal she knew had made the serrated marks. Too thick to be razor blades yet too thin to be claws, the tears had split the container almost in half. They peeled back the metal, a mark of considerable strength. Yet the claw marks had been just a little more than the span of her hand. Without the scent of food, bears wouldn't have tried to open the container, and frankly, nothing else in the Arctic held that kind of strength.

Sigrid pursed her lips and composed an email to Vik, attaching several pictures and telling him about the logo, the partial matches among Russian companies and asking if he had the resources to probe deeper. Finding out the source of the dumping could take him into the highest echelons of the government, and Sigrid preferred to stay out of such crowded ranks. She belonged out here in the field providing the information. After hitting send on the email, she typed up her findings, seeing the glimmerings of several articles among the facts and figures.

A tap on the doorframe interrupted her thoughts. Swiveling in her chair, Sigrid saw Kjell standing in the entrance. He held a slim CD case in his fingers.

"Brought you something." He strode forward with the stalking walk of a predator, and even though Bjorn pulled at her, she acknowledged he was a handsome man. If not for the fact he acted as if he hated her all the time, she could have been attracted to him instead of gravitating toward Bjorn.

"What is it?" She stayed seated, though hated being in a lower position in his presence.

He stopped and reached around her to open the CD drive on the computer. "Take a look at this."

Kjell kept one hand braced on the table next to her, using his left to key commands into the computer. Her work minimized itself as the media player rose to take its place. Grainy video covered the screen.

"Watch," he ordered.

Sigrid did, seeing an expanse of the Arctic. "Where is this? Where'd you get this video?"

"Just watch."

She glanced at him and he pointedly looked back at the computer screen. Something about his demeanor, less hostile, more determined, made her wonder what Bjorn might have said to him. She focused her attention on the screen—and saw large, nearly translucent shapes forming out of thin air.

Tall, gangly, with long, razor-sharp claws on the ends of their hands, the creatures shuffled forward through the snow. They paused, sniffed the air much like Bjorn and his men had done then began to dig. Frantic, the things dug like dogs, bent over, tossing snow between their legs. They pulled out a canister and slashed it, their frantic movements almost a blur.

Sigrid's breath caught in her throat. Here, *on tape*, was the cause of the damage to the canisters. Without audio she couldn't hear their vocalizations, but the gaping maws filled with razor-sharp teeth opened and closed as if communicating.

The night demons. A chill raced through her, raising goose bumps on her skin. A heavy weight rested on her arm, bringing with it warmth. She realized Kjell rested his hand on her arm. Another presence filled the room, Bjorn's, and she reached for him as he stopped on the other side of her. Bracketed between the two men, Sigrid felt safe enough to watch the rest of the tape.

Silence filled the lab. When the screen faded to black and Kjell reached over to eject the CD, she looked first to Bjorn, then to him.

"Those were the night demons." Just saying the words aloud gave them power over her, a power she didn't want them to have. What *were* they? Not human and not animal but...*demon*? Did she really believe in demons? Sigrid's mind whirled. They looked exactly like what the men had fought when she'd drilled her initial cores.

"Yeah," Bjorn's husky voice confirmed her worst fears.

A burst of anger quickly dampened when she recalled the timestamp at the bottom right-hand corner of the video. It was extremely recent. No one had deliberately kept this information from her. In fact, she was beginning to understand that Bjorn and his men had been as forthcoming as they could be under the peculiar circumstances. She needed to remember that. "They're what made those marks in the canister. Almost like they used it for food..."

"Food?"

"That's it! Oh god—that's why those things left such high levels of PCB contamination at the site. They feed on the pollution somehow—" Sigrid stopped

abruptly. "But that doesn't make sense," she continued, thinking out loud. "If they've *always* fed on pollution, a company dumping waste up here would certainly provide easier access...but how did they siphon the PCBs out of the environment before the company conveniently supplied a toxic fast food site? And does that company even know what it's doing, aside from illegally dumping waste?"

"How does a company put the PCBs in those canisters?" Kjell asked.

"A cleansing process. When a lake or soil or other material is contaminated it goes through a siphoning process where the chemicals are removed and usually turned into some sort of slurry for disposal. Various companies, perhaps including the one with the mysterious logo, specialize in this type of cleanup. The PCBs could have come from anywhere, but I might have traced the logo back to Russia and I'm wondering if some country, or corporation, contracted them out to do some cleanup work, and they decided to cut costs by dumping it here. But that doesn't answer who or why." Back on her scientific turf, Sigrid shoved the images in the video from her mind. Concentrating on companies and PCB pollution gave her something concrete on which to focus.

"So someone is throwing their waste up here?" Kjell growled. "And they're not caring who or what is harmed in the process?"

"Nope." She reached up to Bjorn's hand on her shoulder and covered it with her own. "But now that we have this information we can find the company behind the logo and get them stopped."

"But that's not going to stop the night demons."

The demons again. She was mystified by these mysterious creatures that defied explanation. "You don't know that yet. It may stop them or it may not. Certainly the atmosphere brings its fair share of contamination to the Arctic. Let me handle the scientific aspect of it, you just keep protecting the scientists working up here. We'll accomplish the mission. I don't doubt that."

Kjell studied her for a long moment then with a nod to Bjorn, turned and left.

Sigrid watched him leave, uncertain how to take the thaw in his icy exterior. Together, he and Bjorn made a formidable team, both tall and blond with chiseled features and rock-hard bodies. Her breath whooshed from her lungs and for a moment she imagined having them both together. The image of Bjorn behind her, his cock surging into her, and Kjell on his knees in front of her, his face against her skin as he suckled her nipples, sent a rush of cream to her pussy.

Bjorn's fingers tightened on her shoulder. "You think you might have leads on the owner of the logo?" His question pulled her thoughts back to the present.

She brought up the logo images from her search on the computer. Behind her, Bjorn settled his hands on her shoulders, leaning forward so his body shielded her from view. She keyed the images she'd been looking at and pointed out to Bjorn the possibilities.

He dipped his head, his warm breath teasing strands of her hair. "I see." His deep voice rumbled from his chest. His scent, spicy and male, surrounded her, and she

breathed deeply of the heavenly aroma. The mission faded as her world narrowed down to Bjorn.

*Focus girl, focus.* Her mental admonishment did little to cool the fire heating her blood. "I've already sent this information to Vik. Hopefully he can use his contacts to find out more. It looks like the logo has been deliberately altered." She pointed to the screen. "See here where the paint had been scraped away? I don't think it's because those things damaged it."

"I see." Bjorn nuzzled her neck. "Good work, Corporal."

A heated flush rose on her cheeks. She tilted her neck, giving him better access to her skin. "Are you satisfied, Captain?"

He chuckled, the husky notes flowing into her like rich chocolate syrup. "Not by a long shot." His fingers skimmed from her shoulders down to her breasts, where he cupped the mounds through the fabric of her bra and sweater.

"What can I do to satisfy you?"

Her coy question elicited a swift inhalation. With one hand on her breast, his other trailed over her stomach to cup her mons through her jeans, where his fingers pressed against her slit. She squirmed in her chair from the pressure.

Bjorn pulled his hands away and tangled his fingers with hers. A gentle tug had her rising to her feet and following him out of the lab and down the hall, her nipples hardening. She glanced around to make sure none of the other men saw them—especially Kjell. She secretly suspected he and Bjorn had argued about her.

They reached Bjorn's bedroom in what had to be record time, and he ushered her inside before closing the door behind him. Standing there, arms stretched out to his sides, he held her enthralled with his gaze.

"Strip me."

Sigrid stepped forward, willing to comply with his order. A wicked grin curved her lips as she reached for the buttons on his uniform shirt. "Yes, Sir," she said as she slipped the first from its fastening.

Each button bared more of his smooth flesh. The urge to lick him claimed her, and she leaned forward to lave the crease between his flat pectorals. Salty and decadent, his flavor filled her mouth. Closing her eyes, she gave a little murmur of appreciation as she licked a trail to one of his nipples, pulling it into her mouth and nipping gently.

Bjorn's hand closed around the back of her head, his fingers kneading her scalp as he held her mouth in place. She toyed with him, remembering his lips on her nipples, his tongue sliding across the sensitive nubs. She slid her hand inside his shirt to stroke the other, not wanting it to feel abandoned. And then she trailed her lips lower.

Long licks and an open-mouthed kiss along the length of his sternum had him groaning. She unfastened the rest of his shirt and pulled the tails out of his trousers, the rustle of fabric filling the room. As she dropped to her knees, his cock pressed hard and

insistently against his breasts. His musky aroma filled her nostrils and she couldn't wait to wrap her tongue around his plump, broad head.

Bjorn's fingers closed on her shoulders. "Wait." Restraint filled his voice.

Sigrid sat back on her heels. She looked up at him and batted her eyelashes coquettishly at him. "Why? Don't you like what I'm doing?" Through his pants, she stroked his erection with the back of her knuckles. "Doesn't it feel good?"

"Yeah, it feels good. Too fucking good."

Sigrid slipped the buttons from their holes and parted his trousers. His cock surged against the fabric of his boxer briefs and she reached inside the placket to stroke his velvety hardness. From her vantage point, she savored the sight of Bjorn standing there, head thrown back, neck corded, every fiber of his being focused on the pleasure her hands brought.

Grabbing the waistband of his underwear, she pulled them oh-so gently over his cock and shoved them down to join the pants pooled around his ankles. Her pussy clenched, wetness soaking her folds at the thought of all that hardness just for her. She leaned forward and pressed a kiss against the tip.

"Mmm." She rubbed his cock against her lips, back and forth, a gentle sweep that sent shocks to her clit. Closing her eyes, lips parted, she slowly guided him to her mouth. Just a lick, a tiny one, and then she closed her lips around his head and held him there, her tongue dancing across the top.

He tasted like an ice cream cone she wanted to savor lick by melting lick. She worked her mouth down his shaft until her nose brushed his curly hairs and his head bumped the back of her throat. She relaxed her throat muscles and took him even deeper. Her hands reached out, one on his balls the other on his ass, and fondled him.

She licked back down his length until he rested on the tip of her tongue. Rolling the head around in her mouth, she tasted the drops of pre-cum emerging from the tip. His taste, his smell...she doubted she'd ever get enough of him. The thought humbled her. When the mission ended, Bjorn undoubtedly would be deployed elsewhere, as would she. Their time to spend like this, in each other's arms, was limited.

*Make the most of it.* Clutching his ass, she laved the underside of his cock, down to his balls. She licked and swirled her tongue around his sac and slid his balls into her mouth.

Bjorn speared his fingers through her hair. The clip tumbled loose and the silky strands slid over her shoulders.

She released his ass long enough to unbutton her shirt and bra and shove them off her shoulders. Her nipples rasped against his hairy legs. Sitting back, she released his cock and paused long enough to unlace her boots and slide pants and underwear down her legs. Bjorn untied his own boots, kicking them and his pants aside as he shrugged his shirt off his shoulders. She rose up on her knees, naked now, and once more took him into her mouth.

Pleasure. It filled her mind, trickled down her legs with her juices, made her bob a little faster, take him in a little deeper. Her tongue teased him, swirling around the head and then up and down the shaft. Her pussy clenched imagining the thick rod filling her, fucking her, and her hand dropped to her breast to finger her nipples.

"Don't stop," Bjorn panted.

Sigrid looked up at him, saw him looking at her sucking him, touching herself, and she grinned around his shaft. She walked her fingers down over her stomach to the drenched curls at her pussy. She stroked a finger through her wetness and moaned.

"Yeah...finger yourself baby," Bjorn commanded.

She swirled her finger around her opening, avoiding her throbbing clit. Each brush of her nipples against his legs sent sparks straight to her cunt and the muscles contracted as she sucked his cock. Inside her. That's where he belonged. In her pussy. In her ass. She didn't care, right now she wanted to be fucked so long and hard that she blacked out.

She thrust first one finger, then a second inside her. She moaned around his cock, her thumb brushing her clit as she sucked in a harsh breath of air through her nose. Steadying herself with a hand on his hip, she sucked him harder.

Her hips moved with her strokes, back and forth in tune to the movement of her head. In her mind, each time he thrust into her mouth he filled her cunt. His hand on the back of her head—holding her, angling her and then keeping her still as he pumped his hips—only added to her pleasure.

She crushed her thumb against her clit. Curling the two fingers buried inside her, she stroked her G-spot. Oh god—she was going to come and come hard. She redoubled her efforts, cheeks hollowing out with the force of her suction. Her jaw ached, a pain that only doubled her pleasure.

"Come for me," he said. "I want to watch you come."

He was so close she tasted it in the back of her throat, the salty slickness of his precum reminding her how close she was to her own release. A third finger joined the two inside her. The thumb on her clit stroked and gyrated against the sensitive nub.

Bjorn's fingers clenched on the back of her head, nearly pulling her hair.

A final thrust of his cock in her mouth and she came. Fingers buried as far as they could go in her pussy, her hand drenched with her juices, she pressed her thighs together around her hand and struggled not to release his cock to scream. Wave after wave of her orgasm rushed through her. Her breasts ached for a touch and all she could do was press her fingers deeper inside her and ride the crest of her release.

Lights flashed behind her closed eyelids. She curled her fingers into his hip to keep from falling backward. Slowly, she slid her lips from his cock, a tiny mewl of loss rising from her throat. She panted, her chest rising and falling with each breath.

"Fuck me, Bjorn." She ran her hand up and down his leg, the other still against her pussy. Her vagina twitched against her fingers.

"No."

His stark declaration stilled her. She removed her hand from her pussy, the sight of the juices glistening on her fingers making her all the hornier. "What?" The disbelief gave her the strength to rise to her feet.

"I'm not going to fuck you." He stood there, hands on his hips, cock jutting from the curly blond hair. His stern expression looked so out of place she could do nothing but stare at him.

"What do you mean you're not going to fuck me? You want me to beg?"

He smiled a mischievous smile. "No...I want *you* to fuck *me*." He stepped backward until he sat on the edge of the bed then reclined back. He spread his legs, feet planted firmly on the floor.

The picture he presented—balls full and large, cock pointing at the ceiling, his hands braced behind his head—made Sigrid long for a camera. The image made her mouth dry. She strode forward and halted by his legs. Leaning forward, she braced her hands on his knees.

"Do you think you can handle me?" She traced a path up the insides of his thighs and stopped before she caressed his balls. Moving into the opening created by his spread legs, she glanced down at his cock. It jerked beneath her gaze. "You think you're ready?"

"Hell yeah," Bjorn answered. "I think you want a piece of this." He cupped his balls and lifted his shaft to her.

A trickle of moisture dripped down her thigh. She placed one leg on the bed and drew her fingers along her slick labia. How she must look to him with her cheeks flushed with passion, breasts rising and falling with each breath, her cunt sopping wet for him...it made her pussy clench just thinking about it. She spread her labia to reveal her swollen clit. She stroked, keeping her lips open, giving him a full view of the pleasure she gave herself.

She inserted a finger into her pussy and thrust once, twice, then removed it. She desired something more substantial inside her, and Bjorn's cock would prove to be the perfect thing. Crawling over his body, she locked gazes with him. Then slowly, oh-so slowly, she poised herself above his cock. She reached down and circled her fingers around his girth.

She caressed his length, base to tip and back again, all the while slowly lowering herself. When her fingers closed around the base of his penis, she slipped the head inside her.

Bjorn's moan of pleasure mingled with hers. "Do it," he breathed. He lifted his hips, sliding his cock just a little deeper inside her.

Her breath caught in her throat. Savoring the moment took all the control she had. Instead of dropping onto his cock, filling herself in a quick thrust, she slowly slipped, centimeter by centimeter, down his rod. So wide, so thick, she couldn't resist pausing to

stroke his slick skin. She brushed her clit, her shudders sending him even deeper inside her.

Big hands clamped around her waist. "Fuck me, damn you!" Raw desire filled his voice.

She opened her mouth to counter, some pithy comment to further heighten the tension between them. But the exquisite feel of his cock inside her stripped her thoughts away. She dropped, the last few inches rushing into her until his head bumped her cervix. She leaned forward, her nipples crushing against his chest, and claimed his mouth in a bruising kiss.

His tongue parted her lips.

Consumed. He filled her, cunt and mouth, his hips moving restlessly beneath her. Bracing herself, she eased his cock almost completely out of her then slid down again, a gentle, rocking lovemaking at odds with their previous frantic couplings. Her pussy milked him. Muscles contracting around his girth, hard nipples swishing against his chest, Sigrid struggled to retain some measure of control.

Bjorn reached between her legs and flicked his fingers over her clit. She pulled her lips from his. Sitting back on her heels, she fucked him with hard, fast strokes that drove him deep into her cunt. He closed his hands around her breasts and tweaked her nipples.

Sigrid cried out. Her climax hit her immediately. She screamed, the ripples of her orgasm hurtling through her body. Her eyes rolled back in her head, her cries repeating over and over again until her screams degenerated into sobbing moans.

Bjorn rolled Sigrid beneath him. She had the presence of mind to lift her legs and press her heels into his buttocks before he plunged into her, her cunt grabbing his cock and not wanting to let go. Over and over again he drove into her until finally his body stiffened. With a roar, he came. His hot seed bathed the mouth of her womb.

Before he could collapse onto her, he turned them so she lay draped across his chest.

"Damn," Sigrid breathed.

"Yeah, damn," he agreed.

Neither said anything more for long moments.

Aware of her aching thighs, she moved from him and grabbed her pants. "I should get back to the lab. I still have work to do." She stepped into her underwear, pulling it up and donning her trousers.

Bjorn sat up. He reached for her then dropped his hand to the bed. "You're right," he said. "You should go back to the lab. See if Vik replied to your message. I've got..." His words trailed off as he watched her jiggle her breasts into her bra and slide her arms into the sleeves of her shirt.

An intercom buzzed by the side of his bed. Bjorn hit the button. "Here." He frowned at the interruption.

Sigrid stilled as Kjell's voice came through the speaker. "Captain, there's been activity. Looks like there might have been some new dumping."

"Oh shit," Bjorn snarled. "Let's go." He turned to her, releasing the button on the intercom. "You heard. Get cleaned up and meet us to go back out in fifteen minutes. Go."

Sigrid nodded. She spun on her heel and opened the door.

## Chapter Eight

Frustration radiated from Bjorn in waves. He scanned the horizon, the vehicle tracks at his feet disappearing into nothingness. Small, telltale traces showed where the tracks backed over themselves, as if someone attempted to reverse in their exact tracks. Footprints led away from the site and as he sniffed the air, Marc and Trent were following them to see where they led.

Bjorn glanced over his shoulder at the woman kneeling in the snow. The hum of her drill whirled over the wind and as he watched, she extracted an ice core and secreted it into a cooler. If there were traces of PCBs to be found at the site, she would find them. Hans stood watch nearby.

His admiration for her grew. Following the long line of her back, noticing even under several layers of clothing the graceful sweep of her neck, the rounded heart shape of her ass, his cock hardened. *Not now*, he willed his unruly body, yet it ignored his mental pleas. His inner bear stalked and paced with concern over the danger to his woman.

"What do you think?" he asked Kjell. His second looked even more grim than usual, following the tracks where they led to a small rise.

Kjell knelt down and sniffed close to the snow. "Men. Two or three different ones as far as I can tell. And demons." He frowned. "I don't like this. There's no smell of struggle, no blood in the snow. I can't believe the demons capable of working with humans, not when they seem so bent on violence."

Bjorn knelt beside his friend. He inhaled, his sensitive sense of smell deciphering the molecules in the air. "You're right. Damn it. I want to follow the trail. Stay here and watch Sigrid. At the first sign of danger, get her the hell out of here."

"Yes, Captain." Kjell opened his mouth to say something else then closed it.

"Very good." Bjorn rose to his feet.

Over the rise, Marc and Trent appeared. Grim determination etched in their faces, their slow walk told him they'd found nothing.

Damn it. His gut clenched at the lost opportunity. Someone used the Arctic, his home, to dump PCB contamination. He'd be damned if he let them continue. His fingers curled into a fist, the change close to the surface. He loped toward Marc and Trent. The need to distance himself from Sigrid, to keep his inner beast a secret from her, had him running.

He stopped them several meters from their location. "You found nothing."

"The scent just disappears, as do the tracks," Marc confirmed.

Bjorn arched an eyebrow. "Men don't just vanish."

"But demons do. If you want to see for yourself I'll take you back, but the tracks are a dead end. It's a cold trail, one made worse by the shifting winds."

Bjorn turned to Trent. The Canadian had reminded silent during the exchange, and he wanted to hear what his team member had to say.

"Marc's right. I don't know how or why, but the trail's gone cold."

"All right. Return to camp, help keep Sigrid safe. Tell Lieutenant Tveit to return to the compound. I'll be back before nightfall." He gave the order, aware the use of Sigrid's first name revealed the lack of military distance between them. Hell, his men knew of his sexual relationship with her, though none save Kjell had said anything. He'd claimed her, his bear had claimed her. The men's acceptance neither validated nor denied their relationship.

"Yes, Captain," Trent replied. "Good hunting." He took off at a jog back toward the rest of the team.

Bjorn stood watching the blue shape of Sigrid in her snowsuit as she drilled another core. His heart clenched. He had to do this, had to let his bear loose in order to find the truth of the trail. Although his human form held some of the bear's abilities, it limited his tracking—and they'd limited themselves long enough with Sigrid's presence. Now, she hindered their mission, giving him no qualms about sending her back to the compound to hunt alone.

He followed the trail, noticing Marc and Trent's tracks in the snow. The cold powder flew in eddies around his boots. Over the rise and down into a small valley, he looked over his shoulder and saw only the snow-covered terrain he'd crossed. Sigrid and the team lay far behind.

He called to the bear. It hovered beneath his skin, a creature of power and fury accustomed to living in this harsh environment. With a roar, the polar bear burst free. Mouth open, Bjorn struggled to swallow the cry erupting in his throat. He threw down his gloves. Working the zipper of his snowsuit, he pulled it down, shoving off his windproof shell next. Down-filled clothing, a wool sweater and the shirt he wore underneath, all of it lay in a pile in the snow. He unlaced his boots, stepping from them, toes curling into the icy crust. A thought had his feet expanding, shifting into paws, and then he fell forward, nearly inhaling ice crystals as his face lengthened, lips and nose changing to a muzzle. Fingers splayed, they shifted until he stood on four thick legs, toes spread with massive, razor-sharp claws for better purchase on the ice.

He roared, the bear at last free.

Bjorn inhaled a lungful of the crisp air. Scents, like a map overlaid against the terrain, filled his nose. An Arctic fox had crossed this very ridge, veering off toward the left, and he smelled the ocean even though it lay several kilometers away. Two men had followed this path, both rank with unwashed bodies and cigarette smoke. They'd met a third.

And the demons had been here.

He snarled. Five demons and no trace of blood. Whether the demons worked with the men or the men worked with the demons, it mattered little because something had happened here that hadn't ended in death. It meant the demons were more than creatures randomly attacking humans. They had an agenda.

He filled his nostrils with the scents once more and deciding the men had all returned to where the tracks doubled back on themselves. He opted instead to follow the demons. He stepped forward, muscles rippling beneath his thick fur, and strode across the snow, once more master of his domain.

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Sigrid blew a lock of hair away from her forehead and double-checked the cooler holding the ice samples one more time. "What do you mean we're returning without Bjorn?" She secured the cooler in the back of their vehicle and noticed the other men gave her and Kjell a wide berth. Apparently they'd elected him to be the bearer of bad news.

"Captain Lunde told us to return to the compound. He will join us later." Kjell opened the door and motioned for her to get inside.

"So we're going to leave the captain out here by himself?" She shook her head. "Leaving a man behind, even one as capable and trained as he, doesn't make sense. We are *not* leaving him out here by himself." Her voice grew louder and she hoped like hell Bjorn could hear it.

"Captain Lunde is more than capable." Kjell rested his hand on her shoulder. "Look," he said, his voice softening. "I don't like it any more than you do, but he gave his orders. We must follow them."

"What happens if he doesn't return?" A lump filled her throat. Anything could happen out there. They weren't exactly crossing well-traveled territory. The shifting freeze and thaw of the ocean created a treacherous labyrinth of ice, snow and water subject to change at any moment. They neared the end of March, the time when winter released its hold on the Arctic.

"He'll return."

Sigrid resented the niggling of doubt that filled Kjell's voice and the worry in his eyes.

"If he doesn't?" she asked again.

"Corporal Myrhe, get in the vehicle. We're returning to camp." With cold steeliness, Kjell shut down her doubts.

She frowned as he none-too-gently hoisted her into the vehicle and closed the door behind her. Beside her on the bench, Marc and Hans sat already buckled in, perfect little soldiers. Well, she couldn't be a perfect soldier. She cared too much about Bjorn now. These men might harbor their fears, but they wouldn't speak of them. Pressing her lips

together, she tamped down the images in her mind of Bjorn making a wrong step and falling into an icy ocean. She had to have faith.

Her bleak thoughts haunted her all the way back to the compound. She said nothing as she unloaded her gear and went straight to the lab. Kjell reached out to her, his fingers brushing the edge of her snowsuit, but she strode ahead, not caring for anything he might have to say at the moment.

Her hands shook as she gently unpacked the ice cores, affixed labels to their trays and placed them in the freezer. What if Bjorn never came back? She shook her head, wishing she could clear the thought. She sank into a chair to input her notes but only stared at the computer. If only she'd had a chance to talk to him.

If only she'd told him she loved him.

Love. Oh fuck. Burying her head in her hands, she sucked in a deep breath. She loved Bjorn.

No, no, no. She couldn't love Bjorn. But thinking of him out there, alone in the Arctic, sent chills racing down her spine and had her heart in her throat out of fear for him. Kjell should have gone back. Someone should have gone after him.

And she couldn't. Not only did she have analysis to do here, but no one else on the team would go with her. And she wasn't stupid enough to go out alone after him.

He had to return. She glanced at the clock, not liking the passage of time. The fleeting daylight had started to wane by the time they had returned to the compound, and even without the benefit of a window she knew it to be dark outside. A rescue mission under these conditions would be difficult, if not impossible.

Sigrid extracted the first ice core. Focusing on her work at least kept her hands busy. Her mind...well, it tried to stay focused, but it wandered to the man outside, in the cold and the dark, trying to find the trail of some men who'd seemed to have disappeared into thin air. As far as she knew, he'd taken no lights, no survival equipment. She doubted she'd see him again.

Tears stung her eyes. She dashed them away. Perhaps one of the men would take him some gear. But if that were the plan, then why didn't they hurry back here instead of letting her drill those last two cores? And why, if she went to the mess, was she so certain she'd see the four of them having dinner or working on some project together?

No time like the present to make a headcount. She stood and carried the ice core back to the freezer, thankful she hadn't gotten too far into her work. Squaring her shoulders, swallowing hard to remove the telltale lump of fear, she strode from the lab, down the hall where Bjorn had carried her naked to his bedroom to make love to her. Passing the door to his room her steps faltered, her hand reaching for the doorknob to open it and see if Bjorn was in residence. Or maybe just to go inside, open up his closet and inhale his spicy scent.

Male laughter from the mess echoed in the hall. Sigrid stopped. She whirled toward the source of the sound, her fear fading away as she listened to the men joke about something. How could they joke? Bjorn still roamed outside in the freezing cold! Yeah,

she had faith in his abilities. She knew him to be a kick-ass member of EUFOR. If he wasn't, Vik wouldn't have assigned him to this mission. Yet, she also knew the Arctic. She'd lived here all her life, participating in scientific research since shortly after she could read and write. Here, in the struggle of man against nature, man usually lost.

She continued down the hall, her footsteps echoing in the empty corridor. More laughter and boisterous shouts reached her ears. The open door to the gym caught her attention. Terse counting reached her ears and she stopped to look inside.

In the middle of the workout mat, Kjell exercised. He did pushups on the floor, back straight, biceps pumping. His voice, harsh and angry, counted them out, and already he'd passed a hundred. Sweat beaded on his bare back, the muscles flexing with each movement. Her gaze traveled from the heels of his sneakers, over long legs roped with muscles revealed by the tiny gym shorts he wore, to his taut ass. The gray fabric of his shorts molded to the globes of his buttocks and her mouth went dry.

She loved Bjorn, but his second-in-command had a hell of a body. His muscled back entranced her, as did his biceps bunching with each movement.

Her fingers curled around the doorframe. She stepped forward. Hesitant to interrupt his workout—obviously a way for him to channel his frustration into something productive—she waited.

"One hundred and fifty." Kjell held himself upright then dropped to his knees. He stood in a fluid motion, sweat dripping from his hair, more white than blond. Turning, he stared at her. "Sigrid."

"Lieutenant Tveit." Using his proper title as a barrier between them, she struggled to calm her racing heart. Her pussy clenched at the impressive bulge behind his shorts. She brought up an image of Bjorn, held it in her mind, anything to keep from thinking lusty thoughts about his friend. "Bjorn hasn't returned." She glanced at the clock on the wall of the gym, realizing it'd been three hours since she'd last seen him at the site.

"I know." He remained standing where he was, not even reaching for the towel draped over a weight bench not far away. "Discover anything with those ice cores?"

His question brought a flush of heat to her cheeks. She shook her head. "I hadn't had a chance yet to break them down to check for contamination. I heard laughter from the mess and hoped he'd returned."

"Just the men blowing off steam. They're worried too, though they won't tell you. Look, Bjorn isn't like most men. We're different. Harder, trained to this environment. I won't tell you that you don't have to worry. We all do. These night demons are dangerous fuckers and their attacks don't make any sense. That's where you come in. You have to find out why they're attacking." Kjell strode to her. He reached out to curl his hand over her shoulder but instead dropped it at his side.

This close she smelled his hot, sweaty male body. A jolt of lust more powerful than any she'd felt hit her, nearly dropping her to her knees. The need to put some distance between them overpowered her and she stepped back. His stark words reminded her of her duty, what she needed to do for Vik, for herself.

"You should go back to the lab, Corporal." Kjell stepped back and snagged the towel. He mopped his forehead then draped the towel over his shoulders.

"You're worried, aren't you?" The need to hear this military officer admit to some weakness prompted her question. One look in his eyes showed his concern, yet Sigrid wanted to hear him say it. Perhaps if he admitted his worry, she could relax with hers.

"Yes."

"Thank you. I'll let you get back to your workout." She spun on her heel and hurried from the room.

Down the hall, her steps slowed. The lab called to her with its research that might bring her closer to finding an answer. Yet, as she drew closer, she found her heart pulling her toward the living area with its big windows. There, amid the couches and the table on which Bjorn had nearly made love to her, she sensed the pull of solace in the darkened room. The big windows looked over the Arctic landscape, the fencing surrounding the compound visible in the moonlight.

She followed the fence with her eyes, stopping when she saw the gate. It stood open.

Her heart pounded. There, beyond the gate, a dark shape lumbered.

Sigrid pressed her palm to the glass, leaning forward until her nose almost smashed against the barrier. A bear. A massive male, he moved with determination toward the compound. Overhead, the northern lights fired streaks of green and silver against the sky, tiny at first, then growing as if they could sweep the ice with their spectacular colors.

She sucked in a gasp of air, suddenly aware she had stopped breathing. The bear walked through the open gate, straight for the compound.

Surveillance cameras. Who monitored them and what would they do about this polar bear coming so purposely toward them? The creak of a door opening sounded ominously loud, and she saw Trent carrying Bjorn's snowsuit and clothing out in his arms.

"No," Sigrid breathed. The male easily weighed over a thousand pounds. Polar bears had been known to attack humans and this one acted as if he knew exactly where he was going. She leaned forward, the glass cool against her forehead.

The polar bear stopped. Trent continued walked until he stood a short distance away, clothes held out like an offering. She saw his lips moving but couldn't hear what he said.

The bear shook his great head. He rose up onto his hind legs—then his form twisted and shimmered. His limbs lengthened and thinned, muzzle sliding back to form a male face. Fur receded...

Bjorn stood where the bear had once been. Naked, he took the clothing from Trent. He spoke as he pulled on his clothes, laced his boots, zipped his snowsuit and in less

time than it had taken the bear to change, he strode toward the compound, once more the man she knew.

Sigrid shook, her eyes widening. Her knees wobbled. The sense of being watched, of feeling eyes on her, pulled her attention from the window—away from the spot where *a bear had changed into a man!* In the doorway, Kjell stood. He nodded to her then disappeared back into the hallway.

Her mouth dry and she swallowed to try to muster saliva. Bjorn turned into a bear. *The bear became Bjorn!* Like the night demons, it defied explanation. Why the men hadn't worried, why they'd left him—it was because they knew he could become a bear at will. The polar bear was much more suited to the Arctic than man.

Did the entire team know? It made sense, seeing how Trent brought him clothing and Kjell stood there...what? To make sure she didn't run outside? He'd ordered her back to her lab, a windowless room where she wouldn't have witnessed this miraculous transformation. Had he hoped to keep Bjorn's secret a little longer?

A bubble of nervous laughter rose in her throat. Ever since she'd arrived Bjorn had told her his team was different, special. She guessed she now knew *how* special he was. The laughter erupted, spilling over until she grinned like a fool. Hell, if the demons could be real then why couldn't men change into polar bears? For a moment she thought of Svein, Bjorn's cousin, and wondered if her sister knew such things existed. Aud would sell her soul to get up close and personal with a polar bear.

Bjorn. Thoughts of him propelled her out of the room, down the hall to the entryway. She skidded to a stop in the hall, seeing him standing there, surrounded by Kjell, Trent, Marc and Hans. The four men discussed tracks and scents, things more easily observed by a bear than a man.

Oh god—they were *all* bears!

She stumbled against the wall, reaching for the solid concrete to hold herself upright. *A special team.* And she'd been placed right smack in the middle of them. As the men's gazes turned toward her, she knew exactly how a seal felt when a polar bear focused on it. And she had to admit, she'd like these men—or at least their captain—to eat her. More nervous laughter erupted.

"Corporal Myrhe." His use of her title, not her name, in a voice devoid of warmth, had her questioning her safety.

"Captain Lunde." She suddenly sobered. So they were back to military titles and formal modes of address. She stepped forward, wanting desperately to reach for him, wanting to hold him in her arms and assure herself he was all right. Her horrible mental images of him falling through the ice, of it cracking beneath his weight, were replaced by a bear paddling through the ocean. "You've returned."

"I have." A glance sent Hans and Marc hurrying away. "Thank you, Sergeant Major, for your assistance." With those words Trent left, leaving only Kjell and the two of them.

"Lieutenant Tveit told me not to worry. He said you were trained for the Arctic. And you told me yourself that this was a special team. I see neither of you lied." She chose her words carefully, unsure how the men would react to her knowing their secret.

If Kjell's gaze didn't hold approval, it wasn't angry either. "I'm glad you're back, Captain. Once Corporal Myrhe tells us what the ice cores revealed we can correlate the information." With a brief salute, he turned and left.

With the men gone, Sigrid strode forward. She closed her hand over his arm, and he wrapped his around her to haul her against his body. Pressed against the hard planes of his chest, his muscles told a new story. Not just a man in peak physical condition, he epitomized one of the most powerful creatures in nature. She flattened her hand against the cold fabric of his snowsuit and closed her eyes.

"I thought you'd die out there." Her voice shook.

"I know better than to test the ice. I tracked the demons to an abandoned dump site. I'm sending most of the team out in the morning to bring back some samples and take pictures. If Vik hasn't come up with anything on the company, what we have out there should give us some answers." He rested his chin against her head. "I'm sorry I worried you like that, but I knew I could handle it and get back safely. You have to trust me."

Sigrid looked up at him. She reached for a stubbled cheek, flattening her palm against it. "And you have to trust me enough to tell me the entire truth. If Vik didn't think I could be trusted, he wouldn't have brought me into this team. If I'd known what your capabilities were I might have had more resources at my disposal."

Bjorn had withheld information. She loved him, had given him her body and her heart, and still he held back from her. She sensed it in the taut planes of his body, the way he held his breath.

"I told you we weren't a normal military unit."

Sigrid released him. If he couldn't come clean now, after she'd seen his transformation from bear to man, she didn't know if she could continue their relationship. The professional relationship she *had* to continue, and could do so by burying herself in the lab, figuring out the PCB contamination and the connection between the chemicals and the night demons. But their personal relationship would end—right here, right now.

"You don't say," she snorted. "But why are you so special? Because you're a special ops unit of EUFOR that doesn't exist on paper? Or because you shift into a polar bear? Why, Bjorn? Why didn't you tell me?"

## Chapter Nine

"I've never told anyone about my abilities. My father is a shapeshifter. My mother knows of course, but few outside our family does. I've been deployed across the globe. Even in the Middle East, the hottest fucking place I've ever been, I'd find a walk-in cooler or somewhere to shift and try to keep my polar bear from baking us both to death." He balled his hands into fists at his sides. "I'm sorry, Sigrid."

"Were you ever planning on telling me?" She backed away.

Bjorn followed her down the hall into the living room and when she took the couch, he sat down beside her. He reached for her to pull her against his chest but she stiffened and moved away. Letting him hold her might ease her heart but it wouldn't help her get the answers she sought. No, in his arms she'd let Bjorn seduce her right out of this discussion.

"I hoped I'd be able to." Bjorn brushed a strand of hair from her face. He trailed his fingers down the slope of her cheekbone, brushed his thumb across her lips. "I'd hoped that our relationship would reach a point where I could tell you. But you have to understand our unit isn't even on any official EUFOR documents. Outside of Vik and my men, no one else in EUFOR knows about our unit's special ability. And I didn't know what you'd planned to do or where you planned to go once your assignment ended here."

"I'd do whatever EUFOR wanted me to do, and I suspect you would have had a large role to play in that. You change into a fucking polar bear! You know my research specialties. I'm freaked out, but...but I can deal. If the night demons are real—and I've seen them on tape—then so are you. Except I've had tools in my scientific arsenal you didn't let me use because you didn't trust me." She rose to her feet, unable to sit beside him a moment longer. Bjorn frustrated her on a personal and professional level. She paced back and forth, harsh steps that had her channeling the frustration and the anger and the fear that had built up inside her.

"I did nothing to jeopardize the mission."

"Didn't you?" She whirled to face him and pressed her fists on her hips. "How can you say that? I needed samples. You have men who can go into the Arctic at will, travel distances far greater than I could in snowsuits and vehicles. You have vision, smell...senses far keener than my own. How can you say you didn't do anything to harm the mission?"

"I had orders."

"So now you were just following orders? You change into a *polar bear*. How can omitting that information be following orders? Did Vik tell you not to tell me? Did he plan to tuck me into some backwater after the mission so I could never reveal his brave

and wonderful polar bears? Well if that's your plan, fuck you! I haven't worked this hard to have my scientific findings brushed aside. I came here to help you. The least you could have done is let me do that." Releasing her anger made her feel better, though the hurt in Bjorn's eyes only added to her inner turmoil.

She glared at him, chest heaving from the force of her emotions. Her nails bit into her palms. Heat filled her cheeks.

"You're right."

His words diffused her instantly. She stared at him, uncertain of where to go from here.

"I should have told you. But I was afraid. I care for you, Sigrid. More than is probably wise given my position, but I do. And I knew if I told you I could change into a polar bear, I'd lose you." He stood.

"I wouldn't leave."

"Most women would."

"I'm not most women. And it would have saved me a hell of a lot of worry," she said.

Bjorn enfolded her in his arms, a bear hug worthy of the name. He splayed his hand at the base of her spine and hauled her against his body. "I'm damn glad you aren't most women." He claimed her lips in a hard, bruising kiss.

Sigrid melted against him. She needed his strength. Against her stomach, the ridge of his erection reminded her that no matter Bjorn's abilities, he was very much a man who wanted her. Tears stung the corners of her eyes, not signs of loss but relief and love. Her feelings for him welled in her chest.

His tongue parted her lips, sliding into her mouth. She met it with her own, stroking it, sucking on it, images running through her mind of herself on her knees, sucking his cock.

He speared his fingers through her hair, tilting her face for a deeper angle.

She lifted her leg to wrap it around his hips and suddenly they were moving back, stumbling, falling onto the couch with her sprawled on top of him. She straddled him and unzipped his snowsuit.

A throat cleared.

"Obviously you didn't run," Kjell said, amusement in his voice. "Welcome to the team, Corporal Myrhe."

Sigrid sat up, aware of the erection still pressing through several layers of clothing beneath her, the way that Kjell's eyes rested on her breasts, on her intimate position with their captain. "I'm glad to be here." She swung her leg off him. "Though that still doesn't change the fact that I'm mad as hell no one told me before." Laughter bubbled up from her throat at the widening of Kjell's grin.

Behind her, Bjorn sat up and shrugged out of his snowsuit. "Let's call Vik and tell him what I found and what we know. I want our men out there first thing in the morning to haul those canisters back to the compound." He stood.

"Yes, Sir." Kjell left to inform the men of their duties.

"I believe I passed some sort of test," she said.

Bjorn finished removing his outer layer of clothing and carefully folded the snowsuit, setting it on the couch. "Yeah you did. Let's go call Vik."

Satisfied with his answer, she followed him out of the living room and into his office.

The woman walking behind him amazed him. First her scientific mind, then he'd discovered the passion she held inside, and now she accepted his ability to shapeshift. He'd never told anyone outside the military before, certainly not any other woman, and somehow her knowing made their relationship all the sweeter. He'd wanted to tell her, figured she could use their polar bears to help her research. He feared she'd run. Back to Ny-Alesund, maybe as far as Oslo, and out of his life forever.

He'd be damned before he let that happen. So he had hoped she'd stay in her lab, not witness his shift from bear to man. But she had, and she accepted it, and he felt like an ass for not telling her sooner.

He forced his mind not to travel beyond the mission, to what might happen once they stopped the night demons. If he thought about that, if he imagined Sigrid leaving, going on another assignment, then he might as well cut out his heart and feed it to a regular polar bear. She had to stay with him. He had to convince Vik of the value she added to the team.

Sigrid closed the door behind them as they entered his office. He sat behind the desk and picked up the secure line. Moments later the phone rang, and Bjorn placed it on speaker, Sigrid settling in the chair across the desk.

Vik answered the phone.

"Captain Lunde and Corporal Myrhe here. I've returned from a reconnaissance mission. We found a waste dump." Bjorn spoke without any emotion, as if dictating.

Vik's one-word reply spoke volumes.

"There's more. Corporal Myrhe has discovered I'm a shifter."

"Corporal Myrhe is this true?" Vik asked.

"Yes, Sir." Her heart hammered in her chest at the prospect of admitting her discovery. "I saw him returning from reconnaissance and shifting from polar bear to man. I wish I'd known earlier, Sir. Knowing that a member of the team could survive in the Arctic in...in another form would have provided innumerable research opportunities."

"Yes, I'm sure. And how do you feel about this knowledge?"

Vik's question caught her off guard. "I'm not sure, Sir. It's startling news to say the least. However we're not dealing with normal things on this mission. I've seen the demons and I've seen Bjorn shift. And I know him. I'm certain his abilities will be nothing but an asset to my work on the mission."

"I see. Captain Lunde, tell me more about your discovery." Vik turned the attention back to Bjorn.

"A dump. Several canisters, all of them marked. I'm sending the men to obtain photographs and samples tomorrow morning. Someone is using the Arctic as a personal landfill. I also sensed heavy night demon activity. We've suspected the two are related, and right now, I'm inclined to believe Corporal Myrhe's hypothesis about the demons feeding on the PCBs. It makes the most sense in light of what we've found." Bjorn glanced across the desk at her.

She breathed a sigh of relief.

"Very well. Good work, both of you. And Corporal Myrhe, Bjorn isn't the only shapeshifter on the team. They all are. I'll send details to you via a secure channel. Welcome to the team." The line disconnected.

"That went well." Bjorn stood and circled the desk. He leaned against it in front of Sigrid. "I'm glad."

"What did you expect?" Sigrid leaned back, stretching her legs out in front of her. She noticed the way his gaze caressed the length of them, lingering on her hips before lifting to her face.

"I wasn't sure how Vik would take the news of your discovery. I'm happy that I no longer have to keep secrets from you." He straddled her legs and leaned forward, bracing his hands on the arms of the chair.

"Did you think he'd dismiss me?"

"No, not after the work you've done. And once we have the full logo, we'll get it matched up and be one step closer to discovering the link between the demons and the chemicals."

"Then what were you afraid of?"

"That'd you'd leave." He kissed her then, picking up where they'd left off in the living room. He licked her lower lip, nipped it before sweeping the seam of her mouth with his tongue.

Sigrid opened beneath him and he savored the anticipation of sinking into the warm cavern of her mouth. Lips against his, she reached for him, her hands sliding over his arms, his chest, down to the waistband of his uniform pants, and his cock was hard and pounding for her. He tasted her, the tang of coffee, the honeyed warmth that was unique to her. The scent of vanilla and her arousal teased his nostrils and suddenly he had to have her, possess her. He reached back onto his desk to press the remote door-locking device, not wanting to be interrupted until he had thoroughly sated her.

He unbuttoned her shirt. Without breaking contact with her lips he unhooked button after button until her shirt gaped open and he saw her pink lace bra. He reached into the opening and closed his hand over her breast, the nipple pressing into his palm, and suddenly he wanted to taste the tight bud. He inserted his leg between hers, spreading her thighs so he could drop to his knees between them. A shudder raced through her body.

"Mmm, Sigrid," he murmured against her flesh, placing open-mouthed kisses along the side of her neck. He nipped her, tiny love bites meant to mark her for the men to see. He laved each mark with his tongue, continuing lower.

The hollow of her collarbone held his attention. He licked her, savoring her sugared vanilla taste. Like warm sugar cookies fresh from the oven, and he wanted to devour every bite. He followed the slope of her breast, stopping where lace met skin to lick and nibble the curve of her breast, down to the valley in between and then up again. His body held her pinned in the chair.

A sense of power filled him. He pulled down the cup of her bra, freeing her breast and bringing his lips to the tight bud of her nipple. Licking it, he smiled against her skin when she cupped the back of his head, and when he drew the nub into his mouth and sucked, she moaned aloud. All fire and ice, his sexy scientist who made him so fucking hard he couldn't think. Now that she knew the truth about his inner bear, his desire for her grew. She accepted him for what he was. He couldn't think of anything sexier than that.

Sigrid shoved the shirt off her shoulders. Reaching around her, he unhooked her bra, the straps slipping from her shoulders. He reached underneath the gaping fabric to close his hand around the breast he wasn't suckling, caressing and rubbing the nipple. A little pinch to heighten the pleasure, her swift inhalation telling him it worked.

He ached to possess her. He sat back on his heels, taking stock of the red marks from his teeth, his saliva on her glistening nipple.

She dropped her bra and unfastened her pants. He unlaced her boots, pulling each one off in turn before helping her slide pants and underwear down her long legs. His cock throbbed, his boxer briefs and trousers way too constraining. Yet, removing his own pants would make things go too quickly for his taste. She parted her legs and his gaze settled on the slick, plump folds of her labia.

Her clit peeked from beneath its hood, tantalizing him with thoughts of running his tongue over it. Placing his hands on the insides of her thighs, he spread her legs even wider and rained tiny kisses over the insides of her knees, up toward her pussy, stopping when his nose brushed her damp curls. He inhaled deeply. His woman, and he made her wetter than a melting glacier.

A swipe of his tongue across her labia had her shuddering. Good. He wanted her like that, on the edge of an orgasm, teetering but not quite ready to go over. He thrust his tongue between her folds, giving her a long, slow licking all the way to her clit and then down again. He walked his fingers over her ribcage to cup her breasts once more.

Swirling his tongue around her clit, he heard her breath hitch, felt the shudders racing through her body. Her pussy contracted and he imagined what it'd feel like clamping down on his cock right now. So wet, so ready...and yet, he held back.

Focusing on her clit and nipples, flicking his tongue against the former, stroking and pinching the latter, he brought her higher and higher. Her cries rose and broke a moment before her orgasm rippled through her, her cunt grasping for something that wasn't there. Her hands clamped against his and held them to her breasts. Looking up, over the delicious curves of her body, he saw her bite her lip in an attempt to keep her cries muffled.

He pulled his mouth away from her pussy. "Let it go, baby. I want to hear you scream."

"Then fuck me." Her breathy admission had his cock so hard it nearly touched his stomach.

Sliding his hands down her arms, Bjorn stood and finally removed his clothes before tangling her fingers with his and pulling her to her feet. Seven quick steps—too many in his mind—brought them to the wall. He pressed his back against it and stretched out his legs, his heels against the floor and his toes braced against the edge of the desk. Thus suspended, he watched as Sigrid lifted her leg over his. She walked up, over his legs as far as she could until he cupped the backs of her thighs and pulled her closer.

He caressed her, running his hands from the sensitive backs of her knees to the crease where thigh met buttock. The slow strokes cooled his ardor enough for him to cup her ass and lift her onto his cock. He held her suspended, her breasts close enough to lick, and looked at the woman in his arms.

"God, you're beautiful," he breathed and claimed her lips.

She met him open-mouthed, her tongue plunging past his lips. Their mouths mated, tongues stroking each other, devouring, taking, and it would never, ever be enough. Slowly, he lowered her until his cock head brushed her slick folds. He slipped easily past them.

He held her there, his gaze straying past the tempting globes of her breasts with their pert nipples, down over her flat stomach to where they were joined. The sight of his cock disappearing into her cunt, her blonde curls nearly touching his, made his balls tighten. Her pussy contracted and he slipped deeper inside.

He kissed her, swallowing her moans as he sheathed himself inside her. His cock head brushed her cervix, her hot, tight muscles holding him in place. He lifted her just as slowly, her muscles gripping him until he rested just inside her entrance. She rocked onto her toes, almost unable to touch the floor, and then he thrust into her once more.

Sigrid wound her arms around his neck, pressing their bodies together until they were face-to-face, chest to chest, joined as intimately as a man and a woman could be. Bjorn's breath caught in this throat. The phone could ring announcing a nuclear

explosion and frankly, he wouldn't give a damn. All that mattered was this woman, this moment, and he vowed to give her the best release of her life.

Her thigh muscles clenched his legs in a viselike grip. He was completely lost in sensation. The hot, wet sheath of her pussy massaged his cock, her breasts brushing against his chest with every thrust. Her tongue parried his and the need for air became a torture as their mouths parted, only to fuse again.

She rode him, each thrust brushing her clit against him. Pulling her lips away, her panting breaths told him how close to orgasm she was. He kissed her shoulder in an open-mouthed kiss that left a red mark then bit lightly. She moaned as he laved the mark with his tongue.

His. He'd marked her with his scent, his teeth and his seed.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," she moaned over and over again as she came. Her cunt milked him, drawing him ever closer to the edge. Her clit, swollen and wet, tormented him with each stroke, and her nipples, diamond-hard, caressed his own with intimate brushes.

He thrust through her orgasm, catching her on the other side and bringing her back up. She truly rode him, her feet no longer touching the ground at all. His biceps screamed and still he pumped into her, quickening his pace.

Dipping his head, he captured her nipple in his mouth. He couldn't get enough of her. The scent of her juices flooded his nose, her husky sighs and moans danced in his ears. Beyond the walls the men worked on the mission, planned even now for an expedition to retrieve the containers and gather more information. He should be with them. Instead, he buried his cock to the hilt again and groaned.

And then he thought of nothing as the blind haze of lust overtook his senses. He sought only the tight bliss of her cunt, the knob of her cervix caressing his head with each thrust. He feared he was hurting her yet had to go deeper, farther inside her, and with her moans driving him on, she made no move to stop him. The base of his spine tingled, pleasure concentrating in the skin just behind his balls. His cock stiffened even more. He growled – then his muscles locked and held him in place as he shot jet after jet of his cum.

Sigrid screamed. She tightened her arms around his neck, so tight he thought she might strangle him, but oh what a way to go. Head tipped back, breasts thrust toward him as an offering, she came again. Her pussy wrung even more from him, and then, legs unable to support him, he sank toward the floor with her on top of him.

She shuddered, her forehead pressed against his, their breaths mingling. With the solid floor beneath them, Bjorn released his hold on her ass, cupping her hips lightly instead and splaying his fingers against her lower back. Still joined, his cock half hard inside her, he looked into her eyes.

Sigrid. His bear roused enough to grunt its approval then disappeared back inside him. His mate.

His fingers stilled against her back, his cock instantly hard once more. She raised her gaze to search his face, though for what he couldn't guess. His breath caught in his throat. Never before had he thought of a woman as his mate, a partner, someone with whom he could share both halves of his nature. Yet Sigrid prompted those thoughts. He released his pent-up breath and pressed a hard, fast kiss to her lips.

"We should..." Her voice drifted away.

"Yeah." Bjorn kept his hands on her hips, preventing her from moving away. "That was damn..."

"Very."

He dared not think about the future. Right now he had men to send on a mission, research to do and attacks to stop. With Sigrid in his arms, he thought about how much more important it was to protect her. His bear demanded its mate stay safe at all times. In the wild, male polar bears mated at every opportunity and never for life. However, inside Bjorn, this bear seemed to have adapted to the human custom of long-term arrangements. *How* long-term remained to be seen, but he doubted his bear would go looking for another partner anytime soon. In this one circumstance, the bear agreed with the man.

"I have to brief the men," he said. "Need to make sure they're ready for the retrieval."

Sigrid nodded and bent her knees beneath her. Reluctantly he released her hips and she rose in a fluid motion. Her breasts swayed as she stepped away from him and when she turned to pick up her panties, she presented him with the heart-shaped curve of her ass.

Bjorn bolted to his feet. He stopped behind her as she pulled her panties up her legs and his fingers closed around hers. Gently, he pulled the satin and lace scrap over her hips, smoothing the elastic first around her waist, then around each leg. He stroked the satin crotch with his fingers and smiled at the wetness he found.

"Let me get you the specs of what I want," Sigrid said, turning to face him. "That way you can better plan the retrieval."

"Get me your specs, but you're not going." He reached down to retrieve her shirt and handed it over.

"What do you mean I'm not going?" She ignored her bra, slipping her arms into the shirt. "I've got to take readings."

"My men will handle all of that."

"And you?" She left the shirt unbuttoned to gather the rest of her clothing. "What will you be doing?"

"Staying here. With you." He hoped she'd be happy at the news—not about missing the mission, but the prospect of spending time with him. Protecting her meant staying as close as possible and for the next few days he didn't intend to let her out of his sight.

"Who's going?" She pulled on her pants. Each layer of clothing placing distance between them.

Bjorn resisted the urge to pick up his underwear. Professional and personal barriers snapped into place like the cold slice of an Arctic gale as she dressed. "Everyone but you and I. Vik might come through at any time with more information and I want to take a look at your research. I think we might be able to correlate it better together. I know about the attacks, and you have the numbers. I'm not trying to shut you out or keep you away from the action."

"Tell me what you've got," she replied, and he realized she'd adopted a "wait and see" attitude. He didn't like it, but right now it was the best he was going to get. He'd have to work for better. He had her body, now he wanted more.

## Chapter Ten

Three days had passed since she and Bjorn had made love in his office. It wasn't sex anymore, not to her, and it hurt like hell to make the admission. When he told her she wasn't going on the retrieval it stung. Her professional and personal pride wounded, she retreated into her work. Long hours in the lab, then once the men returned with the canisters, ice cores and photos, more time spent gathering and studying readings. On the wall, a map of the area with attack sites marked in red showed no signs of a pattern. Contamination readings went off the charts where the attacks occurred. Elsewhere they read normally.

There'd been no more night demon attacks. She exhaled and rubbed the bridge of her nose, eyes watering from too many hours looking at the computer screen. A tepid mug of coffee sat next to a plate with a half-eaten biscuit. Someone had brought the snacks but she hadn't seen who.

She hoped Vik had gotten further with the logo than she. Searches of public company databases from across Europe and North America revealed no easy answers. Russian sources continued to show possible matches, but the logo had been altered enough that she couldn't be sure. With no name and no information about the dumps, it'd be like finding a specific seal during mating season. Damn impossible.

The computer chimed to announce incoming email. Deciding to take a break, Sigrid launched her email program and scanned the header. A message from Vik, with attachments. She opened it, thinking perhaps this might be the break they needed. Quickly, she read the message. Vik provided a match for the logo using resources far beyond any they had. They'd done it!

Sigrid breathed a sigh of relief. Knowing to whom the logo belonged might ascribe motive to the dumping, perhaps even indicate why the company might have created or enlisted the aid of the night demons. A new type of weapon perhaps?

Vik, true to his word, had come through with plenty of data. Baltic Waste Initiatives, or BWI, worked in the Russian Federation as an industrial cleanup company. Known for their work cleaning up contaminations on the Chalik River, they garnered European attention as a fast, efficient source of PCB cleanup. They'd done work in Denmark, Finland and Sweden. Currently the Norwegian government was reviewing proposals to have them work there as well. Certainly a corporation with access to the north, contacts above the Arctic Circle and a reputation to maintain. Their stock traded on the Russian Stock Exchange, which meant bottom lines to make and shareholders to please.

Her stomach churned as she examined Vik's thorough research. His work confirmed that she and Bjorn had been right on the mark. One company, trying to cut costs, decided to dump its toxic waste in the Arctic. Bastards!

Getting the information to Bjorn—and his men out on a recon mission near the latest dump site—became an utmost priority. She packed away the research on which she worked, knowing full well nothing more would get done until she brought Bjorn up to speed. Then, taking a deep breath to calm herself, she left the lab in search of him.

The weight room stood empty, as did the mess. She hurried down the hall to his office, fighting back a blush thinking of the way they'd coupled there just a few days ago. Thoughts of leaving, heading on to some other mission when this one ended intruded. She shoved them aside. Right now she couldn't afford to focus on the future, not when Bjorn, and the mission, took up so much of the present.

She saw him sitting behind the desk looking as tired as she felt. She tapped lightly on the doorframe.

"Come in." Bjorn looked up from his computer. Lines at the corners of his eyes and his drawn lips told her that whatever he'd been reviewing he didn't like. "What can I do for you?" His lack of sensual interest spoke volumes about his workload.

"I got an email from Vik. He found the company."

"Yeah, he copied me on it. I don't know whether to be overjoyed that we made some progress or hate the fact that it's the Russians. They're trying so hard to be a part of the European Union, yet their old style of doing business remains. We're not going to get much information out of Russia if they don't want us to have it." He gestured to the chair in front of his desk. "Sit, you look like you're about to fall over."

Sigrud sank gratefully into the chair. A part of her, the part not caring about scientific validation, wanted to curl against his broad chest and let him tell her everything would be all right. Except he'd be lying, and she never cared much for men who lied.

"They have the access, the ability to make such a dump, and we can assume the motive. Vik said he'd make discreet inquiries into the Norwegian government to see what kind of presentation they gave about how they can undercut everyone else in the cleanup business. He also said he'd try to stop them from taking the job." She reached across the desk to lay her hands on his. "Now, if only we can find the connection between this company and the night demons." She shuddered.

Bjorn curled his fingers around hers, the warmth from his hands soaking into her skins. "Yeah, we're not going to finish this mission overnight."

"But we will finish it. So, we know *who*. The question is, now what?"

Bjorn opened his mouth to answer—

The perimeter sirens began to blare.

Bjorn bolted to his feet. "Shit! You wanted in on the action? You might just get your chance. Don't bother retrieving your sidearm – guns don't hurt them. They're solid only as long as they're on the ground."

"What about knives?"

"I don't want you getting that close."

"Damn it, Bjorn, you're the only one here." She stood and circled the desk. "I can't let you fight them alone."

"And I can't let you get hurt," he growled. Closing his eyes, he sucked in a deep breath. "Look, we don't have time for this. Go into the control room and stay apprised of the situation. Call Kjell on the radio...see if you can't get him back here ASAP. The rest of the team must stay in the field."

"Yes, Sir." Turning on her heel, she jogged out of the office and down the hall. Perhaps Bjorn was right. She lacked the practical fighting skills of the men. Yet, with him here alone, she burned to battle alongside him. She shook her head. Working the control room played an important part. The nagging feeling that she should be out there, that if she were a young recruit or one of the men then Bjorn wouldn't have hesitated, bothered her.

And that was the question, Sigrid realized. Could she love a man who constantly wanted to wrap her in cotton and tuck her away like a prized porcelain heirloom? She didn't know the answer and feared it was a moot point anyway. She'd already fallen in love with him. Slipping into the seat in the control room and affixing the headset to her ear, she stared at the monitors. She punched a button to radio Kjell.

"Lieutenant Tveit," he answered, static crackling from the distance between them.

"Captain Lunde requests your return as soon as possible. We're under attack."

"Yes, Sir. Sit tight. We're coming back."

"Just you, Lieutenant. The rest of the team needs to remain in the field."

"Yes, Sir, on my way." The radio clicked off.

With reinforcement called, Sigrid turned her attention to the matter at hand – keeping Bjorn safe. The screens told a scary tale. Three night demons flew across the compound. Above them, the northern lights flashed and dazzled brilliant colors across the sky. Maws open, claws extended, the creatures hurried toward Bjorn.

He stood in polar bear form in the center of the yard. He lifted his big head and sniffed the air then charged toward the nearest demon. As a bear she couldn't communicate with him. He'd sent her here to keep her safe, not really give her an important role to play in the coming battle.

A night demon veered off from the group. It headed straight for the building. In the security camera the gaping holes in the creature's head where its eyes should have been burned through the lens. Chills raced down her spine. She checked the locks. They were solid. She touched her hip, reaching for a gun that wasn't there. And according to Bjorn,

guns wouldn't help anyway. Blades maybe. Bolting to her feet, she hurried to the mess. She might not have a sword, but she wielded a mean butcher knife.

Her boots pounded in the hall as she ran, the echoes consciously reminding her of the empty compound. Outside Bjorn fought the demons. Her mind could no longer deny them, not while she knew they were here, now, and not on some grainy surveillance video.

A muffled thump shook the building. Something pounded on the exterior door of the kitchen and an inhuman wail filled the air.

Sigrid yanked open a drawer and closed her fingers around the wooden handle of the ten-inch chef's knife. Yanking it out, she held the blade forward.

The door rattled on its hinges.

She doubted Kjell would arrive in human form, which meant she couldn't communicate with him either. Bjorn fought outside. Though she heard no noise except the rattling door and the wails of the demons, she believed in her heart Bjorn was winning. She stepped toward the door and pressed her back against the wall where she'd be concealed by the door if it burst open.

Sigrid waited. Sweat beaded between her shoulder blades and trickled behind her bra. Overhead, the air ducts whirled as the furnace kicked in. She jumped at the sudden sound. Mentally, she repeated a litany of belief that she could do this, she could fight the demons. If she couldn't, she feared what would happen. The image of the scientist, his guts spilled open by the demons, dominated her thoughts.

A cry arose, the scream of a wounded animal. Sigrid's breath caught in her throat. Straining to listen, she pressed her ear against the wall, knowing full well the solidly built compound filtered out all but the loudest noises. The demons...were they hurting him? Maybe even killing him? She stepped forward then froze, undecided on whether to run back to the control room.

The demon pounded on the door. Solid steel, industrial grade, it shouldn't have moved easily. Yet, on the other side of it, she heard screws rattling, hinges parting as the creature pummeled its way inside.

The door slammed open.

The impact of the door against her left hand reverberated through her skin. Wind swirled inside, carrying with it snow and the smell of a rotting corpse. Fighting against the urge to gag, Sigrid lifted the knife into position and shoved the door closed.

It slammed into the demon, the latch catching against the wall. The hinges hung askew. Frigid air blew in between the gaps. The demon punched the door open once again.

Lifting the blade, Sigrid pivoted into the creature's path. A blast of hot, putrid air blew into her face, making her eyes water from the stench. Slashing in a diagonal pattern across the creature's chest, she landed two quick blows.

Inhuman growls rolled in through the open door. The definitive sounds of a polar bear locked in combat followed them, and every instinct in Sigrid's body told her to flee. She belonged in the lab, not here on the battlefield, and as she jerked back, narrowly missing the night demon's claws, she sucked in a gasp of air. She'd always wanted a chance to prove herself. Now was as good a time as any. Not wasting energy on a battle cry, she rolled forward onto the balls of her feet and stabbed at the demon.

The blade caught its arm, tearing a rent in the diaphanous image from elbow to wrist. The hand flopped to the side as if hanging by tendons and will alone. With its right hand, the demon swiped at her. She ducked, bringing up her arm to slash across the back of its biceps and down over the elbow. Millimeters separated the blade from the demon's image.

Her hand-to-hand combat instructor's words filled her mind. Muscles loose, adrenaline pumping through her veins, she focused on the opponent in front of her. Demon or man it mattered little, not when her life was at stake. Bjorn's too, for if she fell, she had no doubt he'd do something stupid like try to avenge her death.

Another slash and swipe, the demon fell into a pattern. Sigrid mixed it up, a kick at its legs where she quickly discovered the beast might *look* spectral, but was as solid as she. Grinning, she swiped one leg out from beneath it, slashing down with her knife. One of the demon's feet remained on the ground and the blade's edge caught its thigh, tearing a gash across the front.

The demon howled. Long, skeletal fingers flailing, it hooked its claws into her shirt. She screamed as the nails bit into her flesh, tearing a gash over her shoulder blade and into her triceps. Pain radiated from her arm as her fingers spasmed and the knife clattered to the ground.

"Fuck," she growled. She lunged for it, pain making her sloppy, and the beast charged in to gut her.

Sigrid jerked out of the way. Unbalanced, her foot slipped on a pool of blood. Her own, she realized as she fell, landing with a thud against her right hip. The demon loomed over her.

"This ain't over yet!" She kicked out with her feet, using the strength in her legs and hips. Her boot soles slammed into the demon's stomach, sending it staggering back. She rolled to her feet and looked around for the weapon.

There, behind the demon, the blade glinted in the light cast by the aurora borealis.

A polar bear ran across the snow-packed ground. Not quite as bulky as Bjorn, it had to be Kjell. He turned and stared into the door.

Snow flying, the bear turned toward the building.

Sigrid pressed her mouth closed against the urge to yell at him to go save Bjorn. Anything that might give him away would hurt her lover, and she wouldn't let that happen. Instead, she fainted at the demon.

The demon took the bait.

Spinning on her heel, she brushed past him like a basketball player heading for the other end of the court. She reached for the blade, her fingers sticky with blood as they closed around the handle. Pain laced up her arm, so much she nearly screamed. Instead, she brought up the blade.

It sliced into the creature's abdomen, momentum carrying it upward to the shoulder, where it slid out with a sucking noise. A backhanded slash sent the blade back across the demon's neck. The creature's howl ended in a gurgle and with a sizzle, it dissipated into nothingness.

She stared at her bloody hand and felt the burn of her wound. Outside Bjorn fought the other demons, Kjell running to join him now that her demon had been destroyed. She slammed the door, knowing she couldn't go outside without protective gear. Already adrenaline ebbed, letting her feel her fingers, stiff and numb from the cold. She shuffled toward the hall, to the infirmary where the first-aid supplies were. If she bled to death, defeating the demon wouldn't matter.

She reached the infirmary and slapped a large gauze pad on the wound, binding it in a matter of seconds. Downing a couple painkillers with a handful of water, she picked up her knife again and hurried for the snowsuits. Later she'd feel her pain. Later she'd analyze just how close to death she came. Right now, she had to get out there.

She slipped on her snowsuit, the parka painful as it slid over her shoulder, then rushed toward the door.

It slammed open.

Sigrid shrieked and pulled up the knife.

Two polar bears stood in the doorway. The first, Bjorn, looked as horrible as she felt. Slashes covered his muzzle, his shoulders, and she saw the second, Kjell, nudge him with his nose. The bears ambled in and Sigrid closed the door behind them. Sagging against it, she watched as they changed.

"You're safe," she breathed as she slid down the door, her back against it. Black dots wavered in her vision and she rested her head against her knees. "You're safe."

A male hand touched her shoulder. She looked into Bjorn's eyes, the worry she saw there making her thankful she was already on the floor. "You're hurt."

She stared at the bloody, bare hand holding the knife. Nodding, she dropped it by her side then stretched out her arm. "Help me get my coat off. I thought I might be needed."

"You disobeyed a direct—oh hell!" Bjorn cursed as he gingerly pulled the sleeve of her coat away. He nodded to Kjell and both men helped her to stand. Bjorn leaned her weight against him, and it had to be a measure of her pain and blood loss that she hadn't even noticed until now that both men were naked.

"One came at the door. I couldn't let it get past me." She pressed her lips together, not liking the way the room spun and tilted. "I thought it might..." She stumbled against him.

"She's lost a lot of blood, Bjorn." Kjell's voice sounded far away.

"I know," Bjorn answered.

The room tilted as he scooped her up in his arms and carried her to the infirmary. His long strides covered the ground quickly as she watched the lights flash by overhead. On Bjorn's right side, Kjell followed. He slipped away as they passed the hall leading to the bedrooms and she hoped he was grabbing clothing for them. Not that she minded them naked, but she preferred to be in a more capable position to do something about it. She managed a feeble grin. If she was entertaining dirty thought, then maybe she wasn't so bad after all.

Bjorn laid her down on the table, efficiently stripping off her clothing. When Kjell returned moments later, Sigrid hurt too much to care. He'd pulled on a pair of gray sweatpants and offered a pair to Bjorn, who quickly donned them. Rolling her to her side, he grabbed warm, wet towels and began cleaning the wound.

Kjell helped, the way the two men worked together making it clear they'd done this many times before. Sigrid struggled against the pull of blackness. The oblivion of passing out called to her, and listening to Bjorn's muttered curses, she succumbed to the deep.

Each drop of blood against Sigrid's fair skin testified in living color to his failure. Bjorn swabbed them away, his touch gentle. He'd promised to protect her, told Vik he wouldn't let a member of his team get hurt. The ghosts of the dead haunted him, reminded him of his failures both in the past and now. Across the table from him, Kjell helped silently. Handing him instruments, holding Sigrid still, his friend and second-in-command said nothing.

Thankful Sigrid had passed out, Bjorn injected lidocaine into the area surrounding the gash. He waited a moment for it to numb the skin and help staunch the flow of blood before stitching up the wound. Luckily the injury wasn't very deep, just long. After tying off the knot, he pressed white pads against the wound, bound it then secured the arm against her chest. Her other wounds cleaned up with water and antibacterial soap. He made sure to put antibiotic ointment on each, wrapped them and stared back at the half-mummy of the woman he loved.

"She did damn well," Kjell said. He went to the sink and washed his hands. "Not many could have stood their ground against the demons."

"I know," Bjorn muttered. He cleaned up once his friend finished, then slipped his arms beneath Sigrid and picked her up. "I'm going to take her to her room. She'll be more comfortable there."

"It isn't your fault," Kjell said. "Don't blame yourself for what happened here."

"I shouldn't have left her alone. I should have stayed here to protect her."

Kjell stepped forward. "Let me take her back to her room. You need some doctoring too."

"Later." He guarded the woman in his arms jealously. Giving her over to Kjell, even for a moment, rankled. Strength of will kept him from sinking into the nearest chair, or better yet his bed, and sleeping for a week. His muscles ached. His wounds burned. But he wouldn't rest, not until he saw Sigrid safely in her bed.

Kjell studied him for a long moment before turning and holding the door open for Bjorn to pass. He followed his friend down the hall, opening the door to her bedroom then pulling back the covers. When at last Bjorn tucked the blankets to her chin, Kjell laid a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"I care for her too."

Bjorn lifted his lip in a snarl.

"Not like you. You're mated. Anyone with half a sense of smell knows you're all over each other. But she's a member of the team. She put her life on the line for us, for the mission. I'd never do anything to hurt her, and that includes letting you harm yourself. I'll watch her. Go get cleaned up."

"All right," Bjorn relented. For a moment he'd been ready, even in his wounded condition, to fight Kjell for Sigrid. But he had to admit his friend had a point. He loved her. Part of protecting her meant being there for her. Renewed strength filled him as he strode back to the infirmary.

A hot cloth made quick work of his mostly superficial scratches. He inspected the almost completely healed cut on his cheek and dabbed some antiseptic on the lightest cuts on his arms and shoulders. The deepest cut, across his biceps, he covered with a pad and some tape. Taking a couple aspirin, he left the infirmary. He strode back to her room, not wanting to take time to stop in the mess. His stomach growled, reminding him of his always ravenous appetite after he shifted. But seeing the blood on the floor, the door still off its hinges would only remind him of the danger his woman had put herself in and rekindle his rage. He returned to her room, determined to stay by her side until she woke. He refused to leave her again.

## Chapter Eleven

Yesterday she'd forced Bjorn to remove the sling from her arm and leave her wounds wrapped in only light bandages. Sigrid sat in her lab, lamenting over the lost time. She'd spent the past few days in bed while Bjorn hovered over her like a mother polar bear herding her cub. He blamed himself for her injuries. She saw it in his eyes every time he looked at her. He'd reach out to touch her then pull his hand away as if burned. Typing in her notes, her fingers stilled on the keyboard.

"I don't like what I've found," she said.

"Oh?" He stood behind her, and at her words looked over her shoulder. His spicy scent surrounded her in a warm cocoon.

Sigrid leaned against him, enjoying the warmth seeping from him into her sweater. Along the back of her arm, her stitches pulled. Bjorn promised he'd take them out in a few days. For having just field medic skills, he'd done a damn good job.

"What don't you like?" He massaged the back of her neck.

His strong fingers worked their magic. Tension flowed from her, leaving her able to focus on the numbers and data streaming across the computer screen. "The demons that attacked us held even higher levels of PCB contamination than what we've found at the attack sites."

"Almost like they were supercharged." His fingers stilled against her skin. "They seemed harder to fight."

"So the longer we try to figure this out, the more powerful the demons get? I don't like it. We have to tell Vik this information and see what he comes up with on that company. I can do all the research in the world, but if it doesn't lead back to real world applications then it's useless." She brought up a screen full of numbers and compared them again, as if they'd changed from the last ten times she'd looked at them. Finding something to publish had become her life. Now that she stood on the brink of a breakthrough, one that could save lives, she charged ahead. "When's your next call to Vik?"

"In a few hours." He pulled up a chair and straddled it, his arms resting on the back. "So tell me what you think about these stronger demons. Why? What would be the reason to create something like that?"

Sigrid frowned. Turning to face him, her theories, still in their infancy, seemed baseless. She turned back to the computer, hoping to put some distance between them, but Bjorn curled his fingers around her arm.

"Look at me. Tell me what you think."

"I think someone's sending these stronger demons after us. They came straight to our compound. Why? Yes, we brought back three of the tanks, but plenty more were

left in the field where they were easier to get to. If the PCBs are the demons' food source, and that's a big if, then why come here when the pollution is available elsewhere? It doesn't make sense unless they're working in collusion with someone." She reached behind her head and fiddled with her ponytail. "Except why would anyone want to join forces with demons? And where did they come from? What do they want? There are too many variables and we lack information."

"So we start knocking down each item one by one." Bjorn reached for three highlighters and stood them on their ends. He flicked over the yellow one. "We have the night demons. What are they? What do they want? Where do they come from? We need to know the answers. Okay?"

"I'm a scientist, Bjorn. I know how to gather information." She reached for the downed highlighter.

Bjorn grabbed her wrist. "Listen to me. If you still think I'm crazy, I'll accept that, but as your captain, I also expect to be heard. I'm *not* a scientist. I'm just a soldier. So I come at things in a different way than you might."

A smile quirked the corner of her lips. "You're not *just* a soldier." Heat radiated up her arm where his fingers pressed into her wrist. Her nipples tightened, thoughts of the night demons, of her research, fading away under his closeness. Her pussy ached. Her injuries had kept him away from her, and now her studies kept her in the lab.

"Our next question is, who's working with the night demons and what do they want?" He tapped the blue highlighter, sending it to the desk. "Lastly, the connection between the two. Once we have that, we've got them." He scooped all three highlighters into his hand and passed them to her.

"So what do you think we should do about this? We can guess what they want. This company wants an inexpensive way to get rid of PCB contamination, so they dump it in the Arctic. They don't want to be caught." Sigrid bolted to her feet. She tossed the highlighters onto the desk and darted for the whiteboard that hung on one side of the lab. She grabbed a blue marker and drew a scribbled outline of ghostlike stick figures. "These are the night demons. They eat the PCBs. The more they eat, the more the company can dump. And the more the company can dump, the more money they save. As a bonus, the night demons keep us from finding out who's behind it by killing us off." She turned to face him and capped the marker.

Slowly, Bjorn stood. "Shit. You're right. I've been focusing on the immediate picture. Keep the scientists safe from the demons. I know the Inuit stories about Windigos, creatures borne from hunters lost in the cold who succumb to starvation and start preying on humans. Cannibals. I assumed the night demons were some offshoots of that legend. Yeah, I had the contamination numbers, knew they were connected somehow. I thought maybe the contamination *created* the night demons or something."

"And you didn't tell me your suspicions?"

"Hell, you already knew the tales of the snow demons. Cultures call them different things, but they're all the same. I figured we were dealing with the like." He shrugged.

"I'm sorry, but the mission kept you in the lab, and so long as we knew what we were fighting, we figured you could give us the numbers to tie it all together."

"Without knowing what I was working with? You are no scientist, Bjorn. We need to call Vik."

"Yeah, we do. Let's go to the office and make that call."

Sigrid fell into step behind him, unable to get mad at him for not sharing his theories about the demons. Until a few days ago, she hadn't truly wanted to believe they existed. She followed Bjorn into the office, prepared to give her information to Vik.

In spite of Vik's approval of their information, he had no new data for them. Bjorn resisted the urge to curse in front of his superior officer, though Vik had become far more than that in the years they'd worked together. He stared at the woman sitting across the desk from him, remembering what happened the last time they'd checked in with their superior. As soon as the call had finished, he'd fucked her until they sank to the floor with exhaustion. His cock leapt to life, ready to repeat the experience.

"How's your arm healing?"

"Better. I'm thinking we can probably ease up on the bandages." She straightened out her arm as much as the wraps allowed.

Her answer might have given him the green light he wanted, but he caught her slight wince of pain. "We can take another look at it."

Sigrid chuckled as she stood. She leaned a hip against his desk then sat on it, dangling her leg. "You don't get it, do you?" She reached across the space separating them and cupped his smooth cheek. "I chose to charge into the fight. I could have let the demon into the compound to do whatever it wanted to do. You don't have to blame yourself for my injury." She stretched and pressed her lips to his, then pulled back so only a few inches separated their mouths.

"It was my watch."

"And you were outside making sure that further harm didn't befall me. From the looks of your own injuries, you dealt with quite enough." She brushed her thumb across the mostly healed cut on his cheek and the tinier ones on his forehead. Scooting across his blotter, she pressed her lips to them, first one, then another, until she'd peppered his face with soft kisses. "It's not your fault." She swung her legs over the desk until she sat in front of him.

His scientific angel. Threading his fingers into her hair he pulled her lips to his. He didn't deserve her, not when his inattention harmed her, and he had so many deaths on his conscience. Having her injured only reminded him of his failings, how protecting the men under his command had become an all-consuming mission for him.

His savior. She might not blame him, but he blamed himself enough for both of them.

He swiped his tongue across her lower lip, a moan building in his chest. He tasted the tang of coffee on her lips, the soft, buttery flavor of the biscuit he'd brought her after lunch. She opened for him, warm and welcoming, and when he slid his tongue inside her mouth he felt as if he'd come home.

Savor the moment, for when the mission ended, so did they. Already Vik talked about needing their expertise elsewhere, of EUFOR command threatening to pull some strings. Research in Iceland for Sigrid, a mission in Greenland for him. Two separate continents, two separate lives. For Sigrid, he'd fight the separation, fight for *them*, to see what they could be together. But right now they had night demons to stop and findings to explore.

She held onto his biceps with her left hand. Tiny moans and whimpers rose in her throat, and when the need for air parted them, she reached for the first button on her shirt. "I want you," she whispered.

"Sigrid," he breathed. He drank from her, devoured her, until thoughts of Vik, the mission, even her injury faded from his mind. He reached for her breast and cupped it through her shirt. Flicking his thumb across the nipple, he delighted in the shudders racing through her body. He stood and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

Sigrid wound her arms around his sides. Her slight flinch of pain went virtually unnoticed as she clasped her ankles behind his thighs then looked up at him and grinned. "How may I serve you, Captain?"

His cock jerked. Her booted heels pressed against the back of his thighs, her fingers stroking his neck, sliding up into his hair then down again. In his mind he saw her on his knees, his cock filling her mouth. Servicing him, sucking him off, letting him take her sweet pussy or maybe her ass, and then take her again. He kissed her hard on the mouth.

"The men are supposed to be returning soon," Bjorn warned.

"They know we're lovers." Sigrid released her arms from around him and leaned back, bracing herself on her hands. "What gives? You haven't touched me since the attack."

Bjorn caressed the white bandages. "I let you get hurt."

Sigrid grabbed the front of his shirt. "I jumped into the fight. Hell, if I weren't on the verge of passing out, I would have ran outside to save *your* ass. I'm a big girl, Bjorn. I dove in all on my own. If you doubt that, you're not only doubting me, but Vik and EUFOR. They made me an officer and it wasn't because of my looks."

"You're right." Bjorn stared at her and nodded. Had she been any one of his men he would have kicked her back to duty immediately. As it was, he regretted the long hours she spent in the lab. An idea formed in his mind. "Tonight. Meet me in the living room. Eighteen hundred hours." He stepped back.

Sigrid slid from the desk. "You're on." Without looking back, she strolled out of the room.

Bjorn watched the sway of her heart-shaped ass, thinking of her long legs wrapped around his hips. Tonight he'd give her exactly what they both needed. Moments after she left, Kjell appeared in the doorway.

"What was that all about? Corporal Myrhe looked like the cat that had caught the canary but wasn't sure what to do with it." He paused. "The men are back. Thought I'd let you know."

"Good. Thank you." Bjorn paused for a moment. Although he'd known Kjell for most of his life, he never expected to be asking the question he was about to ask. "You think Sigrid's sexy, don't you?"

Kjell stilled. "Where are you going with that question, Captain? I don't want to answer if it will get me in trouble." He shifted his weight from side to side.

"You won't get into trouble. Just assessing the situation." Deliberately, Bjorn kept his words vague. On leave they'd shared women on occasion. He intended to give Sigrid the night of her life. If he could fulfill a fantasy, or three, then perhaps he could prove he had no further intention of keeping her tucked away from the...action.

"You want us to share Sigrid." Kjell sat in the chair in front of the desk and stretched out his long legs. "Have you discussed this with her?"

"I haven't."

"So why are you suddenly wanting to share? I thought she was your woman." Kjell crossed his booted feet at the ankles.

"She is, and she thinks that I'm holding back, trying to keep her safe and out of the action. I know it sounds silly, but if she can handle two trained warriors in her bed, I doubt much of anything else would be out of her league. I want to make her happy. Does that make sense?" He dragged his fingers along his short-cropped hair and searched Kjell's face for signs that the other man believed him.

"You marked her as soon as she arrived. I doubt the other men even entertain thoughts of Sigrid as a woman."

"But you do." Bjorn saw it in his friend's eyes, in the way he couched his words and tried not to reveal too much. "You want her."

"Yeah," Kjell admitted. "Hell, in the infirmary I thought I'd never seen a sexier woman. I'd be honored if you'd let me have a taste."

Bjorn sighed with relief. "Good. Then let's go debrief the men. I've got another mission for them, and then we can talk details about tonight." On his way to the door, he clasped Kjell's shoulder. "Thank you. I don't think either you or Sigrid will be disappointed."

Kjell chuckled. "I hope not."

With his friend and second-in-command following him out the door, and their plans for Sigrid underway, Bjorn felt as if he walked on top of the world. And, with the Arctic spread out around them, perhaps he did.

\* \* \* \* \*

Eighteen hundred hours brought nervousness the likes of which Bjorn hadn't felt since before his first mission. In the living room, with plush blankets and pillows spread out on the floor and the blinds drawn back to reveal the night sky and any glimpses of the aurora borealis, he lit some candles and set the stage for seduction. He wore a pair of silk pajama bottoms in a shade of green a little darker than his eyes. On the couch, Kjell lounged in a pair of flannel pants. He surveyed the scene through Sigrid's eyes, and knew there'd be no doubt as to the intent of both men. Willing his heart to slow, he fought back the demands of his bear and knew tonight, he'd take it slow.

He smelled Sigrid's vanilla scent before he saw her. Closing his eyes, he inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with her fragrance. His cock hardened. He glanced at Kjell and saw he sat a little straighter, a little more alert now that he knew she would arrive in just a few moments.

From his vantage point he watched her round the corner and stop. Eyes wide, she looked from the pile of blankets to him. Her light blue flannel pajama shirt and bottoms decorated with teddy bears might have been better suited to a sleepover than a seduction, but with her hair loose and tousled around her shoulders and the top two buttons undone, she looked every inch the seductress. A sultry smile crossed her lips as she stepped forward. She turned and saw Kjell. Her steps faltered.

Sigrid licked her lips. She glanced from Kjell to Bjorn and back again, her smile widening as she realized what they were both there for. "So that's why you sent the men away," she said, her voice little more than a whisper.

"Yes." Bjorn strode forward. He curled his fingers into fists so as not to reach out and touch her, taking things too fast too soon. "Why don't you join us? Tonight, we wait for your orders."

Sigrid searched his face. Reaching out, she trailed her fingers between his pecs, down over his washboard abs. "I think I'd like that." She swept her touch back along the path she'd caressed and watched as his erection pressed against the silk of his pants. "Yes, I'd like that very much." With a sway of her hips, she strolled toward the blankets in the middle of the floor.

She settled on the blankets with a languid grace and turned her attention to Kjell. "Are you here because you've been given an order...or are you here because you want me?"

Bjorn held his breath, waiting for Kjell's answer. Mentioning other women right now might not be the best of ideas, and he trusted his second's discretion.

"You're a very desirable woman. What man wouldn't want to be here?" Kjell answered.

"You didn't answer my question." She tsked lightly and shook her head. "Do you want to be here? Do you want me?"

"Yes. God, yes," Kjell remained seated, though Bjorn knew he held onto his control.

"Good." She swiveled to look up at Bjorn and reached for the buttons on her pajama top. "So – which one of you gets to undress me?"

Bjorn moved forward and knelt beside her as Kjell slid from the couch to join them. Two pairs of hands reached for the shirt but Bjorn's touched it first. He caressed the skin revealed by the open buttons in light, gentle sweeps of his knuckles.

Between them, Sigrid shivered. She reached for them, flattening one palm against Bjorn's chest, the other hand braced on Kjell's biceps. Her eyelids fluttered closed as Bjorn leaned in to nuzzle her neck. A soft moan rose from her throat as he licked the spot behind her earlobe, and when he took it into his mouth and suckled, her head tilted to allow him better access.

Like putty in their hands, though Bjorn knew he wouldn't tell her that. He slipped one, then another button from its hole. Alternating between gentle nips and sucks on her earlobe, he reached into her open shirt to cup her bare breast in his hand. Her diamond-hard nipples drew him, and he caressed each in turn.

From the bottom of her shirt, Kjell worked at freeing the last two buttons before pushing the plackets aside. He slipped one arm free of the shirt while Bjorn freed the other.

Bjorn blazed a trail along the side of her neck. The sweep of her shoulder fascinated him and he laved kisses along it. Feeling her nipple press into the palm of his hand, hearing her tiny cries and sighs, only heightened his desire. His cock pounded furiously. Balls full between his legs, he suppressed the urge to roll her over and take her. Tonight was for Sigrid.

On her other side, Kjell smoothed his palm across her stomach then reclined on his side to nuzzle the soft mound of her breast. Watching his best friend pleasure his woman fueled Bjorn's desire. Kjell drew Sigrid's nipple into his mouth.

Her back arched, fingers clenching Bjorn's chest.

Bjorn trailed his kisses over the slope of Sigrid's shoulder. Her vanilla scent, the sweet taste of her, he absorbed it all, knowing he could never get enough. From hard-assed scientist to sultry vixen to soldier, the different sides of Sigrid enthralled him. He laved long licks across the rise of her breast and with a nod to Kjell, pulled her other nipple into his mouth.

Two mouths, two men...as Sigrid reached up to clasp both of their heads, Bjorn felt himself being pulled into the vortex of the woman he loved. He smelled her juices, and reached down to slip his fingers beneath the waistband of her pajama bottoms. Underneath the flannel he touched bare skin.

His cock jerked. To know she sat there, bare-chested, her pussy soaked and waiting for them, grabbed him by the balls and pulled him toward insatiable need. He skimmed his fingers through her curls, their dampness making him slide his finger farther down. His teeth grazed her nipple, tiny love bites that had her crying out.

*Come for me.* He caressed her clit, short, light strokes that had her squirming in place. He tongued her nipple, knowing Kjell did the same on the other side. Hard and

fast or soft and whimpering, he didn't care. He just wanted to feel her explode. One finger penetrated her tight channel.

Sigrid cried out. Her voice echoed in the room as Kjell pushed her back onto the blankets. She lifted her hips and Bjorn pulled off her pants, tossing them aside. Her pussy called to him with plump pink lips and dripping need. He filled her with two fingers, his thumb circling and rubbing her clit.

"Bjorn," Sigrid moaned.

"That's it baby, come for me," he urged.

Reclining beside her, Kjell cupped her other breast in his hand as he continued to suck the first, taking control of her upper body.

Bjorn kissed her stomach. The indentation of her navel called to him and he swirled his tongue around it. Her ribs, ever-so ticklish, earned licks and nips and kisses and all the while his fingers fucked her. In and out, up and down, he curled his fingers to stroke her G-spot.

Her vaginal muscles clenched around his fingers. Close, so close he felt the tiny flutters of her impending orgasm, her hips lifting, her voice breaking. The rub of his thumb across her clit—and she came in a beautiful show of pleasure. Her sheath milked his fingers, made him wish he'd thrust his cock inside her to feel the exquisite ripples. He watched as she reached out, her fingers grazing Kjell's thigh.

Kjell jerked, looking up from her breast to catch his gaze. At his nod, Kjell pulled away long enough to shed his pants.

Sigrid reached for Kjell.

Bjorn settled between her legs, his shoulders spreading her thighs wide, his chin just above her pubic bone.

Kjell straddled her chest. He moaned as Sigrid reached for him, wrapping her fingers around his shaft. Her neck rose and Bjorn's cock remembered the silken feel of her lips against his head, the muscles of her throat drawing him deeper.

Bjorn lowered his face to her pussy. He paused for a moment, simply savoring the smell of her. Sweet and musky all at once, with a promise of the honey taste he'd come to associate with her. With her labia swollen and her clit peeking out from under its hood she looked like a woman ready for pleasure, the pleasure only he could provide. Gripping her hips, he licked her, a single long, slow lick from aft to fore along her outer lips.

Above him, Kjell groaned.

Focused on the pleasure, focused on only the things he could do to Sigrid, Bjorn parted her with his tongue. He enjoyed the tease of light contact. With his hands holding her hips firmly, he buried his face in her slit and vowed to lick her until she came...over and over again.

## Chapter Twelve

Two men. On her, in her, Sigrid drowned in the erotic images filling her mind. Kjell's cock in her mouth demanded all her attention. She curled her fingers into the rock-hard muscles of his thigh, the other hand reaching between his legs to fondle his sac. She'd played with benwa balls in college, and rolling his testicles back and forth in her hand made her think of the relaxing exercise. Except this time, instead of clicks, Kjell's moans punctuated each movement of her fingers.

He cupped the back of her head, holding her lips around his shaft while he thrust gently into her mouth. Not quite as big as Bjorn, she took him easily, feeling him bump against the back of her throat. His long thrusts mimicked what she wanted Bjorn to do to her pussy. Instead, her lover had his lips fastened to her clit, sucking, nipping, his tongue toying with her channel. She whimpered around Kjell's shaft and lifted her hips.

Pure bliss. Ever since she'd watched Kjell in the gym, she'd sensed the pull of attraction between them. Only their captain kept them from doing anything about it, and here, in the safe confines of the compound, with Bjorn eating her, she indulged in the fantasies she'd had about sucking Kjell off. To think that Bjorn offered her to his best friend...instead of offending her it aroused her, made her realize that he trusted her to be strong enough to take care of herself, make her own decisions. Spreading her thighs wider, she thrust her pussy against his face. Bjorn's big fingers pressed against the globes of her ass and she hovered on the edge of what would be her second amazing orgasm of the night.

"Can I taste her?" Kjell asked, his voice barely more than an aroused growl.

Bjorn pulled away from her long enough to speak.

Sigrid whimpered at the loss of contact.

"Sure. We have all night." And with those words, he bent his head to her folds once more.

Sigrid clenched her fingers against Kjell's thigh. Reaching behind his balls, she stroked his sensitive skin. He jerked.

Bjorn flattened his tongue against her clit. Sharp spikes of pleasure radiated out from her pussy, through her limbs, her body, until she bucked beneath Kjell's weight. He slipped out of her mouth as she cried out and the spasms of her orgasm washed through her body.

Like the northern lights arcing behind her, she unfurled, her release rolling through her body. Her breathing quickened, her vaginal muscles contracted. And then Bjorn was there, coaxing her up the peak once more.

She curled her fingers around Kjell's cock and licked the very tip, tasting the salty fluid that emerged. To feel them both inside her, one man in her cunt, the other in her ass, had her juices flowing, her toes curling just thinking about the mind-numbing pleasure they could bring. She wrapped her lips around him and pulled him into her mouth, millimeter by millimeter. Slowly, oh-so slowly, she made his breath hiss from between clenched teeth, took him until her lips pressed against the base of his shaft and his springy hairs tickled her nose.

Two fingers penetrated her. A quick thrust, enough to coat them with her juices, then Bjorn reached underneath her and pressed his slick digits against the puckered rose of her anus. One finger passed the tight ring and Sigrid welcomed it, desired it. She lifted her legs, pulling her knees almost to Kjell's back, and offered Bjorn her cunt, her ass. They were both his to do with what he wished, and she hoped like hell he offered one of them to the man whose cock she sucked.

Bjorn eased his finger deeper inside. First one knuckle, then the second, the pleasurable stretch and pain of penetration making her pussy clench and drip. Two fingers from his other hand filled her channel, and he rubbed his fingertips along the thin membrane separating his digits. Stretched and full, Sigrid lost her focus. The slurp of his fingers in her pussy, her ass, the cock in her mouth, became a blurry stroke and slide of flesh against flesh.

Her cunt ached. Her clit throbbed. Her nipples so hard and tight the lightest brush of them against Kjell's legs had her whimpering around his cock. Higher and higher, harder and deeper. Above her, Kjell shouted. His balls drew tight in her fingers, his thrusts less gentle, more demanding. Sigrid took him completely and when he cried out and his hot seed spilled down her throat, she swallowed it and licked him clean.

Kjell rose off her. He glanced down at Bjorn and smiled. "Your turn."

Bjorn's fingers still moved within her. "She's about ready to come again. Why don't you make her scream?" He grinned wickedly and slid his digits from her with soft pops.

Sigrid mewled with loss. She lay on the blankets, too strung out on passion to move. Legs spread, knees poking the air, her pussy empty without Bjorn to fill it, she watched through half-lidded eyes as he rolled to his knees and then to his feet.

Damn, he was sexy. With his light blond hair and green eyes, he looked like a god come to life. Broad shoulders, flat pecs and a full set of six-pack abs. The definition in his muscles, his hip abductors that made her want to take a leisurely lick along either side, drew her gaze to his cock. It rose from his curls, thick and hard, so hard it nearly touched his navel, and to know that she'd brought him to that state of readiness had her creaming. He stepped around, letting Kjell take his place between her legs. She pulled her gaze away from Bjorn to watch the lieutenant lower himself onto his arms, just his shoulders and the back of his head visible as he dipped his head to her pussy.

He licked her, light samples with his tongue that had her whimpering for more.

Bjorn straddled her chest. He aimed his cock at her mouth and she willingly opened her lips. She closed them around his head then slid them away while he teased her, drove her to the brink and beyond. To repay him would reward both of them. She laved her tongue against his head in long, slow licks, savoring his musky taste. The tiny drop of fluid emerging from the end of his shaft became a delicacy to her and she licked it away. Then she wrapped her mouth around his head and tongued the underside.

Bjorn groaned. He threaded his fingers through her hair, drawing her closer to him. She took him in, a slow advance and retreat that had her taking more each time. His ass and balls called out to her fingers and she caressed and rubbed them as if charting new territory. He belonged to her. Not like the man who licked and sucked her pussy with frustrating slowness. Bjorn was hers.

That thought made him taste that much sweeter, his cock that much more enjoyable in her mouth. She cupped the taut globes of his ass in a need to savor him and swallow him whole. Her entire being focused on her mouth. Between her legs, Kjell made her believe in death by a thousand bites, and she whimpered for more.

Bjorn gave it to her.

Relaxing her throat, she took him deep. Her cheeks hurt from hollowing out and sucking him hard yet still she gave him everything she had.

Kjell slipped two fingers inside her pussy. He brushed his knuckles up and down her slit and thus coated with her juices, sent them to her back entrance to press against her muscles there.

She rocked against his fingers, needing to feel something, *anything* penetrate her. Running her tongue along the length of Bjorn's cock, swirling around its girth, she sucked harder.

Bjorn held her head still. "Wait. I want to come in your pussy." He stood, her lips sliding down the length of him, and stepped off her.

Sigrid moaned. "Yes," she hissed.

"And Kjell gets your ass."

"Fuck me," Sigrid answered. She looked down her body at Kjell. "Both of you."

Kjell moved from between her thighs, sitting back on his haunches and waiting for orders.

"On all fours."

Languid, Sigrid rolled to her side, working first one leg then the other beneath her. She rose onto her hands, her hair cascading in a golden waterfall over one shoulder. Through the fall of her hair she looked up at Bjorn and smiled. "Tell me what you want me to do."

Bjorn bit back a groan. He lay down and gestured for Sigrid to come to him.

She did so, staying on all fours, knowing her breasts swayed with every movement. She dipped her back and thrust her ass into the air. Reaching one hand forward, she caught Bjorn's gaze, held it, while she moved like a cat toward him.

Bjorn growled.

"Oh, is the big bad bear getting all upset?" Sigrid purred. She fought to keep an face-splitting grin from her face. "Does the bear want to sink his thick cock into my pussy?"

"Come. Here." The rough undertones in Bjorn's voice told her exactly how close he was.

Sigrid took her time, hearing the men's rough breaths echo in the room. Behind her Kjell followed, his body so close his heat burned the back of her thighs. She focused on Bjorn. Let Kjell do as he would, her quarry lay on his back, his cock thrust in the air, one knee cocked, waiting for her. At last she crawled over him, lowered her lips to his chest and licked a path between his pecs.

Bjorn cupped her face and hauled her mouth to his. He claimed her lips with a savage growl. His tongue thrust into her mouth, his fingers clenching in her hair. He devoured her, drank her, swallowed her whole as she clung to him, drowning in the sensation of his hand fisted in her hair, his other one sliding down her side to cup her ass. Sparks flew from her mouth to her pussy and back again in an endless chain reaction that had her pussy clenching and releasing with need.

Kjell grabbed her ass. His fingers, slick with cold lube he must have grabbed from somewhere, slid along her crease. Back and forth, up and down, he coated her. His finger slipped past the puckered ring of muscle and against Bjorn's mouth, Sigrid groaned.

This was it. Both men were going to fuck her. She knelt over Bjorn's cock. His fingers slipped from her hip to her cunt, swiping through her juices. Grabbing his shaft, he stroked it along her slit.

Sigrid pulled her lips away from his. Kneeling here between these two gorgeous men, both about to penetrate her, she wanted to focus on the exquisite sensation of the thick phalluses entering her body. "Take me," she whispered.

Bjorn eased into her. Slowly, far more slowly than she would have liked, his cock disappeared into her centimeter by centimeter. When his head rested against her cervix and her blonde curls mingled with his, the broad head of Kjell's penis pressed at her back entrance.

Sigrid exhaled, relaxing her body as his well-lubed cock breached her. She focused on relaxing her muscles, the pleasure-pain of being stretched so full forcing her pussy to clamp around Bjorn's cock. Slowly, just the head at first, Kjell worked himself inside her.

For long moments both men rested, acclimating her to the feel of dual penetration. Then, as if he could stand it no longer, Bjorn began to move. As slowly as Kjell entered her, Bjorn retreated. The two men worked in tandem, one filling her as the other departed, and Sigrid rocked her hips between them. She closed her eyes, lips parted, breath easing in and out of her lungs. She rode a tidal wave of desire and struggled to keep from breaking over the crest. The need to come, to let the pleasure pour through

her body, hammered at her. She held back even as tiny mewls of need spilled from her lips and her hips found a frantic counterpoint to the men's thrusts.

She never imagined it could be like this. Trying to hang onto rational thought was impossible. Hell, she struggled to find coherent words. Yet, she did so, the scientist in her wanting to compartmentalize her experiences for posterity. Damn, the men filled her. The pain of being stuffed in her ass abated, and now she only wanted more. Harder thrusts, deeper thrusts. Greedily, she worked her hips between them. She leaned forward, using her hands for balance, and with Kjell's fingers clamped around her waist, Bjorn palmed her breasts.

So close. Almost there...

One more thrust and her body exploded. Head tilted back, muscles taut, she screamed as the dam burst and her body convulsed. Beneath her, Bjorn groaned.

"Fuck, she's tight," Kjell growled behind her.

Her orgasm continued on and on, aftershocks of ecstasy sparking in her veins, sweat beading on her brow...muscles so limp she leaned against Bjorn's hands at her breasts and it was only the two men holding her upright between them. She panted. Spots danced before her vision and yet she couldn't stop coming. Juices flowed from her pussy. Just as she thought she'd finished, when she couldn't so much as twitch, ripples coursed through her. Her vision went black, blurred – and the men stilled.

She whimpered, bereft at the loss of movement. Gulping in breaths of air, she waited for them to continue. Acutely aware they hadn't come yet, she wriggled in their grasp.

Bjorn resumed his thrusts, now in time with Kjell's movements. Sigrid's breath caught in her throat. Pure, exquisite perfection thrummed inside her body. One moment, two cocks, both filling her. She closed her eyes, letting the men support her as they used her body for their pleasure. The rhythm of their thrusts filled her blood. It pounded in her body like her own heartbeat and Sigrid simply let it flow through her.

Harder. Faster. The men pushed inside her. The thin barrier separating them served to heighten her pleasure and, from the sounds emanating from them, theirs as well. Another orgasm slammed into her, sending her spinning. And then another, and another, until her body turned into a convulsing mass of pleasure and she didn't know where she ended and they began.

Beneath her, Bjorn stiffened. He grunted, his thrusts growing harder, more frantic and with a cry, he came.

Behind her, Kjell reached his release.

The feel of two men coming inside her, their hot seed filling her, promptly sent her over the brink again and she cried out, collapsing on top of Bjorn. Kjell leaned forward, bracing his weight to keep from crushing them both. Sigrid lay there in a sweaty tangle of limbs.

Outside the northern lights still shone, but dimly in comparison to the man lying beneath her. A polar bear of her very own. One, it seemed, who was willing to share her

with the other males of his social group. She grinned and knew that, although she'd be sore in the morning, she'd go another round or ten with them. Pressing a kiss to Bjorn's chest, she listened to his beating heart. The mission, the threat of the night demons, none of that mattered right now because she lay in Bjorn's arms. She'd return to her lab in the morning. For now, she had two bears and all the time in the world. She hoped.

\* \* \* \* \*

By noon the next day, Marc, Hans and Trent had returned. Not only did they bring supplies but also news of an impending dump. Following up on some lead, they had sniffed out the location and the time.

"So we move out." Bjorn's announcement pronounced the issue settled.

"We go," Kjell affirmed.

The remaining three men nodded and murmured assent.

"Then it's a plan," Sigrid said. Her words quieted the room.

Bjorn opened his mouth then closed it again. Sigrid needed to be a full member of the team and he wanted her there with them. "Yes, it's a plan," he confirmed. "If we leave tomorrow afternoon, we can make the dump site by nightfall. There will be no polar bears seen tomorrow night, so I want us in place and ready to rock. There are six of us, which makes three teams. Kjell and Sigrid, I want you to keep the escape route open. Trent and Marc, you're on the lookout for the night demons, and Hans and I will go in and disable the men. Our goal will be to bring at least one back alive for questioning, but deadly force is authorized." He fixed each member of the team with a cold, hard stare.

If Sigrid disliked his orders she gave no sign. Bjorn knew Kjell understood that Sigrid's safety lay in his hands. His best friend might have wanted to be in the lead, but protecting Sigrid was where he could be most useful. And in trusting Sigrid's safety to his second, Bjorn was able to allow her onto the battlefield.

He loved her enough to let her go with them. Even now, watching her frown at whatever thoughts went through her mind, seeing her glances in Kjell's direction, he loved her. Loved the way her body tightened around his as she was about to come, loved the way her eyes lit up when she discussed her research. Her curiosity about the world, her devotion to her work, all of it wrapped up in the unique package that was Sigrid. Taking out their enemy might help them find out more about the deliveries, but it wouldn't completely stop the night demons from attacking, and until that threat was eradicated, the mission wasn't over. So long as he had the mission, he'd have Sigrid.

If he didn't let her accompany him, he'd prove to her he didn't trust her in a combat situation. And when she left, she'd leave for good. It was a hell of a situation in which to find himself – and he hoped he'd made the right decision.

## Chapter Thirteen

Sigrid listened to Bjorn's words. Sure, she knew the mission, was familiar with EUFOR methods. But listening to the men spill the news about their discovery had made her thankful she knew nothing of *their* sources or methods. Her expertise resided in the clean, scientific realm of the lab, and frankly, having fought a demon, she was now content to leave it that way. So she was surprised when Bjorn told her she was coming with them.

Sigrid allowed a soft smile to curve her lips at Bjorn's including her. Perhaps last night had changed something, or maybe Bjorn just decided not to argue with her anymore. Either way, it meant she finally had a chance to be a real, productive member of the team outside of the lab. The idea terrified and excited her at the same time.

Sigrid held her breath, half afraid he'd retract his words. She knew the importance of ensuring they had a way to get home once they'd accomplished the objective. She glanced at Kjell, wondering what he thought of being left with her. He focused on Bjorn, attentive and seemingly unconcerned about his part in the mission. She accepted it, her partner accepted it and their captain had ordered it. In doing so, it brought them that much closer to the time when this would all be over—and the uncertainty that came with that inevitability. She frowned and listened to Bjorn's words as he detailed the rest of the mission.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a night of elusive sleep and making preparations for the mission, Sigrid wanted it to simply be done already. She smoothed her hands over her pants, feeling her silk long johns underneath slide against her skin. She stepped into her snow pants, reaching to grab and fasten the bib straps.

"Here, let me get that." Bjorn's voice washed over her.

Sigrid ceased her struggling and let her hands drop to her sides. Bjorn closed his fingers around a strap and slid it along her back, over her shoulders and down her breast. Even through three layers of fabric her nipple puckered at his touch. Her breath sucked from between clenched teeth as he used his knuckles to caress her stomach before hooking the strap into her snow pants.

"We don't have time for this," Sigrid said. She closed her hand over his and found it hot to the touch. "We need to get ready."

"I know." Bjorn pulled his hands away from her as if she'd burned him. "I just can't help but think that it's my job to see you back safely, and if you simply stayed in your lab it would make my job so much easier."

"Yeah, it would," Sigrid admitted with a nod of her head. "Except by making your job easier you'd make mine harder. I'm a member of this team. I'm perfectly trained—"

Bjorn brushed his thumb against her lower lip. "Don't. I know you're just as capable as my men to go out there, but the bear in me roars that you're *mine* and no one else can have you. You know how aggressive male polar bears get around others when there's a female around." A smile quirked the corner of his lip.

"Yeah, and *you* know that a female will swipe a male across the nose if he's being too much of a pain in the ass." Sigrid reached behind her and pulled up the other suspender strap, neatly fastening it.

Bjorn laughed, barking chuckles that brought an answering grin to her lips. Here they were, about to go into danger, and she sparred with him as if they had nothing better to do than trade verbal barbs. She stepped back and reached for her jacket.

"So you're telling me to remember that?" Bjorn stepped forward, pinning her between his body and the bed. "You'll swipe my nose?"

Unable to stop herself, Sigrid reached out and tapped him on the end of his nose. "Exactly."

Bjorn reached up and caught her hand. He pulled it down to her side, using it for leverage as he hauled her against him. "Just remember a male polar bear can pin down a female with his superior size and strength." He reached between them and unfastened her suspenders. The straps slipped from her shoulder to pool against the bed. A twist of his wrist had the button free and he lowered the zipper on her snow pants.

Sigrid remained perfectly still as desire bolted through her system, a hot rush of sensation centering on her pussy where Bjorn's hand was oh-so close. Her nipples hardened, though the layers of clothing kept the response from being visible.

His nostrils flared. "You're wet."

His simple acknowledgement of her current state sent even more moisture flooding to her pussy. "Yeah, I am." She reached around and grabbed his ass. "What are you doing to do about it?"

"I'm going to fuck you," he growled against the skin of her neck. Nipping gently, he reached for her waist and pulled her sweater over her head.

Sigrid raised her arms as first her sweater, then her thermal top went flying. She arched against him, the cable knit of his sweater soft against her skin. The ridges caressed her puckered nipples and an involuntary moan escaped her lips. She reached for him, tunneling her hands beneath his sweater to flatten her palms against his hot skin.

Bjorn shoved his hands down her pants to cup her ass. Her snow pants pooled around her ankles, the heavy fleece pants she wore beneath no barrier to his touch. Her silk underwear trapped the heat of his flesh against hers, and a quick push had both layers joining her snow pants around her ankles.

Too many clothes still sat between them. Bjorn reached behind her and unhooked her bra, sliding it from her arms. A push sent her toppling to the bed, legs trapped by her clothing.

Bjorn shed sweater and pants, freeing his cock. It hadn't even been twenty-four hours since he'd been inside her and suddenly, charged with the adrenaline of the upcoming mission, Sigrid couldn't wait for it to happen again. She reached down to her cleft and parted her slick folds.

Bjorn's nostrils flared. He growled, low in his throat, the bear seeking dominance. His exterior form didn't change. He still looked every inch a man but in his eyes, a predatory gleam glowed. With his mouth open and fingers curled, Sigrid easily imagined him standing on the tundra on his hind feet, sniffing the air for prey. Lying on the bed, her feet tangled in her clothing, she knew this time *she* was the prey. Shivers darted down her spine.

Her breathing quickened. Sweat beaded on her palms and between her shoulder blades. *Run. Flee.* The fight or flight response kicked in double-time, and she struggled not to sit up, pull on her clothes and run from this massive hunter who wanted to devour her whole.

Leaning into her, Bjorn braced his hands on either side of Sigrid's body, the weight of his own holding her pinned to the mattress. Caught between his hard chest and the soft padding beneath her, she reached up and curled her fingers into his shoulders and shoved. Bjorn remained rooted in place, her shoves having no more effect on him than if she'd tried to move his thousand-pound polar bear. His shaft prodded her thighs.

Sigrid spread her legs wider. She moaned as he took the skin where her neck met her shoulder in his teeth and bit just hard enough to leave a red mark. The carnal reminder of his possession, his power, bowed her back from the bed. She gasped as his caress burned a path from her shoulder, across her breast, down to her dripping pussy. He stroked her slit, fingers moving back and forth in a sinuous rhythm that had her moaning and thrusting toward his elusive digits. He swirled his fingers around her clit and flicked across the hard nub. Then he speared her with two fingers.

"Bjorn!" Sigrid shrieked. She raised her head enough to press an open-mouthed kiss against his shoulder. The salty taste of his skin had her laving him, sucking, wanting more. She inhaled deeply of his aroma, a heady, musky scent that was all Bjorn, all male. Whimpering, she lifted her hips.

He thrust his fingers inside her. Her inner muscles clamped down around his digits, holding them inside. Lust filled her, turned her into a purely sensual creature. Her questing fingers skimmed over his side, along his hip to graze the top of his shaft. Beneath her touch, it jerked. She scooted lower, straining to curl her fingers around his girth. At last she did so, her fingers barely touching, and she stroked him from base to tip and back again. Bjorn's groan reverberated against her chest.

Sigrid rubbed her thumb across his head, spreading the drop of fluid that emerged from the tip. If she couldn't have him in her body – though his fingers weren't a bad

substitute—she'd have him in her hand. Any way she could touch him, stroke him, show him how much she wanted to be his.

Her movements brought his flat nipples within reach of her mouth. Flattening her tongue against one, she licked it. When the bud hardened, she wrapped her lips around it and sucked.

Bjorn's hips flexed against her leg. His fingers curled, finding her G-spot and stroking it hard.

Sigrid stifled her cry against his chest. She reached for his ass and curled her fingers into the hard muscle. More. Deeper. She twined her body around his the best she could, riding high on adrenaline and desire.

Bjorn found her clit with his thumb. He toyed with the hood, sending the skin back and forth, over and over, caressing the organ and driving her into a frenzy. His fingers slid from her, leaving her empty.

Sigrid nipped his pecs, his nipple, the gentle love bites leaving red marks against his skin. Although she had no bear inside her, no animalistic way to claim her mate, she wanted the other men to see her marks, to know that she had claimed him. Out of all the men on the team, she marked *him* and only him.

Bjorn moved his cock to her entrance. The width of his head breaching her focused all her attention on her cunt. She lifted her hips, wanting, needing his possession, and with a flex of his hips he entered her—a long, slow thrust she felt all throughout her body, so deep she thought she tasted him. She reached for his ass, grabbing it to hold him deep inside.

"Yes," she hissed, so full of him. The clothing binding her ankles made the fit tighter. She forced her eyes open and looked up at him. Head tilted back, eyes closed, pleasure etched into every line of his face, Bjorn held still. The muscles in his arms bunched and Sigrid turned her head to trace her tongue along one hill and valley in his biceps. She loved a man with big guns.

Bjorn pulled back and thrust forward again.

Sigrid lost herself to the sensation. Her eyelids fluttered closed, their coupling providing an outlet for the adrenaline pumping through her system. In just a few hours they'd be facing the men who dumped waste in the Arctic, but right here, right now, she affirmed her claim on Bjorn. Each slide of his cock had her lifting her hips. The sound of flesh against flesh filled the room. Their combined juices created an erotic, seductive perfume that served to heighten her pleasure.

She curled her fingers into his ass. His husky groans filled her ears and her own mewling cries grew louder. She rode the edge of her orgasm, felt it just out of reach. Lifting her lips to his chin, she nipped and kissed her way to his mouth and thrust her tongue between his lips.

Bjorn returned the kiss, his lips moving hungrily over hers, his tongue delving into her mouth. The dual penetration, tongue and cock, brought her closer to the edge. And then she was there. Ripples pounded hard and fast through her body and she pressed

her lips to his, letting him swallow her cries. Her fingers clenched and unclenched. On and on her orgasm pummeled through her body. Muscles rippling, flesh bending and unbending, as if she were repeatedly being broken apart and reformed.

And then, above her, Bjorn stiffened. He tore his lips from hers, a low, long groan of completion issuing from his throat. His cock pumped hot seed into her and their mingled breaths filled the room.

Sigrid lay there, aware of the sweat cooling on her skin, the bunch of her clothing around her ankles and how so fucking good Bjorn felt above her. She released his rear and curled her hand around his biceps. Tiny red marks covered his chest and neck, evidence of her love bites, and she traced each one.

"We've got to get ready," Bjorn said, his breathing still ragged. "But *that* was for the mission...so you go out there knowing how good we are together."

"Yeah, and don't you forget it," Sigrid replied. She suspected she'd be spending most of her time worrying. She would be covering their escape route; Bjorn would be in the middle of the fight. Knowing he could be hurt or killed raised a lump in her throat. She willed it away, not wanting him to see her weakness.

Bjorn rose, his still half-hard cock sliding from her. He arranged his clothing and soon stood in his snow pants and sweater. Sigrid did the same, though it took a little more time for her to rearrange her bra and pull on her clothing.

She sat on the edge of the bed, seeing him not only as her lover but her captain. A glance at the clock showed their heated encounter took barely fifteen minutes, and she had no doubt the men knew what she and Bjorn had been doing. She hadn't cleaned herself up, wanted the intimate knowledge of Bjorn's seed inside her and on her skin, wanted the men to smell him on her and know that she was his woman. They'd protect her with their lives, but a little insurance never hurt.

"Let's go, Captain. We've got to stop the dumping." She saluted him sharply, letting him know she was once more in soldier mode and more than ready to do whatever he asked.

"As you say, Corporal." Bjorn smiled then turned toward the door. Sigrid followed him out and knew the true test lay ahead.

\* \* \* \* \*

The crunch of the tracks against the snow filled the cabin. The purring engine sounded obscenely loud in the deathly silent vehicle. All six occupants sat mute. Bjorn focused on the trail before them, his thoughts returning over and over to the woman sitting on the backseat between Trent and Marc. Their heated sex reinforced his need for her. To have her on the battlefield, even in a limited capacity, strained his sense of responsibility. But she had to be there, and her words told him she was more than ready for the job. He had to trust her to do hers, even as he did his.

Dumping toxic waste in the Arctic. The idea sickened him. Their mission included discovering the nature of the night demons and their reasons for attacking – and to stop them. Bjorn knew, no matter the outcome of his and Sigrid's relationship, tonight's work wouldn't end their mission. It might bring them closer to that end, but it wouldn't stop everything. He wasn't sure whether to be happy at the thought. More mission meant more time with Sigrid, but more mission also meant more chances to put her in danger.

He risked a glance at Kjell. His second-in-command sat in the passenger seat, staring off into the landscape. What thoughts went through his mind, Bjorn didn't know. But he trusted his friend to keep Sigrid safe. The other three men knew their jobs and would execute them flawlessly.

The dump site was well away from the compound, across terrain that even the specialized vehicle found difficult to navigate. He scanned the sky, aware the night demons could drop on them at any time, and Sigrid's findings about additional PCBs making them more powerful had him more wary than usual. Vik hadn't come through with any more information. Tonight's mission meant finding answers, digging deeper into the threat the Arctic faced.

Tonight, Sigrid would learn what it meant to be the mate of someone like him. A soldier through and through, member of an elite EUFOR group – and bear. Inside him, the beast roared with the prospect of a fight to protect what was his – territory, mate, possibility of cubs, those things which were important to him. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Kjell's attention and nodded slightly. His friend returned the gesture, and Bjorn knew both of them intended to do everything within their power to protect the woman sitting in the backseat.

Bjorn stopped the vehicle. With little natural cover, sliding a camouflaged tarp over the vehicle would have provided some concealment, but their need for a quick getaway necessitated that they leave the vehicle uncovered. He turned off the engine, then turned and faced everyone seated with him.

"We're going the rest of the way on foot. Everyone has their missions. Good hunting." He tried not to let his glance remain too long on Sigrid, didn't want the other men to think he singled her out for attention. He knew Kjell wouldn't leave Sigrid's side unless the tides turned against them. Even then, he would do what he could to secure her safety before joining the battle. He kept his game face, that of a man in charge of his team. Sigrid had to be just another member of that team. Anything more and she'd shatter his concentration and put them all at risk.

"Yes, Sir." The chorus of answers, including Sigrid's strong voice, rang in the confined space.

Bjorn adjusted his protective clothing before opening the door. The rest followed suit and soon, all six of them stood just in front of the vehicle, paired up into teams. Kjell took the back of the pack along with Sigrid.

"You'll be just fine," Bjorn said to her, his voice barely audible as he took the lead.

"It's not me I'm worried about." Sigrid's reply made him smile. He resisted the urge to glance at her, to see if her determined façade would waver to reveal any vulnerability.

He admired her. As a woman, as a soldier, as a scientist. And this mission, he suspected, would prove to be a training ground for all of them. He gestured to the front, and silently the group strode forward.

Bjorn led his team into place behind a massive pile of snow and ice. He smelled the tang of the ocean in the air as it encroached on the ice nearly a quarter-mile away. The sounds of breaking ice, of the world shifting beneath their feet reached him, a sharp staccato counterpoint to the ceaseless wind. He hunched his shoulders, calling on his bear to keep him warm. Leaving Kjell and Sigrid behind, he led the remaining four members of his team forward.

He stopped. The wind carried a new scent. His lip curled as he inhaled the clogging aroma of exhaust and men. He didn't need to glance at his watch nor at the moon overhead. Their sources had been true. The drop was happening now.

Signaling Marc and Trent to change their course, Bjorn bent low and raced over the ground with long strides, trying to flank the arriving vehicle. Rocks and mounds of snow provided scattered cover, and Bjorn used it to its fullest. Hans followed on his heels, gun held at the ready. The metal object felt foreign in Bjorn's hands. He preferred his bear form but for fighting men, bullets worked much more effectively. The arriving vehicle stopped, the logo on the side of the door matching the one found on the containers. Doors opened and three men stepped out.

Bjorn and Hans ducked behind a tumble of rocks. His enhanced ursine vision saw their matching suits, a deep red like the stain of blood on snow. Bearded faces hid behind ski masks and even at this distance he smelled the tang of tobacco that clung to them. One man flicked a butt on the ground, crushing it out with his boot.

The insult to his land galled him. He listened to their conversation, crude jokes about getting laid in Ny-Alesund combined with self-satisfied, mocking laughter about the size of the PCB dump. One of them called this place a "fucking desolate wasteland" and Bjorn wanted to tear out the man's throat with his teeth. Life flourished here, creatures that valued the struggle between life and death and what it took to come out on the right side of the battle every day, every season, every year. His muscles tightened.

The men loitered near their vehicle. Seeing it as a sign of trepidation, as if they were waiting for something, Bjorn and Hans hurried to work their way toward the enemies, Marc and Trent approaching from the opposite direction. Drifting to him from where they waited, Kjell's and Sigrid's scents told Bjorn they were holding firm. Pride in his team swelled within him.

Overhead, the northern lights snapped and crackled like live electric wires. A howl rose on the wind.

Bjorn's steps faltered. The night demons. They had expected them, though not so soon. Time to take out the men. Bursting from cover, Bjorn flew to the men in a blur and grabbed the nearest Russian, throwing him into the side of the vehicle and knocking him unconscious. The noise shattered the silence.

"What the fuck?" The men whirled. "Lev!" The thick Russian accent turned the name into three syllables.

The hot smell of blood overrode all other scents. It filled Bjorn's nostrils, made his bear sit back on his haunches and roar. *Kill. Prey.* Bjorn slammed into another man, his hand going to his throat. "Who are you? What are you doing here?"

His eyes bulged. His throat worked but no sound emerged. Behind his ski mask, his face reddened.

Bjorn eased the pressure, but only slightly. "Answer my questions," he said in English, then repeated his demand in Russian. He knew a little of the language, just enough to recognize the curse the man spat back into his face. "If *you* won't, then one of your comrades will." From the man's facial expressions, Bjorn knew he understood English perfectly well. He brought his gun to the man's chin.

A howl rose behind him. Shit! He glanced over his shoulder to see four night demons descending from the sky. In his arms, the Russian twisted. Holstering the gun, Bjorn held fast, the hair on the back of his neck rising. His bear roared, demanding to be let out to fight the demons, but he couldn't risk changing shape in front of the Russians. Yet, they needed information, which meant killing this bastard outright was out of the question. Beside him, Hans engaged the remaining Russian.

His pent-up rage exploded inside him. An uppercut to the jaw slammed the Russian's head against the tempered glass window of the vehicle and cracks radiated from the point of impact. The man wobbled and raised his fist to strike. Bjorn grabbed it, whirling the man around and twisting the arm behind his back. Frankly, he had little time to secure the man, not right now, so he slammed his chin against the broken window, shattering it. Glass rained down around them, a shard piercing the man's face. Blood spurted from the cut.

The man slumped against the side the vehicle and landed in a pile on the ground. Bjorn whirled to face the night demons. Unable to rip off his gloves lest he reveal his shapeshifter side to the Russians, he pulled a large knife from its sheath on his side. Moonlight winked on the eight-inch blade, the edge honed to razor sharpness. He moved the blade from side to side as he waited for the demons to approach.

Two of the night demons stopped in their tracks. They raised their heads, the gaping holes of their mouths open as inhuman shrieks filled the air.

Bjorn's blood ran cold. The other two demons still advanced, though more slowly now, almost as if they knew whom they faced, as if they were capable of rational thought.

Behind him, a groan came from one of the men on the ground. The sounds of a fight, Hans and the other Russian, echoed in his ears, and standing between them and

the demons, Bjorn was prepared to fight. He had ordered Marc and Trent to look for demons, but he wanted a piece of these creatures as well. Bjorn rolled onto the balls of his feet, ready to move, taking time to size up his opponents. Larger than the other demons, they seemed hell-bent on getting to the vehicle with its load of toxic waste. More PCBs, more damage to the environment, stronger demons. He wouldn't let it happen.

Releasing a blood-curdling roar, Bjorn rushed forward.

The demons shrieked. The two that had stopped hurried to catch up with the lead pair, and all four demons met him face-to-face.

A savage snarl on his lips, Bjorn brought the knife down in an arc. It slashed through the first demon, sending it reeling backward into its companions. The second stood fast, though the knife sliced through its hand. The creature's rotten breath engulfed Bjorn. He struggled to breathe.

*Hack, slash, strike!* The two lead demons engaged him, reaching out with their long, skeletal fingers to rake through clothes and skin. The other two demons hurried toward the vehicle, and booted feet crunching in the snow and sounds of battle told him Marc and Trent held their own back by the transport vehicle. Certain he could take on the two demons standing before him, and that his team members would keep the rest of them occupied, Bjorn focused his attention on his attackers.

He stabbed his knife through the gut of one of them, giving it a twist that would have disemboweled a human. He jerked his knife upward, resistance slowing his stroke. Through what should have been organs and tissue, the knife passed until, with a gurgled cry, the demon fell back. He switched his attention to its even larger companion.

The creature swiped with its claws, barely missing Bjorn's chest. He fainted, parried and brought his knife up and under the space where the creature's ribs should have been.

The demon hissed. Hot, wet fluid dripped over Bjorn's gloved hand, startling him. Never before had the demons bled. Did they develop more substantial bodies as their strength increased? With no time to ponder, he stabbed again, quicker this time. The squish of the knife sinking into flesh and tissue sounded real, as did the anguished cry the demon gave. The creature swiped wildly at Bjorn.

Hot pain seared along his side and Bjorn's hand went to the wound along his ribs. Sliced clean through snowsuit and clothing, his flesh gaped slightly and hot blood dripped down his leg. Pulling his glove off with his teeth, Bjorn willed his hand to change, fingers switching into claws, and the big pads of a polar bear formed where human digits had once been. He swiped at the demon.

Shouts from the scuffling reached his ears. A barked warning and then the report of gunfire filled the air. A bullet whizzed by his head, close enough to tickle his ear.

The first demon rejoined the fray.

“Fuck,” Bjorn growled. Drop the knife and take precious seconds to change his hand or continue fighting like this, half bear, half man? Either way, with bullets flying behind him, he knew the odds had turned against them. He struck out at the newly healed demon, his claws slicing through air. Determined, he faced down the pair and knew whatever happened, they wouldn’t get Sigrid. Not as long as he stayed alive.

## Chapter Fourteen

Watching the ensuing battle reminded Sigrid of watching a horror movie. She knew what would come next, feared it, yet couldn't tear her gaze away. "We should do something," Sigrid said, her hand dropping to the gun in its holster on her hip. She flipped back the latch and curled her fingers around the grip.

"We follow orders." Kjell's icy tone chilled more than the wind swirling around them.

"Two more people could tip the scales." She winced as Bjorn reached for his side, his hand coming away red with blood. Her heart leapt into her throat. Fear turned her blood to ice and she watched, half afraid to tear her eyes away lest something happen and she never see Bjorn again.

"Captain Lunde told us to stay here and secure the exit. They'll fall back if it's too dangerous." He pressed his lips into a grim line.

"The hell they will." Sigrid eased the gun from its holster and flipped the safety. Holding it in a loose grip in front of her, she prepared to bring it up and fire if necessary. Standing here waiting, watching, chafed on her nerves. A battle raged no more than a hundred meters from them, and her superior officer forbid her to enter it.

The report of a gunshot echoed across the frosty landscape. Ice cracked at the noise. Rumbling underfoot, the heavy layers of packed snow and ice shifted.

The night demons howled, the sound curdling her blood. The bullets passed right through them, as if they were made of paper. As Bjorn struck out, multiple slices opened then closed on their bodies. Sigrid focused on the sight of a black-padded paw with white fur. He'd partially shifted. Damn—she didn't know he could do that.

Hans still engaged the man he'd been fighting since the *mêlée* began. The first Russian Bjorn had fought remained on the ground but the second rallied and now fired shots. Marc and Trent shifted their attention from the demons and took him down. Wrenching the man's arms behind his back, they fastened them with what looked like a length of rope. They tossed him into the vehicle before whirling once more on the night demons.

Four against five, with the majority of the enemy not being human. Risking a look at Kjell, Sigrid saw he watched intently, his hand hovering over the weapon at his hip. She looked back in time to see Hans at last knock his enemy unconscious, lifting him bodily and throwing him through the shattered window of the vehicle with a guttural shout.

On the ground, the first man felled by Bjorn began to move.

Sigrid gasped, drawing Kjell's attention to the man. First his head lifted, then his torso as he hauled himself to his feet, as wobbly as a newborn elk.

Kjell frowned.

Sigrid lifted her weapon, not quite ready to aim it. Ordered to stay behind, if she entered the fray she'd encounter Bjorn's wrath. Yet, better to let him vent his anger at her and know he lived, than watch him being torn to pieces by the night demons. The creatures' shrieks and howls filled the air. A gunshot slammed across the landscape, and Sigrid realized the remaining Russian had found a gun.

Trent grappled with the man as Marc and Hans engaged the demons.

More gunshots echoed.

Inside the vehicle bodies moved, the man they'd tied up and the one they'd thought out cold. Obviously one had untied the other, and now both of them focused on the battle happening just yards from them.

"In the vehicle!" Sigrid screamed.

"Oh hell," Kjell snarled. Tension corded the muscles in his neck, his fingers clenching and unclenching next to his gun.

Sigrid ignored him. "Marc. Trent. Behind you!" If she couldn't jump into the fight, she'd certainly alert those in it. If she hadn't been here she had no doubt Kjell would be in the thick of the battle, helping to even up the odds a bit more. But she *was* here, and Kjell was ordered to protect her. She'd die before she let someone else lose his life in a misguided attempt to preserve her safety.

She leaned forward, Kjell's hand clamped around her arm the only thing holding her back. He pulled her to face him. "Stay down," he ordered. "I'm going in."

"Go!" Sigrid yelled.

The war between orders and duty played out across his features. "*Stay put!*"

Sigrid opened her mouth to speak, her words cut off by a shot from a pistol. She dropped to the frozen snow as the bullet whizzed perilously close to them. Bounding to her feet, she leveled her weapon at the men.

"Stay low! They wouldn't be shooting if you hadn't opened your damn mouth!"

Kjell's words stung. Raising his weapon, he flicked off the safety before turning and darting into the fray.

Sigrid ducked behind cover and watched Kjell aim and fire. The awful sounds of the battle surrounded her. More gunfire, this time coming from Kjell, added a counterpoint to the grunts and wails and the thud of flesh against flesh. A man grunted and dropped to the ground. One of theirs or one of the Russians? Sigrid lifted her head but couldn't see. Damn it, she refused to stay behind like a sitting duck. She'd followed orders long enough.

On hands and knees, she crawled to the very edge of the wind-carved pile of snow and ice. A gust of wind swirled loose snow into eddies, stinging what little exposed skin she had. She sneezed as she inhaled the fine particles then pressed her lips closed,

half afraid of the PCBs she'd just taken in from the night demons. She should have insisted the team wear respirators or some sort of protective gear. If only she could take readings, determine the levels before and after the attack, as well as the levels of the demons themselves. She'd have far more information with which to work. The scientist in her lamented the loss.

More gunfire, this time a barrage...she couldn't tell where it originated. A hoarse cry. Man down.

Sigrid stilled, knowing if she showed her head she risked getting it shot off. Yet Bjorn still fought, as did Marc, Hans, Trent and Kjell. Damn Bjorn's orders to keep her safe. Any reluctance she'd felt at fully integrating with the team fled. As a EUFOR officer she'd been trained no less than they had. Experience might separate them, but not for long. She craned her head beyond the concealing pile of snow and stared at the kneeling form not more than ten meters from her.

Kjell.

He supported himself on one knee, the other leg stretched out to the side. Red blood stained his suit from the knee down, dripping into the snow beneath. She hoped like hell there weren't any wild polar bears in the area. The scent of blood would draw them like metal to a magnet. He wobbled, his stance unsteady though his gun was trained on the two Russians who had freed themselves from the vehicle. One was now leaning against the transport, in a position much like Kjell's, and Sigrid saw the dark stain on his suit as well. The other looked unharmed and pissed.

She scooted forward and raised her gun.

"Sigrid!" Kjell's voice snapped back at her like a whip, making her wonder if he had eyes in the back of his head. "Don't you fucking dare! Stay back!"

Damn, he already knew her too well. "I won't leave you out here alone." She inched her way toward him.

Bullets peppered the snow near her hand.

Sigrid held her ground. She raised her weapon quickly, aimed and fired a quick shot. The man on the ground next to the vehicle jerked and went still.

Oh god! She'd killed a man. Bile rose in her throat. Her vision grew dark around the edges, her breath coming in fast pants. She tried to focus on Kjell, only vaguely noting that Trent had wrested the gun from his enemy and the man was now down.

"Sigrid, stay back!" Kjell ordered. He squeezed the trigger several times in rapid succession.

The remaining Russian fired once more before crumpling to the ground.

Bullet hit flesh with a sickening thud. Kjell's mouth opened, his eyes going wide, and he toppled over onto his back. His leg twisted underneath him, his hands out to his side, the gun bouncing to the snow. The weapon lay still.

"Kjell!" Sigrid cried. She scrambled forward. She'd revealed herself and killed a man and in doing so had gotten Kjell killed as well. Hot tears splashed into her ski mask as she reached him.

Sigrid yanked her glove from her hand, sucking in a sharp breath at the icy cold racing into her flesh. She reached beneath his hood and ski mask to press her fingers against the carotid. Slow pulses met her touch. Kjell blinked.

He was alive. Pulling her hand away, she grabbed her glove and slid her fingers into it. Standing, she slid her hands under Kjell's armpits and pulled. "This is going to hurt like hell," she grunted as he moved a few centimeters.

Sigrid pulled again. Before her, the battle still raged. With only the night demons to worry about, Marc, Hans, Trent and Bjorn fought like wild creatures. Still partially shifted, they swiped and clawed at the demons and it appeared as if a couple of them were weakening. She pulled again and Kjell slid a bit farther.

Hunched over, the muscles in her arms and upper back burning, she pulled Kjell slowly, surely, back toward the vehicle. She focused on his face. His eyelids fluttered, his lips parted. No blood emerged from his mouth and she was grateful. Blood on the front of his suit showed where the bullet had entered, perilously close to the heart. If she'd gotten him killed, she'd never forgive herself – and neither would Bjorn.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, nearly halfway back to the vehicle. "I'm so, so sorry."

Kjell blinked. His lips worked but no sounds emerged.

Sigrid risked a look at the battle and saw Bjorn take a swipe across the chest that had him backpedaling away from the night demon he fought. Damn. Damn. And double damn.

*Man down.* Her mind formed the words even if her lips didn't. They wore no radios. With everyone within sight and hearing distance they needed no other means of communication. Each team of two had its orders. So long as those orders were completed, it mattered little that they didn't speak to each other during the process. Except now she pulled Kjell's wounded body back to the vehicle and lacked the strength to haul him inside.

At last she stopped by the door and rested her weary muscles. Opening the vehicle's door, she stared first at the body lying on the ground and then the interior. "I need your help getting you inside. You can't stay on the cold ground."

Kjell gave no sign of hearing.

"Can you understand me?"

He nodded his head once.

"I need your help."

Kjell lifted his arm. White lines of pain showed around his eyes and his hand shook. Sigrid took it, his grip surprisingly strong for his wound, and with a cry of pain, he managed to raise himself onto one leg. He hobbled, resting all his weight on Sigrid as he

maneuvered onto the backseat. With a wince and a curse, he pulled his legs inside. Sigrid followed and closed the door.

Now she just had to wait for the men to return. She reached for the first-aid kit and when she turned around again, Kjell had already unzipped his jacket.

"Work quickly. I'm about to pass out." He bit off the words, as if speaking cost him too much energy.

Determined to keep him alive, she focused on his injuries. Outside, the battle raged.

Bjorn relished the pain. It goaded him, reminded him of all the times he'd failed and of the woman he needed to keep safe. Inside him, his bear roared, demanding release. Bjorn held onto his humanity by a thread. Changing now would take too much time that he didn't have. He thought the Russians might be dead but he didn't need to take the chance of revealing too much.

Kjell's sharp cry echoed in his mind. Risking a glance over his shoulder, Bjorn had watched as his best friend fell. His gut clenched, twisted, and with a snarl of fury he had renewed his attack on the night demons.

Chest heaving, he sent the creature before him back two paces, then three, driving it with everything inside him. A vicious slash to the throat and the demon disappeared with a shriek.

"Sergeant Major and Svetter, fall back!" he roared. Someone needed to be with Sigrid to keep her safe. Of the remaining three demons, one looked ready to dissipate and with a slash of his paw, Hans sent that one into the ether, or wherever the hell the things went when they died.

Sweat dripped down Bjorn's back. The ski mask caught most of the perspiration on his forehead, the cloth clammy against his skin. The snowsuit, good at containing heat, made him too hot for the polar bear living inside him. His side burned and fatigue pulled at him. He stumbled, quickly righting himself, narrowly missing the long reach of a night demon.

Hans stood by his side. A good man, he fought like hell itself even as the second demon ignored him to join the one on Bjorn. He took relief in knowing that the other two men had gone to be with Kjell and Sigrid. He willed them to keep her safe and willed his friend not to die. If Kjell crumpled, then the wounds had to be bad.

The slice of a claw across his shoulder pulled Bjorn from his thoughts. He ducked and wove, all his attention firmly focused on the fight at hand. Letting his mind wander to the other members of his team had been costly. He knew what such distraction could cost, yet, with Sigrid, he couldn't avoid it either. Damn.

He countered with two quick uppercuts. Feet moving like a boxer's, he kept light on his toes. The strain of staying between forms tore at him. His muscles screamed and his lungs burned for air. His gun lay in the snow several meters away, his knife clenched firmly in his hand. Blood crusted his snowsuit, the snow clinging to it not enough to dissipate the infernal heat.

Hot. Moving like this was making him too hot. He panted. Sweat dripped into his eyes, his ski mask too soaked to hold any more moisture. The salty liquid stung, blurring his vision, yet Bjorn couldn't wipe it away. A right hook then duck, counter with a spin kick and a slash.

Next to him Hans re-engaged himself with the other night demon. An occasional grunt and more often a shriek of pain from the demon told Bjorn that his partner landed several good hits. He swung his leg at the demon he battled, hoping to sweep its feet out from underneath it. The creature remained standing.

Bjorn pressed forward. Beneath his suit a fine coat of hairs grew, the shift trying to take place. It added to the heat, made his movements slower, and his claws barely raked the demon. It howled. The scent of rotting meat gagged man and bear. He pressed his lips closed against the need to retch. Not now, not in the middle of a fight.

Staggering, he swung at the demon again. It howled, this time in triumph rather than rage. Reaching out, it snagged the front of his suit with its claws. Material tore. It hung off Bjorn, impeding his movements. He disengaged long enough to shove the cloth off his shoulders, and in his sweater, he engaged once more.

The knit sweater, soaked with his sweat, reacted with the icy air. It chilled him, freezing crystals of water to his body and the pain of frigid air drove the change back. Just a little, but like a dunk in an icy stream it cleared his head. He snarled, a frenzy of anger and hatred rising inside him. The predator inside him settled into place, bringing with it a deadly calm. This was the way it was supposed to be, ferocious nature captured in one package. Something lived. And something died.

In a cold, hollow place inside him, Bjorn knew he would live.

He redoubled his efforts, half aware of the inhuman noises rising from his throat. He snapped teeth not yet elongated into slashing fangs. He tossed the knife away...both hands curled into bear paws now, the six-inch claws more than adequate to slash into the demon. It howled, curling in on itself, and still Bjorn attacked over and over again, until the burn of muscles receded and a red haze tinged his vision. *Fight. Survive.* The bear's world narrowed down to those two concepts and Bjorn rejoiced.

The demon in front of him shrieked and went up in a puff of smoke. Bjorn whirled on its neighbor. He fought like a fiend. Putting the protest of his muscles, the sweat soaking his skin, his clothing, everything aside, he poured his rage into the last remaining demon. It didn't have a chance. With its cohorts gone and fighting two trained warriors, the last demon vaporized with a slash and a scream.

Bjorn whirled around in search of more enemies.

A hand closed around his arm. "Captain! Bjorn!" Hans yelled.

Bjorn shook it off. He stormed toward the vehicle, his steps moving into a ground-eating lope. He stared at the bodies and at the blood. Inhaling the rich tang into his nostrils, his bear roared. Prey. They'd been slain.

Sigrid. Her image filled his mind as proud and fierce as the bear inside him. With Kjell assigned to protect her, Bjorn had been sure he'd return to her waiting arms. But

his friend had crumpled amid the crack of gunshots, possibly slain, and he knew without doubt Sigrid had become the protector. He snarled and shook off the hand trying to hold him back.

Bjorn spun on Hans. He lifted a great paw, the fur between the toes drenched red with blood. Swiping at his partner, Bjorn opened his mouth to reveal the fangs he didn't have. The change hovered under his skin. The bear tugged at the will holding it back, wanting to be free, wanting to avenge the injury and the hurt to his friend, his woman. "Hans," Bjorn warned, barely with it enough to recognize the sergeant. "Get away."

"No." Hans stood firm. He grabbed Bjorn's arm again. "Stay strong, Bjorn. The battle's over. Come back."

The hair on the back of his neck rose. The smell of blood in his nostrils conjured images of steaming entrails, of hot meat in a place so very cold and hungry. He glanced over at the crumpled Russians by their vehicle. The mission, something about it pulled in his mind. Find out who made the dumps. He shook his head.

The bear fought back. Partially free, it refused to slide back into hiding, living in a dark corner of his soul. It demanded its time in the frigid Arctic air.

"Sigrid," Bjorn offered the name like a benediction. "Make sure she's all right. I have to go." He twisted away and pulled his sweater over his head. The long-john shirt beneath came next, until he stood bare-chested. He reached for his snow pants.

"She needs to see you," Hans insisted. He marched forward, step by step, until he stood chest to chest with Bjorn. He moved slowly, surely, like one male polar bear staring down another.

Bjorn inhaled the offal scent of the dead men, the stench of the night demons, and underneath it all the musk of another male polar bear. A rumble worked its way through his chest and up his throat. He bit it back, the man not wanting to challenge his subordinate officer. The bear bellowed inside.

Pain lanced through him. He bent double, making Hans scramble back to avoid being head-butted. Never before had the change hurt like this, but then never had he struggled so hard to repress it. Even in the desert he could make his excuses and retreat to a refrigerated truck or a chilled room. And when he couldn't, well...the desert in the middle of the night held many secrets, even if the polar bear panted and immediately retreated back inside. But here, with the ice and snow surrounding him and the lure of prey and sex, the bear reveled in its perfect environment.

Bjorn sucked in gulps of air. His wounds spilled pain into his bloodstream, the flesh tearing, rending, as it tried to shift from human to bear and human once more. He cried out, a wordless yell of pain. His stomach doubled in on itself and bile rose from his stomach. Turning his face, he vomited.

Someone held his head. Hans, he figured, though the bear's monosyllabic thoughts overrode his own. *Friend. Foe.* The two terms blended in his mind.

Bjorn concentrated on the scent of Hans, of his knowledge of the team. Pain pounded through his bones. His head throbbed. Blood slicked his skin, the freezing temperatures of the snow and air on his bare chest shocking him back to reality.

Sigrid. Kjell. The team.

Fuck. He'd nearly lost it in a moment's rage. His gut twisted.

He exhaled and looked up to find Hans still holding his head. With the back of his hand, he wiped spittle from his mouth. Wordlessly, Hans held out his clothes.

"Come on, Captain. We have to take Sigrid, Kjell and the rest of the team back to the compound. Tend our wounds, figure out what we know and go from there," Hans said as Bjorn shrugged back into his undershirt and sweater.

Bjorn squared his shoulders and wadded his torn parka into a ball. "Yes, Sir," he said. He stepped forward and Hans fell into a march beside him. "Thank you. The bear...it's never fought me like that before."

"I know. My father told me there'd come a time in a man's life when his bear would struggle for supremacy. If the man was strong enough, good enough, he'd win, and the two would live in harmony ever after. I suspect Sigrid's arrival caught your bear's interest and he wanted her all to himself." Hans didn't look in his direction as he walked.

"I want her more."

"I know," Hans replied. "She's a member of our team now. She pulled Lieutenant Tveit off the battlefield. I'm sure Sergeant Major and my brother got him stabilized, and we can get him back. You did well. We stopped the dump. And now we have equipment, bodies. I'll help them bring it back. You get Sigrid and your second back home."

Bjorn didn't question who gave the orders and who took them. The sight of their vehicle, engine running as it sat on the frozen snow, consumed his attention. Inside, the woman he loved battled for his best friend's life. He wouldn't let either of them down.

## Chapter Fifteen

The sight that greeted him when he opened the door of the vehicle and saw Sigrid in the back kneeling over a bloody Kjell would haunt him for as long as he lived. A curt order and a nod from Hans had Trent and Marc accompanying him back to the Russians. Bjorn crawled into the back.

"How bad is he?" he asked, noting Sigrid appeared whole, the only blood on her seemingly from his friend. Joy leapt in his heart as he realized he'd accomplished his mission of keeping her safe. The knowledge his best friend might die quickly dampened his enjoyment of the moment.

"Bad. We've got to get to the compound." Sigrid pressed her lips together and concentrated on applying pressure on the worst of the wounds, including one on the left-hand side of Kjell's torso.

"I'll get us there." He vaulted over the seats, sat behind the wheel and turned the tracked vehicle around to go back to the compound. He pushed the machine to the edge of its limits. Not meant to travel at such great rates of speed, the tracks bounced and jolted over ruts and boulders.

Behind him, he heard Kjell's moans of pain. Sigrid spoke to him, her soft voice like music that soothed his raw soul. The bear lay dormant, apparently satisfied with the leadership of the man. Bjorn knew later he'd have to think about Hans' words, the challenge the bear had offered. Later he'd have to run on all fours through the dark Arctic night.

Sigrid said nothing as they drove, save her soft crooning to Kjell. She'd fired at the Russians to defend them and her position. She'd pulled Kjell from the battlefield, and even now applied field medicine to keep him alive. If he'd thought her a pampered scientist before, watching her care for Kjell blew all his preconceived notions out of the water. A strong woman, one capable of defending herself and others. Somehow, she'd gotten him into the vehicle, started first aid and still managed to keep a level head. He knew as a member of his team he needn't doubt her scientific or military skills. And in spite of his worry for Kjell, the knowledge turned him on.

Over halfway back now, the terrain grew smoother as he eased into a path they'd used many times before. He thought he heard Sigrid saying "thank you" though to him or some deity, or even to Kjell, he didn't know. His sensitive sense of smell picked up the smell of blood, sweat and fear.

"You did well out there," Bjorn said. "I'm very proud of you." The words emerged in a military bark.

"Th-thank you," Sigrid said. "How much farther?"

"Not much at all." He risked a look over his shoulder. Sigrid dabbed a wet cloth on Kjell's forehead, her other hand holding the pressure bandage in place. With his suit open and layers of clothing torn away, he looked not unlike the many injured soldiers Bjorn had seen. He pulled his glance back to the road, focusing on their destination and not Kjell's grave wounds.

"It's my fault Kjell was injured, Sir. I'm sorry. I couldn't stand by and watch you get killed." Tears choked her voice.

Oh hell. The way the Russians were firing, the military captain in him felt they were lucky with only one man on the critical list. Sure, most of them had wounds, but even Bjorn's, though he suspected the aching gash in his side would need stitches, would heal eventually. A new scar or three, but nothing major. Not like Kjell, who hung on for his life.

"Injuries are a part of war, Sigrid." Deliberately, he used her civilian name, making it a caress. "You did nothing wrong. If you want to make a full report, I'd appreciate hearing the battle from your point of view, and I know Vik will want the information. But I can tell you unequivocally I don't blame you for Kjell's injuries."

"Even without knowing what happened?" Disbelief filled her voice.

"Even without knowing what happened. You thought we were in danger. You acted upon the knowledge you had. Should I think any differently, Corporal Myrhe?"

"No, Sir...Bjorn. Though my shouts drew fire."

"You still did well out there, whether you want to believe it or not." With those words, he pulled into the compound. Sigrid said nothing and he realized he'd spoken as much to himself as to her. Parking the vehicle, he opened the garage doors. A backboard hung on the garage wall, part of the emergency first-aid kit they kept there. Gently sliding Kjell onto it, they carried him inside and into the infirmary.

Silently they worked to undress Kjell. Bjorn worked on the large injuries, letting Sigrid clean and bandage the smaller ones. A bullet had lodged inside his chest, next to a rib. Praying his friend would stay unconscious, he grabbed a pair of forceps and worked to extract the blob of metal.

Sigrid worked efficiently, not getting in his way, handing him tools and supplies as needed. She finished cleaning and bandaging the smaller wounds then helped with the gunshot wounds. As soon as Bjorn removed the bullets, she cleaned and packed the wounds, first the one in the abdomen, then the one on the leg. Not bad for field work, and it'd have to do. Going into Ny-Alesund for a doctor or taking Kjell to a hospital would expose them to possible discovery. Luckily, as polar bears, they healed faster, though even the chest wound would take several days to a week before Kjell was out of danger.

"We've done all we can do for him," Bjorn said. He peeled off his bloody gloves and dropped them into a wastebasket. "Now he can sleep."

Sigrid raised the rails on the hospital bed and pulled a blanket over Kjell's legs and lower abdomen. After checking the thermostat, she went to where Bjorn stood by the door. "We have to call Vik and tell him what happened."

A rumble outside announced the arrival of Marc, Hans and Trent.

"Yes. Let's clean up a bit and then go to my office."

"All right."

He watched her turn and go down the hall to her room before he continued on to his office.

After washing up and binding his wound in the small bathroom off his office, he sat down behind the desk, punching in the secure line to Vik and waiting for the leader of this team to answer. His best friend lay in the infirmary, unconscious from serious gunshot wounds. The military leader knew the injuries to be a part of war, yet the man in him knew he'd failed once more. All the words he told Sigrid about things happening and making the right decision...they applied to her, not him. As the commander it was his job to bring his men back alive. He'd done that, but not without cost.

Vik answered on the second ring. Sleep clouded his voice and for the first time, Bjorn realized it was still the wee hours of the morning. Adrenaline still pumped through his veins, though weariness followed, and he knew once this call was over he'd be hitting his bed.

"Captain Lunde, has the mission been accomplished?" Vik asked, suddenly alert once he realized who was on the other end of the line.

"Yes, Sir. We killed the Russians, unfortunately, and my men are bringing their vehicle and what equipment we could salvage into the compound as we speak. The dump was successfully aborted and with the information in the truck, we have enough evidence to put pressure on the company involved," Bjorn reported. He struggled to distance himself from the words he spoke. His stomach churned, his thoughts with Kjell in the infirmary. Sigrid hadn't returned and he feared he should be with her instead of reporting to his superior officer.

"Very good. And the demons?"

"We destroyed the four who came to visit, drawn by the PCBs. Sigrid has put together theories, which she's transmitted to you. We believe they're working with the company, a symbiotic relationship of consuming the waste and helping to keep the dumping sites clear."

"And once we stop this company from dumping, we can work on destroying the demons completely."

"Yes, Sir." Bjorn dragged his fingers through his short hair, careful not to dislodge the headset. "I think we're on track to complete that, Sir."

"Very good. It sounds as if there's something else. Your men...they're all right?" Vik asked.

The moment he'd been dreading. "Kjell took heavy fire. He's in the infirmary with gunshot wounds to his left abdomen and leg, and other minor injuries. We've cleaned, packed and disinfected the wounds. He's unconscious now, and as soon as the men report I'll have someone watch over him twenty-four seven." He swallowed hard against the rush of guilt that threatened to swamp him.

"Anyone else harmed?"

"No, Sir." He bit back a remark. Didn't Vik care about Kjell? Shouldn't he be worried? He braced himself for the recriminations that were sure to come.

"Very good. I'm sorry Lieutenant Tveit sustained injuries. If they're not life-threatening, then I'll wish him a speedy recovery. He's a valued member of the team. You did well, Bjorn. You did well." Vik sounded relieved.

"What?" Bjorn asked. "How can you say that?"

"Because you brought your men back alive, with the objective. Yes, we wanted one of the men to interrogate, but frankly, they probably wouldn't have told us much more than their equipment will. You found a link between the demons and the pollution, and Sigrid has found valuable information in our fight against them. This isn't over, not by a long shot, but we've made good headway and I'm very proud of you all. Please relay that to your team."

"Yes, Sir." Bjorn stumbled over the simple words. The door to his office opened, revealing Sigrid standing there in a long-sleeved T-shirt and a pair of jeans. Heavy slippers covered her feet and her blonde hair glistened with water from the shower. Her vanilla scent filled the room, swamping his senses. Shoving back his chair, he rose to his feet and hurried toward her.

"Bjorn?" Vik's question brought him back to reality.

"Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir. Corporal Myrhe just arrived." Bjorn stopped short of pulling her into his arms and assuring himself that she was unharmed. Instead, he reached out, gesturing her into a chair by his desk.

"Very good. I'd like to speak to her if I can. Can you put me on speaker?" In the background, paper shuffled and the creak of leather told Bjorn that Vik had made himself comfortable.

Bjorn sat and pressed a button on the phone, switching it from headset to speaker. A soft crackle filled the air then the sounds of Vik in his office filtered through.

Sigrid leaned forward, a tendril of her hair sliding over her ear. It shone golden, like a halo of light on her head. Bjorn lifted his hand then settled it on the desk, curling his fingers into the blotter in an attempt to ease the need to reach out and caress the silken strands. He breathed deeply, letting her vanilla fragrance fill him, soothe him. With her face scrubbed clean and her skin rosy from the shower, she bore no trace of blood or wounds.

Bjorn closed his eyes and breathed a silent prayer of thanks.

"Corporal Myrhe, I'm glad you could join us. Captain Lunde has reported the actions of your team. He commends you highly. I'm very proud of you, and of the team. However, there is an issue I want to discuss with you."

Sigrid stiffened. She tucked the errant strand of hair behind her ear and crossed her arms over her chest. She looked ready to battle.

"What is it?" Bjorn asked. Neither the tone in Vik's voice nor the look in Sigrid's eyes boded well. He settled into his chair, prepared to do battle for the woman he loved. He glanced up at her. As soon as this call ended, he'd be sure to tell her. After today, he needed her on his team. He just hoped after she heard whatever Vik wanted to say that she wanted to stay.

After all she'd gone through, if Vik wanted to kick her off the team she swore she'd fly to Oslo and kick his ass, military general or not. Looking across the desk at Bjorn, she feared what was to come. Bjorn looked upset, worried, two things she hardly expected out of her commander. Kjell remained unconscious and frankly, after the pain medicine they'd poured down him, probably would for a while.

The silence in response to Bjorn's question grated on her nerves. "General Targent, what did you wish to discuss with me?" she asked.

"I've looked over your findings, Corporal Myrhe, and taken the liberty of having them reviewed by two additional scientists working for the organization. It's good work. Quite solid. I see where your hypothesis leads, and frankly, your data goes a long way toward achieving our mission up there. With your help, I have no doubt Bjorn's team can determine how the demons came into existence and destroy them. We have good leads. I'm working to find out more about the Russian corporation as we speak, and have several high-level government officials looking into emissions and pollution treaties to see who might gain the most from an arrangement with them. I'm quite impressed." The sounds of shuffling papers came through the speaker.

Sigrid released a sigh of relief. If he loved her work, and she'd had no doubt he would for she'd used solid science and built her suppositions carefully, then why did he sound so stern. "Thank you, Sir," she replied, hoping her comment would draw him out. Thoughts of her work published in a prestigious journal, not while the mission continued of course, but afterward, filled her mind.

"I'm sure you're thinking of publication," Vik said.

Sigrid stiffened at the verbalization of her thoughts. "Yes, Sir. I am. I think this will make a good paper, one that will shed some light onto the way PCBs are handled. As I'm sure you're aware, I cannot mention the demons, at least not directly, and any EUFOR involvement in the project would be kept confidential." She glanced across the table and saw Bjorn watching her.

"Negative on the publication, Corporal. We can't risk the chance of a security leak. I'm sorry. Now if you'll excuse me, I have an important meeting in less than two hours."

"Yes, Sir," Sigrid replied, closing her eyes against the rush of disappointment. All her life she'd worked to make a name for herself as a scientist, and finally, now that she had a chance to get out from beneath her family's wings, she'd been shut down. She knew Vik had EUFOR to consider. As her commanding officer, he had the right to make the decision. Except now she'd not have her article printed, not have the chance to show the scientific community and her family the kind of research of which she was capable. Distantly, she heard Bjorn signing off the call and the click of the receiver.

He knelt in front of her and took her hand in his own. She looked up at him, suddenly aware of the tears that washed her face in bitter grief.

"I'm sorry," Bjorn said. "I'm so damn sorry." With his thumb, he brushed her tears away. "I know how much you wanted to get your work published."

She sniffed and dashed away the tears with the back of her hand. "I don't think you do, Bjorn. I don't think you know how much I wanted that at all."

"Maybe not, but I can guess. As much as I wanted to bring my team back whole. Now, my best friend lies in the infirmary with a couple bullet holes in him and the woman I love is crying. Not exactly how I expected tonight's mission to end." He sighed and pulled her down to him. She ended up across his lap, his back leaning against the desk.

"The woman you love?" Sigrid snuggled into his broad chest. Reaching up, she cupped his cheek. "Really?"

The emotion in his gaze stopped her breath. "Yeah, baby. I love you. You're the strongest, bravest, smartest woman I've ever known. I don't want to think of *not* having you on my team, and I sure as hell don't want to know what my life would be like without you." He brushed his lips across her forehead.

Sigrid's eyelids fluttered closed. She breathed him in and rubbed her thumb across his lower lip. "Oh Bjorn, I love you too." Cupping her hand on the back of his neck, she pulled his lips down to hers.

Reverently, so softly it might have been a breath of air, he kissed her. His lips moved over hers, softly at first then harder, more insistent. He curved his hand over her breast, palming it through her thin shirt. When he flicked his thumb across her already-hard nipple, she wriggled in his arms, thankful she hadn't put on a bra after her shower.

He reached beneath her shirt and groaned. Dragging his lips from hers, he pulled in a shuddering breath. "As much as I want to show you exactly how much I love you, I think painkillers and some sleep might be the smarter move." Pain shone in his eyes.

"I'll be here when you wake," she said, knowing she was in the arms of a man she loved more than life itself. The disappointment over her paper faded, though didn't leave entirely. In his arms, she felt every inch the woman he described her to be. Smart, a hell of a scientist—she'd have more findings, more chances to publish papers. And so long as she held that acceptance deep in her heart, she knew she'd be all right.

Bjorn rose and Sigrid followed him. She wrapped her arm around his waist, intending on leading him to the bedroom for sleep. Anything else could come later.

"We're not done with the mission," he said. "But after tonight's mission, we're closer than we were. And now that Vik is looking into who might have ties to that Russian company —"

Sigrid pressed her fingers to his lips. "Shh, we can talk about that later. Right now let's check in on Kjell and then go to bed. Once you've rested, I think I know how to spend a few hours." She helped him to the door.

"Really?"

"Yeah. In pursuit of science." She reached for the doorknob and opened it.

"Science?" Bjorn grimaced.

"Yeah, science." She reached over and through his uniform pants, closed her fingers around his half-hard cock. "Science of the carnal kind."

Throats cleared and Sigrid's cheeks heated as she realized she'd been caught fondling Bjorn in the hallway.

He seemed not to notice as he nuzzled her neck and rumbled contently against her skin. "Mmm, now you're talking. I think my bear likes the way you think."

"Good, because I think I like your bear." She brushed past a startled Hans and Marc. "Think you're strong enough to come and get me?"

"You're my mate. Come here," Bjorn ordered.

"Is that an order, Sir?" Sigrid danced backward a few steps down the hall.

"Should I make it one?" Bjorn asked.

"Only if you can't catch me." Knowing his bear would have to give chase, she chuckled and took off down the hall at a slow jog.

Close on her heels, Bjorn followed. He wrapped his hands around her waist and pinned her against the wall with his body. Leaning in close, he nuzzled her neck. "Looks like I won't have to issue an order after all."

She curled her fingers against the back of his head and pulled his lips to hers. "There'll be plenty of time for orders...later."

## **About the Author**

Mary Winter began writing when she was 16, using it as an excuse to skip gym class. She currently lives in Iowa with her pets and dreams of writing full-time. Her advice to anyone is: "Persistence pays off. Don't ever give up on your dreams!"

Mary welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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