

SIREN ADULT FAIRY TALE

Little Red Rides the Wolf

Lara Santiago



A Siren Adult Fairy Tale

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Against her mother's final dying wish, Cheri Amaranth travels across the galaxy to the planet Selenia to meet her ailing Grampa for the first time.

Caine Wolver eagerly awaits her arrival to explain his intentions for their intertwined future.

However, Hunter spoils their first meeting and guides Cheri through the woods to Grampa's house, taking her on a different path than Caine planned.

Long bitter rivals, one man wants her heart, but the other only wants her goodies bag.

Will Cheri make it to her Grampa's house in time to give him the goodies she's brought from so far away? And which man can Cheri ultimately trust, the man she met first or the one who drives her crazy with passion?

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EROTIC ROMANCE



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DEDICATION

I'd like to dedicate this book to my cousin Julie. I'm so grateful for your friendship. Thanks for being a big part of my fondest childhood memories. I look forward to our lengthy conversations every time we're able to get together. I always will.

Lara Santiago
February 2007

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LARA SANTIAGO
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Chapter 1

“You must come alone...”

Cheri Amaranth leaned closer to the console of her spacecraft communications device as if it would help her see the garbled holographic vid-phone message better. It didn't.

“...main platform is dangerous...use alternate landing site...” the miniaturized figure of her recently located grandfather pleaded.

“Roger, that. Setting coordinates for alternate landing platform.” Nothing but static greeted her. “Send your coordinate location.”

“...sending a guide...not safe...the woods alone...follow...path...” The vid-message degraded further.

“Say again. What path?”

“...watch out for the w...wolf!” Her grandfather's urgent tone on the last word came through clearly, then the image disappeared.

Communications went dead as her ship entered the misty atmosphere of the small planet Selenia.

“Did he just say watch out for the werewolf?” Rex, her co-pilot, asked.

“Very funny.” Cheri gave Rex an eye roll and flipped the switch to end transmission.

“That’s what it sounded like. Are you sure we want to land on a planet named Selenia with a fresh werewolf warning?”

“Why wouldn’t we?”

“Selenia means dweller of the moon. Moon dwellers added to a werewolf warning is trouble with a capital T.”

Cheri scrunched her brows in disbelief. “Remind me to send you on a long vacation really soon.”

Rex huffed. “I don’t like this sudden trip to visit someone you’ve never met.”

“Noted. Now prepare us to land at the new coordinates.” Cheri didn’t believe in the boogiemán—or werewolves either—and Rex knew it.

They landed without incident in the thick wooded forest. The alternate landing site was on the opposite side of the planet from the primary port. Selenia had little substantial population anyway. She imagined the alternate port would be deserted.

Rex powered the craft down. “Are you sure you want to traipse alone through the woods to visit a man you’ve never even met?”

“Sure. Why not? I’m doing a good deed. Grampa was very glad to hear from me. He asked me to come right away when I contacted him.”

“Grampa? You don’t even know this guy and you’re already calling him Grampa?”

“I realize he’s a stranger, Mr. Mother-Hen, but he is also the only link I have to my father’s people. I was born here, you know.” Cheri paused before adding, “I’d probably still live here if my mother hadn’t moved us when my father died.”

Cheri wondered if she'd still have wanderlust if she'd grown up here. Since her earliest memory, she'd looked to the twinkling night sky as a place she wanted to explore.

"Why contact 'Grampa' now?"

She heaved a deep sigh. "Curiosity, I guess. I didn't know anything about my dad until Mom died. She left me a letter to be opened on my twenty-fifth birthday."

"Your twenty-fifth birthday isn't until next month." Rex gave her an accusatory glare.

She shrugged, refusing to feel guilty about ignoring the warning emblazoned on the letter her mother had left. "You should know me by now. I was filled with raging curiosity, Rex. I've always wanted to know more about my father and his family. Now is my chance."

"Curiosity killed the cat, you know."

Cheri shrugged again, grinned and added, "But not the werewolf."

Rex sent his surly gaze upward. "I'm going on the record that this is very strange."

"Right. Again, noted. Now please go get my goodie bag for Grampa ready. I'll be outside checking the hull for damage until the guide gets here."

"Watch out for werewolves," he warned.

Cheri responded with a deep sigh and stepped into the airlock to exit the ship. Outside she walked around her pride and joy, the small transport ship called Scarlet's Legacy, named for her mother. A few dings here and there. Seeing no serious damage, she headed to the hatch. Pushing her collar button to radio Rex as she approached the ship's entrance, she halted in her tracks, then released the button without speaking.

The largest wolf she'd ever seen blocked her way back to the hatch.

Her instincts, always attuned to animals of all kinds, told her

this great beast was not a danger. Even with fresh werewolf warnings dancing in her mind, the uncontrollable urge to stroke the wolf's beautiful fur to determine if it was as soft as it looked raged inside her.

Sensing no threat, Cheri took a step closer.

"Holy shit, Cheri," Rex whispered in her ear breaking her calm. "There's a big fuckin' wolf by the hatch door."

"Yeah, I *see* him," she muttered sarcastically. "He's blocking the door." The wolf regarded her with the most stunning blue eyes. On his haunches with front paws resting forward, tail wrapped around his paws, mouth open slightly as he panted, revealing lots of white teeth, he was the most beautiful creature she'd ever seen. His coat was deep space black minus the stars.

"Don't move. I'll try to angle the cannon around and get a shot," Rex whispered in her ear.

"No," Cheri shouted into her radio. "Don't shoot him." She moved closer to the wolf, putting herself between the ship's gun mount and her visitor. The beautiful wolf didn't budge except for his gentle panting.

"What's wrong with you? That beast is two seconds away from ripping your throat out." Rex's flair for the dramatic emerged in full force.

Cheri glanced at the wolf and couldn't help but smile. The wolf in turn tilted his head to the side and his tongue lolled out. Her smile changed into a huge grin.

She crept forward to an arm's length away. The wolf watched. His eyes blinked slowly as if sizing her up and finding her acceptable.

"Are you crazy, Cheri?"

"Relax. He won't hurt me. I can sense it."

"Oh? You're a wolf whisperer, now?"

Reaching out with thumb and fingers tucked inside her palm to be less threatening, Cheri let the wolf sniff her hand. After

bumping his long nose against her fist, he licked her knuckles. A girly giggle bubbled out as his rough textured tongue tickled her skin. She stroked his nose and scratched behind his ears. His fur was kitten belly soft.

“See, Rex. He’s harmless.”

Her sentiment changed in the next second when the black wolf’s ears went straight up. He turned his big furry head toward the forest and a deep growl resonated from his throat.

“Someone’s coming...” Rex shouted. The wolf sprang up on hind legs, towering over her. Sucking in a breath, Cheri almost peed on herself when the animal’s great front paws landed on her shoulders and pushed her to the ground. A couple hundred pounds of canine landed on top of her as the sound of a sonic laser blast rang out.

The wolf yelped when she hit the ground with a thump. His paw brushed her neck, scratching her. The warm sting of the wound registered as her head struck the dirt. She fought the blackness of unconsciousness. Something wet caressed her cheek. The wolf licked her? She didn’t have time to analyze the gesture before dropping out.

* * * *

The wolf scrambled off of the landing platform favoring his hind leg and disappeared into the vast forest covering Selenia. His leg hurt. A lot. He hated leaving her behind, but he could barely walk. He couldn’t go back until his wound healed. Changing to his human form was the fastest way to heal.

Transforming from wolf to man before Cheri’s eyes moments after she landed on this planet, or letting her see his rapid recovery, wouldn’t facilitate his plan.

Out of sight of the space craft, the wolf tucked away his beast and became human again. Glancing down at his thigh, he watched

the skin knitting over the laser blast as if it had never happened.

His leg wound completely healed, he sprinted, picking up speed as he traveled. The man soon shifted back into his wolf form. Leaping over a pile of dead branches, he raced back through the woods towards Scarlet's Legacy ready to fulfill his destiny. And hers.

Chapter 2

When she opened her eyes, Rex hovered over her his face pinched in worry. Behind him, a stranger wearing a satisfied smirk held a big sonic blaster gun.

“Who the hell are you?” Cheri asked the newcomer, rising to her elbows.

“I’m Hunter.”

She glanced at the gun. “If you were trying to kill me, you missed.”

“I wasn’t aiming for you. I was trying to kill the wolf. He was about to eat you.” The sincerity of his expression moved her.

Cheri nodded, but she was unconvinced the wolf was anything but intriguing. She had a sudden flash of wrestling with that big wolf in a meadow of fragrant flowers, but she kept her opinions and visions to herself. Now that she was waking up, the idea was ludicrous.

Standing up, Cheri brushed dirt off of her clothes. She glanced surreptitiously at Hunter and sized him up. He was attractive. His hair was so blond it was nearly white. His eyes were an unusual amber color and watching *her* closely as well.

Rex broke the silence. “Did Cheri’s grampa send you as a guide?”

Shifting his gun to the other hand, Hunter paused a moment before answering. “Yes. He sent me to guide her through the woods to his house.” Turning his complete attention on Cheri, he asked, “You’re bringing something to him, yes?”

She stared at Hunter without answering. She’d rather find the

wolf and ask for directions, but she remained silent. Shifting her gaze to the ground, she noticed a small puddle of blood, presumably from the wolf. Concern for the friendly beast enveloped her and she hoped he wasn't seriously hurt.

"Goodies," Rex's amused voice answered for her when she neglected to respond. "She's bringing a satchel of goodies to him."

Hunter's mouth lifted on one side as if in scornful amusement. Cheri wished Rex would shut up.

"Go get my stuff, Rex. Don't forget my coat."

"Sure thing." Rex grinned and ducked into the hatch. When he returned, he carried the coat her mother had treasured and the satchel with the goodies.

"You aren't wearing that coat, are you?" Hunter asked.

"I most certainly am." Cheri slipped the hip length jacket on and slung the satchel over one shoulder.

"Red marks you. It's not safe. Take it off."

"No. Lead me or don't. I don't care, but I'm wearing the coat." Cheri hitched the durable micron-fiber knapsack higher on one shoulder. The strap, made of the same indestructible fabric, was hooked under one thumb.

Hunter didn't argue further about her coat. Lifting one hand, he tilted his head shielding his eyes from the mid-morning sun peeking through the clouds. Turning back to her, Hunter grazed her body with his stare. "Time wastes. Let's be on our way. We have miles to go."

* * * *

The wolf hadn't meant to mark her. The nick from his claw on her throat had been accidental. Before leaving to heal his own wound, he'd licked her face to apologize, inhaled her scent to commit it to memory, and moved away to avoid detection. More than anything, he wanted to discover the shooter's identity.

Scenting her on the wind, he knew she'd already moved into the woods, but another smell crossed his nose in tandem with hers.

The rank stench forced an automatic growl low in his chest. Her scent, which dominated his being, was tainted by the smell of...the other. His enemy. His rival.

Who had the shooter aimed for? Him...or her?

Senses acute, the wolf sniffed the air once more and moved silently through the woods toward the woman he'd marked.

* * * *

"Are you mated with anyone?" Hunter asked.

"Do you mean married?" At his curt nod, Cheri responded, "No. I'm not married."

"Why not? Don't you wish to bear children?"

Cheri wanted to tell him to mind his own business but decided it might be part of his job as guide to extract information for her grandfather. "Perhaps one day, but for now I'm content with my supply transport business."

"A man would be foolish to turn you down as a mate." Hunter perused her form. His gaze was decidedly dispassionate. Why did he want to know about her marital status and parental aspirations since he was so obviously not interested?

Was her grandfather trying to set her up with this man? Cheri hoped not. She wasn't exactly looking to snag a husband and *bear* children any time soon.

"Foolish perhaps, but it hasn't ever come up. Anyway, I'm not ready to settle down yet. I have plenty of time."

Hunter didn't respond, but he picked up the pace. They walked a well-marked path deeper into the dark forest. The misty dreamy quality of the air around them put her in an odd mood. Her heart rate sped with each step. The landscape wasn't familiar, but it called to her. It was frightening and beautiful at the same time.

Unease replaced the anticipation of meeting her father's family, which had pounded in her brain all the way here. She was uncomfortable for a reason she couldn't name and glanced at Hunter to see if he was disturbed. He marched forward without looking around as if on an urgent mission. As their pace increased, the trees overhead soon blocked most of the meager sun light leaving only a few shafts of light to offer direction.

Hunter didn't speak or ask her anymore questions, so they marched in silence.

After twenty minutes, the path forked. To the right, the way was wider and easier to navigate. To the left, the trail was narrow and dark. Limbs encroached on the space and tree roots jutted up through the mat of leaves.

Cheri paused to stare down the lonely left side path in consideration. As derelict as it looked, Cheri thought they should traverse left. The dark path called to her on some subliminal and unexplainable level.

Hunter marched to the right without noticing her hesitation.

"What's to the left?" Cheri called out to his back.

Hunter turned quickly, clutching his gun close as if he'd forgotten she was along for the trip and was surprised to hear someone speak.

His brows creased in puzzlement. Suspicious eyes glanced at the other path and then back at her. "Nothing. It's an ancient path not used any more. Derelict. We need to go this way." He motioned for her to follow and turned as if she were an obedient dog that should trail behind its master without question. She wasn't.

Cheri remained rooted and looked down the neglected path again. Once more the dark, twisty lane called to her like a siren song. Cheri frowned. She was a scientist. She didn't believe in magic or werewolves or the like, but right now her sixth sense told her she should go left.

An indefinable pull from her instinctual side had lodged in her soul the second she had landed on this planet. She was loath to admit relying on her gut instinct, but she had done so a time or two with excellent results. Something about this planet heightened her instincts and changed her attitude.

“I’m going left.”

Turning back with a flash of anger that radiated all the way to his glowing amber eyes, Hunter growled. “Who’s the guide here? We’re going right.”

Cheri heaved a sigh. “Taking the path less traveled makes all the difference, I hear.” She crossed her arms, ready to be difficult. She did difficult very well.

A wolf howled from the direction of the abandoned path, a lonely, eerie wail. They both turned their heads in the direction of the sound. The haunting cry calmed Cheri. It confirmed her gut instinct on which path she should travel. Perhaps her beautiful wolf waited at the end of the trail she wanted to follow.

Hunter, on the other hand, became distinctly agitated. “Enough. We need to go. Now!” He grabbed her arm and took off down the right lane, dragging her along and bruising her flesh with every step. Another wolf howled as if in angry agony. The sound definitely more irritated than the first.

Cheri wrenched her arm from Hunter’s grasp. “I’m not going anywhere with you.” She turned toward where her soul directed.

Behind her another growl erupted. Hunter aimed his gun at her, but before he could level it completely, a huge black wolf jumped from the thick woods and knocked Hunter to the ground. He dropped his weapon when he hit the dirt trail, but Cheri saw the flash of a knife in his hand.

“No,” she screamed when Hunter reared back to strike her wolf.

Chapter 3

The wolf rolled to the side and Hunter's knife missed. Sinking his teeth into Hunter's hand, the wolf caused him to drop the knife. Wrapping his arms around the beast, Hunter clinched him close so the wolf couldn't bite again. They wrestled, moving closer to the gun.

Watching the fight, Cheri shuffled back and forth on the balls of her feet wondering what to do. A growled voice called, "Run!"

Uncertain where the command had come from, she turned and ran anyway. She headed for the derelict path, running for all she was worth and clutching the satchel close.

The new path was difficult to follow, but fear motivated her.

She'd had an unsettled feeling about Hunter from the moment she'd met him. After having him pull his gun on her for the second time, it was weak relief that her gut instinct was vindicated.

Her greater concern lay with the beautiful black wolf wrestling with Hunter. She hadn't seen his eyes but suspected they were cerulean blue. Their ability to make her throw caution to the wind and approach was uncanny, but there was something else in the way the lovely beast looked at her, lolling his tongue out that made her feel safe.

Cheri didn't know how far she'd run along this new trail, but the hitch in her side begged her to stop moving. She ignored it and pressed on, dodging hanging branches around every sharp twist of the path.

The trail was fast losing shape and becoming more deep woods than a marked pathway leading anywhere.

Cheri looked behind her for anyone following and tripped on a root sticking out of the ground. She fell to her knees and hands. The satchel slid to the ground with a thud.

Scrambling to her feet, Cheri yanked the bag into her arms and turned to the direction she'd come from. Branches snapped and broke behind her. Something moved toward her through the dense forest.

Finding no options for a hiding place, she stepped further into the dark trees, seeking haven from unseen danger.

She needed time to assess her options. Time she didn't have. Her usually great sense of direction might not get her back to her own ship at this point. She needed help.

Hunter, wherever he was now, wasn't trustworthy enough to provide it. She'd rather try to communicate with the wolf and see if he could lead her back to her spacecraft or forward to her Grampa's house.

As if she'd conjured him up from her mind, her black wolf appeared between the trees in a clearing near where she hid. Cheri moved as quietly as possible to the clearing's edge for a better look. The black wolf with the incredible blue eyes sat as serenely as he had before when he'd blocked the door to her ship. This time his mouth was closed. No big white teeth or lolling pink tongue.

"Hello," Cheri whispered, feeling slightly foolish to be talking to an animal. Speaking in a low tone made it easier.

She scanned his coat for wounds but saw none. He didn't look any worse for wear from the gun battle back at her ship, or the more recent one on the trail.

"Are you okay?" Cheri squinted and searched his fur again quickly for fresh wounds.

The wolf's ears perked up. He tilted his head to one side as if puzzled by her presence as well as her question. His great jaws snapped open. Cheri sucked in a surprised breath. But the wolf only yawned, a big deep one showing all those beautiful white

teeth. His jaws snapped shut again and he returned to his tilted head stare.

"I'm lost," Cheri whispered. "Will you help me find a safe place?"

The wolf woofed once in response, rose to all fours and left the clearing. He turned his mighty head back as if to see if she followed. Cheri took a deep breath and crossed the clearing after him hoping he'd lead her to her grampa's house. Or at least to someone besides Hunter for the information.

She wouldn't normally take such risks to see a man she'd never met if it weren't for the letter her mother had left upon her death.

I know you're a good girl, Cheri. I wouldn't ask you to do this if it weren't important. I know I was the one who kept you from visiting your father's people. I was so devastated by his unneeded death. I couldn't deal with it. I left and turned my back on them, but you need to visit there eventually and meet your grampa. If I die before your twenty-fifth birthday, then you're reading this letter and they'll have to explain.

There is a remote possibility you carry a genetic anomaly, sweetie. The only way to test for it is to visit your father's people. I ask only that you wait until after you turn twenty-five. I want you to have every chance to live as you wish. I want you to have choices. I know it sounds melodramatic, but please listen to me in this one matter.

Cheri couldn't wait. She loved her mother, but Scarlet tended to be overly dramatic. Of the two women, Cheri was the sensible one. She had contacted her grampa with her mother's warning letter still clutched in her fist.

Visiting her father's side of the family shouldn't be constrained by a silly superstitious notion of her mother's. Before or after her twenty-fifth birthday didn't matter. At least Cheri hoped not. She

knew for a fact she couldn't wait a moment longer or her brain would explode with curiosity.

Her heart had slowed its furious pounding since she departed the ancient trail. Now completely lost in the woods of Selenia, Cheri forged ahead, brushing branches out of her face trying to keep the black wolf in sight. Several minutes in, she lost him and decided it was beyond foolish to follow an animal through a strange and misty forest in the first place.

Finding a large elm tree beside another small clearing, she crouched by it to listen for anyone following. Nothing. She might be lost, but she was safe.

Tucking a piece of hair behind her ear, she closed her eyes to listen to the forest sounds around her. Plans to set off in another direction and locate the trail were quickly discarded. What was she going to do? How would she find her grampa now? Or the ancient trail, for that matter? Her gut instinct remained silent.

Strangely, she wasn't scared. Not like she should be.

"Are you okay?" a voice queried from behind.

Opening her eyes, Cheri twisted to see a stranger towering above her.

Slapping a hand to her chest, she huffed out, "Lord above, you scared me. Where did you come from?"

Why hadn't she heard him?

"I'm sorry."

Cheri stood, slinging the satchel over one shoulder as she assessed the attractive man standing before her. The top of her head didn't come level with his very muscular shoulders.

Black, shaggy hair and three days growth of beard gracing his jaw, highlighting the most amazing blue eyes she'd ever seen on a man. The impact of his presence shot her libido off the charts.

Mesmerized by the blue depths of his eyes, she continued to stare while wicked thoughts of him naked slid through her mind. After several seconds, the corners of his eyes crinkled in

amusement and she was distracted by the straight white teeth revealed by his grin. Dazzling. Had he read her mind?

He laughed.

“What are you laughing at?” His amusement puzzled her. She hoped he couldn’t read her thoughts.

“What are you staring at?” he responded and she realized how rude she was being.

“Sorry. I’ve never seen eyes the color of yours before.” *And in my recent daydreams, you have a great body.*

His laughter changed to a chuckle. “You’ve never seen blue eyes before? I find that hard to believe.”

Cheri broke the gaze and searched for something intelligent to say without divulging her true thoughts. “Did you see a wolf run through here a minute ago?”

The blue-eyed Adonis stepped closer and caught her stare again. “You’re looking for a wolf?”

Cheri sucked in a breath. Lord above, he was gorgeous. “Kind of.”

Another step closer. The wind picked up at that moment and blew his scent into her face. He smelled like the woods around them. A hint of campfire smoke and pine trees melded with his unique musk. She inhaled the enticing scent deeply and a buzz of sensation centered in her core, dampening her.

“Either you are or you aren’t.” He grinned again.

Cheri knew she didn’t sound the least bit intelligent. “I am.” She nodded partly to convince herself. “I followed a wolf through the woods.”

The man tilted his head to one side. “What were you going to do with him once you caught him?”

Cheri couldn’t find her voice to answer, but the rush of blood to her cheeks made her curse the fact that embarrassment showed so easily on her face. It wasn’t like she could say, “Gee, after running for my life from the guide my grampa sent, I was hoping

the wolf could lead me to his house so I could give him some goodies.” She shrugged and remained silent. Probably the first intelligent move she’s made.

“Lucky wolf.” He grinned. His gaze swept up and down her body with seeming interest. Cheri’s gut instinct kicked in. Finding this man was even better than finding the wolf.

Chapter 4

Caine resisted the virulent urge to bury his face in her throat, sniff her skin's unique fragrance and lick her. Focused so intently on the lovely span of her neck, he noticed the puncture mark.

"You're hurt." He reached out, not thinking beyond the fact that she was wounded, but halted his hand inches from her throat. Caine didn't quite trust himself to touch her yet. She was more beautiful than he'd imagined. He didn't want to scare her.

Eyes widening, she brushed her fingers over the injury on her neck, hiding the mark briefly. "It's nothing."

Caine glanced from her neck to her face. "You're bleeding." He wiped a drop of blood from her cheek, ignoring his previous worry. She shivered the moment he touched her. Caine eased closer, to within an arm's length away. Her skin was rose petal soft. A vision of his hands stroking her naked body skated through his mind.

Premonition or merely wishful desire? He didn't know.

Her eyes lifted to his. Mesmerized by her appraisal, he brushed a strand of strawberry blonde hair off of her face avoiding the scratches.

"What happened to you?" Caine tucked the errant strand of her hair behind one ear.

She lifted her small shoulders in another shrug. "I was running through the woods because...I thought someone was chasing me." Her low soft voice caressed him until the words registered.

He frowned. "Who chased you?"

"I'm not sure." She smiled suddenly and added, "He didn't

catch me though.”

Caine wanted to catch her. “Nobody caught you. Until me.”

“You haven’t really caught me.” Her gaze darted from his eyes to his chest to his hands and back up. What was she thinking about?

“Not yet anyway. May I offer you a place to clean up?” he asked. “My lodge is tucked away over this hill.”

A falling tree crashed thorough the foliage. The racket startled her. She twisted toward the direction of the sound. While she was turned away, he closed the distance between them, leaving only inches.

Her scent pounded though his veins. The vision of them writhing together in a frenzied sexual fervor pervaded his mind. He took a deep breath to calm himself, but the delicious perfume of her arousal tightened around his lust. He blew out the breath. Focus. He wouldn’t gain her trust if he yanked her pants down and mounted her right here in the clearing. Beautiful aroused scent or not, he needed to calm down. She was so important. He’d waited endlessly for her to arrive.

Caine lowered his lips to her ear and whispered, “I don’t mean to sound dramatic, but it isn’t safe here. We should go.”

If she was troubled by his proximity when she turned to face him, she didn’t show it.

Her head tipped back until their gaze met. “I haven’t seen safe on this planet yet.”

“I’ll keep you safe.” His hand grazed her shoulder gently. She held his piercing stare as he ran fingertips down her arm, stroking her wrist. So soft. He tugged her closer. “Trust me.”

“Why I should trust you?” she whispered.

“I won’t hurt you. I’ll mend your scratches. And besides, you’re already entranced by my blue eyes.”

She grinned and his heart melted a little further.

“What’s your name?” she asked.

“Caine Wolver.”

Cheri nodded. “I’m Cheri Amaranth.”

“I know.”

Her brows quirked. “How?”

“There aren’t many visitors to these woods. Besides, your grandfather mentioned you were coming. I expected you, eventually.” It was beyond fortunate that she’d arrived here before her twenty-fifth birthday.

“Can you take me to him?”

“Sure. But first let me take you to my lodge and tend your wounds. Your grampa would be concerned to see you bleeding. Let me clean you up and I’ll take you to his cabin myself.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

Caine pulled her hand to lead her to his cabin until she said, “The guide my grampa sent was scary.”

“Guide?” Caine stopped and turned to her. “What guide was scary?” The wolf had arrived first. Had she been frightened of him?

“Said his name was Hunter.” She shivered.

Caine stiffened at the mention of the other man’s name.

“Hunter wasn’t sent by your Grampa.” Caine started walking again. “They don’t get along.”

“Figures.” Cheri huffed.

Caine led her carefully through the thick forest, holding limbs back for her to pass. Each time he paused, Cheri slid so close he fought grabbing her to inhale her delicious scent and nibble on her neck. The longer she stayed in his immediate presence, the more desperately he wanted her.

They traversed the dense woods as quietly as possible. Around a copse of flowering red bushes and through a stand of trees, the corner of his log cabin came into view.

Once past the trees, he said, “Here we are.”

As they walked up the stone path to his door, he vowed to keep

a civil distance once they were alone inside. He'd patch her up and take her to see her grandfather straight away.

Unless she wanted a kiss. He would gladly oblige. Caine glanced at her luscious mouth and cursed under his breath.

If they kissed, it was likely he wouldn't want to stop at just one. If he tasted her, it was likely he wouldn't stop at merely a kiss.

* * * *

Cheri followed Caine inside. The rustic cabin charmed her on several levels. The stone fireplace, which took up the entire back wall, made it homey. She easily pictured a huge roaring fire in the dark space. The huge bed in one corner made her want Mr. Gorgeous on a visceral sexual level. She slid the pack between her feet and shrugged off her jacket, never taking her eyes off the bed. It was huge. A homemade quilt covered the mattress. The four poster frame lacked a canopy, but that would make it look too girly. She preferred its masculine appeal.

Caine slid close behind her and took her jacket. He hung it on the wooden peg by the door. Picking her satchel off the floor, she handed that to him, too. Grazing her fingers with his electric touch as he took the bag, he added it to the peg holding her jacket. She fought the urge to throw her arms around him and hug his neck.

Stroking a sleeve, he smiled and said, "I like your coat."

"Thanks. It was my mother's. I think my granny made it for her as a wedding gift."

"Red is definitely your color." He crossed the room and pulled out a chair at the small dining table in the center of the space. "Have a seat."

Cheri eyed the bed again and smiled as she seated herself on the edge of the simple wooden chair he held for her. Legs spread wide with her hands resting on her thighs, she glanced around the

room. It was welcoming and comfortable.

Next to the peg with her coat and satchel was a bookshelf filled with titles. Even squinting, Cheri couldn't read any of the titles in the small library from where she sat. She wondered what a sexy man about the forest read in his spare time when he wasn't rescuing damsels in distress.

Meanwhile, her sexual senses were already on high alert. She'd been off-balance since landing on this fantasy planet, but never more than right now in the company of the man about to tend her wounds.

Caine busied himself at a side table gathering things. Cheri watched his muscular backside as vivid images slid deliciously into her mind. Tall and well-built, she wondered if his body looked as muscled as she imagined underneath his simple clothing.

Glancing over at the bed intensified her visions. Cheri knew one other thing she wanted before heading to Grampa's house. Seducing the stranger was out of character for her, but she couldn't think of anything else. She shifted in her chair as her clitoris twitched with impatient need. Sliding her hands to her sensitive inner thighs, she resisted the urge to rub herself to end the torment.

Caine turned and carried a tray with supplies across the room to her now wiggling, anxious form. "Is that bed comfortable?" Her heart pounded at the audacious thoughts pummeling her brain.

His low-lidded gaze pierced all the way to her clit, but he didn't seem too surprised by her question. "Yes, it is." He pulled out a chair and stuck it directly in front of hers. "After I patch you up, you can try it out."

Perhaps he had the same salacious visions running through his head. Cheri pulsed with sexual desire.

"Excellent." She planned her seduction. Her gaze slid to his wickedly seductive mouth. That was exactly where she would start. A lip-smacking, tonsil-tickling kiss.

Caine glanced across the room at her satchel hanging on the

peg. "So, what's in the bag, if you don't mind my asking?"

Cheri smiled. "I'm bringing some goodies to my grampa."

"Goodies?" He grinned and wiped her face with a damp cloth. "Like chocolate?"

He leaned closer, holding the cloth in place against her neck where the wound from the black wolf itched but didn't sting. His luscious woodsy scent penetrated to her core. She leaned closer, wanting desperately to kiss him as he wiped blood away from her cheek and neck.

She grinned and pretended to be coy about her goodies. "Something like that. Grampa asked for some things. I'm just the carrier."

"I see." He dabbed a wad of cotton on the wounds with something that stung a little at first but quickly stopped when he blew on it.

His warm breath floating across her flesh did nothing to stop the heat rushing across every inch of her skin. He ignited her senses to the point she was fast becoming unable to control herself. She glanced at his face.

Caine looked at her like...well, like a man who was interested in...goodies. Her goodies. Cheri wanted to touch him. Wanted to run her hands underneath his thick shirt and caress what she suspected was mouthwateringly lean muscular flesh. Wanted to follow her fingertips with her tongue.

She blinked once. Lust overwhelmed her.

In one smooth move, she leaned up and pressed her lips to his. The moment their mouths touched, something wicked and carnal unleashed inside her. She licked his bottom lip as they kissed.

Cheri moaned and Caine responded with a low growl. He slanted his mouth across hers and deepened their first intoxicating kiss, licking his way through her parted lips.

Chapter 5

Cheri hungered for Caine's touch as his tongue penetrated her mouth. Hovering over him, she squeezed his shoulder once before sliding her hand to the back of his neck.

She straddled his legs and sat on his lap. Rubbing her breasts, complete with sensitive peaked nipples, against his muscular chest inflamed her ardor to an irrational proportion. His arms slid around her back and held her loosely.

Breaking the kiss, she trailed her lips across his rough whiskered face to whisper in his ear, "Are you finished patching me up yet?"

He either groaned or cleared his throat, she wasn't certain, but he didn't respond. His fingers traced the length of her spine. His touch sent a spasm of desire straight to her clit. Wet and vibrating with a longing she could barely control, Cheri stepped up her seduction.

After a lengthy silence, she whispered, "Because if you are..." Cheri brushed her mouth along his jaw and continued, "I'd love for you to join me on the very comfortable bed."

She leaned away from his warmth to ascertain her chances of getting him to scratch the strident itch now pervading her clit.

Caine's eyes fairly glowed with desire. "I'm done." His gravelly voice betrayed the calm exterior he expressed. She scooted her hips closer and bumped into a huge ridge beneath the front of his pants.

Grinning, she lifted her wet and wanting body off of his lap and replaced it with her hand on his thigh. She ran her fingertips all

the way to his hip and said, "Let's go then."

"Right now?"

"Yes, please." Cheri ran her hand over his cock. He sucked in a breath at her bold touch. She stroked him. Under the rough texture of his slacks, he enlarged even further with her attention.

"My, what a big cock you have!" Cheri couldn't seem to help her attitude. It was as if she was under a spell, a spell she didn't want to break. She'd stroked a cock or two in her past, but none which made her so hot and bothered before. A shot of moisture coated the sensitive lips between her legs. She was drenched and ready.

Caine kissed her cheek. His lips slid to her mouth. He licked the corner and nibbled her bottom lip. Cheri twisted her mouth over his and devoured him.

The subtle buzz of arousal upon entering the cabin had developed into full blown lust. She couldn't think past gratification. Her feminine parts retracted in pleasure, further soaking her core.

Breaking the sensuous kiss, Cheri murmured, "I really want you." She grabbed two fistfuls of shirt and hauled him up to prove her point.

"I have no doubt." He pulled away, grabbing her arms before they could circle his neck. "You need to know something first."

Cheri paused in mid launch. "What?"

"I don't usually fall into bed with women I've only known for ten minutes."

"Seems like longer."

Wait a minute. She didn't normally attack men she'd only known ten minutes, either. What was wrong with her? She backed away sitting in her chair but didn't release his arms.

"I'm not usually so aggressive. Have you put me under a spell?" She couldn't believe she'd said that out loud. She extracted herself from touching his delicious body but remained close. Her

breasts tingled with the desire to rub against him.

“I haven’t put any enchantment on you...that I remember anyway.” Towering over her, he sighed deeply and watched her eyes.

She grinned. “I wouldn’t mind.”

Caine sat back down. He placed his hands on her hips. Gazing into her eyes, he lured her with his hypnotic stare. “I know this sounds like a line, but have we met before? I feel like...maybe I know you or that I’ve seen you before. Have you been on this planet recently?”

Cheri shook her head. “I haven’t been on this planet since I was an infant.” She knew her mother hadn’t wanted her to come here until after she’d turned twenty-five. But Cheri was drawn here as if she’d been merely waiting for a destination in her riotous search of the galaxies. Now, she was inexplicably drawn to this man. Was he the reason she was here?

“What about you? Do you live here?”

He nodded. “I was also born here. This is my primary domain, but I do travel quite a bit” He rubbed his hands up and down her arms and the tingly warmth reminded her she was still unsatisfied.

“Why?” Cheri didn’t really care why he traveled. She wanted to peel his clothes off.

“I’m a doctor. I travel as a part of my practice.”

Cheri shook her head in disbelief. “You’re a doctor?” The sexiest, most gorgeous man she’d ever seen was a doctor, too. What were the odds?

He grinned. “Didn’t my medical training show when I cleaned you up?”

“I guess. Honestly, I wasn’t paying attention.” She’d been focused on his mouth. As a matter of fact, she wanted to kiss him again. Will power already dissolved, she straddled one of his legs and sat on his thigh. Her nipples brushed his torso and hardened. Pushing her hands along his muscular chest, she said, “Maybe you

could kiss me again and make it all better.”

Caine slid his fingers to her head. Grabbing her face between his large hands, he pressed his mouth to hers without hesitation.

His firm lips rubbing across hers sent another gush of moisture through her pussy. Cheri scooted even closer. He slid his arms around her and crushed her to his chest. His tongue slipped inside her mouth, a warm, wonderful invasion. Cheri moaned as their tongues danced. Her body pulsed with desire with each thrust and lick.

In the distance, a wolf howled. Cheri paused breaking their ardent kiss to listen.

“Are there a lot of wolves on this planet?”

“Yes.”

“Any of them friendly?”

He chuckled. “Many of them are very friendly.” He hugged her tight and nuzzled her neck.

“I saw a beautiful black wolf when I landed.” She pulled away and gazed deeply into Caine’s eyes. “He also had blue eyes.”

Caine laughed. “Wolves can have blue eyes.”

“Do they?” Cheri smiled and asked another question burning in her brain. “Is it true they mate for life?”

* * * *

Caine was speechless. Her question about mating for life took him completely off guard. His rampant desire to mate with Cheri for eternity danced in his soul, screaming, “Yes. Yes. Yes.”

“My mom told me that once. She never remarried after my father died. She told me she was like a wolf. She never wanted anyone else but my father.” Cheri’s thoughtful expression as she reminisced about her parents touched him.

“Wolves do mate for life.” *So do I*, the additional three words Caine wanted to say out loud, but he didn’t.

Instead, he shifted her off of his lap and back into her own chair. Resting his elbows on his knees, he drilled a gaze her way and said, "If we carry this any further, prepare to have me in your life."

Cheri nodded, leaned forward and kissed his mouth. "I think I belong with you. Or you've enchanted me with your blue eyes. Either way, I'd like to check out that bed." In a flash, she shifted to his lap again, straddling his legs, and threw her arms around his neck.

He hugged her close. "You're right. We belong together." His self-control disappearing, Caine kissed the space below her ear, earning a sensual moan. His cock throbbed in response. Iron willpower was what he needed desperately and lacked entirely.

Hands beneath her thighs, Caine stood and took her with him across the room. Cheri remained wrapped around him, locking her feet behind his back. She clenched him tight on the short journey. He carried her to the foot of the bed, kissing her slowly and methodically. She moaned again, stoking his passion, which was already at a volcanic level. He couldn't resist her. If she didn't choose him as a mate, he'd be devastated. Caine vowed not to carry things so far as to leave her without choices. He'd concentrate on pleasuring her until she was left with only one choice. Him.

Caine removed his hands from underneath her legs. She slid down his body until her feet touched the floor as they kissed. And kissed. And kissed.

Slowly undressing each other, a trail of shed clothing dotted the floor from the foot of the bed to the edge of the quilt on one side. Caine hugged her naked body close and lifted her onto the tall mattress. Standing by the bed, his mouth aligned with hers perfectly, so he kissed her. His hands found their way to her thighs. He pulled her knees apart and stepped between them.

Kissing a path down her throat, Cheri arched her neck,

exposing the lovely flesh to his mouth. Her subsequent moan of approval sent an electric pulse to his cock.

Unable to resist, Caine trailed kisses to her chest. Once there, he paused to lick her breasts. He sucked a nipple into his mouth and was rewarded with another seductive whimper. Trailing his hands from her knees to her thighs, he couldn't resist slipping his fingers into her body to assess her level of readiness.

Fingers parting her soft lower lips, he slid his longest one deeply inside her pussy and shuddered, realizing she was drenched and ready. His cocked throbbed in anticipation. Time to pleasure her.

Caine kissed a path down her belly on a trajectory to her clit. He couldn't wait to taste her.

* * * *

Cheri fairly vibrated with the need to release when he pumped his finger inside her, hitting a sensitive spot. It only heightened her passion. She moaned. His mouth trailed to her lap and attached to her clit before she took her next breath. When his tongue flickered over the sensitive flesh of her clitoris with feather light pressure, Cheri slid her fingers into his hair and arched back until her shoulders met the bed. A moan escaped her lips.

Sinking into the mattress, she noted that it was indeed very comfortable, but with Caine's head between her legs, blinding ecstasy overtook her thoughts. He sucked her clit and licked her until she was on the edge of release. The rough texture of his whiskered face added delicious friction on her thighs.

She wanted to climax but knew that if she did, an invisible line would be crossed. There would be no going back to her ordinary life after sex with this fascinating man. In her heart, she knew this to be true. She hesitated only a moment before allowing the sensations he wrought to envelope her. He sucked harder on her

clit, the tempo of the pleasure almost too much to bear. His fingers eased in and out of her drenched pussy with a pulse-driven rhythm. A pressure of monumental proportion was moments away from releasing a primal response in her core.

“Caine. Ohmigod.” Cheri heard her desire-laced moan.

Her nipples tingled. She reached up to caress and pinch the hardened tips herself as Caine strummed her clit with his tongue and penetrated her pussy with his talented fingers.

His tongue slid over her with light strokes, driving her insane with the desire to shoot over the edge of orgasm. She hesitated only a moment more. He sucked her clit between his lips, licking her with his firm tongue, and the pressure sent her into unfathomable bliss. Her hips bucked as the delicious climax gripped her body.

Cheri screamed his name as waves of pleasure rode across her heated flesh. She quivered in utter delight.

Caine released her clit with a final lick, kissed his way to her bellybutton, and rested his head on her stomach. His hands skimmed her thighs, and her pussy clenched with the need to copulate. She rose to her elbows, body sated and satisfied.

“Take me. I want to feel you inside me. Please.”

“If we make love...it will bind us permanently.” Caine nibbled her tummy and sighed. “I won’t deny I want you, but make no mistake. Once I penetrate you, you’re mine forever.”

“I’m already yours. I just hope forever is long enough.”

He laughed against the tender skin of her belly. “I hope so, too.”

Caine climbed onto the bed beside her, snuggling up close. His cock brushed her thigh, and it was all she could do not to pounce on him.

“Let me hold you for a little while.” He gathered her in his arms, resting his head on her shoulder.

Cheri didn’t want to wait. She twisted in his embrace. “I need

more. I want you inside me.” She rolled him over onto his back. “I have the most enthusiastic desire to ride you.”

She straddled his hips. Caine’s thick cock nestled at her slick entrance.

“Wait.” He grabbed her thighs, keeping her from impaling herself on his cock.

“What?” Shifting her legs apart, the tip of his dick glanced across her clit and made her shudder. “Please.”

“Look at me,” Caine’s husky voice commanded. His eyes had deepened in color to an azure blue deeper than any ocean hue.

“You’re mine. I claim you.” And with those simple words, he released his hold on her legs. Cheri sank down over his wide cock. It pierced her slick pussy, penetrating to the hilt.

Beneath her, Caine’s eyes drifted shut and he groaned.

Cheri clenched on him, unable to stop the shiver of her body. “I’m yours,” she whispered. Grabbing his face, she leaned to kiss his mouth once, tasting herself on his lips. She straightened to ride him. As she raised and lowered herself on his magnificent cock, his eyes drifted open. He watched her with something akin to awe. His gaze dipped to where their bodies joined in carnal abandon.

In and out. In and out. The magnificent sensation of skin sliding across skin made the anticipation of climax unbearable.

His fingertips danced on her responsive thighs before skimming up past her belly to cup her breasts. Cheri’s pussy clenched hard when his clever fingers pinched her nipples. Electric arcs sizzled a path from peak to clit.

His thick cock stretched her with each plunge. He scratched an insistent fiery thirst Cheri wanted desperately to quench. She was on the brink of climax again. His movement teased her clit, almost touching her but not quite enough.

Reaching her hand between them, she stroked herself.

Caine broke their gaze and watched her touch her clit for a few seconds before he uttered a deep groan and thrust his cock so deep

Cheri came instantly. Dizzying waves of pleasure rode over her flesh and through her body. She threw her head back and screamed.

Unable to hold herself upright any longer, she slumped over his chest, brushing his shoulder with her lips. She stopped moving, but Caine continued to pump his cock inside her with gentle strokes.

The urge to bite came when she kissed his skin. She tasted the salt on his smooth flesh before sinking her teeth into his shoulder. The indescribably perfect climax still clenched her pussy around his embedded cock as she licked his shoulder where she'd nipped him.

Caine wrapped his arms around her and twisted them until she was beneath him, never breaking their intimate contact. He kissed her mouth and pumped his shaft inside her with a tenderness she wouldn't have expected.

The reverence of his movement touched her on some primal level. He took his time as if savoring the experience of this continued mating with her. Never before had lovemaking been so sweet or so perfect.

Cheri lifted her hips to meet each deep stroke of his cock inside her slick walls. The slow, steady rhythm compelled her legs to open wider. His penetration went deeper. He moaned, increasing the speed of his thrusts.

Three strokes later, he released a positively satanic growl and grabbed her face. His gaze penetrated to her soul as surely as his cock penetrated her body. Cheri watched his climax wash down his face. His eyes drifted shut, and his teeth clamped down.

A moment later, he slumped against her spent body, breathing deeply. His head dipped to the scratch from the wolf earlier. He kissed the spot and rested his cheek on it, burrowing his head into her shoulder.

Cheri wrapped her arms and legs around his body, trapping his cock snugly inside and his lips against her throat. Together they

panted until a serene calm descended. It didn't last long. Her heightened and recently satisfied libido wasn't through yet.

His cock, amazingly enough, was still stiff within her. Wiggling her hips, she asked, "Don't you ever go soft?"

The deep rumble of his laugh made her smile.

"Not with you, it seems."

"Whose turn is it to be on top?"

"Ladies choice, love."

"Am I really your love, or do you say that to all the girls you bring here?"

"You are my only love. No other woman has graced the inside of this cabin who wasn't related to me. You're the first and only girl I've brought here. You'll be the last."

"Promise?"

"Yes." He nudged her with his hips, his cock hard, thick and heavy inside her. "So what's it going to be? I'm ready."

Cheri took a deep breath and rolled him to his back. Her nipples tingled with desire to be sucked. Caine slipped an arm around her back, bent at the waist, and scooted across the bed to rest against the headboard. Intimately connected as they faced each other, Caine eyed her nipples and smiled.

She lowered one tip to his mouth and he clamped it between his lips. A zing of pleasure went straight to her clit as he sucked on her. Shifting her pussy halfway off his cock, she sank down again until he was deep. He slid his hand between her legs to rub her clit as she rode him softly. The insatiable itch for release was back as if she hadn't just climaxed twice before. She wondered if she'd ever get enough.

Riding Caine as he sucked on her nipples and played with her clit proved to be the most gratifying experience of all. Her pussy clenched his cock repeatedly when she came. Caine thrust up from beneath her as she impaled him. Cheri's head flipped back and her eyes shut as a groan of enthusiastic release escaped her lips.

The third orgasm was the most powerful, as if the first two were merely trial attempts to whet her voracious appetite. Caine grabbed her hips, thrusting deep and sure until he thundered a growl, unmistakable for anything but climax.

Moments later, Caine held her tight as she slumped against him. He maneuvered them between the sheets and snuggled her close. Sleepy and sated, her mind drifted as her body relaxed enough to fall asleep.

She fought the urge to doze in the arms of her lover. A stranger. He wasn't really a stranger, was he? After sharing this most intimate of acts, she was convinced she belonged exactly here.

Moments before she dropped into misty dreams of satisfaction, she heard the howl of a wolf outside in the distance.

Caine lifted his head from her shoulder and Cheri promptly fell into a deep gratified sleep.

Chapter 6

Caine slid from beneath the covers, doing his best not to disturb his beauty. His focus remained on her lovely body as his feet touched the cabin's cold floorboards. Cheri. His mate. The One he'd waited so long to meet. And love. He bent over and kissed her soft cheek. She sighed but didn't wake.

Pure providence brought her to this planet before he had to seek another. Fate put them in each other's arms with a little help from Cheri's ardent passion. As he stood by the bed watching her sleep, Caine's chest filled with emotion akin to gratitude and relief. He swiped a hand down his face. For the first time in years, he was hopeful for the future of his family.

He'd meant to bring her to the cabin to explain, to tell her the history of his family and hers. Instead, the pull of sexual craving long denied encompassed them. She was feisty. The thought of her passionate nature brought a smile.

The wail of a wolf interrupted his reverie. The air in the room was cold, but he barely registered the chill. Taking his gaze from Cheri, Caine glanced at the satchel hanging on the hook over her coat. The contents were so important.

Caine tread silently to the satchel and removed it from the hook. Shifting his gaze back to Cheri to ensure she still slept, he carried the bag out. Once he secured it, Caine went to gather wood for a fire. When she woke up, they'd have much to talk about. He hoped she would be receptive to his long-range plans.

He exited the cabin and strolled to the woodpile, lost in thought over his future.

Carrying several pieces of firewood to the back door of his cabin, Caine nearly dropped them when the urgent call of a lone wolf beckoned him into the woods with news. Bad news. He dropped the load he carried and ran into the stand of trees behind his place. Glancing back at the cabin before he disappeared through the trees to respond, he sent a prayer up that he would return before Cheri woke all alone.

* * * *

Cheri stirred awake and stretched, trying to remember where she was. Yawning, she rolled over on the soft bed and realized it wasn't the narrow cot on her ship. Sitting up in a blind panic, searching her memories for an explanation, a worse realization occurred.

She was completely naked under a homespun quilt. A darting glance around the rustic cabin found her jacket on the peg where Caine had hung it up. Caine.

The memories of him, and all they'd done together, flooded in all at once. She put a hand to her cheek. *Oh, my.*

What had she been thinking? And where was he? Cheri vaguely remembered hearing a wolf howl after they'd made love that last time. She'd only noted it because Caine reacted, lifting his head as if the wolf's call had meaning.

He'd left the bed as she'd rolled over in sated slumber. He'd also brushed a kiss on her cheek. Cheri touched fingertips to the spot. Silly. It wasn't as if she could feel the kiss. Her fingers unerringly slid to the wound on her neck. She rubbed the scratch lightly. It didn't hurt but was beginning to itch. Didn't that mean it was healing? Could a scratch she received only hours ago heal that fast?

Glancing around the room again, she knew she was alone. Where had he gone? Another awful thought finally made its way

through her murky mind. Cheri shifted her gaze to a disturbing sight. Her coat hung alone. The satchel was gone from the peg.

Scooting to the side of the bed clutching the sheet to her chest, she looked over the edge. Caine's clothes were no longer strewn on the floor with hers.

Where was he? Had he taken her bag? And if so, why?

The front door burst open, and Hunter crowded his large frame into the doorway. He stared her down, eyes narrowing as he scanned her body. His free hand clenched into a fist; the other held his blaster.

Cheri clutched the quilt tighter to her naked body, eyes wide, as Hunter entered the room.

"I've looked everywhere for you," he snarled. "What were you doing here with him?"

"None of your business. Get out." Cheri wished she had her gun. She'd left it on her space craft.

Hunter spied her coat on the peg. Turning his head first left then right, he searched the space urgently before he asked, "Where is the satchel?" Not waiting for an answer, he shouted, "Did you let him take it?"

"Stop screaming at me. Get out of here. I mean it." Cheri didn't know what to threaten him with, so she just glared. A pillow seemed like an inadequate projectile and the only thing surrounding her.

Hunter deflated a little and seemed to notice she wasn't dressed or attempting to get that way with him in the room.

"I'll wait outside. Get dressed. We'll have to go after your lover. I can track him. We must get the satchel."

"Why?"

"It carries something important for your grandfather."

"What?"

Hunter cleared his throat. "Your grandfather is dying. The item he asked you to bring will save his life."

Cheri shook her head. "But he didn't tell me it was life or death."

"Undoubtedly he didn't want you to worry." Hunter gave her a once over as if he wanted to see through the quilt.

Cheri pulled the blanket higher on her neck. "I'll meet you outside."

Hunter retreated out the door, closing it behind him, and left her alone. Cheri gathered her clothing, wondering what she'd done. Why would she sleep with a stranger? *Because you belong with him*, said a voice in her subconscious. She brushed her hands over the quilt.

You're mine. I claim you. Caine's declaration rang in her memory.

Spell or not, she sensed in her bones that Caine was important to her and didn't regret their tryst.

Cheri didn't completely trust Hunter, but unease colored her judgment as she wondered why Caine would take her satchel.

She'd been mesmerized somehow. Perhaps Caine *had* cast a spell on her after all. Oddly enough, she didn't have any regrets about what had happened. It seemed natural.

Cheri shook her head and donned her red coat. Securing the buttons, she took a deep breath, preparing herself to confront Hunter. She couldn't figure out what it was about him that troubled her. Once outside, she shivered, but not from the chill in the air.

"Why did you pull a gun on me back on the path?" Cheri asked without preamble.

"I didn't pull it on you. I heard the wolf coming. Didn't you see him jump on me?" Hunter's eyes widened as if persecuted unfairly.

Cheri nodded as if his answer had satisfied her, but she didn't believe him. "Take me to my grandfather, then."

"We need to get the satchel first."

Hands gripping the hem of her jacket, she asked, "What would

Caine do with it?"

Hunter pondered her question, eyes shifting back and forth as if trying to think up a plausible explanation. "He would probably take it to your grandfather's house to taunt him."

Cheri crossed her arms. "Why would he do that? He's not the monster you paint him to be."

"How do you know? Sleeping with him only proves my point. He has bewitched you. You trust him, but not me. Why is that, I wonder?"

Cheri shrugged. "I don't know." She directed her eyes to the ground to avoid his close scrutiny. But she *did* know. It was because Hunter unnerved her. His eyes were dead. Frosty yellow in color and dead. Even glowing in anger didn't make the windows to his soul appealing.

"Are we going to grandfather's house after all?"

Hunter nodded. "Let's hope we make it in time to save him from your lover."

* * * *

Caine rushed through the woods toward his cabin. His gut told him he'd been gone too long. The information regarding the declining health of Cheri's grandfather spurred him to run faster. New plans would have to be made and put in place if her grandfather died before the pack alpha transfer ceremony. Ignoring the pile of firewood he'd dropped earlier, Caine burst through the back door.

Hunter's foul odor assaulted him first. A growl erupted from his throat without warning. Cheri was gone. Caine glanced around, looking for a struggle and finding none. His relief was short-lived when he noticed her coat gone from the peg.

Launching out the front door, he sniffed the air. Catching her scent, Caine took a step in the direction of the ancient trail that led

to her grandfather's house, but stopped. Indecision gripped him for only a moment. Scraping his hands through his hair in frustration, he turned from the scent of Cheri's trail and went back into his cabin.

He rushed to the hidden compartment in the floor where he'd hidden the satchel expecting it to be gone. Thankfully, it was exactly where he'd left it.

Caine slung the bag over one shoulder and ran out the back. He knew a short cut through the woods, which would hopefully put him at Cheri's grandfather's house before she and Hunter arrived.

With the 'goodies' from Cheri's pack, the future of her grandfather's life would change dramatically. Caine would die before allowing Hunter to impede his ultimate goal.

With Cheri as his mate, he would assume leadership as the pack's next alpha without a contest.

Chapter 7

Cheri followed Hunter as they tromped through the woods, arriving at the derelict path quickly. Hunter stopped to show her an occasional broken branch as a sign that they were on the right path and following Caine. She dearly wanted to mention that they were on the path she'd wanted to follow in the first place but held her tongue. Her snarky attitude would no doubt make an appearance soon enough.

The further they traveled together, the less Cheri trusted him. His surly demeanor didn't help. Hunter led her along, but Cheri waited for an opportunity to ditch him and look for Caine on her own. She was convinced that she'd find him if she only listened to the voice inside her heart. The lovelorn one still pining for him.

A short time later, the path straightened and became easier to navigate. She and Hunter strolled along in silence. Staying slightly behind him, Cheri watched for any sign or signal from Caine. Not a bird or cricket sounded as they walked along.

The unnatural quiet put Cheri's nerves on edge.

Near a forested hill Hunter stopped suddenly and stepped off the path a few feet. He pulled back a branch and pointed to a tidy little cottage at the base of the incline.

He motioned her to remain silent with a finger to his lips. Together they watched. Only a few moments later, Caine emerged from the bank of trees on the opposite side of the clearing where they hid.

Caine paused and looked in their direction, but after only a second, he continued to the door and entered as if he lived there.

“Why is he going inside?” Cheri whispered.

“Probably to harass your grandfather. Trust me, he’s up to no good. You’ll have to go in and get the satchel.”

“Why me?”

“He’ll give it to you, now that you’ve become so intimately acquainted.” He sneered.

“That’s none of your business.” Cheri narrowed her gaze. “Why were we on the wrong path earlier if the one I chose led us directly to my grandfather’s cottage?”

Hunter’s eyes widened a moment, but then he calmed. “I moved your grandfather to a hidden location. He’s not inside the cabin.”

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

Hunter pressed his lips flat. “Go get the satchel so we can take it to him. Your grandfather doesn’t have much time left.”

Cheri wasn’t convinced Hunter was telling the truth, but she didn’t know why Caine had taken her satchel, either. Her trust in this planet’s men flagged.

“I’ll get it. Then you’ll take me to my grandfather so we can give him what he needs, right?”

“Of course. Now go.”

Cheri crept down the hill. Curiosity compelled her to discover what Caine was doing with the satchel. Was he actually taunting her grandfather? She doubted it, since he was a doctor. Doctors didn’t taunt people. But then again was he really a doctor?

Entering the cottage, she heard Hunter rustling around on the hill behind her, but she closed the door as soon as she slid through.

Straight down a short hallway, a large room opened up with a beautiful stone fireplace centered against the far wall. Next to the fireplace rested a large brass bed. In it was a very large gray wolf with kindly brown eyes and spectacles perched on his long nose. He wore a brown homespun dressing jacket exactly like the one her grandfather had worn in the vid-phone message sent to her

ship.

Trying to understand the scene before her, she spun as the door to the cottage burst in behind her.

Hunter stormed inside, his gun aimed at Cheri. She pushed out a breath. "Are you telling me that you aren't pointing your gun at me this time? Because if you are...I don't believe you."

"The gun is for the wolf."

When Cheri turned back, her grandfather was no longer a wolf but the man she'd seen on the vid-phone. He looked old, ailing and very frail.

Hunter leveled the gun at her grandfather, but Cheri stepped in the path. "I won't let you shoot a helpless old man."

"He's not a helpless old man. He's a rabid werewolf. Remember the wolf at your spacecraft? That's him. He's just shape-shifted to fool you." Hunter nodded once in the direction of the bed, pointed the gun at her head, and motioned for her to move.

Cheri turned to look over her shoulder and saw the gray wolf once again. Twisting back before Hunter could fire off a round, she said, "I don't believe you. He's not the wolf I first saw." The wolf from earlier had been black.

"He's tricking you, Cheri. We must kill him." Hunter lunged forward with the gun cocked.

"No." Cheri shot a spiteful glare in his direction. She grabbed for the gun but he pulled it back out of her reach. She placed her body into the path of Hunter's blaster again and raised her hands in the air. "Put your gun down. You're not shooting anyone."

"Hunter, stop this nonsense." The frail voice of her grandfather came from behind her.

Hunter tightened his hold on the gun and closed his eyes as if trying to decide whether to pull the trigger or not.

"Where is Caine, old man? Did he desert you?"

Cheri kept her body in front of the gun but twisted her head enough to watch behind her. Her grampa sat taller in his bed. "No.

Caine isn't a coward like you."

"I know he hasn't cured you yet or you'd have your shifting under control."

"I don't know what you mean." Her grampa clamped his lips tight.

"Caine!" Hunter called out loudly. "Where are you? I have your bitch out here. Bring the satchel or I'll shoot her."

Cheri was sick and tired of Hunter pointing that big honking laser canon at her. Arms still raised over her head, she took a deep breath, leveled another insolent expression and yelled, "Stop pointing your gun at me!"

"Sorry. I can't allow you to give the goodies in your satchel to your grandfather like you gave 'your' goodies to your mangy werewolf lover."

Cheri squinted her eyes in question. "Werewolf lover? What is wrong with you?"

"Didn't you know? You're part werewolf, too, Cheri. When you turn twenty-five, you'll find out whether you'll spend the rest of your life howling at the moon."

A door next to the fireplace opened and Caine entered, carrying her satchel. "Shut up, Hunter. Lower your damned weapon."

The black strap rested over one beefy shoulder. In his hand, he carried a fragile tea cup too small for his big fingers to the bedside night stand. Her grandfather was a wolf again. Caine turned to Cheri. "As you can see, he's lying to you. I haven't shape-shifted into your grampa."

"However, you *are* a werewolf," Hunter growled. "Give me the satchel or I shoot her."

The gun barrel poked her temple. "He's not a werewolf." She shot a look to Caine. "Are you?"

"Once you bear his litter of pups from your tryst in the woods, you'll sing a different tune." Hunter tapped the side of her head with his gun again.

Caine rolled his eyes. “Shut up, Hunter. You know that’s not true.”

Cheri looked over her shoulder and sent Hunter a malicious glare. “Stop jabbing me,” she uttered between gritted teeth.

“I see you marked her as yours, Caine.” Hunter glanced at the scratch on her neck, ignoring her snarled demand.

“You marked my granddaughter as yours?” Her grampa was back in human form. The switching back and forth from man to wolf made her dizzy. Her grampa turned a questioning glance to Caine.

Caine didn’t respond. He tilted his head to one side and raked a possessive glare down her body. She was his all right. Cheri longed for his hands to stroke her skin.

“Shotgun marriage later. Satchel now or I start shooting,” Hunter said.

Cheri held Caine’s intense stare and asked, “Does he need what he asked me to bring, or is that a lie, too?”

Caine focused his searing gaze on her face. “He needs it. He has a virus that prevents him staying in his human form. If he doesn’t get a dose soon, he won’t be able to stop it...permanently.”

Cheri turned to her grandfather. “Why didn’t you tell me it was life of death?”

Her grampa sighed. “I didn’t want you to think it was the only reason I wanted you to visit.”

She turned back to Caine. “If he’s a werewolf, what am I?”

“Mine,” Caine responded leveling a malevolent gaze toward Hunter.

“The satchel or I blow her head off, Caine,” Hunter barked. “This is the last time I ask.”

Chapter 8

Caine stuck a thumb under the strap at his shoulder and lifted the bag off. He tossed it one-handed at Hunter's feet.

Hunter smiled but didn't look down. Instead, he gave Cheri a blatantly sexual stare from head to toes.

"Shouldn't have left her behind, Caine. I was tempted to overlay your mark with my own. Anyone with ambition will sniff after her until you become the alpha," Hunter taunted. "Or should I say *if* you become the alpha."

Caine glanced at Cheri. "I'll be the alpha."

"You won't if 'Grampa' dies without overseeing the official transfer ceremony." Hunter pressed the gun to Cheri's torso and squatted to grab the bag at his feet. Slinging it over his shoulder, he added, "Now that I have the satchel and the cure, we'll fight to the death for the title of alpha." A sneer shaped Hunter's lips. "And make no mistake. I'll annihilate you in battle."

Caine growled, "Trust me, that won't happen."

Shaking his head, Hunter grinned. "All this could have been avoided."

"No, it couldn't."

"If you had agreed to my terms, he'd already be healed." Hunter gripped the gun tighter.

"Your 'terms' went against our laws. Extortion isn't the way to endear yourself, Hunter. You don't deserve to be the alpha in this pack."

"What pack?" Cheri asked. Arching a brow at Caine, she was lightheaded at what their conversation implied, not to mention the

disturbing vision of her grampa morphing from man into a wolf every few moments.

“Tell her, Caine. Tell her how you spend the first night of each and every full moon.”

Caine stared at Cheri first then glanced at her grandfather. Cheri returned a searing gaze. She smelled his seductive woodsy scent from where she stood. She *was* like a bitch in heat. Was her grampa really a werewolf? Was Caine? Was she?

“Put the gun down, Hunter. There is no need for any violence.” Caine’s voice was calm. The deep tone resonated to her already aching core. What was wrong with her? This was not the time to want to leap on Caine’s frame and suck his tongue into her mouth, but she found herself gravitating towards him.

Hunter yanked on her shoulder to halt her drift. Caine’s eyes narrowed the second Hunter’s hand touched her.

Caine leveled his gaze at Hunter. “Take your hand off her or we’ll do more than a ceremonial fight for the position of alpha.”

Hunter stiffened. “I’m not afraid of you.”

“You should be.” Caine’s hands fisted at his sides. “Touch her again and I’ll show you why.”

Hunter retreated a step and patted the satchel. “I have what I came for. I’ll be back to fight you as soon as the old one expires.”

Caine launched forward. Hunter shoved Cheri into his arms.

In an inhuman flash, Hunter escaped out the door, changing into a large white wolf right before her disbelieving eyes. He leapt through the door frame and dropped the satchel outside.

Arms wrapped securely around her waist, Caine clenched her close, fingers digging into her sides. He rested his chin on her shoulder and released a sigh. “I’m sorry.”

Through the open front door Cheri watched the newly formed Hunter. Transformation complete, the white wolf picked up the satchel in its teeth and loped off into the woods.

Cheri could have sworn the beast was grinning.

She twisted her head back to focus on being wrapped in Caine's arms. "Did you see that?"

Caine shrugged. "I've seen him change before."

Inhaling a deep lungful of his wonderful scent, she sighed when her grampa changed from a wolf to a man again.

"Damn it, Caine. Release her and go after Hunter."

"There's no need." Caine pulled her away from his chest. "I checked the satchel. The cure wasn't in there."

The deep sigh from Grampa was the only sound in the room. "I guess that settles it then. Call the council. We'll try to get through the ceremony while I can. If not, you'll have to fight—"

"No, wait," Cheri said grasping Caine's shirt. "You don't have to fight to the death."

Grampa huffed, "I don't understand. Did you bring the vial of cure or not?"

"I brought it."

Caine gripped her shoulders. "It wasn't in the satchel."

Cheri leaned in and kissed Caine on the mouth. She couldn't resist. "I know." She reluctantly disengaged herself long enough to open one side of her red jacket.

"I didn't put the cure in the knapsack. I kept it close. It was so difficult to find, I figured it must be important."

"Clever girl." Caine's relieved smile touched her heart.

"Sometimes." Cheri retrieved a small vial of blue liquid from her inside pocket and crossed the room to Grampa's bedside.

Uncorking the vial, she emptied the contents into Grampa's tea cup and handed it to him. "Cheers."

"Thank you." He smiled and sipped his tea with the cure. "I thought I told you to beware of the white wolf."

Cheri smiled and turned to Caine. "It sounded like you said beware of the werewolf. Guess that would have worked too. Everyone is a werewolf. Even me."

Her grandfather finished his tea and placed the cup on the

nightstand. "Cheri, I need to explain a few more things to you."

"I'll explain everything she needs to know." Caine enfolded her in his arms.

"Why didn't you wait for Caine at your ship?" Her grandfather crossed his arms. "I told you I'd send a guide."

Cheri laughed. "I wasn't expecting a big black wolf as a guide."

Brows furrowed, Grampa shifted his stare to Caine and huffed, "I wasn't either. Why didn't you go to her in your human form?"

"I had my reasons." Caine led Cheri to the door next to the fireplace where he'd emerged earlier with the teacup. "We'll be back in a few minutes."

Grampa nodded as a smile played on his lips.

In the rustic kitchen, Cheri asked, "Why did you show up as a wolf?"

"I wanted to see how you'd react."

"Oh? A test to see if I was scared of the big, bad wolf?"

"Something like that." He grinned. "You passed when you rubbed my nose and patted me on the head."

"You licked my fingers. It tickled."

Caine leaned closer and whispered in her ear, "For the record, that wasn't the only thing I licked." He chuckled and moved away. "I'm not going to forget that you marked me when you bit my shoulder."

"I'm sorry. I couldn't seem to help myself." Her fingertips brushed over her lips in memory of kissing his shoulder before she sank her teeth lightly into his firm flesh.

"Don't be sorry. I liked it" He tipped her chin up with a finger to gaze deeply into her eyes, his lips shaped into a wicked smile. "Besides that little bite mated us."

She sobered. "Mated sounds very permanent."

He squinted. "Is that a problem?"

"Why did you leave me alone at your cabin?" Cheri changed

the subject to avoid answering his question.

Caine rolled his shoulders back. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to leave you for so long. I went to get firewood, but there was a message about your grandfather getting worse. When I came back, you were already gone."

"Why did you take my satchel? I woke up and thought you'd deserted me."

His hands came up between them as if gesturing capitulation. "I didn't take it. I hid it. The satchel was still in the cabin when you left with Hunter. I grabbed it after you'd already gone. I took a shortcut to beat you here."

"About what we did in your cabin..." Cheri didn't mean to sound so melodramatic.

Caine's spine snapped straight. "Yes?"

"All those things you said about claiming me...does that mean I'm required to be your mate?"

A blank expression washed down his face. "Technically, yes." He exhaled and his body deflated. "Are you sorry?" He picked up his cup and turned toward the sink.

Cheri grabbed his shoulder before he could turn away. "No. I'm not sorry. I just never planned on a permanent relationship. It isn't because I don't care for you."

Caine eased into her personal space. "What is it then?"

"What if I don't want to stay here? I like piloting my own ship and flying through space."

His brows quirked. "No one is asking you to give up your life."

Cheri rolled her eyes upward. "What will happen now?"

He shrugged. "Your grampa will survive, and when he's ready to relinquish his alpha status, we'll go through an official pack ceremony. No one knows this, but he named me his successor regardless of whether you came back in time."

"In time for what?"

"We were promised to each other as children. However, if your

twenty-fifth birthday had passed without word from you, I would have been forced to select another female in your bloodline as my mate.”

Cheri’s eyebrows rose to her hairline in jealousy. “Why?”

“You’re a direct blood line to the alpha clan. I’m not. Even though we were informally matched when you were born, the alpha female must be available to accept. After your father died, your mother left the planet with you and no trace of her could be found. In order to qualify as pack alpha, I needed to mate with a member of your bloodline.”

“Who else was in the running?”

“In my mind? No one.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

Caine’s eyes lifted to the ceiling. “You have a couple of distant female cousins here on the planet.”

She crossed her arms. “You would have mated with them if I hadn’t shown up?”

He pushed out a deep breath. “Eventually or else I would have had to relinquish the title of alpha to Hunter.”

“I don’t like thinking about you with anyone else.”

“And as my permanent mate, you no longer have to worry about it.”

“How long will I have to stay?”

“You only have to be present during the ceremony the one time.” He pushed a heavy breath out. “Then you’ll be free to go.” This time he didn’t let her stop him from turning around. He stared out a small window over the sink and didn’t speak.

Cheri studied his back and released her own sigh. “I have one more question.”

“What?”

She stared at his luscious backside. “Why can’t I resist you?”

Caine laughed and turned to face her again. “I accidentally marked you when I pushed you down. During the initial few weeks

of mating, feelings can be intense.”

“I’ll say. What if we weren’t meant for each other?”

“If you hadn’t been attracted to me, it wouldn’t have worked. Instead of enhancing your attraction, it would have fueled your distaste. You instinctively made your choice.”

“Oh? By ravishing you in your bed?” She grinned.

“No. You chose me when you bit my shoulder and marked me as yours.”

“So Hunter knew that at the cabin.” Cheri moved closer.

“Yes. Once we were mated, he had to keep you from getting the cure to your grampa. He obviously thought, as we all did, that it was in the satchel.”

“And if Grampa wasn’t cured to designate a new leader in the ceremony, then you’d have to fight for the position of alpha?”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “Would you have to fight as wolves or men?”

“Both.”

Cheri pressed her lips flat. “There’s another problem…”

“There’s no problem.” Caine crossed his arms and leaned against the sink.

“What if I don’t want to settle down and raise a litter of pups? I have a business. I like what I do.”

“You don’t have to settle down or raise pups. I’m a doctor. I travel, too. Perhaps we could work out a schedule and travel together.”

“A schedule? Travel together?”

“Yes. Will you try to make it work?”

“I guess so. For a price.” Cheri smiled and crossed her arms mirroring him.

“What price?”

“Will you let me see you change into a wolf?”

He grinned. “If you’d like.”

“Will I ever change into a wolf?”

He shrugged. "We'll know when you turn twenty-five."

Cheri pursed her lips. "Will you still love me if I can't turn?"

"Of course. Will you still love me when I do?"

"Yes." Cheri tilted her head to one side. "When you're the wolf, can you understand me?"

He nodded. "It's instinctual."

"Can you speak?"

"Sometimes a word or two if it's necessary."

"Like the word 'run' when you're battling an enemy?"

"You've asked more than one question." Caine arched one eyebrow. "I want something."

"What do you want?"

"My price is a kiss." He dropped his arms and closed the distance between them. Cheri didn't stop him when he took her into his arms and pressed his mouth to hers. She couldn't resist him.

After several lip-licking minutes, Cheri broke the luscious kiss. "Did you say we were promised to each other as children? Like an arranged marriage or something?"

"Yes. I even remember visiting you with my parents a few months after you were born." He pressed his mouth to hers, swiped his tongue across her lips once and then retreated. He glanced at the top of her head. "Back then you had bright red hair just like your mother's. I believe I called you Little Red."

Cheri pulled away slightly and narrowed her eyelids. "If you ever want to see me naked again, I believe you won't call me that in the future."

He burrowed his face in her neck. "No problem. I was five, I can certainly let that nickname go for the sake of seeing you naked again."

Epilogue

Caine became alpha so Grampa could retire. Cheri turned twenty-five, but she never became a wolf.

As promised, Caine loved Cheri anyway just as she loved him.

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AUTHOR'S BIO



Lara Santiago always loved to write. However, her pragmatic, analytical side got the upper hand at an early age and informed her she should be getting a 'real' job and not pursuing a creative writing career.

She joined the Air Force and spent her four years of service in Blytheville, Arkansas working nights in Supply issuing aircraft parts to guys working on the flight line. Her husband discovered her there and married her to continue getting his aircraft parts quicker than all the others.

Lara soon earned a degree in the field of Logistics—a word she thinks is very sexy. No logisticians will ever be the bad guy in any of her novels.

After the military, Lara spent many practical years working at a 'real' job, allowing her analytical side total free rein. Then one day, the characters banging incessantly inside her brain simply couldn't be silenced any longer. She bought a laptop with the sole purpose of writing a book to allow her creative side to express itself and to let all those characters out. Her motto...so many characters...so little time.

To those interested, Lara's practical, analytical side is now stuffed in a dark hole and only allowed out once or twice a month to pay bills.

When she isn't hunched over her faithful laptop, now with half the letters chipped off in her zeal to write as fast as possible, Lara enjoys reading, catching up on all her recorded television shows, and watching movies. Oh, and occasionally, she cooks for her family, too.

She hopes her readers enjoy her stories and looks forward to hearing from them—but only if they refrain from insisting she make anyone in Logistics a bad guy. ☺

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