



CIRCE'S RECRUITS:
DERRICK

MARIE HARTE

Loose Id

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Chapter One

The bullet wound in Sabrina Torrence's shoulder throbbed, the pain flaring every time she wrenched the steering wheel. Thankfully, the bleeding at her temple had ceased. One worry to cross off her seemingly infinite list.

Swearing at the bastards still hanging on her tail, she yanked the wheel to make a hard right and felt the van go up on two wheels.

"Shit!"

Reversing direction, she rocked the van back onto all four wheels, turned into an abandoned building, and hit the brakes hard. She quickly shut down the engine and waited in the welcome darkness. Her attempt to escape the industrial park wasn't working. She needed to use the adjacent city to mask her getaway. The Project's Protection Agency, the damned PPA, had added two more cars to the chase, effectively blocking her escape from the eastern side of the complex.

Sabrina wasn't stupid. She knew if they caught her, they'd make her wish for a quick death. In the four years she'd worked for Pearson Labs, first through the Navy and then as a civilian, she'd had her hopes for a future dashed more than once. Granted, sabotage and theft weren't the best way to jockey for promotion, but right was right. Dr. Elliot Pearl had played God one too many times.

She held her breath as several vehicles streaked by the dark garage in which she hid, then exhaled a shaky breath. She'd lost them, at least, for the time being. But that wouldn't last forever. Right now, she was high on adrenaline, but when she crashed, she'd crash hard. Cursing Pearl and his labs to everlasting hell, she exited the van and peered out the garage bay door.

From what she could see, the city slums were her best bet. She'd need to cover a quarter mile of open space from the edge of the industrial park into the surrounding

neighborhood -- *away* from the direction the PPA currently headed. Her vision grew spotty, but she shook it off. No time to pass out. Not yet.

Hoping the woman -- the Circ -- she'd rescued had at least made it to safety, Sabrina ran like hell away from the complex, praying no one had spotted her. Two hundred meters. One hundred meters. Closer, *closer*. The roar of a vehicle spurred her to move faster than she ever had. A boost of some reserve adrenaline kicked in, and she sped into a narrow alleyway just as shots rang out, scarring the concrete buildings behind her.

Sabrina didn't intend to run far. She simply needed to gain a safe enough distance from the PPA. Yet an hour later, she continued to run with ease. Which made no sense, none at all, unless...

Stopping in a dimly lit alley and still not out of breath, Sabrina tore at her shirt, ripping the material in her haste to see her wounded shoulder. Though the bullet shouldn't have exited her skin, she felt a slug at the bottom of her shirt. And to her horror, the hole in her shoulder had already closed. As she stared, the red puckered mark continued to fade. She swept a hand over her forehead, feeling under the crusted blood for the graze that should have been there. Only smooth skin remained.

"*Oh my God.*" The realization hit hard, and she stumbled to her knees on the cold, hard ground. Shock finally took hold, and she shivered uncontrollably. Her increased speed, enhanced senses -- now that she paid attention to them -- and accelerated healing all added up to a truth she didn't want to face.

Elliot Pearl had done more than experiment on the unwilling. He'd experimented on the unknowing.

On her. Sabrina Torrence -- Navy corpsman turned scientist turned... *Circ*?

* * * * *

One month later

Derrick Packard growled at his friend Hale Rogers with a frustration he could almost taste. "Where the *fuck* is she?" For several weeks they'd been looking, trying to pick up Torrence's trail, only to lose it again.

Hale slowly drove them up and down a deserted street in an area just north of Trenton, where she'd last been seen. They looked for her in the side streets and the alleyways between the run-down buildings. "D, something's not right with this chick. I don't care what Kelly said. Torrence must have had some ulterior motive for saving her. The PPA never does anything without a reason."

Derrick agreed. But several weeks after Kelly's rescue, he still couldn't get her kidnapper/savior out of his mind. He was a Circ, dammit. Pearson Labs and the PPA were his enemies. Yet each time he recalled the brief flash he'd seen of the woman's face, of the steely determination in her light gray eyes, his dick hardened like iron. Hell, talk about bad timing.

"Cut it out," Hale growled.

Like Derrick and the other members of Circe's Recruits, Hale was a Circ -- a genetically altered person who possessed increased sensory abilities. He could see, smell, and hear ten times better than any human. With an ability to *change*, to shape-shift into a hulklike creature of monstrous strength, speed, and stamina, Hale and his friends were man-made weapons capable of great destruction.

Once, the military had used them to protect the nation. Called Project Dawn, the program had been run by Elliot Pearl. He and his scientists had created two platoons of super soldiers. For five years, they'd been the country's top secret golden boys. And then everything went to shit. A lot like now, like it always happened whenever that dickhead Pearl was involved.

"Dammit, D. We just escaped a house full of female hormones. I was hoping to avoid this. I'm not up for a mating heat right now." Hale squirmed in his seat, his erection impossible to miss. "Tone it the fuck down."

Flushing, Derrick forced himself to think about something nonsexual. "Sorry, man."

Hale grumbled under his breath, and they returned their attention to looking for Torrence. A mating heat was not something Derrick wanted either. Unfortunately, in addition to cursing the men with superhuman abilities and enhanced DNA, Project Dawn pushed Circs to procreate. Evolution at its finest, Derrick thought with a snarl.

Only able to be satisfied by another Circ when the mating heat struck, Derrick and his four *male* squad mates had been forced to sexually fulfill one another. At least, they had until Caitlyn, and then Kelly, had been discovered. Now Circe's Recruits numbered seven. Derrick would have been happier about the matter if the females weren't mated. Along with a fierce desire to copulate, Circs were possessive. The females were damned strong, the males violently aggressive.

Roane had claimed Caitlyn, no question. Zack and Ace claimed each other *and* Kelly, who, now pregnant, didn't arouse Derrick's lust as much as she aroused his protective instincts. That left just Derrick...and Hale.

Derrick studied his friend. A solid white boy, probably with Viking ancestry. Hale had short, sandy hair and hazel eyes that turned absolutely green when he was pissed or aroused. Thankfully, they were hazel now. And Derrick intended them to stay that way.

He flexed his arm, staring at his hand as he deliberately transformed it into his own personal weapon. Simultaneously fascinated and horrified by his ability to *change*, he was still taken with his darkened skin. Normally a rich brown, it was now raw umber. His fingers elongated, ending in sharp talons an inch long. He could cut with those nails as easily as he could bite through flesh when his fangs extended. Those fangs that pushed through his gums when danger neared --

Instinct roared. "Stop the truck."

Hale stopped on a dime.

Derrick opened his mouth and tasted her on his tongue. A glance at a darkened warehouse beckoned him closer. "There."

Hale pulled inside the building, and they stared at a battered vehicle, the same make and color as the one Torrence had been spotted in a few days ago. "She was here."

They left the truck to investigate.

Derrick looked around the building and followed her scent toward the back, away from the complex and facing the woods. "The scent's strong. She was here recently," he said. "I can still taste her."

"She would have made for the woods. That's what I'd do." Hale shook his head. "One more lead to follow. Shit, D. We shouldn't be out here on our own, not without backup. If Torrence is near, you can bet the PPA is too. They've been one step ahead of us all month."

Derrick had a hard time focusing. His beast was calling to him, demanding he find and capture the female on the run. *Take her before the enemy does. Find. Taste. Keep.*

Fuck.

The urge to mate grew once more, and Hale narrowed his stare.

"Dammit, don't do this." Hale breathed deeply and closed his eyes. "I can barely hold on when Caitlyn's fucking Roane at home. Now we've got a pregnant Kelly and two raging, walking hormones in Ace and Zack. Control it, D. I don't want to deal with this right now."

"You think I do?" The lingering smell of Sabrina Torrence called to Derrick on a basic level. Not thinking about it, he *changed*. Six feet four inches of man became seven and a half feet of raging Circ. His muscle mass increased, as did his sex drive. He ripped through everything but his elastic-waist trousers, pushing them to his feet. He kicked them aside and waited, breathing hard.

"Fuck." Hale snarled and quickly discarded his clothing, *changing* in an instant. "This is not a good time. The PPA could be anywhere around here."

Derrick knew he was right, but he couldn't help himself. His beast needed, desperately. Derrick took another whiff of rich, feminine perfume, not surprised when it mixed with Hale's earthy desire.

"I don't sense them." He looked at Hale. "I need this." *So when I find her, I won't hurt her.* Shaking his head at his baffling thoughts, Derrick stalked Hale the way he would prey. His cock hurt, his beast desired.

By the look and smell of Hale's arousal, he knew the other male was also in the grip of an extreme lust.

Hale grinned, his teeth sharp, his slitted pupils expanding to overtake the glaring green of his eyes. "You know, my beast is in a good mood. I'll let you have what you need, but you have to earn it. You want it? You're gonna have to take it."

Derrick laughed. "No problem, playboy. Who's bigger and meaner?" He licked his lips, hungry to feel Hale around his cock. Without giving Hale time to prepare, Derrick launched himself at him.

When *changed*, Derrick towered over everyone, with the exception of Roane, and his muscles were more massive. Holding Hale took skill, though, because of the five of them, Hale had the most speed. He was as agile as a fucking cat, second in their chain of command, and built like a tank. Overpowering Hale was a challenge, one Derrick's beast loved to engage. Thankfully, Hale didn't make him work too hard. Either he felt Derrick's need, or he realized the precariousness of their position.

Derrick's beast didn't care. It drove him to slake his lusts. Torrence couldn't be allowed much more time to evade, he could *feel* it. Knocking Hale to the ground, Derrick quickly struck him in the solar plexus, momentarily winding him. Picking up and shoving Hale belly-down over a nearby steel table, Derrick pulled his ass cheeks apart and thrust home.

Hale groaned but didn't stop pushing back against Derrick's groin. A side benefit of Circ lust was the oiled secretion emitted by their cocks. Though Derrick pushed hard and fast, he slid through Hale's anus effortlessly. Hale's *changed* body accepted him with ease and an eagerness that went straight to Derrick's head. Though the man inside him cringed at the lust spurring him on, his beast thrived on it.

"That's it," Derrick growled as he thrust faster. "Give it to me." *All of it. The surrender, the pleasure; slake the need.* "I want to smell some cum, playboy." He reached under Hale and grabbed his hot cock.

Hale bucked under him, clawing at Derrick's arms, the tabletop, anything he could reach. "Yes," he hissed, pushing through Derrick's fingers. "Fuck, yes."

Pummeling with an animalistic desire, Derrick continued to push for more. Always needing to be dominant, his beast took great delight in commanding Hale's body. The smack of his balls against Hale's aroused him to no end. And when Hale's moans grew, he frantically sought fulfillment, to shoot hard inside another Circ. An instinctive need to plant his seed, no matter the gender of his recipient.

"Now," Derrick demanded as he came hard. He gritted his teeth when Hale tensed and shot over his hand. Loads of cum trickled over his fingers as he released into Hale's warm body. Their climax felt like it lasted forever, yet it was gone before it started.

Sated, at least for now, Derrick withdrew and waited until Hale turned around. Staring into his friend's satisfied gaze, Derrick slowly wiped the cum on his fingers over his own chest. Hale's nostrils flared, and he moved closer until he stood chest to chest with Derrick.

Without warning, he grabbed Derrick close and kissed him with ruthless passion. Biting his lower lip hard enough to draw blood, Hale licked the red droplet, then pulled back. "Go find your S. Torrence. I'm going to check in with the others. Roane should know what's going on here." When Derrick remained standing in place, dazed by Hale's kiss, Hale

sneered, “Do you need help corralling one lone female?” Hale licked his lips. “Want another go? Only this time, I fuck *your* ass?”

Hale wrapped a large hand around Derrick’s cock, shaking him out of his stupor. The contrast of Hale’s light-colored hand over Derrick’s darker flesh enthralled him. *Too much.*

Hurriedly pulling away, Derrick dressed in his trousers but remained *changed* while Hale turned back to normal.

“No need to share *everything* with the others,” Derrick mumbled, ashamed at his loss of control. His damned beast always took command in the throes of a mating heat.

Hale sighed. “Go find the woman while I wait here. I’ll keep an eye on the vehicle and watch out for the PPA.” Hale walked to their truck and returned with an earpiece he handed to Derrick. “You have any trouble, you let me know.” Hale bent over to pick up his clothes, and Derrick forced himself to turn away. Unlike his squad mates Zack and Ace, his human half had no desire to mate a male. Or a female, for that matter.

Sex for sex’s sake was all well and good. Even fucking Hale fulfilled a basic core need. To feed a hunger. Now it was done. Time to find what he’d come here for. A woman, the enemy, named S. Torrence. Then maybe he’d find what it was about her that called to his beast with such desperation.

Women. Nothing but trouble, he reminded himself as he loped into the woods. With a growl and a groan, Derrick merged fully with his beast and tracked down the source of his latest unease. Her scent was a heady fragrance that wrapped around his balls and wouldn’t let go.

“Led by my dick. Christ, I’m turning into Hale.”

Sometime later, what he found shocked the hell out of him. Half a dozen dead PPA agents littered the forest ground. Heart-wrenching weeping hurt his beast, and he took a step back as surprise hit him once more.

Curled up in a ball by a large boulder lay a naked female. Her golden skin was scratched, bruised, and bleeding. Long, dark hair covered her face until she shifted and looked at him. Gray eyes clouded with grief pierced him where he stood. The emotional punch hit him hard, and as he stared at her, he felt his heart rip in two.

Not liking his connection with what had to be S. Torrence -- the enemy -- Derrick snarled and approached, fully expecting a fight on his hands. But she didn’t do more than turn her head away, trembling with surrender.

The submissive gesture undid him. Heedless of the danger, Derrick said nothing as he took her in his arms and carried her away. She remained stiff for several heartbeats before she finally relaxed. Curling her hands against his chest, she sighed and eased into his hold, her soft curves pressing into his hard flesh like licks of fire over his skin.

Scared at her effortless effect on him, Derrick wanted nothing more than to drop her and never set eyes on her again. His beast, however, nearly purred with satisfaction as her scent filled his head.

"Nothing but trouble," he grumbled, remembering the last woman who'd left him as fast as she could run, the way they all did.

Torrence paid no heed to his irritation, nor did his beast. Derrick promised himself to keep an eye on her even as he kept his distance from the dangerously intriguing female.

Then she snuggled closer, and he started purring for real.

Chapter Two

Sabrina hadn't felt so safe since she'd first discovered what Pearson Labs was really up to nearly four years ago. Yet now, in the arms of a clearly wild Circ, she settled helplessly against his hard chest. Stroking her fingers over the rough texture of his enhanced skin, she mused at the dark color.

She'd seen Elliot Pearl's secret files and was familiar with the members of Circe's Recruits, Evan "Doc" Dennis's men. This was Derrick Packard, the ferocious, African American ex-Marine. He had a history of brutal efficiency when dealing with the enemy, which he must have considered her. The fact he hadn't killed her spoke volumes. His contradictory behavior should have sparked terror, but she couldn't manage more than a tired sigh.

"Easy," he growled and ran a massive hand over her knotted hair. The gesture soothed her, and despite her need to stay aware, her eyelids closed.

The rumbling under her ear meant something, but after the strain of the past month and the horror of the last few days, she couldn't think. She inhaled his scent, relaxed, and fell into a deep sleep.

Rough jerking jarred her awake. Prone, she tried to remember how she'd gotten that way. She moved and gasped at the cold that met her body. Her *naked* body. A blanket fell off her shoulders, and she shivered in the dark confines of the...truck?

"She's coming to," a deep, calm male voice said. Unnerved, she clutched the blanket tight and slowly sat up, still foggy.

An overhead light in the truck came on.

"I've got her." The low rumble soothed her. *Derrick Packard*. She blinked and studied the dark eyes measuring her with disapproval from the front seat. Packard was no longer in his Circ form, yet he was just as intimidating as a human. Chocolate brown skin highlighted

muscles earned from dangerous training. His face was smooth, his hair short on top and shaved on the sides, a typical military haircut. A square jaw, chiseled cheekbones, and a stubborn chin warned her to tread warily. And that was to say nothing of the firm lips and angry glare directed her way. "One wrong move, lady, and you're history."

"I'm history? That's the best you've got?" Sabrina quirked a brow, conscious of how often that expression irritated the men who worked with her. *Great, Sabrina. Pull the tiger's tail. Why don't you just put your head in his mouth while you're at it?*

The other male chuckled, but Packard's scowl turned downright vicious. He smiled, showing a hint of sharp teeth.

The first stirring of fear swirled low in her belly.

"Honey, you should be thanking your maker you're in the backseat right now."

She swallowed and forced herself not to respond. Fear often made her say things she shouldn't, which made her wonder how she'd survived as long as she had working for Elliot Pearl.

Sabrina sat back and glanced out the window, trying to identify her whereabouts with the aid of the full moon. They left the main road, what looked to be a highway, and drove along a two-lane street with no traffic. The farther they drove, the more rural it became. Distance between houses grew. The isolation should have worried her, but she knew Packard and his friend wouldn't take her to Pearson Labs. She could rest easy on that score. Then again, she didn't know much more about Doc and his Circs other than the brief descriptions she'd filched from Elliot Pearl's private files.

Doc had a loyal crew with Circe's Recruits -- the only remaining members of the original Project Dawn. Doc's Circs were a complete success and no longer Pearl's to play with. They hated the PPA and Pearl in particular, but they likely had no idea how far Pearl had fallen in the chain of command. Hell, if he'd been the only man still pulling the strings, Sabrina would have ended his reign of terror long ago. But after Project Dawn had initially crumbled, another government agency had stepped in. Pearl was now no more than a lackey, except in the scientific department.

All her hard work for nothing...

"Hey, princess. I asked you a question," Packard said in an overly loud voice.

"Yes?" She continued to stare out the window.

"What the hell happened out there in the woods?"

She cringed. She'd been trying in vain *not* to think about that. "I don't know."

"Please." He snorted. "You can tell me now or save it for later. Either way, you're gonna talk." His tone brooked no nonsense, and Sabrina realized that while he might not be taking her back to Pearson Labs, escaping from five Circs would be nearly impossible.

Though she didn't have much strength in her limbs, she needed to move. No telling how soon they'd arrive --

“Here we are,” the other man announced.

Dammit.

They pulled into a long driveway. Nothing but farmland around the place that she could see. They drove past the house and into a large barn in the back. Inside, the barn was actually a steel-framed garage. She wondered what other surprises this place held in store. But more than that, she wondered why the hell these Circs had brought her here. Could this be their compound? Pearl had wanted to storm the place for years but had been under strict orders to leave it and Doc’s Circs alone.

That didn’t mean Sabrina had to play nice.

Before she could figure out what to do next, the back door of the truck opened. Packard yanked her into his arms, tangling the blanket around her as he held her against his chest. Blushing at the thought of him or his friend seeing her naked, she forced herself to think of more important things. Like what they would do to her if she didn’t tell them what they wanted to know.

Why lie about any of it? I hate Pearson Labs, Elliot Pearl, and the damned PPA. I can never go back. Not that I’d want to. She sighed in resignation. She really had no other choice. It had been her decision to free Kelly Malloy, a pregnant Circ Pearl had been drooling over. Sabrina had given the woman an encoded data disc full of Pearl’s prized experimental findings. What, then, was stopping her from helping Doc and his team as best she could?

Fear.

Fear that she’d make another mistake in judgment, in trusting the wrong people. Look at what her time with Pearl had been. Just because Doc and his team were Pearl’s enemies didn’t necessarily mean they were the good guys.

Packard tightened his arms around her, and one of his hands grazed her ribs exposed by the shifting blanket. A surge of heat lit her body from the inside out, and she sucked in a breath. *What the hell was that?*

“Hold on, D.” The other man pulled the blanket back down, and his fingers grazed her side.

She instinctively jerked away, then wished she hadn’t. Hell, the first thing she’d learned working for Pearl was not to show fear. But God, she was so tired. She met the other man’s gaze and recognized him at once. Hale Rogers, second in command to the Recruits’ leader, Roane Weston. Like the others, he was strong and sure. Hale excelled in keeping the peace, and if she recalled correctly from his file, he was faster and more agile than the others. Pearl’s picture of the man hadn’t done him justice. Nor had his notes mentioned how piercing Hale’s gaze could be, or how green his eyes looked, even in the dark.

She tucked her head closer to Packard’s solid chest, the only place that felt safe in her crazy world.

"Dammit, Hale. I've got her. Get the fucking door," Packard growled.

Hale said nothing.

She assumed he'd gotten the door, because Packard walked outside with her into the crisp October night. Hale forgotten, she glanced around. Unfortunately, a bank of clouds covered the moon, making the area pitch-black.

Unable to see a thing, she marveled at Packard's sure steps and knew she shouldn't have. Circes had incredible night vision. To him, this probably looked like an overcast day.

As they approached the back door of a huge house, it opened. Evan "Doc" Dennis stood there waiting, his gray hair highlighted by the glow of the kitchen light behind him.

"Bring her inside and down to the lab. Room D."

Hearing the word "lab" brought back the anxiety of her recent discovery. What if Doc was no better than Pearl? What if he learned the truth about what had been done to her and decided to exploit her the way Pearl had his test subjects? After all, she wasn't one of Doc's precious Circes. He could learn a lot from her to help his men.

She automatically struggled the closer they drew to the doorway. Packard's arms tightened, but they no longer provided comfort. Now she thought of them as restraints.

"Calm down," he muttered and shifted his hold, exposing various parts of her to the elements.

Hale whistled, and she had the insane urge to rip his tongue out. Sabrina felt her fingers tingle, then lengthen, and she froze. Terrified she might *change* in front of the others, she did everything in her power to shut down. As a lab technician for Pearson Labs, she could offer them information. As a Circ, she could offer them *too much* more. Better to be a snitch than a lab rat.

"Relax, Sabrina," Doc said as he held the door open. "We're not going to harm you. We want some answers that I expect you're more than willing to share. That data disc you gave Kelly answered a lot of my questions, but I have many more."

Sabrina took a deep breath and let it out. Withdrawing every damned part of the beast inside her, she forced it into the back of her mind, where she'd kept it successfully hidden from even herself. Except for that one instance a few hours ago...

"Derrick, please bring her inside."

Packard stepped forward and pushed past the others waiting in the house.

She recognized Roane Weston, their leader: tall, dark, and brooding. Next to him stood Caitlyn Chase, his mate. A blonde, green-eyed beauty who'd been Elliot's first real success -- his very first Circ. Zack English and Ace Two Bears, the newly mated pair who had also joined with Kelly Malloy, looked imposing, while Kelly remained conspicuously absent. Hale joined the group as they surrounded her.

It was apparent none of them wanted her here except for Doc. "Why am I here? I gave you Pearl's data."

“That’s the question. Why did you give us that data?” Doc asked in a gentle voice. He looked no different than he had the last time she’d seen him. The older man was still reed thin. Genius intelligence sparkled behind horn-rimmed glasses. They made him look distinguished rather than nerdy, though the pocket protector sitting in his chest pocket didn’t do him any favors.

Before Sabrina could answer, they moved to a nearby family room off the kitchen. Doc nodded to a seat on the plush couch. To her surprise, Packard set her down gently and tucked the blanket around her, hiding her lack of clothes. Then he stepped back and assumed an expression like the rest of them, set and untrusting.

“Why did you help Kelly escape from the labs? Why steal Elliot Pearl’s information and give it to me?” Doc repeated.

“I want to know what the fuck Pearl did to my mate,” Ace demanded in a menacing voice. His dark eyes glittered with hate, which did nothing to diminish his good looks. Sabrina thought it strange that all the Circs in the room were better than average in the looks department. Especially Packard, with those broad shoulders and --

What the hell is wrong with you? He wants nothing to do with you. None of them do. For all you know, he’ll kill you before the night is through.

“Ace,” Roane warned. The leader of the group had a commanding presence. He looked mean, until his gaze met Caitlyn’s. Sabrina was startled at the obvious tenderness there for his mate. The few Circs she’d come into contact with had been brutal and mostly self-serving. It was interesting to see another side to them.

“I want to know too,” Zack said in a quiet voice, his posture a subtle stance in aggression. His gaze narrowed on her, but he said no more. He looked as if he’d wait forever, but he wouldn’t take no for an answer.

A glance at Caitlyn showed the woman stood as firm as the men. No help from the female corner of the room.

Sabrina sighed. “Look. I’m a lab tech. I don’t do, I *didn’t* do, more than help Dr. Pearl run tests on fluid samples. Blood, urine, plasma... I never interacted with any Circs, or those hapless victims Pearl liked to pretend volunteered for his bullshit.”

She took a deep breath, conscious she couldn’t tell these people everything yet. They didn’t trust her, nor should they. If they knew exactly what she’d done, they’d probably string her up by her thumbs.

“I joined Project Dawn a few years into its success. I was a Navy corpsman. I worked hard and followed orders.” Until she’d learned what was really happening -- that Circs were going crazy, no longer helping their country but mutilating and killing innocent people instead. And the government knew it.

“Great job. I’m sure Uncle Sam would be real proud of your efforts,” Ace said with a sneer.

"Once I learned what was happening, I tried to stop it," Sabrina continued, ignoring Ace. "But it was no use. The government pretended to close up shop, but they opened it right back up again on the outside in the private sector."

Doc frowned. "You're telling me Elliot's in cahoots with the government?"

"He has been all along."

"I don't believe it. I was there when Project Dawn disbanded. General Kohl severed any and all ties with the project."

She didn't know the name Kohl. The only person who knew the name of the higher-up in charge of the project was Pearl, and he'd never shared it with her. She didn't even think he took his bodyguard when he met his boss, and he took McKinley *everywhere* with him.

"Maybe he did, and maybe he didn't," she said quietly. "But Pearl's working harder than ever on some secret experiments for the new Project Dawn. I copied as much as I could from his files without getting found out and gave it to you."

"Yes, you did. But I can't access one important folder. I need a password to get in." Doc looked at her expectantly.

"Shit." So he hadn't been able to hack the folder. Great. She knew she should have swiped that decryption file, the one Elliot had been forbidden to keep on hand but had because he could never remember his passwords. But she'd run out of time trying to save Kelly.

"Convenient." Packard crossed his arms over his broad chest. "You help Kelly 'escape' then the PPA just happens to be all over your ass. No one can find you for an entire month, until we pick you up surrounded by dead agents. What was it? A double cross? A setup to make us think you're one of us, so we'd take you in? Princess, we're not that naive."

An image of a gun pointed at her belly, of a burning sensation ripping across her abdomen before she ripped through flesh and bone, filled her mind's eye. She tasted blood, smelled death on the wind, as more of the enemy came at her. They wanted to harm her, but she couldn't let them. If she just tamped it down, pretended it didn't exist -- that *she* didn't exist -- they'd go away.

"Grab her." Doc's voice sounded as if it came from a distance.

Arms caught her as she tumbled forward. She was pushed back across the couch. Something pinched her arm, and she frowned. *A needle making me sleepy. Another laboratory, experiments, pain.* She wanted to struggle but couldn't find the energy.

"It's okay, you're fine. Just something to help you sleep, dear," Doc promised, before he and everyone else faded to black.

"Derrick, Hale, excellent work." Evan beamed. He'd been dying to talk to the woman who'd given Kelly so much information, to finally see her again. He remembered seeing her in the military facility years ago, but he hadn't realized she'd stayed with Elliot once Project

Dawn had disbanded. Insight into Elliot's resources and laboratories, and knowledge of the man's current mind-set, would be priceless. From what his source was telling him, Sabrina Torrence was not a plant but someone of great interest to Elliot. Someone he wanted back very much.

Odd that that same source had never mentioned Elliot's ties to the government.

"Watch her, Doc. I don't trust her." Derrick glared down at the woman.

"Big news. You don't trust anyone," Hale muttered.

"What the hell did you find out there?" Roane asked. "You reported a lot of dead PPA agents, but how? What was your take on what happened?"

"And what happened to her clothes?" Caitlyn pointed to the slipping blanket, exposing the slope of the woman's breast.

Ace and Zack exchanged a glance. Curiously, Derrick moved quickly to straighten her blanket. His fingers lingered on the woman's shoulder a moment long enough to be interesting.

Derrick exhaled loudly and rose. He towered over Evan and was second only to Roane in height. The brawniest of the Circs, he possessed an intelligence and discerning eye for detail that could be very helpful, when he wasn't dissecting everything to the nth degree. Derrick had trust issues.

"Hale stayed by the woman's car while I scoured the surrounding woods. I found her a few miles away. She was surrounded by a half dozen dead PPA agents. Mostly maulings, a few gunshots, but every one of those assholes bled to death. She was naked and bruised, curled up into a ball when I found her." Derrick paused. "And she was crying."

Caitlyn frowned. "Naked and crying?" She paled. "Do you think they, ah, took advantage of her?"

Roane sighed and pulled her close. "Did you see evidence of rape?"

Evan watched Derrick's hands clench. If he wasn't mistaken, Derrick's left fist began to grow, talons beginning to overtake his fingers before he stopped the *change*.

"No. No rape. But she'd been scratched up some."

Hale nodded. "I saw some bruising and blood on her torso, but I didn't smell semen at all."

"Good." Caitlyn blew out a breath.

"Yeah, well. PPA or not, she saved Kelly's life." Zack shook his head. "Don't start, Ace. You know what Kelly said. Torrence took a few bullets while freeing Kelly from Pearson Labs."

"I didn't see a bullet wound." Hale frowned.

"I didn't either," Derrick added.

Evan had a feeling he knew why there was no wound after reading Elliot's notes. But now wasn't the time to go down that particular road, not with Derrick inching closer and closer to the female. Trying to tell Derrick what to do was as effective as herding cats. Evan would let nature take its course.

"We can talk about this later. Right now, we have an injured woman to look after. Ace," he said to forestall Ace's objections when Derrick bent to take her in his arms. "I don't want to hear it. We aren't Pearson Labs. We take care of injured people. We don't jail and interrogate them."

"I wasn't going to object. I was just going to ask D why he's so touchy-feely with Torrence all of a sudden. Sure, she's got a nice pair of tits, but come on, man, she's PPA."

Zack groaned and covered his eyes with his hand.

Caitlyn scowled. "Really, Ace. What would Kelly say about your mouth?"

"That it's always running away with him?" Roane suggested, wearing a wide grin.

"But he's got a point," Hale added. The spark in his eyes told Evan to step out of the way. "What's with you and Miss PPA here, D? You got a thing for the bad girl? Hey guys, I think hard-ass has a crush."

Derrick stopped, letting Sabrina sink back onto the couch. He turned and took a determined stride in Hale's direction. "Scuse me, Doc. I need a word with playboy."

"Bring it on, Romeo." Hale snorted and stood there when Derrick moved right into his face.

"Look, dumbass. It's not my fault you haven't been laid by a woman lately. Maybe if you'd shut your mouth and smile, you'd get lucky."

"You know, you're right." Hale smiled wide. "Worked with you, didn't it?"

"Motherfucker," Derrick snarled and leaned closer.

Hale shoved him back. "Is she waking up?" he asked, looking at Torrence.

Derrick immediately looked over his shoulder at the woman, which threw Hale into a gale of laughter. Not surprisingly, Derrick threw the first punch. A picture frame broke, endangering a lamp and a vase of flowers.

"My money's on Hale. Derrick's not thinking straight," Roane said.

"You're on. Winner gets to pick the next movie," Caitlyn added.

"Roane, stop them before they destroy anything else." Evan had been through too many of the men's "play" sessions to worry. Like the beasts inside of them, the men needed to release some aggression every now and then. "Zack, you can bring Diego and Kelly downstairs now. I don't think we have anything to fear from Ms. Torrence, particularly for the next twelve hours." *Well, at least as long as that heavy tranquilizer should last.*

Zack nodded and left the room to fetch Diego, their cook and Doc's lover, as well as a pregnant Kelly from the upstairs.

“Ace?”

Ace sighed. “You want me to drag Torrence down to Lab D.”

Evan nodded. “I need to run some tests and make sure she’s not tagged with any recording devices or tricky toxins in her bloodstream. But no more crude comments from you, Ace Two Bears. The woman happens to be very vulnerable right now.”

Ace flushed, but Evan noticed he took care to keep the woman covered and in his arms. “Vulnerable, my ass. Anyone who works for Elliot Pearl is a snake waiting to strike.” He cleared his throat. “Not you, Doc. I mean, anyone who works for him *now*, knowing what a dickhead he really is.”

He followed Evan down the hallway to the steel-plated elevator that would take them downstairs into the underground lab. While they waited, Evan dwelled on Ace’s words and wondered what Ace and the others really thought about him.

He’d worked with Elliot for five years, as one of the original members of Project Dawn’s scientific team. As soon as he’d found out that the dormant virus carrying the Circe serum had not only become active but had mutated, he’d done everything in his power to fix the problem. Unfortunately, the only way to “fix” a psychotic Circe was to kill him. Of the seventy-eight super soldiers they’d created, fifty of them had turned murderously crazy, fulfilling base instincts with no thought to right or wrong. Roane and his squad were all that remained of the twenty-eight sane Circes. The rest had died taking down their psychotic brethren.

Evan and Ace stepped into the elevator and went down one floor. Once there, they traveled down a clean hallway painted a cheerful yellow. Several rooms remained empty, while a few others had been used just hours ago. Evan monitored his Circes daily, always conscious of his responsibilities.

Since the termination of Project Dawn, Evan had used his vast wealth and resources to make a home for the last of Circe’s Recruits, these five men he thought of as his family. In the past few months, they’d added two female Circes to their small group. Evan tended to their medical needs, studied their evolution, and provided them with a mission -- to rout the crazed Circes Elliot continued to manufacture. Once they finally took care of Elliot and his new “Project Dawn,” Evan had an idea of where the Circes might take their future.

But he knew his own future couldn’t exist until he’d dealt with his past.

He only wished he knew what the others would think if they knew the whole truth. Would they condemn him, or accept him? Would they understand, or would they want nothing more to do with him? He felt a sweat break out at the thought. Roane, Hale, Zack, Ace, and Derrick meant the world to him. He thought of Kelly like a daughter, and he was coming to love Caitlyn as much as Roane did. He didn’t want to lose them, but he didn’t know how much longer he could go on living with this burden.

“Doc, you okay?” Ace asked, concerned.

Doc patted Ace's arm. His troubles could keep another day. He had an unconscious woman to deal with, one with secrets of her own. "I'm fine, Ace." *For now.*

Chapter Three

Sabrina's mouth felt like cotton, her temples throbbed, and her body ached. Groaning, she blinked into awareness. She lay on a bed under a soft, warm comforter. Bright rays of sun shone through a window to the right of the bed, landing on the large feet of the man who wouldn't leave her thoughts, or apparently, her presence. He sat in a leather chair with a magazine open on his lap.

"Packard?" She sounded more like a frog than a woman and coughed to clear her throat.

"Finally." He tossed the magazine to the floor, stood, and stretched, calling attention to his superbly conditioned body. Even wearing a long-sleeved T-shirt and jeans he looked downright edible. *Sexy, dangerous*, an inner instinct rumbled, setting off internal alarms.

Packard stilled and stared at her with such intensity, he scared her. For just a minute, a flash of inhuman, slitted pupils looked back at her. *Not good*. She'd seen firsthand what the savage Circs at Pearson Labs could do, and it wasn't pretty.

"What are you?" Packard asked as he stepped closer.

She scooted back in the bed, relieved to find herself clothed in a baggy sweatshirt and matching pants. He continued to approach until he was all but on top of her, while she tried to blend in with the headboard. His mouth opened, showing sharp canines, and she froze. She waited for him to rip into her throat and end her supposed threat to his team.

Instead he *sniffed* her, and her damned libido kicked into high gear.

Angry at herself for showing fear, but more, at him for screwing with her hormones that couldn't decide if she was turned on or scared, she went on the offensive. "What the hell are you doing?"

Derrick gripped her shoulders, holding her in place. The heat from his hands traveled through her shoulders directly to her breasts, where her nipples hardened like marbles.

Painful, arousing, and embarrassing, especially when he locked on to her breasts and rumbled with what sounded like satisfaction.

"Get off me." She squirmed in his hold.

He tightened his grip, not looking very happy himself. "Dammit. I'm trying to see --"

"Derrick, is she awake?" Doc asked as he walked into the bedroom. Conveniently ignoring Packard's threatening stance, Doc smiled at her. "Good morning, Sabrina. How do you feel?"

Packard muttered under his breath, let her go, and backed away. He stood behind Doc with his arms folded over his chest, looking properly intimidating. Tall, dark, and handsome, but with a twist. This guy wasn't anyone's knight in shining armor. Sabrina compared him instead to the dragon terrorizing the townspeople.

"Sabrina?"

She turned to Doc, blushing because she'd been so immersed in Packard that she'd missed what he said. "I'm sorry. What's that, Dr. Dennis?"

"Call me Doc."

"Okay, Doc."

"Why don't we let you get cleaned up before breakfast? You're about Caitlyn's size, so these clothes should fit." He motioned to a pair of jeans and a sweater sitting on the dresser and fiddled with his glasses. "I'm sorry about the lack of undergarments, but you'll have to make do until we can go shopping. Derrick is here to help you if you have any problems."

"Help me? He looks like he wants to eat me." The words slipped out of her mouth before she could stop them. *Think*, then *talk*, Sabrina.

Derrick, damn him, gave her a huge, toothy grin. "Not a bad idea, princess." His glance lingered over his breasts, making them feel tight and heavy.

"Derrick." Doc frowned. "If I need to get Roane for this detail, I will."

"I'll behave. Go on, Doc. I promise not to eat our prisoner." He sighed and amended, "Guest," at Doc's glare.

"Circe." Doc shook his head and left the room.

Leaving Sabrina alone with Packard.

He looked over his shoulder. Apparently seeing Doc gone, he turned around and stepped close again. He seemed to have no appreciation for personal space. "Okay, Torrence. Out with it."

"Out with what?"

"What are you?"

"Why do you keep asking me that? What do you think I am?" She held her arms out wide, for once using her body as a distraction. Like honey, her breasts attracted his beeline stare.

"A woman, no doubt." Packard sniffed at her again. To her dismay, a part of her *liked* his interest, even welcomed it. "And something more. Lie to Doc if you want. But don't lie to me."

"I-I don't know what you're talking about." Rising to stand on the bed, she stood a good foot taller than him. Liking her small advantage, she glared down at him. "Stop threatening me. I put myself at real risk to help you people. A thank-you wouldn't be out of line." She used her best petty officer voice, one that had worked so well in the Navy to put her sailors in line.

Packard didn't blink an eye when he yanked her off the bed in a move so fast she had no time to deny him. Caught in his hold, now on the floor and a good bit shorter than the rough giant, she could only watch as he eliminated the slim distance between them.

"Don't push me, princess. I don't care what you did, only who you work for. I'm not falling for your bullshit, so stop with the come-ons. How about some truth, for a change?"

Come-ons? What the hell is he talking about? "You're one egotistical ass if you think I want you anywhere near me." She deliberately ignored the excitement pounding through her veins. "I don't like bullies, and I sure as hell don't like Circs. If you think for one minute I'm lying about that, you can go --"

His lips stopped the obscenities from landing on his head. Time stood still as the first taste of Derrick Packard exploded in her system. The kiss was far from gentle. Lust rolled through her body with the force of a hurricane as he demanded a reaction. Unable to resist, she met his fierceness. Pushing harder against his mouth, grinding her nipples against his firm chest, she thought she heard him groan but couldn't be sure past the pounding of her heart.

He tasted fresh, like toothpaste, and more, like candy. Cinnamon spice that addicted her better than any drug. His teeth were flat and even, his tongue commanding as he plunged into her mouth. He licked and stroked with raw need, easily showing her how masterfully he'd use his body when -- if -- they finally came together.

She didn't know when she'd put her hands around his neck, but suddenly she was pulling him closer. Pleased with the erection shoving against her belly, she nearly begged him for more when he palmed her ass and ground against her crotch.

He tore his mouth from hers and nipped the column of her throat. "That's it, princess. Show me how much you don't want me."

"I...don't..." She could barely breathe, awash in sensation. Never before had she been so aware of her body. How soft she was in contrast to the hard man against her.

"Mmm, show me some more." Packard ran his hands up her body, along her ribs and higher, cupping her breasts. With a low growl, he closed his hands over her nipples and pinched, and she cried out, astonished at how good it felt. How good *he* felt, surrounding her with his strength.

He lifted her sweatshirt and swore. Before she could even think about protesting, his mouth closed over one tip. She arched into him, groaning and helpless as he sucked her into a state of oblivion. At that moment, he could have laid her down and fucked her senseless, and she would have encouraged him. Thankfully, he pulled back.

"Take off your clothes," he said in a thick voice as he pulled his shirt over his head.

The sight of his broad chest confirmed her suspicions about his power. Muscles rippled in the sunlight, the frame of the brown-skinned giant before her apparent in exquisite detail. He was cut, his biceps like rocks on either side of a chest as hard as steel. His nipples were erect, like hers, but cocoa brown and bitable.

Absorbed by his body, she reluctantly broke her concentration to see his face -- and froze.

His eyes had *changed*. He was a Circ, much more than a man. Deadly. One of Doc's men. *What the hell am I doing?*

Still breathing hard, she stumbled back from him, not questioning that he let her. She blurted the first thing that came to mind. "I need a shower." Not waiting for his permission, she tore around him in a burst of nervous speed. Two doors down the hallway she spied a bathroom and locked herself inside. Panicked and out of control, she stared at herself in the mirror, wondering what had just happened.

One minute she'd been arguing with the unreasonable man, and the next... The next, she'd been hip deep in lust. And she couldn't blame the beast inside her. *She'd* wanted him. Sabrina Torrence desired a man who considered her his enemy. For all she knew, he'd been playing her to see how far he could take it. God, she'd been easy enough. What was wrong with her?

She blushed and closed her eyes, wishing she had the strength to run very fast, very far away. Sabrina was a scientist first, a woman second. She rarely dated, and her few forays into sexual exploration had left her unsatisfied. Nothing could have prepared her for Derrick Packard. He wasn't even her type. Too big, too masculine. Too...everything. She shivered, recalling his thick erection pressed against her, and wondered what Anita would have made of him.

At times like these, she really missed her best friend. Anita and Sabrina had entered the Navy at the same time and gone through school together. Anita never took crap from anyone and had a sense of humor that never quit. "*Once you go black, you never go back,*" she liked to promise. A running joke between them, considering anyone who dated Anita was immediately smitten. An African American more than proud of her heritage, Anita had been adamant that Sabrina date her older brother, hoping to get a sister-in-law she might actually like. Unfortunately, her brother had been less attracted to Sabrina than he was to another classmate, an airhead with more boobs than brains. At the time, Sabrina had been disappointed, but she figured it was for the best. Men didn't look at Sabrina the way they'd looked at Anita.

The way Derrick had looked at her, or *pretended* to look at her.

She hurried over to the shower and turned it on. She didn't wait for the temperature to even out but stripped and jumped in, letting the lukewarm water shock the desire right out of her system. Only an idiot would believe a man like Derrick -- *like Packard* -- could want her. He was playing with her. When she didn't back down to his intimidation, he'd tried another tactic. Unfortunately, idiot that she was, she'd played right into his hands.

And no wonder. With her body adjusting to the new hormones coursing through her system, the complete mess her professional life had become, and threats against her safety, was it any wonder she didn't know up from down? Why else would she even try confronting a man who could snap her in half like a toothpick?

Sabrina groaned and used the shampoo and liquid soap sitting in the shower. The scent of strawberries made her wrinkle her nose, but at least it wiped away that damned smell of cinnamon lingering under her fingers. She cupped her nose with her hand and swore when her entire body tingled. *Not gone yet, but soon.* Unable to ignore her need, she lowered her hand down her body and reached her pinnacle quickly, all the while her thoughts strayed to the handsome, gruff Circ probably still waiting in her room.

Now, how to get the rest of me gone as well, out of this compound and away from Circ madness? And how to deal with what I'm becoming before I do something crazy, like challenge Derrick Packard for real?

Derrick was hard and aching, and he had only himself to blame. Christ, he'd even left the door open when he'd been all but devouring her. Hale would have had a field day catching them. Irritated and hornier than hell, Derrick shut the door to Sabrina's room and leaned back against it. He could easily hear the shower running, thanks to his Circ senses. And the thought of the woman naked and wet was killing him.

He peeled open his jeans and released the pressure on his cock. Damn, he was wet, his slit moist, needing to spill inside a hot pussy. Growling under his breath, he took himself in hand.

Thank God he'd satisfied his lust the day before with Hale. The mating heat usually didn't last long, a few hours at most. Otherwise, he might have taken Sabrina whether she had wanted it or not, frustrating him all the more, because he needed to come in a Circ. As it was, he'd been hard-pressed to let her go.

The feel of her, the taste of her... He stroked himself faster, marveling at how good she'd felt against him. Sabrina Torrence stood a head and a half shorter than him. She wasn't as curvy as he normally liked his women to be. But those breasts had given him the hard-on from hell all the same. Cupping them had been bad enough, but sucking on that hard nipple, biting the juicy bud, had nearly brought him to his knees. Her breasts were pale, her nipples rose red and so pretty against the dark brown of his hand.

Which made him wonder what those cherry lips would look like around his dark cock.

He panted as he imagined what it would have been like to fuck her. To shove inside her with his dick the way he'd stroked in her mouth with his tongue. His inner beast rumbled again, that damned animal that had scared her away just minutes ago.

He should be glad, despite the unfulfilled ache between his legs. Because fucking Sabrina would be dangerous. One touch and he'd forgotten she was the enemy. Talk about fucked-up.

He was just hard up for a woman. Nothing more, nothing less. A simple, physical response, like his hand currently around his dick. Any man feeling her curves, biting that tit, and sucking on that delicious mouth, would have done the same. He could almost taste her again, could feel her in his mouth as she squirmed in his hold. He imagined her under his command -- his to dominate, to control -- and he came hard over his hand, jetting into the cold air when only minutes ago he could have been spilling into a warm, wet woman.

It took Derrick several moments to compose himself. Cursing all the while, he cleaned the mess he'd made on his hands and the damned floor. Pulling his shirt back on and righting his jeans, he knew he'd have to take his own shower, or the others would smell what he'd been up to. While his mated brothers might be too wrapped up in their own women to pay him much mind, Hale would definitely be paying attention to Derrick around Sabrina.

That was all he needed, to smell like cum around her. Muttering under his breath, he grabbed the clothes Doc had left for her and stalked to the bathroom. Pounding on the door, he waited until the water stopped and she opened the door. He saw no more than her face. Dripping wet, she should have looked like a wet rat. Instead, she looked like a sexy water nymph.

"Take these and hustle your ass back into your bedroom. I need the shower."

She blinked at him but didn't argue. "Okay. Hold on." After closing the door, she opened it moments later wrapped in a towel that reached her knees. She grabbed the clothes from his hands and raced toward her room.

"Wait for me in there," he called after her. "You leave before I come back for you, and we'll have a nice repeat of what just went down. You got me?"

"Yeah, yeah."

Though she didn't seem to take him seriously, instinct told him she'd do what he said. The woman knew enough to fear the predator within him, even if she didn't act like it. Entering the bathroom, he shut the door and was surrounded by her again.

"Fuck." Pissed with his continued arousal, he tried to separate thoughts of Sabrina from his dick as he showered. But he wasn't halfway through washing his hair before he began jerking off again, this time to the smell of *her*.

Underlying the strawberry scent was the hint of female cum. Just thinking about what she'd been doing in here while he'd been jacking off was too much to handle. Angry at not

being able to control himself, Derrick pumped through his fingers and shot a second time, hitting the shower wall with his seed.

As he settled down, *finally*, he wondered at this voracious need. It had to be *her*, along with whatever else he sensed in the woman. Sabrina was more than human, that much he understood. “*What are you?*” he’d asked her, and she’d pretended ignorance. But he knew. His beast recognized her difference, even as it questioned *how* she was different. She didn’t smell like a Circ. There was something off about her. Maybe she was something new, something that asshole Pearl had fucked up besides a Circ.

Why the fuck should I even care what she is beyond what she can do for us? She’s a woman. She’s the enemy. You have an itch? Fine, let her scratch it. Then dump her ass back where it belongs, with Pearson Labs. Grunting at a solution that made sense to him, Derrick finished washing. He dried and dressed himself in record time and found Sabrina waiting for him in her room.

Her guarded look pleased him, enough that he smiled and held out a hand to help her stand. She ignored him and preceded him out the door before stopping in the hallway. He couldn’t help liking her attitude. She challenged him, and she was nothing if not exciting. The enemy, yes, but one who wouldn’t bore him. Derrick thrived on the hunt, on the thrill of the chase. Running down this particular woman appealed to him, as did returning her to Pearl. Where she belongs, he reminded himself as he studied her.

Her hair gleamed. Long, wet, and black, it hung down her back, resting against the burnt orange sweater she wore. The strands teased at her ass, one that he’d cupped not long ago. Hurriedly putting a lid on those thoughts, Derrick wondered what Sabina Torrence was to Pearl. How the hell could she work for that monster and live with herself?

“Why do you do it?” he asked her in a low voice as they walked down the hall. She walked beside him, not behind him, he noted with grim amusement.

“Do what?”

“Why do you work for that asshole, Pearl?”

She shrugged, but he noticed her tension. “I didn’t know what he was up to when I started working for him. And it wasn’t him I worked for in the beginning, anyway. It was the Department of the Navy.”

“Huh?”

“I was assigned to work with the scientists on Project Dawn, to help them engineer something great, something that would help our military,” she answered as they stepped through the kitchen into the attached dining room, where everyone else sat eating. They took their seats, and Derrick was pleased to see she’d been placed right next to him. And Hale. That he could have done without.

Diego scooped them up plates of eggs and smiled his welcome before sitting back down next to Doc.

"Strawberry, Derrick?" Hale said.

Ready to pound Hale if he gave him any grief over the fruity shampoo, Derrick waited. "What?"

"Would you like a strawberry?" Hale held up a bowl filled with strawberries. As he passed it, his eyes twinkled with laughter. "I love how they smell." He turned to Sabrina and grinned. "Have a nice rest?"

"Dickhead," Derrick muttered.

"Yeah, just great," Sabrina said, echoing his tone. "Nothing like being stabbed with a needle to ensure pleasant dreams."

He hid a grin. The woman wasn't one of them, but she had no problem dishing out attitude.

Doc coughed. "About that. I'm sorry, Sabrina. You passed out, and I wasn't sure why. I wanted you to remain sedated so I could thoroughly examine you without interruption."

To Derrick's surprise, she sighed. "I understand."

"Do you?" Ace asked, his gaze narrowed. Derrick could feel the male's aggression. Ace sat next to Kelly across from them, and Derrick knew Ace was acting this way because he couldn't forgive what had been done to his mate.

Derrick couldn't blame him. A month ago, the PPA had kidnapped Kelly. According to her "rescuer" Sabrina, Pearl wanted Kelly's baby. God only knew what the fucker would do to an innocent child. Hell, he'd used Caitlyn as a guinea pig for most of her life, though unbeknownst to her.

Elliot Pearl had affected every damned person at this table. Sabrina Torrence was the only one who'd willingly complied with his madness. Even Doc, who'd first worked with Pearl, had turned against Pearl the moment he'd learned about Circes turning into raving killers.

"Look. As I was telling his highness over here" -- she paused to throw a thumb in Derrick's direction -- "I worked on Project Dawn while I was in the Navy. I drew blood. Period."

"Yet you're still working for him," Roane said quietly.

"Not anymore. In case you haven't noticed, Pearl doesn't like you people much." She faced Kelly, studying the red-haired beauty who'd turned Zack and Ace, two hard-assed Circes, to mush. "And he had plans for you, Kelly Malloy. Big plans."

Zack and Ace vibrated with rage.

"Here we go," Hale said with a sigh.

"Easy, you two," Roane growled a warning.

Sabrina didn't stop talking, and Derrick wondered if she had a death wish. "He was going to take your embryo and watch it grow. Document, clone, and test it."

"Clone?" Doc asked, obviously fascinated with the discussion.

"*It?*" Ace growled, his hands changing into claw-tipped weapons. "Our kid is not an 'it.'"

"Ace." Kelly grabbed his arm. "Relax. Sabrina helped me escape. If it wasn't for her, Pearl might already have our baby."

Ace put an arm around her but kept an accusing eye on Sabrina. "Why'd you help her? What was one more experiment in that freak show you call a lab?"

"That's what I'd like to know," Zack, Kelly's other mate, asked as well.

Derrick studied Sabrina, hoping for something to clue him in to the woman's feelings. But she didn't so much as flinch under the impact of so much hostility.

"First of all, that 'freak show' is more like a nuthouse. Elliot Pearl is no visionary. I thought he was at first. That he'd help our guys overseas, so we wouldn't lose so many of our people." She paused, and Derrick had a feeling she'd lost someone dear to her. "You five are proof the science was right on. Your missions were legendary. Even a lowly leech like me heard about your exploits."

"Leech?" Caitlyn asked.

"Bloodsucker, what we used to call the people who drew our blood," Roane explained.

"Phlebotomist is the technical term," Sabrina said wryly. "My job was to draw blood samples for Pearl and the others to study. Then everything went wrong, and Project Dawn was over. Except it wasn't."

"Yeah, we know," Zack added with a scowl.

"But what you don't know is that the government knew about the potential problems from the get-go. Pearl had told them what to expect, but they didn't care. And when the only answer was annihilation of any and all test subjects, good old Uncle Sam okayed the deal."

"No." Doc shook his head. "That's not true. General Kohl helped us. He was -- is -- a good man. He still keeps in touch, monitoring our progress while aiding me in anything I need to keep Elliot in check."

The others stared at him in shock, Derrick included. He hadn't realized Doc was still on good terms with the government. General Kohl had the reputation of being a stand-up guy, but he was one man. The Department of Defense hadn't been happy that any Circ had been allowed to walk away from the project.

"Stunned at Doc's revelation, hmm?" Sabrina said. "Well, here's shocker number two. Since Pearl's never been able to duplicate the success he had in you five, he's done the next best thing. Pearl thinks he's found the answer to his problem in a specific gene sequence within his new and improved Circs. By isolating one protein from their coding, he can effectively leash the monsters he's creating with a certain drug. So far, it's working. Six of the nine Circs currently on missions have responded favorably to his treatment."

"My God," Doc breathed.

"Explain, Doc. This shit gives me a headache," Derrick complained.

"Amen," Roane agreed.

Derrick avoided scientific discussions. If it wasn't about cars, sports, or sex, he normally wasn't interested. Even a walking, talking experiment had to have space from the scientific world at large. Bad enough he felt like a pincushion when Doc called him in for weekly blood work.

"Okay, okay." Doc took a deep breath. "Remember, the Circe serum was given to you through an injection. We manufactured it to be spread via a virus that was engineered to die after it released the serum into your bodies. But for some reason, the virus remained dormant instead. It then mutated, triggering chaos. The rogue Circs' mental instability, as you know, devolved into murderous rampages we couldn't control, no matter what we did.

"We tried everything we could think of to stop the madness. But we couldn't separate the serum from the virus that we used to inject it. We couldn't make more Circs without using a virus to affect the *change*. I still don't know why you five remain immune to those aftereffects. But that's neither here nor there. We know that for the past three years Elliot's been trying to create the perfect Circ. From what we've seen, he's only managed to recreate the rogues."

Sabrina nodded. "The first batches he made went crazy after a few weeks. They now last six months, tops, before the madness hits them. That's when he starts them on that wonder drug of his."

"So if what you say is true," Doc said. "Elliot has found a way to map the particular genes affected by the mutated virus. If he can control them, then that means --"

"You have a whole new set of problems on your hands," Sabrina said, looking worried, and Derrick's unease grew. "Because someone in the government is signing Pearl's paychecks, and they like what they see. New super soldiers who not only do what they're told but won't turn into killing nut jobs unless given the okay. As long as Pearl keeps injecting his monsters with his new wonder drug, which neutralizes the proteins he mapped, they're fine and dandy. But miss a dose and they turn rogue, big-time, and worse than before."

"Shit." Derrick could only imagine the nightmare coming their way.

"Yeah, especially since this new batch is stronger and faster than you guys. More deadly, too, to the point that even Pearl has had a hard time controlling them. The only good thing about them is that the males appear to be sterile." Sabrina grimaced. "I know that for a fact, because Pearl just put me in charge of collecting samples for his new 'mating' program. Another reason why Kelly would have been so valuable -- as a control for his new offspring project."

Kelly gasped, and the others swore.

Sabrina continued, a hard glint in her gray eyes. “Pearl’s out of control, and no one is stopping him. *That’s* why I saved Kelly. *That’s* why I gave you that damned disc. And that’s why I tried to destroy Project Dawn three years ago.”

Chapter Four

Sabrina hadn't meant to drop that particular bombshell, but recounting Pearl's crimes out loud enraged her. These people had no idea what hell she'd been through, living a lie, forced to turn a blind eye to the atrocities committed under Pearl's reign. Hell, at this moment, she had Circ blood running through her veins. She'd sacrificed her *humanity*, for God's sake. She'd done the best she could, waiting to destroy him and his lab from the inside out.

Her last attempt had failed, showing her she couldn't rely on the government to put Pearl away. Thankfully, she'd had the sense to expose Pearl behind a shroud of anonymity; otherwise, she had no doubt she'd be dead. Sabrina couldn't trust anyone at the federal level. Nor did she know if she could really trust anyone here.

So why the hell had she mouthed off? Glancing around, she ignored the cacophony of denial and studied faces. Kelly seemed to be the only one willing to believe her. But that might have been because she felt beholden. Sabrina really had saved her from a harsh fate -- rape and worse under Pearl's guidance.

"Bullshit," Packard said, his gaze hard, his mouth a tight line.

She hadn't expected him to believe her, yet his denial hurt. *What the hell do I care what he thinks? I need to focus on ditching this place and deciding what to do next. The belief or disbelief of one man shouldn't matter.* She couldn't explain why it did.

No longer hungry, Sabrina pushed away from the table and stood.

Five other men stood with her, and she knew she'd made a mistake telling them the truth.

"Please, Sabrina, sit down," Doc said to fill the dangerous silence.

"Yeah, why don't you sit down and explain how the hell a leech managed to take down Project Dawn," Roane drawled.

Sabrina glared at him. "Why don't you go fu --"

"Shut it, princess." Packard cut her off and shoved her into her seat. He leaned close, and she jerked back, not wanting the temptation of his mouth so near. She couldn't have said why, but the danger around Packard was totally turning her on. A Circ thing, or something perverted within her? "Trust me when I tell you not to piss Roane off."

She looked around him and decided he was right. Roane Weston looked capable of tearing her apart with both hands. Whereas Packard's danger excited her, Roane's frightened her.

"It's not that we don't believe you," Caitlyn piped in.

"We don't," Roane said flatly.

"It's just that it seems pretty far-fetched that a *lab tech* ended Project Dawn," Hale said dryly. "I don't remember ever meeting you, to be quite honest. Want to fill us in on the details?"

She might as well, as she'd already opened her big mouth. "I put the right information into the right hands. Easy as transferring classified documents can be. Does it matter how I did it? The point is, you're here and not dead because I did it." She snorted. "And I'm still doing it. Where do you think your snitches get their information on Pearson Labs? Just because Harry's homeless and hangs around outside the facility doesn't mean he knows jack about what goes on inside."

Derrick started. "You know Harry?"

"I still want to know how a phlebotomist knows so much about Pearl's organization," Roane said. "You seem to have a lot of knowledge about Pearson Labs, and from what I know of Pearl, he isn't the kind to share."

"No, he isn't. He's a genius at biochemistry, but he's clueless when it comes to security."

Doc pursed his lips. "Really?"

"Yeah. Pearl keeps an electronic copy of his passwords. I didn't have time to copy it when I downloaded the other information onto that drive I gave Kelly." A glance around her showed she was getting nowhere with her defense, and she was tired of trying. She didn't want to be here any more than they wanted her here. She aimed her next comments at Roane, their leader. "You know what? Screw you. I don't owe any of you a thing. I think it's best for all of us if I just leave." When they all continued to stand, intimidating in the extreme, she threw back her shoulders and stood as well. "You can't keep me here!"

"Oh, we can't?" Roane's dark smile made her shiver, but she refused to lower her gaze. For all of about thirty seconds.

Two nights later, Sabrina stewed as she paced in a bland, *locked* lab room, annoyed with her own stupidity. For someone as intelligent as she liked to think she was, she couldn't

believe she'd laid her cards on the table the way she had. *Of course* they could keep her here, locked in one of Doc's damned labs strong enough to contain Circs. Hell, they could kill her if they wanted to and bury her body where the cops would never find it. From what Kelly had told her, the compound sat on over thirty acres of Doc's private property.

Sabrina had no idea how to circumvent his security, which surrounded not only the lab and the house, but the entire grounds. And she hadn't seen anyone else but Kelly, who served her meals and checked on her every few hours under the careful eye of one of her mates.

Until Sabrina agreed to speak to the others about everything pertaining to Project Dawn, past and present, she was to remain a virtual prisoner. From the Circs, she would have expected such treatment. Doc, though, she'd thought would be different. The older man seemed far too kind to allow such tactics.

But the real problem wasn't about divulging what she'd done while with Pearson Labs. The real problem gnawing at her was the alien itch under her skin. She didn't like feeling hemmed in, and the room seemed to grow smaller with each passing day. She needed something she couldn't put her finger on, and she found it harder to suppress the Circ inside her trying to claw its way out.

Doc would eventually see the abnormality in her blood work and come to question her. She didn't know why he hadn't mentioned it yet, but she knew he would if she waited long enough. Those small, intermittent cells that increased her oxygen absorption, among other things, weren't human, nor were they fully developed, as they were in the Circs she'd studied. She was somewhere in between, and she didn't know what to do about it. Sabrina hadn't come across this condition in the four years she'd worked with the project.

Maybe that's what made her so valuable to the labs, why the PPA had been dogging her ass. It wasn't about her helping Kelly escape; she knew there was more to it. Sabrina still couldn't say for sure how she'd attacked so many of the PPA before Packard had found her. It was all hazy in her mind, so maybe she hadn't fully *changed*. What if she hadn't even been the one to kill all those men?

Yeah, and Santa's on his way to free you. She sighed at her leaps in logic. No one else had been around her that night. She'd already partially *changed* several times since leaving Pearson Labs.

"Dammit."

She didn't want to be like those animals she'd been forced to watch in the labs. Yet Packard and the others seemed somewhat normal. She liked the way Roane looked at Caitlyn, the way Kelly talked about her mates on each of her visits. Unlike the ugly sex and occasional rape in Pearson Labs -- rapes that she'd been unaware of until she'd caught Simon Dunn attacking one of the females -- the Circs here accepted their need for sex. The mating heat, as Kelly had been all too happy to explain, had cemented her bond with two males.

God, am I going to have to go through that? A sexual frenzy that only a Circ can satisfy? Unnerved, Sabrina felt more than ever the need to escape. But how? She had no intention of trying to overcome a pregnant woman, not that she could with one of Kelly's mates always at her side during her visits. So what then?

The sudden turning of the door handle startled her. The damned room was soundproof, so visitors constantly surprised her.

Instead of Kelly, Caitlyn entered. Roane's mate, the female alpha in the group. A low hum settled in Sabrina's belly. *Worthy of challenge. Possible escape.* Tamping down the notion, Sabrina studied Caitlyn closely as the woman approached her, confidence in her stride. They stood about the same height. But Caitlyn was curvy, whereas Sabrina was leaner. She had blonde hair and green eyes, a real beauty. Like every annoying cheerleader who'd ever taunted Sabrina in high school.

Sabrina realized she might derive some pleasure by putting Caitlyn in her place. And she'd have no better opportunity than now. The late hour would ensure a dark cover, though any of the Circs would be able to spot her easily enough. Though Caitlyn was a Circ, she was a newly *changed* Circ. As a young girl, she'd been given shots to enhance the EP12 -- what Doc called the Circe serum -- that she'd been born with.

"You might as well just tell them what they want to know," Caitlyn said in an even voice. She wasn't as friendly as Kelly, but she wasn't as aloof as the men were. She set down a tray of food on the counter. "You take any longer and Derrick's threatening to force the truth out of you." Caitlyn frowned. "He had a scary smile on his face when he said that, so I'm envisioning something unpleasant."

Sabrina lowered her gaze, adopting a position of defeat. She forced herself to think of something sad -- of Anita, now dead thanks to the unrest in the Middle East. A temporary duty station that had turned into a permanent one, thanks to naval orders and an unforeseen car bomber. Sabrina keenly felt the loss and tears pooled in her eyes. She could almost hear her best friend cheering her on. *Use it, girl. Work this bitch.*

"I can't do this anymore." Sabrina lifted her gaze to meet Caitlyn's, not surprised when Caitlyn softened. "I don't know who to trust. It's been so hard, being all alone." The truth, all of it, but she would never normally admit such to a stranger.

Caitlyn nodded with sympathy. "Want me to get the others?"

"Roane's the squad leader and your mate, right?"

"Yes."

"He cares for you, treats you right?"

Caitlyn smiled. "He loves me."

Terrific. So when he finds you crumpled in a heap, he's going to rip my lungs out. Sabrina didn't have to force a sigh. "Do you think you could answer a few questions for me,

then, before you get him? I'd feel a little more comfortable talking to you." She gnawed her lip and glanced at a corner in the room. "Off camera."

As Caitlyn's suspicion flared, Sabrina flushed, hoping she didn't look as obvious as she felt.

"Look, I know you're Circ," she tried again. "You can tear me apart pretty easily. It's not like I can overtake you. I just wanted to know a few things about the others, and I wouldn't feel comfortable talking about this in front of the men." She lowered her voice. "I want to trust them, I do. But I saw...things...during my time with Pearl."

Caitlyn glanced at the camera. "Roane is right outside," she warned.

No, he's not, Sabrina's beast argued. *No one came in with the female. She's all alone.* Sabrina had to work quickly. "That's fine. I just don't want him to hear us."

Caitlyn glanced up at the camera again. She moved to the door and punched in a sequence of numbers, turning it off, just as Sabrina had watched Roane turn it on when they'd thrown her in here.

Caitlyn returned and leaned against the exam table, right next to Sabrina. "Okay, now tell me what's on your mind."

Sabrina gave her a shaky smile. "Thanks for this. I just wanted to know --" Her beast exploded into action. She moved fast, clamping down on either side of Caitlyn's neck with hands that suddenly felt as hard as stone and were twice as large. "Tell me the code to the door, or I'll snap your neck," she hissed.

"They'll find you," Caitlyn choked, clutching at Sabrina's hands.

By catching the woman off guard, Sabrina had hoped to avoid her turning Circ. The fight-or-flight instinct in the female Circe Pearl had studied generally leaned toward flight.

"I know. I don't want to hurt you, Caitlyn. Tell me the damned code." Caitlyn squirmed, and Sabrina pressed harder. "You know, there's a chance if I press hard enough, I'll really hurt you. Then where will your precious Roane be without his mate?"

Caitlyn glared at her. "Seven-five-four-three-two."

"And the elevator?"

"Six-one-two," Caitlyn whispered, clutching at her neck.

Cutting off the woman's oxygen supply to knock her unconscious, Sabrina used her newfound strength to gently lift Caitlyn onto the exam table that was wide enough to accommodate a fully turned Circ, so there was no chance Caitlyn would fall off the thing.

Hurrying to the door, Sabrina punched in the code. She streaked down the empty hallway and used the elevator code. So far so good. She was through the house and out the back door when she came face-to-face with a black SUV and two furious sets of eyes glaring at her. Without waiting a second more, she turned and raced around the house.

Streaking across the open fields, she headed for the tree line. Once in the surrounding woods, she'd have a much better chance at freedom. That's what she thought before she heard a roar unlike any she'd ever heard before. She poured on the speed and prayed that just this once, luck would be on her side.

Roane's shout drew Hale and Derrick's attention. They ignored the fleeing female in favor of their friend. Hurrying inside the house, they followed the sounds of Roane's anguish down the emergency staircase that led to the basement. They found Roane in the room Sabrina should have been in, leaning over an unconscious Caitlyn on a lab table.

Doc rushed in after them, breathing hard. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"I'm going to fucking kill Torrence." Roane *changed* in a heartbeat.

Derrick *changed* as well, knowing he had to interfere.

Something was very wrong here, beyond the obvious. Because instead of feeling concerned for Caitlyn, he experienced an overwhelming urge to find and protect Sabrina. He shook his head, as if he could shake his beast's urges so easily. "What happened?"

"The camera went out, so I asked Roane to check on Sabrina." Doc pulled at his hair, obviously distraught.

"Caitlyn was supposed to wait for me to feed the woman. Now the enemy's gone, and my mate is down."

Caitlyn took that moment to wake, groaning. "Roane?"

He exhaled heavily. "Hellcat? You okay?"

She sat up, rubbing her neck. "She took me by surprise."

"I'll say," Hale murmured. "You all right?"

Caitlyn nodded. "She played me, and like a sucker, I fell for it."

Hearing that she was okay, Roane pulled away, intending to leave her. But Caitlyn latched onto his arm. "No. Derrick, Hale, you guys find her. Roane, if you go, you'll probably kill her."

Caitlyn's tiny hand on Roane's arm looked so strange, yet right. Derrick's beast wanted, his need to find Sabrina pushing him to leave.

"One question," Hale asked. "How did she take advantage of you? She's no Circ." Hale glanced from the fading fingerprint marks at Caitlyn's throat to Doc. His eyes narrowed. "Or is she?"

Derrick didn't want to hear any more. His beast was clawing at him to find the female. "I'll bring her back."

"In one piece," he heard Doc shout as he raced down the hallway. Once again, he'd shredded through everything but his pants, which wouldn't be a problem. He'd rip them off

in seconds before fucking the female into submission. Derrick didn't plan on waiting any longer to satisfy his beast. Or himself.

Evan sighed. "I'm sorry, Caitlyn. I would have warned you not to be alone with her if I'd realized how far she's progressed." He felt everyone's eyes on him.

"You knew she was Circ?" Roane asked as he *changed* back. His shirt clung to his shoulders in tatters. His pants weren't much better.

"Sure he did. He did her blood work," Hale answered. "So why the secrecy, Doc?"

Evan had been shocked to learn about Sabrina, especially considering the odd mutations in her blood that hinted at, but didn't confirm, her status as a Circ. "Honestly, I'm still not one hundred percent sure she *is* Circ, but watching Derrick interact with her is giving me ideas," he answered. To his surprise, he saw immediate understanding on Hale's face.

"Huh?" Roane sat on the exam table, picked Caitlyn up, and set her in his lap. "Explain that one, Doc."

Hale gave a harsh laugh. "Oh, this is perfect. Doc's setting up our resident hard-ass with a woman as devious and stubborn as he is. Only problem is, we don't quite know whose side she's on."

"I do." Doc's quiet words sobered the others. "I knew her when she worked for the original project. She never handled your team's blood tests, which is why you never knew her. But she was hardworking. She treated the men in the project like heroes, with respect. I liked what I saw -- an ethical young woman trying to do good. Like so many of us," he said, aware of his deception now more than ever. Secrets always had a way of coming to the surface.

Roane kissed the top of Caitlyn's head. "I don't know, Doc. I still want to break her in half for hurting Caitlyn. Either you're taking an awful lot for granted, or there's more shit you aren't telling us. Wanna share?"

Evan wondered if now wasn't the time.

"Doc?" Roane's deep voice urged him to let it out.

"What I have to say has nothing to do with Sabrina." Better to tell Roane with Caitlyn there to soothe him. Evan could also trust Hale, the most temperate of the men, to listen with an open mind. He hoped.

"Doc," Hale prodded. "Come on. How bad can it be?"

"Doc, spit it out," Roane growled. "Tell us."

Evan sighed. Do-or-die time. "My father had two sons. But he only claimed one."

"O-kay," Roane said slowly, looking as confused as the others at the change in subject. "So?"

“So,” Evan paused to take a deep breath. “Elliot Pearl is my half brother.”

* * * * *

Sabrina ran as if her life depended on it. Finally releasing the beast living inside her, she gloried in her speed as she flew so fast, the trees appeared a blur. The rest of her body remained normal, but her senses amped tenfold. Sights and sounds were sharp. Her skin felt extra sensitive, attuned to the changes in wind and pressure around her. She nearly ran over a group of startled deer that scattered at her intrusion.

The night sky became a treat, providing a canvas of heat and color, illuminating the night in soft images that were almost too magical to be real. Caught up in her newfound abilities, she examined a squirrel perched high in a tree. Though naturally camouflaged in its dark environment, Sabrina could see a faint outline of orange around the creature, like a heat signature. *Incredible.*

She'd never been able to talk with the Circs she'd been forced to study. The few she'd recently been given watch over had been certifiably insane. Cartoonish brutes both larger and stronger than anything she'd encountered, with the scary intelligence to hunt and kill on a whim. Perhaps not so different from regular men, she thought, recalling some of the PPA agents she'd encountered at Pearson Labs.

Slowing down, she trusted her newfound senses to tell her of any pending threats. Doc's Circs would be after her, but she needed a small breather. This was the first time since she'd realized she was different that she'd actively called upon her mutation. She couldn't recall that first instance, before Packard had found her. Only hazy remembrances of pain and stretched tissue all over her body surfaced.

I must have changed, but why can't I remember it? Sabrina stared down at her hands, hands that had recently been wrapped around Caitlyn's throat. Now they were small and pale. Her fingernails were ragged, bitten to the quick during bursts of nervous energy. Nibbling on them again, she tried to decide where to go and knew she didn't have much time to plot her future.

Pearson Labs would continue to hunt her. And Sabrina had no way of knowing how long she had before she turned insane, like the rest of Pearl's rogue Circs. She had six months from her first introduction to the serum, but she had no idea when that had been. Hell, for all she knew, she could go ape-shit hours from now.

The responsible thing to do would be to return to Doc and his crew and let them study her. But she couldn't. She knew what it was like to be imprisoned. She'd seen what Pearl had done to those in his care. For all that Doc looked after his own, she wasn't one of Circe's Recruits. She couldn't go back to living inside a locked room again. She'd rather be dead than be nothing more than a living guinea pig going slowly insane.

In her mind's eye, she saw the pitiful Circs she'd been forced to monitor. Sad and beaten down, they could do nothing but lash out at anyone who tried to help them. She hadn't been able to put them down herself. Sabrina was no killer, much as she wished she were. Instead, she'd managed to deliver small amounts of untraceable poison to the Circs, leaving them with the decision to end their lives if they wanted. Without exception, each one had. Pearl still couldn't explain why his creations died at such a rapid rate.

Sabrina had done her best, but she didn't have Pearl's knowledge or experience. She couldn't develop a cure for the Circe madness. Apparently, Doc couldn't either. His men were still just as much animal as they were human. She could almost smell it on the others, that wildness, that need to run free and hunt. Tamping down her own beast within was growing harder with each passing day. She was losing herself, and there was nothing Sabrina could do about it. Instead she needed to focus on the end state -- to destroy Elliot Pearl and Project Dawn before they could hurt anyone else. No more needless deaths, no more butchered victims falling prey to Circ chaos.

She could do it. She knew the layout of the labs and most of the passwords to override certain clearances. Even though the PPA would have reset the access codes, Sabrina was certain she could find a way inside. But she needed to know the players. Pearl wasn't the man she had to stop. His boss was, and she had no idea of who, or how many people, that might be.

Leaves rustled around her, and she realized that in her doom and gloom she'd wasted precious time. She needed to put more distance between herself and Circe's Recruits. Even as she thought it, her night vision flickered, then died. The wildness within her retreated, and a moment of panic set in. Just when she most needed her inner beast to escape, it vanished.

Wind whipped through the trees like an omen whispering danger. The remaining leaves drifted off the limbs, a thick fall of warning. In seconds, the clouds covering the moon shifted, allowing a beam of moonlight through the trees, illuminating her like a target.

He was on her before she could move. A hulking giant with steel-tough, dark brown skin, muscles on top of muscles, and claws and fangs that could slice her in two. Slitted pupils gleamed with intelligence, and Sabrina recognized a familiar heat gleaming in the light brown depths of his eyes. His hands tightened around her arms as he lifted her off her feet, dangling her before him like a rag doll he planned to discard.

"Packard," she whispered, not as scared as she should have been. To her dismay, arousal heated her body.

He pulled her close and sniffed, then licked her neck with a long, raspy tongue. "Sabrina," he growled in a low voice, like a declaration of ownership. In seconds, he sliced her clothing from her body and stared his fill.

Sabrina remained frozen in shock. Now, when she needed it, her beast wouldn't respond. She was limp, unable to do more than submit to the aggressive male, waiting. For what, she didn't know.

Fight. Run. Move, she willed her body. As if under a spell, she found it impossible to resist him. So she did the next best thing and relied on instinct. She broke her stare and looked away, baring her throat as she did so.

With a contented grunt, Packard opened his mouth and closed his sharp teeth over her jugular. But instead of biting, he *changed* back to his human form in a flash and lowered her feet to the ground. He kept his mouth over her the entire time and sucked hard, giving her one hell of a hickey. Then he shifted his stance and something fell to the ground. Tattered clothing?

He leaned back, six feet four inches of prime, *naked* male. His cock was stiff and thick as it rubbed against her belly. And Sabrina knew.

He would not be refused.

He surrounded her with heat. As if his *change* prodded her own, Sabrina's inner beast finally woke up -- and it was hungry. Her sex ached, her breasts tingled, and her gums suddenly hurt. To her shock, some of her teeth reshaped themselves in her mouth, slicing through her gums in seconds. The taste of copper scared her and apparently alerted Packard to be cautious.

Forcing his fingers between her lips, he lowered her jaw and stared at her mouth. With a satisfied grunt, he ran a finger over her sharp canines, smearing blood over his fingertip.

"Pretty. And all mine." He growled a warning when she still said nothing, and wrapped a hand around her slim neck, making her wet with need. "You're mine. Say it."

She had no intention of agreeing. She was no man's -- *or Circ's* -- plaything. No matter how much she wanted to touch Packard, to be near him, she couldn't give in. Not if she wanted to survive, to escape.

And then her brain completely, *unexplainably*, dissociated from her body.

"I'm yours," she whispered, falling under his spell once more.

Chapter Five

Derrick couldn't stop himself. Hearing her admit she belonged to him tore his control to shreds. Bringing her back to Roane, securing her potential threat, making her pay, none of that mattered now. The only thing on Derrick's mind was tasting that sweet pussy beckoning him closer.

He kissed her hard. Sliding his tongue over the sharp points of her teeth made him groan. Though much smaller than him, Sabrina's presence shouted danger, and both beast and man welcomed it.

Derrick couldn't tolerate weakness. He needed strength, someone who could take all of him. Instinct told him he'd found what he sought in Sabrina. His cock hurt with the need to spill inside her. But he had to possess her first, to show the female where she belonged.

Under him.

She groaned into his mouth as he deepened the kiss, stealing her breath into his body. Derrick ground against her, the feel of her hard nipples like daggers of need against his chest. Her soft flesh tickled his own, blazing trails of fire across his skin, inflaming his passion.

He barely registered taking her to the ground. "Spread your legs."

She closed her eyes and gave herself to him, but not without a price. Two gashes stung his hips as she clenched him with hands like talons. The beast inside her wanted to play, and damned if Derrick didn't want the same. This woman wanted him. Her scent called to him, dared him to take what he knew to be his. For two fucking days he'd done his best to ignore her. Nearly climbing the walls, he'd been out of his head with confusion, anger, and lust. Sparring matches with the others hadn't helped, nor had he desired sex from anyone but Sabrina.

"Fuck," he swore and pulled her hands off him. He shimmied down her body and clamped his mouth over her pussy. Sucking hard, he relished her cries of need. She was *it*. Perfection. Sugary sweet and finally all his.

She clutched his head, grinding against his mouth. "Oh, please. *Derrick*."

The first time she'd ever said his given name, and the arousal in her tone pushed him over the edge.

Racing to mount her, he spread her thighs wider and shoved between her slim legs. Staring into her eyes, he thrust deep, not stopping until he was fully seated inside her. To his satisfaction, she wrapped her legs around his hips and moaned his name.

Not able to finesse her, not this first time, he pounded hard with the urge to mark her. Possession and desire fueled his rough taking, and her wet heat made it easy to lose control. Derrick came before he was ready, yet he wasn't sorry.

As he shuddered into her, he felt her digging her nails into his shoulders, and the pain was like a drug. Ecstasy raced through him, turning the world black while her slick tongue licked at his chest. Firm lips grabbed his nipple before she bit down.

On a hiss, he withdrew, still hard, then plunged inside her again. Thanks to his Circ genes, he could fuck her all night long, in human form or as his beast. And he intended to.

"You're hugging me tight. You want more, don't you, princess?" he asked, his voice gravelly with repletion. "Those claws of yours are turning me on. That's it," he rasped when she withdrew them and ran the sharp points down his back. *Oh, fuck. She really is Circ*. He should have been upset about that fact, but he couldn't wrap his mind around more than taking her. "Tease me. Excite me, and I might let you come. You need to come, don't you?" He held himself still, enjoying the flush that spread over her face and breasts. She looked angry as she lay helplessly beneath him. When she would have taken a swipe at him, he pinned both of her wrists to the ground above her head.

He transferred her imprisoned wrists to one of his hands and used the other to tug at her nipples.

"Stop playing with me," Sabrina groaned. She gasped when he pinched hard. "I'm so close, *please*."

"I'll play with you if I want to, princess." Her hair slid over one breast, and he pushed the soft strands aside. "We fit, hmm?" He pulled out, then rammed back into her heat, making her moan.

"We'd fit better if you'd stop teasing. You're driving me *crazy*." She clenched his hips with her knees.

Derrick couldn't help grinning. "Crazy, hmm? That's good. Real good." He pulled out, resting at her entrance. Leaning down, he took one taut nipple in his mouth and played, sucking and nipping until she begged him to stop. Then he moved to her other breast.

He couldn't remember ever feeling so damned pleased with a partner.

Holding her down, forcing her to surrender to his touch, the commanding position eased the knot of hunger normally holding him apart from his lovers. Taking his fellow Circes during a mating heat was instinctive and necessary. But he was never in control then, no matter who was on top. Even with the normal women he sought for sex, he could never fully satiate his desire for submission. What Derrick wanted, no normal woman could give him. Sabrina, however, was handling all of him and giving it right back. His shoulders ached from her nails -- *her claws* -- as did his hips. But the throbbing only accentuated the pulsing desire in his dick.

As he laved her breast, he reached between them and fondled her taut clit. The nub was wet, saturated with her cream and his seed. Rubbing with soft motions, he felt his own need build once more. He didn't want his hand there, he wanted his dick there. Pushing, touching, easing though her pussy into that hot heaven promising ecstasy.

Derrick removed his hand. Wanting more, he moved back and flipped her onto her hands and knees. He mounted her from behind and reached a hand around to continue teasing her clit. Without giving her a chance to protest, he thrust deep, grunting his pleasure when she screamed and came around him. Her pussy sucked him deeper, and he wasn't surprised when he found his own release moments later.

She was still pulsing around him when he leaned down and put his mouth over the bruise he'd left on her. He couldn't stop himself from biting, drawing the smallest amount of blood that only confirmed what he knew. She was Circ, and she was his...*just for right now*.

Still high on lust, it took him a moment to clear his head. When he did, he realized he had done more than mark Sabrina's neck. Her wrists, arms, and breasts had bruises on them. Derrick had never in his life manhandled a woman who didn't want it, and he should have been horrified at what he'd done. Derrick the man was.

His beast purred.

"You okay?" was all he could manage.

"You're doing that cat thing again," Sabrina mumbled as she backed her ass tighter against him, clutching his cock inside her. "You feel so damned good. I want to rub myself all over you." Turning to look over her shoulder, she blinked up at him with lazy satisfaction. His worry that he'd hurt her faded. "God, what did you do to me?" She ran her tongue over her teeth. "My teeth are really sharp."

"It's not me, honey. It's your beast coming out to play." He rotated his cock inside her. "Damn, girl. I've never been this horny, not in all the days I've been Circ. I just came twice, and I want to fuck you again. Pearl must have given you some magic juice, because you are the sexiest thing I've ever kissed."

She shuddered under him, so much smaller and softer. So much paler. He sobered in the darkness, no longer so lost in his needs that he didn't see how much more dangerous she was to him now. How damned appealing he found her, despite knowing she worked for Pearl.

Trying to shake free of his dark thoughts, he resolved to remain in control. "You're so sleek and pretty." He stroked her back, pleased when she arched into him. "You going to purr with me, honey?"

"I don't know," she said, getting her wind back. "You going to beat me if I don't?"

He flexed inside her. "Oh, baby, I'd love to beat you. To spank that ass bright red, before I fuck it."

She stilled, and he smiled.

"What, Sabrina? Never been ass-fucked before?"

"No, and I plan to keep it that way." She wiggled her hips, as if to dislodge him.

"Please. You're not going anywhere unless I let you." He loved that fact. "I'm in charge, honey. Remember that, and we'll get along. Where do you belong, Sabrina? You said it before. Say it again. Whose are you?"

She shook her head and tried to move away, but he wouldn't let her.

"We can stay here all night. In fact, we can wait for Hale and the others to join us. I bet they'd love a piece of this ass." He palmed her cheeks, aware she trembled, and not from fear. Arousal drenched the air around them, both his *and* hers.

She swore. "I'm yours, dammit."

He chuckled and spanked her, because he could.

She shook and moaned, and then pissed him off when she added, "I'm yours, *for now*."

"Uh-uh, princess. That's no way to behave. Let's work on that obedience, hmm? After I drain my cock and you come a few more times, then you can tell me everything I want to know. Starting with why you ran so hard from the PPA when you clearly have a death wish. Why not stand your ground and let them finish the job?"

"No...death...wish," she breathed when he ground against her. "You're too big," she complained, contradicting herself when she tried to back harder into his pelvis, pushing his cock even deeper.

He knew she had to be somewhat uncomfortable, because she was so damned tight around him. But the whole situation smacked of his possession, and he refused to give her any relief. Instead, he remained still as he thickened again, stretching her. "If you didn't have a death wish, you wouldn't have tried to choke Caitlyn. Not with Roane around. But don't worry, princess. We'll get to that soon enough. Right now, I have a need to come again."

Derrick was a smart man, one who knew how to use his time wisely. He needed to fuck Sabrina out of his system. Only then could he rebuild those walls guarding his heart and his head from this woman. Because no matter how sexy he found her, Sabrina Torrence was still the enemy. And he'd do well to remember that.

Fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice...shame on me.

Hours later, Sabrina winced when Derrick pulled her to her feet. She wouldn't have believed it, but she'd had more orgasms in one night than she'd had in her entire life. Her body felt like one giant nerve, exposed and uncomfortable. The same way she felt around Derrick.

Hell. I can't think of him as Packard anymore. Not after all this.

"Come on, princess. It's a long walk back."

She found it odd no one had come after her but Derrick, but she wouldn't question her good fortune. "Quit calling me 'princess.'"

He chuckled. Apparently, great sex could tame even the most dangerous of men. "But the shoe fits, baby. What do your friends call you?"

"I don't have any friends." As soon as she said it, she felt pathetic. Still, it was the truth.

"Working for Pearson Labs, I'm not surprised," he murmured and fell into step beside her.

As they walked in companionable silence, Sabrina realized Derrick wore nothing but the skin God gave him. Granted, her clothes were in tatters, but they still managed to cover the important parts. But Derrick...

"You're naked," she blurted.

"Yeah. That happens a lot with the *change*. You'll see when it happens to you."

"What do you mean?" She tried for ignorance.

"Cut the bullshit. You and I both know you're not human. Now that I've tasted you, I can sense the Circ buried deep." He smacked his lips. "Princess, you are so damned sweet. Best pussy I've ever had, I don't mind telling you."

"Thanks. Great to know I rank high among the competition," she muttered, astonished to feel jealousy at his mention of others.

Derrick laughed. "You know, even though you're PPA, I like your attitude. You don't take much shit from anyone, do you? I still can't believe you made a move on Roane's mate." He whistled, and she stopped to look at him. He stopped with her. "Takes balls, which we sure know you don't have," he said suggestively, eyeballing her up and down. "So it must be that suicidal tendency we were talking about."

"That *you* were talking about." She huffed but followed him when he resumed their trip back. Walking side by side clearly illustrated how much larger than her he was. She fought to ignore his muscular thighs, that firm ass she wanted so badly to bite, and the heavy shaft hanging between his legs. Even flaccid, he was huge. She flushed, recalling how right he'd fit inside of her. Amazingly, her desire spiked anew, though she hadn't the energy to do more than fantasize about sex with him at the moment.

Think about other things, Sabrina. "When I worked for Elliot Pearl -- *not* the PPA -- I had to watch what he did to those people he turned into Circs. He locked them up like

animals.” She swallowed hard, remembering their cries of rage and pain. “They were a danger to everyone, even themselves.”

“And you never had a hand in it? In making them into psychos?” He sounded skeptical, and she couldn’t blame him.

“No.” She sighed. “I sound like an idiot, but in my defense, I was young and stupid. I really thought what we were doing would save lives. Too many of our military die in hostile situations. Why not give our troops an edge? I know a lot about the Circs. Your skin is thicker, your senses keener. Hell, you can run for miles without getting winded, and those fangs and claws do real damage.

“I wasn’t privy to the missions you actually did when the original Project Dawn was up and running, but we heard things. You guys did a lot of good.”

He looked uncomfortable. “We did our jobs.”

But at what price? “No one had any idea there would be such severe problems, especially not after almost four and a half years.”

“Pearl knew. But he was too interested in looking good to do the right thing.” Derrick gave her a funny look. “You weren’t, though, were you? According to you, I should be on my knees, praising you for taking down the project.”

“Look, I know you won’t believe me.” *And I shouldn’t care.* “But it took a lot for me to do what I did. If they had found out, I’d have been court-martialed and sent to the brig. I disseminated classified documents to uncleared people, to the press.”

“Really? Because I never saw anything about it in the papers.”

“You can’t really be that stupid. The government squelched any possibility of public notice in a heartbeat.” She liked the scowl he sent her. Good to know she annoyed him as much as he vexed her. “Let me ask you this, genius. How do you think Senator Kuntz and General Shields got wind of what the hell went down? It wasn’t because either man had contacts within the organization. Pearl hated both of them with a passion. The medical personnel were never to tell anyone anything about what we did or saw, and we signed paperwork to ensure our silence. One peep and we’d be declared traitors, threats to national security.

“We all knew how much Pearl hated Kuntz and Shields. That’s why I sent them files they otherwise never would have seen, files that were supposed to crush Project Dawn without question. I knew stuff even Doc didn’t know.”

Derrick remained silent as they walked. He lifted her over a large log before she could think to climb over it. Other than that, he didn’t touch her. Minutes passed.

“It always bothered me that Doc’s name never came up when the project died,” he said softly. “Sure, he helped us make a new life out here, but I always wondered what part he played in the breakdown of Project Dawn. He’s never said.”

Now that he was listening, she wanted to tell him what she knew. "I was low in the chain of command. No one told me anything. I did my job, but I always kept my eyes and ears open. I saw a lot they never knew about. Doc didn't even have access to most of Pearl's files. They used to fight about it, and Pearl threatened to have Doc removed from the project." A sudden realization occurred to her. "I think Doc laid low because he wanted to be there to help. He was probably afraid that if he left, you guys wouldn't have made it, let alone had the resources you have now."

She'd seen Doc a few times during their shared time in Project Dawn. At the time, she'd thought him another disgruntled scientist, not that she'd disagreed with his rants about Pearl. Still, he hadn't done what needed doing. No one else had, either. And more innocents died as rogue Circes rampaged. When the few good Circes began dying, falling prey to their manic brethren, Sabrina knew she had to act.

"That's quite a theory," Derrick murmured. His gaze rested thoughtfully on her face before turning back to their surroundings. "So you knew Doc when the project was running. Did we meet? Because I don't remember. And I'd remember *you*."

She flushed, the heat in his words making her tingle. "I saw all of you at one time or another, but it was brief. I never worked with your squad. I saw pictures and read your files, files I wasn't supposed to read. Elliot Pearl doesn't like you very much." The man had called Derrick a killing machine and feared he'd never amount to much more.

"Now you've hurt my feelings." Derrick flashed sharp teeth as he grinned.

"Actually, Hale was Pearl's favorite. He had plans to make Hale his personal security guard, his right-hand man." She grimaced. "But McKinley took that job a few years ago. Came out of nowhere. He's different than any Circ I've ever met."

"Rogue?"

"No. And that's what's odd. He's more feral, a helluva lot more dangerous. I get the feeling that he's working on his own agenda at the labs." She couldn't be sure, but she could swear he'd helped her when she'd escaped the labs with Kelly. McKinley was smart, yet he hadn't questioned why she'd chosen to leave by way of the elevators that led, not to the laboratories, but to the outside. No matter how many times she'd reviewed her escape, his actions made no sense.

"Sabrina?"

"Huh? Sorry, just thinking about McKinley."

Derrick stiffened. "Why?"

"He's scary, but something about him doesn't add up."

"Funny. We've never seen him. Never even heard of him until you just brought it up. Why's that, I wonder?"

"Well, don't look at me. I'm the one here under armed guard." Aware she felt no threat from Derrick, she couldn't help glancing at his hands. Thankfully, his claws remained sheathed.

"You need a damned keeper. This is twice now I've come after you at night in the middle of a damned forest. Twice now that you've shown me that Circ blood. So when you gonna *change*, princess?" His voice lowered, and his impressive body stirred. "Because as much as we just fucked, I can't wait to take your beast."

"I'm not --" She stopped herself. Who was she kidding? Derrick had senses attuned to everything around them. Did she really think he wouldn't recognize a Circ when he saw one? When he tasted her? She blushed. "I didn't know, not until a month ago. It must have been when Pearson Labs forced us to take some new vaccines. It was supposed to make us immune to a new drug they were manufacturing," she said bitterly. "Some vaccine. Now I've got something I can't get rid of." *And who knows how long I have until I lose my sanity?*

"You're Circ." He sounded satisfied by the fact, which made little sense.

"That's a good thing?" She shook her head. "Derrick, I'm not like you and the others. I can't control it. Hell, I don't even remember what happened the other night with the PPA. I might have taken them out. I probably did, but I don't remember much more than a haze of pain and anger."

"Welcome to my world. I never said being Circ was fun. It's a rush, no doubt. But the beast likes to control you, and you have to fight it all the time." He frowned. "There are very few people who can accept what you are."

She knew his mother -- his only family, according to Pearl's files -- had passed away a few years ago. "Did your mother know about you?"

"Of course you read my file," he muttered. "So you know she died two years ago. Did it say how she died?"

She shook her head, expecting the worst when he grew quiet.

"A rogue Circ followed me home the last time I visited. I tried to make my mom see that her son wasn't a demon in disguise, but she threw me out. And then that fucker snapped her neck like a twig."

Sabrina empathized. "I'm so sorry."

"Save it." He laughed, but the sound grated. "He isn't around anymore to hurt anyone else. It wasn't a pleasant visit home, but it opened my eyes. Being Circ opens up a whole new world. It's dangerous." He grabbed her arms, bringing her face close to his. "But it also creates bonds that don't break. The squad is my family now. I won't let anything, or *anyone*, hurt them."

The look he gave her sincerely pissed her off. "Yeah, well, life sucks. People die, and bad things happen to good people." Anita flashed into her mind's eye. "You get over it, and you move on. I sacrificed a lot to do the right thing, and so far, it's given me nothing but

trouble." She paused. "Look, why don't you do us both a favor and let me go?" She nodded to the dark area behind them. "I could vanish. You'll never see me again. I promise."

His grip tightened. "If I could trust you, maybe." He focused on her mouth, and his gaze darkened. Even in the moonlight, she could see his pupils dilate.

Her senses flared, as did the need for something more. Something just beyond her grasp. *Oh no, I'm going Circ again.* The skin on her arms itched under his hands, the need to *change* an ache that wouldn't go away.

Derrick glanced at his hands in surprise, then met her gaze again. He banked the heat there and pulled her closer, so that they met nose to nose. "But that's the thing, princess. I *don't* trust you. Don't let that sex go to your pretty little head. Yeah, you're hot. But I haven't forgotten where I found you, or who you 'don't' work for."

Sabrina sneered, burying the hurt under harsh words. "Yeah, well, guess what? I don't trust you either, Packard. I know what you really are underneath that skin." She forced her beast to back away, more determined than ever to escape. To do that, she needed to remain in control, neither a slave to her beast nor the odd attraction she felt for this jerk. "You're a monster. So don't let that sex go to *your* pretty little head. I had an itch. You scratched it. End of story."

Derrick's eyes narrowed, and to Sabrina's satisfaction, an angry beast glared out at her. Slitted pupils glowed with heat. She could almost *smell* his rage, as if the intense cinnamon that bled from his pores conveyed itself as emotion. He put her down and stepped away from her.

Though infuriated with his arrogant assumption that she had fallen for him based on a few orgasms, Sabrina couldn't deny his beauty. As much as she wanted to think of him as a monster, as one of the many rogues she'd had the misfortune to observe, she couldn't. Derrick's dark splendor pulled at her. She could only watch as his muscles stretched and his bones grew. His skin pulled tight, hardening and darkening like armor over enhanced strength. The totality of his power radiated from more than his frame; it came from that intangible aura that hung over him as he turned into something much more than a man.

The threat of danger permeated the air around him, yet she maintained her ground, daring him to step closer.

He did, baring his teeth and clenching his mighty fists. An answering challenge welled from within. That scared the crap out of her, and she began sweating as she fought to keep the *change* buried deep.

"Let it out, princess. Give it what it really wants," Derrick growled, his voice husky and all-too-appealing to ears that now recognized the pitched nuance of his sexual need. Then his cock rose thick and long before her in invitation.

Pain tore her from her attraction as she fought her body. Nothing about her transition was natural, she tried to remind herself. Simply a product of Elliot Pearl's scientific madness. She didn't know what might have happened had Hale and Zack not suddenly appeared.

She gasped at the sudden pinch in her neck and turned to see Ace standing with a gun pointed her way. Before she could panic, everything fogged, and she fell into Derrick's arms, the very last place she wanted to be.

Chapter Six

"Derrick, tell me again what she said about Senator Kuntz?" Doc asked for the second time.

Derrick, now dressed, and the others stood in one of the labs while they watched Doc take Sabrina's vitals. She hadn't so much as twitched since Ace had knocked her out an hour ago. Talk about déjà vu.

Derrick sighed and repeated parts of his conversation with Sabrina word for word, skirting references to their more personal discussion. He frowned by the time he came to the part where she called him a monster. *He* was a monster? She worked for a mad scientist who'd been willing to experiment on a pregnant woman and her fetus, for Christ's sake.

The woman tied him in knots. He'd told her about his mother, and he never talked about her. Judy Packard hadn't accepted the new and improved Derrick any better than Wendy had. He could only be thankful he hadn't told Sabrina about his cheating ex-fiancée. Wouldn't that have amused the ferocious little liar lying so still on Doc's exam table?

Derrick ran a tense hand over his head, still not sure why he'd opened up to Sabrina on their walk home. "*Don't let that sex go to your pretty little head,*" he'd said, because he'd been scared out of his fucking mind. He wanted her more than he'd wanted Wendy, more than he'd ever wanted any woman. She made him purr with contentment -- not just sexually, but emotionally. He'd felt more at peace losing himself in her body than he had in a long, long time. And he didn't know what to do about it.

She didn't hide the fact that she came from the PPA, but she'd lied about being Circ. He still didn't believe her story about starting the project's downfall. How could he? *Then why did she rescue Kelly when she could have let her rot? Why did your confirmed phone conversation with Harry verify her as his source of info -- information that had taken down dozens of rogue Circes in the years we've been working with Doc?*

“Derrick? I need to know about her beast. You said you felt it?”

Derrick avoided the curious stares aimed his way. He wished like hell he and Doc were having this discussion in private. But what reason could he give for not wanting the others to overhear? That would imply he and Sabrina shared something special. Something personal and private. And he refused to go there.

“I was holding on to her arms to keep her still. She’s almost as slippery as Hale when she tries to avoid you.”

He ignored the finger Hale shot him and continued. “While I was holding her, I felt her muscles fluttering beneath my hands. Her scent deepened, like apple, only sweeter. Really intense,” he murmured, staring at his hands, which had been so close to her skin.

“What else happened?” Zack murmured, glancing knowingly at Derrick’s growing erection.

“I’m surprised, D. Didn’t think you’d do it with the enemy, even if she is hot. Oh, I get it. You’re going to seduce her into telling us the truth?” Ace asked, a hint of approval in his voice.

“No, I’m not going to fuck her into telling me the truth,” he snapped. “What the hell’s wrong with you? I’m not getting anywhere closer to that woman. She’s trouble,” he told them, willing himself to believe it.

“Oh boy.” Hale shook his head. “D, I hate to say it. But you’re going down, man. You wouldn’t let me touch her when we first found her. You growl whenever any of us look in her direction. You took off when she disappeared with barely a glance in Caitlyn’s direction. And I can still smell the sex rolling off you. Just admit you’ve got a problem, and we’ll see if Doc can help you.”

“Fuck off, Rogers. I don’t need any help. There’s nothing between me and the female but some harmless sex.”

“Really?” Hale shared a look with Doc. “Then you won’t mind if I have a go at her. If you can’t seduce the information we need out of her, I’m sure I can --”

He’d barely ended the statement when Derrick’s fist caught his jaw. Derrick couldn’t see past the rage clouding his mind. He’d *changed* in an instant, aware of nothing but a possessive need to pound Hale into the ground. *Protect and claim. She’s mine*, his beast urged.

“I told you,” Hale breathed as Roane, also *changed*, stepped between them.

“Easy, D. Don’t let Hale get to you.” Roane wouldn’t let him look away, forcing the issue. “Back down. Let it go. No one’s going to touch Sabrina but Doc.” When Derrick caught Doc leaning over her, he took a step in Doc’s direction.

“Whoa, big guy.” Zack stepped between them with Ace by his side. Both men retained their human forms, their scents strongly of one another and Kelly. Oddly, reminders of Kelly calmed him down.

"No one's touching anybody," Ace said with a glare at Hale. "Playboy was *playing* you, Derrick."

"She's PPA." Derrick forced himself to back away and *change* back. Roane, he noticed, didn't shrink down but stood with his arms crossed, ready to move at a moment's notice. Embarrassed because they thought he had a thing for Sabrina -- *the enemy* -- he flushed. "Look, she's a beautiful woman. So I fucked her. So what?"

"Derrick, she responds to you." Doc motioned him closer, pushing Zack out of the way. "I'm worried that she hasn't *changed* yet."

"She said she didn't know when Pearl had injected her with the serum. Maybe she needs more time." Derrick shrugged.

Doc frowned. "From the material I've read off that disc, Elliot still doesn't know why he could never duplicate his success with you five. The newest bunch of Circs are lasting longer before they deteriorate into madness. But he's manipulating their genes and guessing at what will work. He has to use his wonder drug to manage them, effectively turning them into mindless drones. They're stronger than you five, but very uncontrollable without medication. If Sabrina is right, she's going to soon follow that path."

"Come on, Doc. She's here. Can't you work your magic and do something with her?" Derrick asked, his voice gruff. He tried to mask his concern, but he could feel the others staring at him.

"I've tried working with the samples I took from her before. Perhaps with her willing cooperation to run more tests..."

"She'll agree." Derrick would make her.

"There's still the matter of whose side she's on." Zack held up a hand when Derrick would have interrupted. "Sorry, D. But I still don't understand why she tried to escape. Nobody here has hurt her. And since she's *supposedly* gone out of her way to put Pearson Labs out of business, I don't see why she'd hesitate to tell us what she knows about Pearl."

"He has a point," Hale said.

"Maybe she's scared," Caitlyn added. "Before she knocked me out, she mentioned she'd seen things at the labs that freaked her out. I know she was stringing me along, but I can't help but wonder if some of that is true. Maybe to her, all Circs are psycho."

"But we're not." Ace frowned.

"She's been dealing with Derrick since she's been here," Hale cut in. "Of course she thinks we're nothing but trouble," he said, giving Derrick a sly glance.

Derrick grinned despite his worries. "Fuck you, playboy."

"You wish." Hale snorted.

"And we're back to that immature man-to-man banter you boys have perfected," Kelly added as she entered the room. She joined Ace and Zack and gave Sabrina some intense scrutiny. "Doc, you have to help her." She looked around the room. "I don't care that you

don't trust her. And I'm sorry she hurt Caitlyn, but this woman saved me and my baby. If nothing else, I need to repay that debt. And I'm not going to take no for an answer."

Doc rubbed his eyes under his glasses. "Don't look at me. I want to help her. But like I said, I'm not Elliot. I need my patient's consent."

"Then Derrick will see to it that she agrees." Kelly nodded at Derrick. "She smells like you, Derrick."

"She does not." Damn, he felt himself blushing. Thank God for his darker skin.

"I'm pregnant. I can smell pancakes from the diner a mile away. Trust me, she's yours," Kelly said bluntly. "So fix your attitude and claim her."

"You can't tell me what --"

Kelly narrowed her stare and snarled.

Ace and Zack exchanged a glance, and Zack murmured, "Derrick, she's a little testy lately. I wouldn't argue just now."

Hell, they weren't kidding. Derrick watched as Kelly's eyes *changed* and her nails lengthened.

"Hormones are all over the damned place," Ace added, holding his hands palm up in supplication when Kelly turned her scowl on him. "Truth is truth, babe."

"You're all a bunch of idiots when it comes to women." She snorted, her voice rougher. "Roane didn't have the balls to tell Caitlyn he loved her. You two," she said to her mates, "danced around each other and me for years. And now, Derrick's afraid of a female he could break in half."

Derrick opened his mouth to snap at her but quickly closed it when Ace shook his head violently behind her.

"You males are so incredibly dense," Kelly continued, inciting Caitlyn to join the conversation.

"That's the truth. Derrick, you have to trust a woman someday. And don't start. I know you trust Kelly and me, but that's because we're safe. You aren't really invested in us the way you're going to be with your mate."

"Christ." Derrick passed his hand over his head, wondering why the hell these women were ganging up on him.

His mother, his cheating ex-fiancée, all the women he'd met since becoming a Circ who he could barely stand for more than fucking, had all let him down. Except for Caitlyn and Kelly, he at times wondered if he even liked women for anything other than sex. They were too emotional. They liked to talk things to death. And they turned simple into complicated with a look.

"Yes, well, you make some excellent points, Kelly," Doc said gently, leading her away from the group toward the door. He motioned for her mates to accompany her. "I think you

three need some alone time,” Derrick heard him say under his breath to Zack as they passed. “She feels hot to me.”

Unfortunately, the rest of them heard it...before feeling it as well.

“Shit, another heat,” Hale groaned.

Before he could say another word, Caitlyn pounced on Roane. Her eyes were huge in her face, her sexual hunger apparent as she gave him one hell of a kiss and then eyed Hale like a slice of dessert.

“Come on, Hale,” Roane said with a sigh. “When she gets like this, there’s no talking to her.”

Derrick felt the same urge to fuck, but he couldn’t leave Sabrina. More than anything, he wanted to spread her thighs and take her again and again until she couldn’t walk. But seeing her lying there, so still and vulnerable, hardened his resolve. He’d force the damned woman to accept Doc’s help, no matter what he had to do to make her.

“I’m staying here,” he said to no one in particular.

“Good idea,” Roane answered, sparing him little attention, his focus on his mate and his second in command. Lust turned his eyes from brown to black, and Derrick caught the glint of fangs when Roane smiled. “She’s all yours, D. Your responsibility, bro. Don’t fuck up.”

Hearing Roane, their leader, acknowledge Derrick’s claim on the woman -- *not claim, responsibility for*, he reminded his beast -- filled him with satisfaction. “No problem.”

Hale complained, “Why does he get to sit with the pretty girl while I’m manhandled by the mean one?”

Caitlyn laughed, a rough sound signaling she was close to *changing*. “You think *I’m* mean? That woman nearly snapped my neck in two.” Roane growled, but Caitlyn pushed him and Hale ahead of her toward the door. “Believe it or not, my beast likes her. That’s not to say I wouldn’t mind some payback, but she might just fit here. We need to work on her subordination in the grand scheme of things, but I have a good feeling about her.”

“Bullshit,” Roane argued and tried to stop moving toward the exit, despite the erection clearly visible between his legs, but Caitlyn wouldn’t let him.

She shoved him and Hale out the door and winked at Derrick over her shoulder, leaving him alone with Sabrina and Doc.

“Finally. I thought they’d never leave.” Doc wiped his forehead with his sleeve. “The mating heat in those females packs a wallop, even to us mere mortals.” He gave Derrick a knowing look. “Interesting you’re able to resist its lure.”

Derrick ignored the jab even as he realized his need to procreate had faded with the departure of both women. The scent of Sabrina calmed him in a way he found both relaxing and worrisome. Pulling up a stool, he sat next to Sabrina while Doc maneuvered around the lab. The older man returned to Sabrina’s side in no time.

"I'm only going to take a bit more of her blood so I have something to work with. But I'm not going to force her to undergo experimental treatments." Doc grimaced. "I saw too much of that with Elliot."

As Doc worked on Sabrina, Derrick chatted with him, the familiarity of Doc's soothing voice further putting him at ease. Doc talked about the weather, Kelly's baby, Roane's growing strength, his brother Elliot...

"*What?*" Derrick stared in horror at a man he considered to be beyond reproach.

"It's true. Elliot Pearl is my half brother."

The room remained silent for the minute it took Derrick to process Doc's words.

He swore. "We've been with you for eight years, Doc. You think you might have mentioned this before."

"I know." Doc continued to avert his gaze.

"The others know?"

Doc nodded. "I told Hale, Roane, and Caitlyn earlier. I'm sure they've told the others by now."

Derrick was shell-shocked. He trusted his squad and Doc in particular. It was as if a cornerstone of his very foundation were crumbling. Sabrina, Doc, what the hell other surprises were in store tonight? "Wait a goddamned minute," he growled, pointing at Doc. "You're telling me you and Elliot worked together to create unstable Circs? That you knew they would go insane and --"

"No," Doc interrupted, his voice firm, and finally met Derrick's gaze. "I never knew about the problems we'd face. Everything you've known about me is true, except for my 'relationship' with Elliot. I can't help the nature of my birth. He and I were never very close. We shared the same mother. She divorced his father a few years before she met mine. He and I were never friendly, but we shared an aptitude and interest in science. And that's all there was to it."

"You two just *happened* to work together on Project Dawn." Derrick's sarcasm wasn't lost on Doc, who flushed a bright red. Dammit. He liked the man. And as much as he didn't want to, he liked Sabrina. *The story of my fucking life. I'm drawn to assholes who want to leave me or kill me.*

"Derrick, I'm sorry to tell you like this. Trust me. I've wanted to tell everyone for a very long time, but with all you'd gone through, I knew you'd never trust me if I confessed the truth. At first, I told myself it was because I wanted to help you all, and I wanted you to trust me. But the more I lied, the more I found I liked not facing a link to Elliot."

"He's my brother, a man I neither like nor respect. He's a genius in his field, but a man with no moral compass. I've tried to appeal to his sense of fairness, but he has none." Doc's blue eyes clouded with what looked like remorse. "He's a very sad man, as much as he's a monster. Do you know he e-mails me with advice about you five?"

"And what do you tell him?" Derrick couldn't help his suspicions, and he hated himself for it. If Doc had really wanted to screw them, he could have done it ten times over by now. Still, Derrick hated lies. Coming from Doc, they were a perversion. Doc was his mentor, his friend, hell, a pseudofather.

"Derrick, do you really think I'd tell Elliot anything? Really?"

Derrick had to look away from Doc's piercing gaze. "No. But I don't like this."

"How do you think I feel? I hate that I'm related to a man who does what Elliot does. Derrick, he experiments on *people*. If you knew half of what I read in that file... Which is why I can't, and won't, do anything to Sabrina without her consent. And if you think about it, I've never done anything to you and the others against your will, either."

"I guess."

"I admit," he said with a faint flush, "that I misled Kelly about the shots she was receiving. But that was a decision her mother made, one I didn't agree with, but respected all the same."

"I know, Doc," Derrick said with a gentleness to put the man's mind at ease. Kelly had told them all how she'd come to be a Circ. She'd been infected at a young age, but her mother hadn't wanted her exposed to Pearl. So she'd convinced Doc to block her daughter's *change*. Doc had, until Kelly's body refused to suppress her beast any longer.

"I'm sorry." Doc sighed. "I shouldn't have lied to you, to any of you. But I was afraid if I said anything, you'd leave." Doc took an unsteady breath. "You've become my family. I don't know what I'd do without you all."

Derrick started to panic. Sensitive, controlled Doc looked on the verge of tears. *Shit*. "Doc, man, it's okay. I believe you." He took Doc's shoulders under his hands, acutely aware of how easy it would be to crush the smaller man. His beast reared its head, wanting to protect, further convincing Derrick that Doc was on their side. "Doc, it was just a shock, okay? With you and Sabrina, well, I'm confused enough as it is. You know?"

Doc smiled, blinking away tears. "Actually, I understand. I've felt the same way myself, Derrick."

Derrick knew he referred to his quiet relationship with Diego -- their cook -- Doc's best friend and lover. Diego and Doc had been together for as long as Derrick had known the man. He wondered what that felt like, to have such a tight, loving bond.

"It's not that I think of Sabrina like a mate," he hurried to argue. He didn't need another woman in his life. Hell, he didn't trust Sabrina at all. At least with his other troubled relationships, he'd begun on a positive note. And look at how those had ended.

"Derrick, you don't need to convince me."

He wasn't sure, but it looked like Doc tried to hide a smile. "Good."

Sabrina stirred, taking his attention.

"I gave her some of this to counteract the sedative." Doc held up a syringe. He turned to Sabrina. "Sabrina? Can you hear me?"

Her eyelids fluttered and then opened, revealing light gray eyes that reminded Derrick of diamonds. "Doc?"

"Sabrina, give it a few moments. Your vision and faculties will start to clear." He turned to Derrick. "Derrick, help her sit up."

Derrick put his arm under her back, his energy pooling where their skin made contact. Was it his imagination, or did she lean closer on purpose? He felt her sniff him, and then the woman curled into his chest. *Shit*. There went his heart again, racing like crazy.

"Derrick?" Doc asked, his mouth open. "Are you purring?"

Derrick wanted to crawl through the floor. "Yes," he hissed. "And you can't tell the others, okay? I catch enough shit about her as it is." He nodded toward Sabrina, resting in his arms like a contented kitten. He stroked her back, wanting to put her at ease while she regained her wits. *But only to even the playing field. I hate weak women, and I can't fairly defeat this enemy if she's facedown and knocked out.*

His beast cried bullshit, but he knew better than to give it its way. He'd already fucked the hell out of the woman for hours. Instead of pushing her out of his system, he'd damn well become addicted to her. Some help his beast turned out to be.

Sabrina muttered something against his chest, then leaned back to look up at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Why do you always smell like cinnamon?"

"Why do you smell like apples?" he countered.

Stymied, they stared at one another until Doc cleared his throat.

"Sabrina? I need your permission to run some tests --"

Before he could finish, Sabrina was shaking her head. "No way."

"Sabrina, you haven't *changed* yet, and I'm worried. What Elliot did to you may not be reversible, but we can work on fixing the broken aspects of the mutation."

"He hasn't managed that in four years," she scoffed.

"Princess, let him finish," Derrick interrupted, annoyed she wasn't giving Doc a chance. "You want to be a mindless monster that kills for fun?" When she blanched, he continued, "Then give Doc a shot. What do you have to lose?"

"My freakin' mind?"

"What there is of it," Derrick muttered and grinned at the curses she uttered. She was so damned cute when riled. Not cute, dangerous. *Appealing*, his beast countered, and he mentally counted to ten to control his unruly thoughts. Just because he wanted to help a fellow Circ didn't mean he'd forgotten anything. She was still the enemy, still a woman he didn't -- wouldn't -- trust.

"Sabrina," Doc tried again. "Without any help, you will lose control of yourself. Despite not wanting to, you'll hurt people. You'll be stronger and faster than many of our squad. Do you want to chance hurting Caitlyn or Kelly? After all you went through to save Kelly's baby from Elliot, do you want to be the one who kills her child?"

Sabrina scowled, and Derrick could smell the fear drifting from her pores. "Fine. You do what you have to, but don't let me hurt Kelly or Caitlyn." She gave Derrick a shuttered glance. "Or anyone else." The stubborn woman sighed. "Maybe you should just do us all a favor and kill me."

"Hell, no," Derrick growled, purposefully ignoring his alarm at the notion of Sabrina's death. "Not after all the hell you've put me through. You're going to deal with this shit. Doc's going to fix you, you're going to answer our fucking questions, and then your ass is mine." He grabbed hold of her hand, ignoring how hard she grabbed him back.

"Jackass," she muttered, but she didn't let go.

Chapter Seven

Dr. Elliot Pearl scowled and reread his missive again. “Now? They want to see me *now?*”

McKinley slowly moved from his position against the wall, startling Elliot, who’d forgotten the massive man’s presence. “Dr. Pearl?”

The deep voice sounded more like a growl than a question. Elliot glanced at his bodyguard, refusing to be cowed. Regardless of his fall in status within Pearson Labs, Elliot maintained the title of head scientist. Without his tireless work, the drug that enabled them to control the newest batch of Circs wouldn’t exist. McKinley worked for *him*, and Elliot resolved to be more in command around the Circ.

He forced himself to meet McKinley’s *changed* eyes. Golden amber surrounded slitted pupils, a clear indication that McKinley was more than human. Unlike the other Circs Elliot had dealt with for the past twenty-plus years, McKinley never looked anything but the way he did now. He didn’t *change*, and he didn’t look completely human. Instead, he had the height and brawn of a super soldier in human skin, but with the eyes and senses of a fully transformed Circ. The man radiated danger by simply breathing.

Elliot focused and composed himself. “I need to leave in the next five minutes. Please see that my car is ready to go while I grab my briefcase. And check on Simon Dunn for me as well. The CEO wants a full update on the casualties of our last altercation with Circe’s Recruits.”

McKinley cocked his head, as if aware of what Elliot hadn’t told him. “You want me with you this time?”

“Yes.” Elliot swallowed around the nervous lump in his throat. “I believe your abilities may be necessary during this meeting.”

McKinley nodded and left, presumably to see to the car.

Elliot didn't want to take McKinley. In fact, he'd been ordered to come alone, as he always did. The new CEO of Pearson Labs liked his air of mystery. The less people who knew about him, the better. Especially if he wanted to maintain his military connections. To the United States government, Pearson Labs was still *persona non grata*. An unfortunate circumstance, but Elliot appreciated not having to work under Uncle Sam's thumb any longer.

Or at least, he *had been* free to work uninhibited. Without understanding how, he'd awakened one morning a year and a half ago to find that he was no longer running the labs. His funding had been cut, only to be replaced by a backer with a different agenda than his own. Science paled next to the potential applications of his powerful Circs.

Assassins, mercenaries, animalistic automatons who would obey on command -- they were in short supply and high demand. Already, the CEO bragged about how much money they'd earned with a successful Circ operation in Nicaragua to recover "stolen goods."

Elliot wondered if drug money was now funding his science, but he didn't much care either way. So long as he was able to continue his work on Project Dawn, the other obstacles in his path to true freedom could wait. He could handle inconvenience and annoyance, but he couldn't handle failure. He simply had to know why Evan's experiments worked and his didn't.

Given time, he knew he'd find the answer. He just had to give Sabrina enough time at Evan's compound...

"Dr. Pearl, you're ready to go."

Elliot turned and almost ran into McKinley. The man moved like a cat. Fumbling with his briefcase, Elliot exited his office. He left the labs and entered the backseat of his black Lincoln Town Car, then sat back as McKinley expertly handled the wheel.

The silence bothered him, and he tried once again to learn more about his bodyguard.

"McKinley, why do you work for me?"

"I believe in the project." The man didn't turn his head as he answered.

For three years, ever since the initial Project Dawn had disbanded, McKinley had worked for Elliot. He'd simply shown up one day on Elliot's doorstep and waited, saying nothing. One look convinced Elliot the man was Circ, but everything else about him remained a mystery. McKinley had no traceable fingerprints. His DNA revealed strains unlike anything Elliot had ever seen. And most of his DNA had disappeared from the lab hours after Elliot had ordered it to be collected.

McKinley didn't respond to threats or violence. He disabled and had once dismembered a Circ ordered to bring him down. Guns didn't work on him. Though his skin felt and looked human, it retained the deflective density of *changed* Circ skin. The small parts of McKinley's DNA that Elliot played with in his off-hours did nothing but pose more questions.

Elliot couldn't duplicate his abilities, no more than he could figure out why Evan's Circs remained sane and rational while his creations continued to unravel.

"Doctor, where are we going?" McKinley asked in a deep bass.

Elliot sighed. "Philadelphia, the Navy Yard."

McKinley grunted, and they drove in silence for miles. "Do you want me to recapture Torrence?" he asked, surprising Elliot that he'd spoken.

"Ah, no. Not yet." Curious, Elliot regarded his bodyguard. "Why do you ask?"

"Because you aren't one to let an experiment go until it's done."

"True." Elliot preened. "My work ethic has never been questioned."

"No."

The way McKinley left that "no" hanging led Elliot to believe he had more to say.

"But...?"

"But nothing."

"You're one of mine, aren't you, McKinley? You've never admitted it, but how else could you be Circ if not for me?"

"True." McKinley paused. "Everything I am is because of you, Dr. Pearl. And I'll never forget that."

Elliot beamed. "Thank you, McKinley. It means a lot to me to know I've done some good."

McKinley said no more, and Elliot tackled the notes he'd brought with him in his briefcase.

"If you want to show that appreciation, keep me safe. Our new 'boss' isn't the most trustworthy of individuals. I'm afraid he sees Project Dawn as a means to an end and not the scientific breakthrough it really is."

"Yes, Doctor."

Elliot glanced up again, mesmerized by the dark look of McKinley's eyes in the rearview mirror. "And don't worry. When it's time to bring Sabrina home, I won't trust her with anyone else but you. If all works out as I think it will, we may just have the answer to fixing our mutation problems. No more controlling drugs, if I have my way."

McKinley didn't answer, but his massive hands tightened around the steering wheel.

Concentrating on what he planned to brief his boss, Elliot made a mental note to e-mail Evan later. It wouldn't hurt to see how Sabrina was doing. After all, in just a few more weeks, she'd be back under his control again. Time enough to enable some changes and to establish a new playing field with his boss. Rational Circs would be worth so much more than the drugged, mindless killers they were today.

* * * * *

Two weeks later, Sabrina grimaced as Doc injected her with yet another doctored serum.

"How are you feeling this morning?" he asked.

She'd gotten used to his kindly manner. Unlike the scientists at Pearson Labs, Doc had never treated her as anything less than an intelligent woman. He frequently asked her questions about Elliot's procedures and what she thought of his treatments. Doc used gentle hands when touching her. He didn't try anything new without asking her permission first.

"I'm okay," she told him, refusing to think about the erotic dreams that had been plaguing her for the past week. Visions of Derrick *changed* were bad enough. But the odd dreams of Derrick and a few of the other Circes surrounding her while naked tormented her into unfulfilled states of orgasmic need. She wondered if Doc's drugs were making her this horny but was afraid to ask.

Because you know it's not the drugs. It's the change. It's getting closer. That and the fact that Derrick wouldn't touch her while Doc tried to fix her. Two long weeks of celibacy were killing her, when for years she hadn't let a man touch her. *Great, I'm a horny Circ addicted to Derrick, of all people.*

Sabrina sighed, shifted on the exam table, and stared down at her clothes. Kelly and Caitlyn had purchased her new wardrobe. Mostly jeans and T-shirts, a few sweatshirts, and undergarments and socks. She loved her shoes, leather moccasins as soft as butter, but with durable soles. Considering she hadn't stepped foot outside the compound since she'd arrived, it wasn't as if she needed formal attire.

"Sabrina, I can't help you unless you tell me the truth." She glanced up at Doc. His blue eyes seemed to look straight into her soul. She had the uncanny feeling he could read minds.

She flushed. "Is it that obvious?"

"That you're in a constant state of arousal? Not all the time. But my sensors pick up your increased levels of pheromones, which incidentally spike whenever a certain Circ appears."

As if he'd heard Doc request him, Derrick appeared in the doorway, shirtless and covered in a fine sheen of sweat. He held a T-shirt in one hand and was wiping his face with a hand towel using the other.

The monitors beside the exam table showed massive line upheaval. Then something started beeping.

Sabrina forced herself to look away from Derrick and back down at her hands as she tried hard to tamp down the beast straining to get free.

"Sorry, Doc. I meant to be here earlier, but Hale and Ace were sparring and needed help." Derrick chuckled, and all too easily Sabrina could envision his lips curled in a smile.

A wide, firm mouth closed around her nipple as she pulled his head closer.

Doc coughed, and she glanced at him. He looked sideways at the monitor measuring her pheromone levels.

Sighing with defeat, she flung her head back against the exam bed. "I can't help it. It's *his* fault."

"Huh?" Derrick stepped closer and pulled on an olive drab T-shirt. "What's wrong?"

The worry in his voice further aggravated her. Derrick Packard had become her central focus these last few weeks, and his growing importance in her life worried her. More and more, her inner voice convinced her to spend time around him. Though at least one Circ watched over her daily, she normally sought Derrick's company, and the rest of the group knew it.

She'd overheard the others mention how amusing they found it that he watched her all the time. Even when he wasn't right by her, she could feel his gaze boring into her. Worse, she welcomed his attention. It would have been easier if she could have attributed all her longing to her inner beast. The truth was, she liked Derrick, the man, just as much. Bullheaded, sarcastic, and downright mean, Derrick used his outward toughness to protect a tender soul. It was there in the way he touched her, in the way he looked at her and protected her against any perceived threat.

God, she wanted to melt every time she looked into his big brown eyes.

"Nothing's wrong," Sabrina growled. The leads attached to her chest under her shirt picked up her increasing heartbeat.

"Then why the hell is all this equipment going off? You feeling okay?" He frowned and leaned closer, as if to feel her forehead.

Before he could touch her, she shot off the table and ripped the wires from the cups suctioned to her body. Fiery tendrils of sensation feathered through her body, like pinpoints of need, sparking her desire anew.

"Ah, Derrick?" Doc said.

"What's wrong with her?" Derrick looked truly worried, and Sabrina basked in his concern.

"Kelly's hormones have been playing havoc with the squad since yesterday. Haven't you felt it?"

"No. I've been out all night."

Sabrina stared at him. "Out all night? What the hell does *that* mean?" Had he been screwing around while she'd been tethered to the guest bedroom she considered a second home? Rage clouded her vision, and she took several steps closer to him. Her inner beast whispered to her to smell the truth.

Instead of cheap perfume and the scent of an unknown woman, Sabrina smelled Derrick, Hale, and Ace. Apparently, Derrick hadn't been out carousing all night. That, or she couldn't smell his misdeeds under the male sweat coating his body.

"Sabrina, are you *sniffing* me?" Derrick asked with amusement. The man never failed to come up with some degrading way of making her sound like a dog in heat.

"No." She shoved him back, astonished when her push knocked him into a wall.

She immediately reined in her need to be wild, accepting the pain accompanying her withdrawal from the addictive adrenaline pulsing through her blood.

"No, Sabrina. You've got to let it out." Doc swore under his breath as he read the monitors again. "Derrick, I'm not sure if you're a help or a hindrance."

The door behind him opened, and Roane and Hale entered. Both stopped, their nostrils quivering as feminine need reached them. To her embarrassment, Hale wiggled his eyebrows and stared at Sabrina from the top of her head to her feet. She prayed he couldn't see her nipples stabbing through her shirt or smell the sudden arousal pooling between her thighs.

"Sabrina, I wanted to thank you for sharing as much as you have with us," Roane said, drawing her attention. The large male commanded the room. Even as taken as she was with Derrick, Sabrina could see the alpha inside Roane, the man her mate obeyed.

Not mate, she snarled inwardly.

"Sabrina?" Hale asked. "You okay? You're looking a little wild around the eyes." He snickered, and she flipped him the finger, which made him laugh even more. "And that's why I think she's perfect for D. So much attitude."

"Twenty says she can kick your ass when she *changes*," Derrick drawled, looking as entertained as Hale.

"You're on, hard-ass." Hale shook his hand, while Roane and Doc shook their heads.

"I just wanted you to know that the team no longer considers you the enemy," Roane continued, shooting Derrick a look to behave himself. "All that you told us about the labs checks out."

"Like I'd lie after all this," she muttered, allowing Doc to reattach her lines.

"That information about the breeding program is something we've been looking into as well," Roane continued, as if she hadn't spoken. "I'll ask again, are you sure Pearl doesn't have any more of Kelly's blood? You said you disposed of it all, but how do we know he didn't keep some of her blood to work on?"

"Who do you think collected her blood? Me. Pearl is normally too busy to deal with trivial matters. Or at least, he was. Even after his demotion, he kept his hoity-toity ass away from the 'patients' while working on theoretical applications. Most of his work involved genetic recombination, as well as a lot of microbiology. He kept insisting that the answer to it all lay in the virus used by the initial EP12 recipients. But a lot of that was beyond me."

"I just wish we could see into that encrypted folder," Doc muttered.

"Doc?" Hale asked.

"The data drive Kelly gave us. There was an entire set of files I couldn't access without the proper password. I'm afraid if I fiddle with it, I may cause something to malfunction or even the files to degrade."

"Yeah," Sabrina said. "Sometimes the security on those files is deceptive. You input the wrong password a few times and it'll delete the information. But I could get you that password."

"How?" Roane asked, at the same time Derrick said, "No way."

"What?" Hale looked from Roane to Derrick to her. "Explain."

"Since I know the layout of the place, I can sneak into Pearson Labs. It'd be easy enough to get in there. As long as I don't run into trouble, namely McKinley, I can grab the file with Pearl's passwords and leave."

"Are you out of your mind?" Derrick asked, his eyes wide. "You'll get yourself fucking killed."

"Or worse," Roane murmured. He stared at her curiously, as if seeing her for the first time.

Amid the Circs' arguments about the merits of her retrieving that data, Doc nudged her back onto the exam table and hooked her up to the rest of his wires monitoring everything but her bra size. This time he also shoved a damned IV into her arm, some saline solution to do what, she had no idea. Trying to pretend she didn't feel like Frankenstein's bride, she talked over Derrick's objections. As if he should care whether she risked her life. It was *her* life.

"Look, none of you wanted me here in the first place. There's no reason I shouldn't go back in there. Maybe something in that folder Doc wants so badly can help cure me of --" She bit back a gasp and arched uncontrollably as her back seized. Her muscles began cramping unmercifully.

"Shit. What's wrong with her?" Derrick yelled over the loud roaring inside her brain. "Doc, what the hell did you give her?"

"Exactly what she needed," she thought she heard Doc say before her world turned upside down.

She screamed as agony ripped through her body. Sabrina tried to push past it, to at least gain some control over herself, when she felt several pairs of hands holding her down. *Strapping her down, like the unfortunate female Circs in Pearl's subbasement. Watching them reject the change, even as they embraced the urge to kill, to feed, and to fuck again and again.*

Confused as past images mixed with her present ones, Sabrina cried out to the one person she instinctively knew would never hurt her. "Derrick!"

"I'm here, Sabrina. Come on, princess, hang on." He gripped her hand, and a part of her eased. She wouldn't come to harm with him here. The male would protect her. From the

others, if need be. Then she caught the scent of the alpha, a distinct amalgamation of all the Circs in this place, layered over Roane. He was the leader here, but Sabrina's beast recognized only Derrick, her mate. And it was high time she showed him just who was boss.

Chapter Eight

Derrick watched in awe as Sabrina began to *change*.

"Back away, *now*," Doc commanded, and they moved quickly.

In less than a minute, Sabrina tore Doc's wires and IV from her body. She ripped her clothes off, one glorious article at a time. Derrick was caught in an overwhelming lust and didn't hesitate to *change* with her, shucking his clothing in seconds before assuming his beastly form.

Hale and Roane, he noted, did the same.

"Doc, you'd better let us handle this," Hale rumbled, slightly smaller than Roane and Derrick, but no less powerful.

Doc left with a warning, "Remember, she's going to be a lot stronger than what you're used to. Be careful."

As if Derrick needed that reminder. Staring at the female before him, his beast took notice with a vengeance. His cock throbbed, his balls ached, and his fangs pierced his gums with ripping pain. He wanted so badly to bite her as he took her, to mark her finally as his.

"Shit, D, I think you're bigger than you were before."

Derrick was about to smack Hale when he realized Hale wasn't making some smart sexual reference. He was staring at Derrick's entire body, comparing him to Roane, who also took note.

"This isn't a competition," Roane growled. "The female's yours. No contest. But D, we have to establish some rules up front. You remember how Caitlyn took us all to bond us together? Well, I have a feeling your mate isn't going to go as easily. And without bonding to us, she won't belong. Kelly didn't need this, but Sabrina's a wild card."

Not used to hearing anyone referred to as his mate, Derrick missed what Roane said.

"You get me, bro?" Roane asked again, clenching his fists.

"We're going to fuck her into submission," Hale said bluntly. "And from the look of her, that's going to be easier said than done. You lucky bastard."

Derrick watched as Sabrina came into her own. She was much paler when human, but as she shifted, her skin grew to be a shade lighter than his own. "Beautiful," he murmured as she continued to *change*.

Her breasts looked fuller, her nipples a cocoa brown and growing harder as he stared. She snarled, drawing his attention to her face. Her proportions remained intact, though broadened. Her eyes were a deeper gray, the color of slate. Fangs peered over her full lower lip, and her pupils elongated.

Her torso expanded, bones popping and muscle stretching as she fully transformed. He could only imagine the agony, remembering how much it had hurt him the very first time. Her hair lengthened, as did her fingernails into sharp, pointed weapons.

Sabrina's toned body soon became larger, streamlined, and corded with strength. Thankfully, her tongue didn't look black, unlike the one mutant Circ they'd seen. Her skin tone stopped at light brown as well, not tar black like that monster's.

"Mine," she said as she stared at him, her voice octaves lower and sultry enough to make him wish he was inside her already.

"Easy, princess," Derrick said and took a step closer.

She jumped on him before he could blink and knocked him back into the wall. His ears were ringing and he saw double, before he realized Hale and Roane were advancing.

"Back off," he roared before Sabrina could do them any damage.

"The female needs to know her place," Roane argued. "And that's under me."

"Fuck you." Sabrina jumped away from Derrick and slashed out at Roane, nearly making contact. But Roane wasn't leader for nothing.

He and Hale leaped out of the way, then attacked and knocked her to the ground. Pinning her beneath them, they continued to fight her, suffering several wounds while Derrick watched, not knowing what to do.

His beast was conflicted. The desire to protect and claim his mate was strong, but so was his need to obey Roane.

"Get your ass down here," Roane said, panting. "Hale and I will hold her arms and legs; you get the rest of her. Claim her quick. We have to get her under control this first *change*."

Derrick understood, his hunger spiraling out of control. He'd had sex with her as a man, and it had been out of this world. Mating while as a beast... He shuddered with need.

Sabrina growled and threatened every other word, hissing and spitting until she saw Derrick. Then she ceased fighting so suddenly, she startled them all.

"Mine," she rasped, her eyes glued to Derrick's frame. As her gaze moved over him and centered on his groin, she licked her lips. "All mine."

"Let her go," Derrick ordered, barely aware when they released her. He was so damned hard, he hurt.

Falling to his knees, he covered her in seconds and prodded her slick sex with his fingers. His cock was so ready, he feared he'd explode as soon as he entered her.

"Now," she whispered and stared into his eyes as he slid inside her.

Aware of Roane and Hale watching his every move, Derrick's arousal grew. Sabrina didn't seem to mind it either. She moaned and grabbed Derrick tightly as he pushed all the way inside her.

"Fuck," he growled as he roughly took her.

"Yes, yes. More." She was as wild as he could have imagined, and her strength pleased him to no end. Even when he'd taken Caitlyn, during her first *change*, he'd tried to be careful. Derrick always had to watch himself with women. Before he'd joined Circe's Recruits, he'd been big. But as a Circ, he had tremendous power. Yet here in this female, he met his equal.

Derrick snarled at her when she gouged his back, but he didn't stop. If anything, he pounded her harder. He didn't see Roane or Hale but heard them groaning behind him and could only imagine what they were doing.

God, Sabrina fit him as if she'd been made for him. As he fucked her, her breasts swayed, those full globes so pretty, so brown and perfect, she made him ache. Not able to finish without leaving some mark, Derrick leaned down and bit her nipple, causing her to shriek as she came around him.

He felt her grip him tight around his cock and his body as he sucked her nipple, drawing a hint of her blood. She tasted spicier than she had before. More addicting.

And when she locked her legs around his waist and clenched around him like a vise, he completely lost it.

He released her breast and thrust twice more before exploding. He rode out his orgasm, coming harder than he ever had before. And just as he ended his climax, he heard Hale groan and felt something spatter on his back.

Sabrina's eyes widened as she sniffed, but before he could say anything, she tried to scramble out from under him, her rage directed over his shoulder.

Derrick barely managed to keep her under him, her movements stirring his lust to new heights. He chanced a look behind him to see Roane fucking Hale, who'd apparently already come over Derrick's back. Caught in the middle, Hale could do nothing but wait until Roane finished.

Sabrina pulled away from him, and Derrick felt her loss like a physical blow. Irritated, he snarled and latched on to her legs while Roane finished with Hale. A few more pumps

and he stilled, groaning his release. Sabrina continued to fight him, trying to swipe at Hale. Derrick held on, finally shoving her back down to the cold cement floor beneath him.

"Stop," he ordered.

"I don't want him marking you," she said as she squirmed free. With a burst of speed, she launched herself at Hale again but was intercepted by Roane, who tackled her to the ground. Hale and Derrick quickly joined him to subdue the troublesome Circ. Another fierce female. It seemed Circ women didn't come any other way.

Holding her throat in one hand, Roane snapped at Sabrina, "Hale's mine. Derrick's mine. You want Derrick? You pledge yourself to me first."

Sabrina cursed and hissed, but she couldn't free herself from Roane, Hale, *and* Derrick. Finally tiring herself out, she shook her long, black hair away from her face and glared at Roane. "He's mine."

"He's mine first," Roane corrected. Then, to Derrick's surprised pleasure, Roane stroked the side of Sabrina's face. A subtle sign of acceptance her beast apparently recognized, because she settled down. "You want him, you tie yourself to me. To us," he said, nodding at Hale.

With Roane and Hale holding her down by her arms and chest, and Derrick half sitting on her legs, she had nowhere to turn. But seeing her pinned down, submissive, stirred Derrick's desire once more. He could go for hours without tiring. Looking at Sabrina, he knew he'd go longer. He needed to fill her with his seed more than he needed to breathe. But more, he had to make her see she belonged to him. To the squad, yes, but specifically, to him.

"Is Caitlyn going to be okay with this?" Derrick asked, knowing Roane intended to fuck Sabrina to ensure her loyalty. The way he'd gotten his Circs' loyalty when they'd first undergone the *change*.

"We talked about it. She doesn't like it, but she knows it has to be done." Roane looked down at his massive cock, now erect once more. "This involves your mate," he said to Derrick. "You okay with it?"

"Hell, yeah," Hale answered without being asked. "This is fucking great."

"He was talking to me, dipshit. I'm good, Roane." Derrick was more than okay. He was aroused, being around so much sexual scent. To see his alpha take his mate... His beast wanted it now. He nodded. "Do it."

Roane looked down at Sabrina. "This is the way it's going to be. I don't give a shit how strong they made you. *I* lead this group. You need to give your loyalty to *me*."

Confusion flashed in her eyes.

"He's going to fuck you, princess. Him and Hale," Derrick explained, more than ready to watch them take her. To accept her. But her submission would be his and his alone. "They're going to share their seed. But you'll allow it only because *I* allow it. Understand?" He forced his power to shine in his eyes, to show his mate his strength would more than

match her own. No matter what Pearl had done to her, Derrick's mate *would not* overwhelm him, not sexually, unless he gave her permission.

Sabrina jerked at the men on top of her, but there was no power behind it, merely a defiant gesture that had Hale grinning.

"I really do like her more and more."

She bared her teeth at him, and he retaliated by nipping her throat.

"Don't bleed her," Derrick growled, amending his command when both Roane and Hale, his alpha and beta, glared back at him. "*Please* don't bleed her."

"On your hands and knees," Roane ordered her.

The men backed off Sabrina, waiting for the slightest sign of defiance.

She got to her feet and tossed her head. Her eyes sparkled, and her lips shone with the slick shine of her saliva. "Make me."

Roane swore and tackled her again. But Sabrina put up little fight. In seconds, Roane had her on her hands and knees. Between her legs, he thrust home, moaning as he did so. "Fuck, she's hot."

Hale knelt in front of her face. He tilted her chin up and prodded her lips with his dick. "Open up, Sabrina. And no teeth," he warned. "Drink it all down. The faster you take us, the faster we can get you back to your mate." He groaned as she sucked voraciously. "Damn, D. I think she wants you bad."

Derrick stood to the side, growing more aroused with every suck, every thrust, and every moan uttered by men he considered his brothers. Sabrina looked so incredible, her dark body sandwiched between the men he would give his life for. Watching them take her reminded him of his own initiation into the Circ mating heat.

And it was just as erotic, if not more so, to watch their pleasure, even as he readied to partake in it again.

Hale was no longer letting Sabrina suck him off, he was actively fucking her mouth. Roane clenched her hips and plunged into her with rapid strokes, his ass clenching as he neared his end. Hale groaned and came, holding Sabrina's hair as he filled her mouth.

Roane panted. "I'm close. Now you'll take me, Sabrina." Derrick could feel the shifting energy in the room center over Roane. "You'll take all of me." He pulled out of her. "Turn around and swallow it."

When she turned on her hands and knees, Derrick pounced. Roane pushed between her lips and Derrick shoved himself into her wet, warm pussy and stayed there. She moaned and sucked harder, her cheeks hollowing as she took Roane to bliss.

Derrick forced himself to be still, watching with anticipation as Roane tensed and groaned, coming down her throat.

"That's it." Roane stroked her cheek, and Hale moved closer to rub circles over her back. "I'm not sure if we'll still need Zack and Ace to finish the bonding. That was pretty intense." He sighed with satisfaction and slowly pulled out.

Derrick's beast sensed a faint *click* as the power in the room shifted from the alpha and beta to settle over Derrick and Sabrina.

"Better?" he leaned over to ask.

"Yeah," she breathed, nuzzling her cheek against his.

"We're done here," Roane said and pushed Hale toward the door. "Come on. Give the newlyweds some time."

"I'll try. But all this coupling is leaving me the odd man out. I need to get out of the compound for a while."

"Go. I'm going to find Caitlyn and get this fucking need out of my system. Nice pair, aren't they?" The glance Roane threw Derrick and Sabrina was blazing hot.

"Yeah." Hale swore and changed back to his human form. Roane did the same.

"Thanks," Derrick called after them.

"Our pleasure," Hale said with a smile before closing the door behind them.

Finally, they had the room to themselves.

My mate, he tested internally, pulling out, only to slam into her again.

She moaned his name, and he pulled out completely.

"No, don't go."

"I'm not going anywhere, princess," he rasped, positioning himself at her anus. He pushed forward slowly, secreting more oil at the tip of his cock. As if his body knew what it needed, his excitement lubed up his cock until he slid easily inside her.

Changed, Sabrina accepted Derrick's penetration, though she was still tight in that virgin hole.

"God, Derrick. That feels so good."

"Oh, oh yeah," Derrick said and grunted when he seated himself fully inside her. "I'm going to own you before the night is through, Sabrina. You're mine," he repeated and began fucking her.

The scent of his brothers lingered over them. It was enough to ensure her loyalty, to strengthen her bond to the squad. But this claiming was about Derrick and Sabrina. His mate needed to know where she belonged. As he took her, he stroked the pads of his fingers over her back, in love with the firm yet soft skin of her ass. Her *changed* frame screamed sex. Built to endure and more sensitive to touch, Sabrina would feel everything he did to her a dozen times over. Derrick intended to make her come so hard she passed out, just as soon as he found what he needed.

Her surrender.

"You belong to me," he panted as he claimed her. "This is *my* ass. *My* pussy. *My* woman," he growled and sank his claws into her waist.

She pushed her ass into him. "Fuck me."

"I am. Every inch of you belongs to me. I want to hear you say it."

"No." Sabrina dared challenge him. Bent over and his for the taking, and she wanted to fight?

"Fine." He snarled at her and swore, then gave her the ride of her life. He came hard, filling her ass with warm seed, but he didn't stop. He fucked her again, filling her twice more before he paused to take a break.

"You're mine, dammit. Say it."

Sabrina shook. He could feel her body trembling with the need to experience the same bliss he was still recovering from.

"Derrick," she moaned.

He pulled out and shoved back inside. "*Say it.*" Reaching around her, he found the tight bud between her legs and pinched.

She screamed at him, on the verge of climax, and he backed off. "Please," she whispered, her head bowed in a position of submission that nearly undid him. He had his cock buried in her ass, his fingers over her clit, and she bent her head, assuming obedience. "I'm yours."

Derrick roared and squeezed her clit, groaning when she came and clenched him tight, squeezing her ass along with her vaginal walls.

"Fuck," he said thickly and spent yet again, leaving her a mess. The room smelled like sex. But more, it smelled like Sabrina immersed in *him*.

Sabrina's orgasm lasted for several moments, and while she gathered her wits, he pulled out and stood on shaky legs.

Changing back, he waited for her to do the same. Still on her hands and knees, she trembled and slowly shifted back into the form of a woman. Derrick lifted her in his arms and carried her to the lavatory in silence. He washed them both in the large shower stall built to accommodate Circs. Throughout it all, Sabrina said nothing. But her gaze lingered on him, puzzled yet satisfied, as if she wasn't sure how to feel.

"Turn around," he said in a guttural voice as he soaped his mate.

His mate.

Holy shit. That can't be right. A moment of panic intruded, and Sabrina stilled. More concerned with her than his own worries that could wait, Derrick ignored his panic, kissed the top of her head, and continued to wash her. His beast was in heaven, feeling soapy breasts and warm skin under his palms. *Finally*, it snarled. *My female.*

"You okay?" he forced himself to ask, prepared to hear whatever she'd say.

To his surprise, she nodded shyly and kept her face averted away from him.

Sabrina? Shy?

He nudged her chin, forcing her to meet his stare. "You going to obey me now, princess? Have I finally fucked the fight out of you?" He followed his comment with a soft kiss, a reminder that he could be gentle too. When he met her eyes again, he was pleased to see daggers in her gaze.

"Please. You were good, I'll grant you that. But don't get a fat head over it."

Derrick laughed and hugged her tight, shocked at the contentment stealing over him. A feisty Sabrina made his head spin and his world right. Go figure, but he liked her a bit mean. It meant she was okay, and that he could stop worrying about her, if only for a while.

They still had to fix the mutation inside her. But if anyone could help her, it was Doc.

"Yeah? Well, you weren't so bad yourself. But I'm not sure I came enough inside you." He frowned down at her. "That mouth is looking awfully empty."

She tried to scowl but couldn't hide her smile. "You wish. You're going to have to work to earn one of those, hard-ass," she teased, before her expression sobered.

"What's wrong?"

"About what happened in there." She blushed, her face turning bright red while the shower rained beads of water over her shoulders and back. "I can't explain it, but I feel different now."

He nodded. "You needed to bond. It's a Circ thing. The sex pulls us closer together. You don't have to do them every time," he warned, not wanting her to like it so much that she wanted them again. Truth be told, now that their group encounter had ended, Derrick didn't want to share her again with anyone.

"I don't want to. I can barely tolerate *you*," she grumbled. "I just hope Caitlyn won't try to rip my head off."

Good point. "Roane had to bond with you. Now you're a part of the squad, so to speak." His beast was delighted, but Derrick still had doubts. He felt a connection to Sabrina he'd never felt with another woman. But he didn't trust it, nor did he trust her 100 percent. He admitted he now believed much of what she'd told them. Her facts about Pearson Labs made sense, as did her stories about what she'd seen inside Pearl's laboratories. But something inside him wouldn't let him surrender everything to her.

Hell, I still don't really know her, he argued with his beast, who wanted to lie down and give her everything. His trust, his heart, his soul...

"So, uh, does that mean I have to go through all this with the others too?"

Zack and Ace. Would they need to take Sabrina as well?

"I don't know."

His answer bothered her, clearly. She frowned and shook her head. "But Kelly --"

"Is a Circ. She understands better than you think. Besides, I know she wants to trust you, but until you've bonded with the whole group, I don't know that she will."

"What about Caitlyn and Kelly?" Sabrina grimaced. "I don't have to mess around with them, too, do I?"

Derrick got hard at the thought. "Hmm, I'll see what I can do."

She slugged him in the stomach, enough to make him bend and cough to catch his breath.

"Or not," he added. "I think so long as you bond through the males, you'll be fine. I don't remember Kelly fucking Roane or Hale. But then, her mates are pretty weird."

"Oh?"

"They, ah..." How did he tell her they liked dick as much as pussy? Considering he occasionally fucked Hale and had done the squad, how could he differentiate between his sexual needs as his beast and those as a man?

"They like each other? I know. Kelly's mated to two men, who are also mated to each other. Pearl hadn't counted on that, but it did make for interesting reading." She gave him a speculative glance. "I assume you've done your share of 'bonding.'"

He flushed, though he'd thought himself beyond embarrassment over needs that were natural to the man -- the beast -- he was now. "I, well --"

"Relax, Derrick. I understand all about the mating heat." She scowled. "I just did three guys, remember?"

"Right." He cleared his throat, not wanting to ask, but he had to know. "It doesn't freak you out at all? That I was with Hale and the others?"

"Truthfully? No." She closed her eyes and let the water sluice over her hair.

"That's it? Just no?"

"What do you want me to say? That it's hot? That the thought of you fucking the others, of being handled by a big, strong man, is turning me on all over again, even though my body is completely worn-out?"

Startled at the passion in her voice, Derrick didn't know what to say.

"So now that we have that out of the way, when's dinner?" She blinked up at him, a sly grin on her face. "You're cute when you're embarrassed, you know that?"

"Cute?" he growled. Derrick wasn't cute. He was mean, abrasive, a hard-ass who liked to play the odds. Yet watching her, this woman his beast claimed as his mate, Derrick wasn't sure how much he was willing to risk to hold on to her. Because if he let Sabrina all the way in, she'd take his heart with her when she left. "Shit. Let's dry off, so I can feed you."

His heart leaped when she smiled at him, and a frisson of doom snaked over him. *Trouble all the way, from the first moment I laid eyes on her. Now what the hell am I going to do about Sabrina?*

Chapter Nine

Zack and Ace eyed her warily throughout dinner. Kelly and Doc seemed oblivious to the undercurrents in the dining room. Roane, Hale, and Derrick tried to act as if nothing had happened. Caitlyn, however, was absent from the table.

Sabrina felt like a home wrecker, despite the fact that she'd had no control over herself. She'd been denying her beast for weeks. Once it broke loose, she'd had no choice but to follow where it led. That foreign part of her still struggled for dominance. It was much more powerful now that she'd finally undergone a transformation. Scared, she concentrated on mentally and physically locking it tightly inside her. More than once, she saw one of the others watching her with concern. She refused to show her anxiety, and as the meal progressed without incident, tension around the table eased.

Still, no one mentioned Caitlyn's absence.

Sabrina finished eating, her surprisingly large appetite sated.

"Damn. You eat a lot for someone so little," Derrick murmured.

"I'm not little. You're just big." She looked up and found him right there in her personal space. The old Sabrina might have bristled, but the beast inside her thrilled at her *mate* so near. And that was another thing that bothered her, something she'd been trying to avoid thinking about. All that mate talk. She knew what it meant. Did Derrick and the others actually consider her and Derrick mated?

"You look troubled. Is everything okay, Sabrina?" Doc asked.

She forced herself to look away before she drowned in Derrick's gaze. "Sure, yeah. I'm done." She stood and took her plate to the sink, wanting a moment to herself. Clenching the kitchen counter, she studied her short fingernails, remembering how her hands had looked only an hour ago. Long fingers, thicker and rougher, ending in needle-sharp, inch-long

points. Sensing no one around, she gave in to her curiosity and watched her hand grow, right there in front of her eyes.

The feeling was both heady and scary. Finally, Sabrina had an ability that put her on equal footing with the Circs, yet there was more writhing just beneath the surface of her skin. She sensed danger to herself and Derrick's friends should she let it go.

Not good, not good at all.

She left the kitchen and joined the others. "Thanks for dinner." She cleared her throat, awkward in the sudden silence that descended. "I'm, ah, just going to go back to my room."

"I'll take you." Derrick started to stand.

"I know where it is. I'll be fine." She kept her voice mild, but her irritation must have shown.

Derrick exchanged a look with Roane, who shrugged. "O-kay." He slowly sat back down, a frown on his face as he studied her.

She left the group and turned the corner, looking at the junction of two hallways. Instead of heading toward her room, she followed Caitlyn's scent. Stopping outside of the room Roane and Caitlyn used when they stayed in the house, she paused and took a deep breath. Before she could knock, Caitlyn called out, "You might as well come in."

Sabrina entered and shut the door behind her. Caitlyn sat propped up in bed reading a book, but Sabrina had a feeling the woman hadn't turned a page in a while. Her hands clenched the book's edges. Her nails were sharp, threatening, and lengthening as she watched.

Sabrina's inner beast warned her to be cautious, but Sabrina couldn't let this go. She felt as if she'd wronged Caitlyn by being with Roane, and she needed to make amends.

"Just say what you came to say." Caitlyn lifted her head, staring at Sabrina with a curious detachment.

"Look, this isn't easy for me."

"I know, it's *really scary*," Caitlyn mimicked, further reminding Sabrina that she'd taken advantage of Caitlyn when trying to escape.

"Hell." Sabrina leaned back against the door. "You can't hold that against me. I had to try to escape. I don't belong here, and I think you know that."

Caitlyn said nothing.

"As far as this afternoon. Well, I feel...closer to Derrick, I guess you could say. I didn't want to get together with the others. At least, the human part of me didn't. I couldn't control myself, and Roane wouldn't let me go until we finalized things." *God, can my face get any redder?*

Caitlyn stared a moment longer, then sighed and rubbed her eyes. "I don't blame you for the bonding thing." She took a deep breath. "I had to go through something similar when

I first arrived. Roane gave me details of what he and you, er, what happened between you all.”

Sabrina hadn't felt this awkward since her last real date years ago. “Yeah. About that. There's no chance at all I'll conceive a baby with him or anything. Nothing we did could... You understand what I'm saying.” Which made her think about the many times she'd had unprotected sex with Derrick. “Hell.”

“What?”

“Derrick and I, we --” She suddenly realized what Caitlyn meant about “going through something similar.” “Are you telling me you slept with Derrick?”

Caitlyn flushed and defensively crossed her arms over her chest. “I told you. I had a similar joining experience when I got here.”

Jealousy flared, but then something curious happened. The beast within her tamped down the emotion, acknowledging Caitlyn's right as the alpha's mate. The notion that Caitlyn had had sex with Derrick *before* Sabrina entered the picture helped as well. “So, you were with Derrick and the others?”

“Yes. Do I need to paint a picture for you? I had sex with the guys. *All of them*. It was the only way Roane and Doc could think of to cement our bonding. And it worked.”

Sabrina considered that, trying to put it all into a scientific perspective. Scientists didn't blush. Scientists didn't get jealous. And scientists didn't fall in love with distracting, dominant Circes. “Makes sense. Your pheromones must have thrown them for a real loop. As Roane's mate, they most likely saw you as an extension of him.”

Caitlyn nodded. “I've never spoken about this with Kelly, though I'm sure she has an idea of what happened before she and the guys mated. I'd appreciate it if you wouldn't mention it.”

“Trust me, I didn't want to talk about this with you.” Sabrina grimaced. “I can't believe I even had anything to talk about. I'm not a very sexual person. Not a lot of boyfriends.” *Try not any*. “I didn't have the time or energy for relationships while I was trying to figure out what to do about Pearl.”

They stared at one another for a moment.

“Have a seat.” Caitlyn scooted over, and Sabrina took the tentatively offered olive branch.

“Thanks.” Oh, hell, now she really had to apologize. “I'm not sorry for trying to leave this place, but I am sorry for choking you the other day. Never thought I'd hear myself say *that*.” She shared a grin with Caitlyn, and a subtle kinship grew between them. “Believe it or not, everything I told you that day in the labs was true. I've had a hard time trusting you all. Not because you're Circ, but because everything and everyone I've trusted since joining Project Dawn has been a bust. The military, Pearl, and then the government turned out to be skunks in disguise. Trust me when I say that Pearl's Circes are nothing less than monsters.”

She barely contained a shudder, recalling Simon Dunn as he forced himself on an unwilling, murderous female in the throes of conversion. Of the breeding program Pearl had set in place, the malformed mutants attacked anything they could get their hands on. What they'd done to that one poor, unfortunate female...

"You're all so different, so in tune with your beasts," Sabrina said out loud to change the subject. But as she said it, she considered what that might mean to her.

"It's natural by now. After so many years of being Circ, the guys are used to it. I was born with this 'condition.' Working with it makes it easier to bear."

"Maybe for you." Sabrina swallowed around a lump of fear. "Caitlyn, I'm not like you. I'm something else. Those bad things Pearl was creating? I'm one of them."

"No, you're not."

Caitlyn's defense brought a knot of sorrow to her throat, because Sabrina knew she didn't deserve it. "I wish to God I wasn't, but it's there, inside me. I'm not right, Caitlyn. And I'm worried."

"Did you tell Doc?"

"He knows." Sabrina sighed. "He's trying, but I don't think he's going to be able to help me. Now that my beast has been freed, it's growing fiercer all the time. Derrick..."

"Derrick what?" Caitlyn asked in a softer voice.

"Derrick says it'll work out, and I want to believe him. I feel differently about him than the others." She watched Caitlyn's reaction. "They called us mates."

"You know what that means?"

"I think so. Pearl used it to denote the ability to procreate between pairs. But with Derrick, it feels like a lot more. There's an emotional aspect to this I hadn't considered." *Especially after what I witnessed in the labs. I never would have thought the animal inside me could lo -- like --another so much.*

Caitlyn nodded. "There is. Derrick won't be an easy man to love."

Who said anything about love? Am I that obvious? Sabrina had it on the tip of her tongue to ask, but she waited, wanting to hear more.

"His mom never really accepted him, the *changed* him. And from what Roane told me, his fiancée cheated on him big-time. Broke his heart, though Derrick would never admit it. He's not a ladies' man. I mean, he has sex a lot, sure." Caitlyn colored, and Sabrina suppressed another surge of jealousy. *Derrick used to have sex with others a lot. No longer. He's mine,* her beast roared. "My point is that he doesn't trust easily. He tolerates Kelly and me because of his bond with the others."

"He speaks of you with respect. I know he likes you both."

"Yeah, he does now. But he's always been standoffish. The bonding we celebrated changed that a little. With you, though, he's different. I can tell."

Sabrina warmed inside, then wondered why the hell Derrick's affection meant so much to her. "This 'bonding' we shared. Will it calm the intense rush I get whenever I'm around him? Because I feel more deeply, and I think it's because of my new Circ hormones."

"Do you still feel a need to get lucky with the squad?"

"No. Definitely not with Roane or Hale. That was totally a onetime deal. And watching the way Zack and Ace look at me, like I'm one step away from being a convicted criminal, puts my back up. But Derrick's different."

"Because he's your mate. Sorry, Sabrina. I don't think that's going to go away anytime soon."

"Great." Sabrina sighed. "I'm turning into a monster that's crushing on a guy who's unattainable. Perfect. As if I needed one more crazy thing to handle." She stood, needing to think about what Caitlyn had said. "I appreciate our talk. And seriously, I have no urge to make a move on Roane *ever* again. Except maybe to slap him if he takes the last slice of pie Diego promised to make for tomorrow night's dessert."

Caitlyn smiled, a genuine show of amusement that finally eased Sabrina's misplaced guilt.

Sabrina nodded at the door. "You should go out there. They're missing you at dinner."

Caitlyn stood. "Maybe I could eat."

Sabrina left her with a good night and returned to her room. Deliberately locking the door behind her, she undressed and settled into bed, aware sleep would be a long time coming tonight. Derrick, as usual, refused to leave her thoughts.

Love. Why would Caitlyn mention love in conjunction with a basic physical attraction? Lust and love were forever being confused between sexual partners. So what that Sabrina preferred Derrick's company? He was the lesser of the evils around here, or so she kept telling herself. Naturally she found him physically pleasing. Derrick Packard was a handsome man. Another fact. Just because she liked the way they interacted meant nothing more than that a friendship, albeit an odd one, was developing between them.

Unfortunately, all the common sense in the world couldn't cure this warm, mushy feeling she had whenever she spent time with him. Her tie to Derrick went deeper than the sexual. He felt "right," whatever that meant. Her beast pushed her toward him, certainly, but Sabrina the woman wanted just as much to spend time with Derrick the man.

She liked his outlandish comments, the way he bickered with his friends, his crazy bets, and the way he looked at her when he didn't think she was watching. Oh yeah, she had it bad. But for the first time in her life, she had the feeling the object of her affection returned her interest. And what was she going to do about *that*?

If her suspicions proved correct, it wouldn't be long before she began *changing* into a raging, out-of-control beast. She might hurt someone accidentally.

She might hurt Derrick.

Sabrina groaned and closed her eyes, wishing she could leave her problems far behind as easily as blocking out the light. Because no matter what form she eventually settled into, her life wouldn't be the same without Derrick by her side.

Derrick pulled his head back from Caitlyn's door and moved swiftly out of sight down the corridor. He rejoined the others moments before Caitlyn entered the room. A subtle nod at Roane told his leader all was well.

As Caitlyn made small talk and the mood in the dining room lightened, Derrick pondered Sabrina's conversation with Caitlyn. She hadn't seemed overly fond of their mating, which offended him deep down. Oh, he wasn't happy with it either, but he had good reason. What the hell did Sabrina have against him?

The sex between them was killer crazy. And in a good, my-head's-going-to-blow-off kind of way. Their rapport had eased the many days they'd spent together. He was abrasive; she maintained that acerbic wit, and everyone else avoided them whenever possible. A win-win in his book.

He never would have pegged Sabrina as the romantic type, but she preferred romantic comedies over action-adventure movies. Her reading material spoke volumes as well. Self-help books on top of the latest romance paperbacks. The woman was a bad date waiting to happen, except Derrick couldn't envision her with any man but himself. What other guy would tolerate her lapses into "scientific-ese" when she conferred with Doc? What self-respecting man would allow a female to talk to him the way she did? She called him "genius," "he-man," and other sarcastic endearments with a twist of those full lips. Had she not been so worried, he'd have fucked that nonsense right out of her. But he held back, knowing she had a lot on her mind.

Unfortunately, he worried right along with her...when he wasn't jerking off, thinking about her. Even Kelly's wacko hormones had no effect on him. Only Sabrina and her wild scent called to him on every level. If Doc hadn't warned him that sex with her might hinder her progress, he'd have been fucking her every night for the past two weeks. God, their bonding encounter had been perfection made real. Remembrance of Sabrina's beast had him hard in two seconds flat.

Derrick ran a hand over his scalp, trying to control his lust, when a sense of foreboding stole his focus. Instinct told him to take note. *Something was wrong with Sabrina*. He was on his feet and mumbling his excuses before hurrying to her room.

He knocked on the door, surprised when she opened it. Derrick pushed his way inside and closed the door behind him, subtly locking it behind his back. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know." Sabrina shivered. Her pupils elongated, then returned to normal. Her skin tone varied between pale white and light brown, striping in odd patterns not hidden by the large sleep shirt she wore.

"Looks like you need to *change* again." He couldn't help anticipating the sight of her beast. She was so damned pretty. "Let it go, princess. I'm here to help."

"I want to, but I'm afraid."

"The pain will ease up the more times you do it. You need to get used to it."

"That's not it." She bit her lower lip, and he wanted to soothe the sting with a kiss. "Derrick, you have to help me."

"I will."

He stepped closer, and she put out an arm to hold him back. "I need you to tie me up."

"You want me to *what*?"

"Tie me up. You don't understand. It's coming closer and closer. It's more than my 'inner beast,' Derrick. It's that monster Pearl created. It's growing inside me." She looked on the verge of tears, and the lust in Derrick quickly transformed to tenderness.

"It'll be okay," he said gruffly, hugging her to him. "If you want me to tie you up, I will. But you'll need to *change* first. If you don't, you'll just tear through any binding, and the rope burns will hurt before they heal."

She chuckled and wiped a tear away. "You've done this before, hmm? Kinky, Packard. I should have guessed."

"You have no idea, baby." He smiled down at her. "We went through a lot of experiments with control when we first *changed*. Restraints can work, but it's really more about learning how much you can control yourself." He sighed. "I knew it was too good to be true that you'd be into bondage."

Sabrina seemed less bothered by his humor, which tempered his own anxiety. Her happiness translated into his own lately. Despite not wanting to be so attached to her, he couldn't help feeling what she did. Instinct, his beast, hell, call it twin destiny, but Derrick literally "felt" his mate's emotions. Doc had no idea what to make of it, though most of the other couples seemed to experience the same.

"Okay, you wait here for me. Don't *change*, don't do anything more than sit on that bed. I'll be right back." He waited for her to acknowledge him, pleased when she breathed deeply and nodded.

Derrick raced through the house to his room. Finding the small bag he needed, he returned to her, ignoring the grins and knowing looks his friends shot him as they passed in the halls.

He knocked once before entering and locked the door behind him. He found her sitting where he'd left her. She glanced up at him with dark gray eyes and smiled, exposing the glint of a sharp fang. The scent of sex filled the room, her pheromones binding him tighter than the damned restraints in his bag.

"Shit, princess. Give me a minute, okay?"

She rose and ripped off her sleep shirt, leaving her body bare.

Derrick moved like a man possessed. He fastened the restraints to the four corners of the iron bedposts, sure from experience they would hold her down. He turned to Sabrina once more and stripped out of his clothes.

“*Change* with me,” he growled, his voice lowering as nature took its course.

Her *change* was slower and more painful. She couldn’t hide her muted cries from him. He waited, watching her with stunning clarity. With his senses enhanced, all of Sabrina came to him. Her scent, the sight of her, the soft, sexy cries of pain and pleasure as she grew accustomed to her new skin. In this frame, she reached the bottom of his chin but remained slender, feminine.

“So pretty,” she murmured in that husky alto as she stared up at him. She stepped closer and cupped his balls in her hand, squeezing with enough pressure to promise a danger that enticed him all the more. “So mine.”

“That’s right, princess. *Mine*. Now get on the damned bed and spread yourself for me.”

She purred and turned her back, showing a resolute trust. Her long, black hair curled over her hips like tendrils of silk. She knelt on the sturdy frame and crawled on all fours, showcasing that glorious ass. Glancing over her shoulder, she flashed him a heated gaze that centered on his erection.

Resisting the urge to mount and fuck her right then, he growled another warning and watched her slowly fall to her back. He tied her up in no time, making sure the leather straps were tight but not too tight.

When finished, he stared down at the picture lying on the bed. Spread-eagled in an X, Sabrina looked anything but submissive as she challenged him to tame her. The look in her eyes promised pleasure if he was man -- or beast -- enough to take it. He advanced, prepared to play with her until she screamed. And then he sensed it. That darkness she worried about flashed through her eyes.

“It’s there,” she warned.

“I know. I guess I’ll just have to beat it out of you.”

She narrowed her gaze, and he smiled, relishing this opportunity that had landed in his lap.

“Or maybe I’ll bite it out of you. Whatever I feel like doing, I’ll do. About time you realize who you belong to.” He sat down next to her and grabbed her hair, hard. “Not Roane, not Hale, not Pearl, McKinley, or anyone the fuck else. You’re *mine*, princess. Now, it’s time to show you.”

Chapter Ten

Sabrina forced herself to breathe deeply and contain the monster threatening to break loose. She longed for a return of her inner beast. It was wild and rough, but pure. And it loved Derrick. The monster didn't like him, and that worried her. Derrick thought he'd controlled her, but in truth, he'd only scratched the surface of her strength the other day. She'd been so in lust, she'd have crawled on all fours to feel him inside her. And her inner beast would do anything for the man she'd decided would be her mate. But since their bonding, the darkness inside Sabrina had grown. Hell, it didn't even like her warning him.

Her monster, as she thought of it, wanted pain. It wanted death and violence, hungers that she didn't think sex could assuage. Derrick, for all his dominance, wasn't a brutal man. He had violent tendencies, but at his core, he was a decent human being. This *thing* inside her needed blood. It needed to harm someone else, to kill.

"I don't think you're paying attention." Derrick shook his head, his eyes almost black as he studied her.

His muscles looked huge, shadows of his definition making him seem even larger. His chest was twice as broad as hers, his legs more massive, more muscular and firm. His thick cock was already moist, though she didn't think he'd need the natural oil he secreted. She was already wet from the scent of him.

He climbed on top of her and thrust inside. The woman wanted to sigh with happiness, the beast wanted to purr with delight, pleased at being claimed again. But the monster pushed them aside. It demanded more. The tender touch of Derrick's hands bothered her. The sweeping feel of his cock brought pleasure only when he accidentally pushed too hard.

Which scared the hell out of her.

As if sensing something different about her, Derrick stopped. "Sabrina?"

She wanted to tell him how she felt, but she couldn't. Instead, she smiled and beckoned him closer. "Come here." She licked her lips, thrilled when he shifted, his cock huge inside her.

He leaned closer, and she struck. Biting the muscle of his upper shoulder, she sank her teeth into him and sucked, craving his blood.

Derrick didn't move for a moment, allowing her actions. He started pumping again, pistoning inside her with more and more force.

The wildness within her subsided enough that her fangs retracted, and Derrick yanked his head back, furious.

She wanted to apologize, but that inner darkness loved this part of him. Turning her head, she bared her neck, waiting. He didn't disappoint and bit hard. The minute he sucked, he came, shuddering inside her.

He let go of her neck and leaned up, and she saw the wound in his shoulder had already healed.

No more blood. No more pain. Frowning, she yanked at her restraints again while the sane part of her fought for control.

"Derrick, I'm sorry," she said in a strangled voice. Dammit, she couldn't speak! "Sorry I couldn't do more damage," some part of her ended with a demonic laugh.

He didn't say anything, just stared at her. His cock remained hard, and the monster approved of the way he'd used it and his fangs.

Oh, God. Was this turning Derrick on? Was he really into pain and brutality? Sabrina tried to free herself from the fugue turning her into something she didn't want to be. But then she fell under the weight of that angry cloud and could only share in the monster's experience.

Without a word, Derrick withdrew from her and left the bed. He returned with something in his fist. He walked right up to her, leaned down, and sucked on one nipple, then the other, alternating between the two.

The suddenness of his action surprised her, and she squirmed as heat rushed to her sex. *Changed*, her nipples were extremely sensitive to touch. He left one nipple, and the brief flare of pain that followed made no sense until she realized he'd clipped something to it. A golden alligator clip surrounded one nipple and then another clamped over her other nipple, linked together by a thin chain. Derrick stood back to eye his handiwork.

"Oh, now, that's beautiful." He licked his lips, and the sight of his fangs made her purr with arousal. "The fun we're going to have..."

Kneeling on the bed, he positioned himself between her legs. He latched on to her clit and sucked hard before biting down with his teeth. The pleasure before the pain shocked her enough to mentally break free from the monster. Sabrina fought back, testing her bonds, not

sure she liked where she sensed this playtime was headed. The monster not only liked it but welcomed it and took charge once more.

"Go ahead. Struggle. Those were made specifically for Circes, by a friend of Doc's who's into bondage. Fight it, princess. Show me your strength. Then I'll show you mine." He rose to his knees and stroked his cock. She wanted to suck him, to bite him and listen to him howl in pain.

"Pull hard," he breathed, yanking his shaft. "Let the restraints chafe your wrists and ankles. A little pain's good for the soul."

The monster relished the thought, and she tugged harder, burning her limbs.

"Yeah, nice." Derrick walked on his knees over her until he stopped with the tip of his cock an inch from her lips. "Now, I want you to open that mouth."

She did so without question, wanting to watch him squirm as she took control back from the arrogant male.

"You bite me, and I'll sedate you," he said. "I'm not kidding." He held a syringe to her neck, and she wondered where the hell that had come from. The monster didn't want to leave, as it would when she *changed* back. So it kept silent and nodded.

"Watch me," Derrick said as he slid the head of his shaft between her lips, then pulled it out before she could suck him. "I'm going to fuck your mouth. Don't close your lips over me. Open your mouth wide. Let me scrape those teeth," he said in a gravelly voice.

The monster liked this side of Derrick. His danger she respected, but this affection for pain aroused her. She waited, wishing he would turn around and touch her while he played in her mouth. Tasting Derrick was a pleasure in itself. His rich blood fed that burning hunger that throbbed inside her. She hadn't thought she'd like it, but being bound and helpless while he fucked her made her oblivious to everything but him. Centered on the desire overriding her system, everything else but Derrick faded from existence.

Derrick shoved his dick to the back of her throat. Her monster's form allowed him to go all the way in without a responding gag reflex, but the foreign sensation of being stuffed and unable to breathe for a moment thrilled her.

"That's it. Let me fuck that mouth." His growl drove her crazy. She could not only feel his desire, she could hear it as well. "But I'm not going to come, not yet. I just want to show you what I can do if I want." He pushed harder over her teeth and groaned. "That little graze probably bled me a split second before I healed. You like that, princess? You like taking me in your mouth?"

The thought that she'd injured him excited her. Derrick's broken breathing told her how much he liked it. Hmm, there was more to Packard than she'd suspected.

"You love this, don't you?" He reached behind him and thrust a finger inside her. "You're dripping wet because of me." He glared, and the monster sensed he looked right at

her. "Don't ever forget that. *I* make you wet, not the others, not Pearl or McKinley," he seethed. "*Me*."

He pulled out and shifted, turning around on top of her so that his sac rested above her mouth, his cock aimed at her breasts. "Suck me while I come on your skin. I'm going to mark you."

The monster wanted this claiming. Despite the restraints, she sensed Packard's inner strength, surprised it was indeed a match for hers. It dawned on her that he must have let go of the syringe, that she could hurt him if she wanted to. But the monster needed more. Packard's harsh beast refused to let her take advantage.

He squeezed her breasts and tugged on the chain, making her wheeze in glorious pain.

"I said to suck me. *Now*." He released one nipple from the clip, then let it snap around her flesh again. The agony was orgasmic.

The monster moaned her release as she licked and sucked him, wondering if he'd give her the same satisfaction again. Soon lost in his taste, she groaned when he pushed his cock down between her breasts, pinning down the chain. It couldn't be comfortable for him, but his erratic breathing increased.

"That's it," he rasped as he ground into her sternum. The chain rubbed her uncomfortably, and she relished the beads of blood that slicked over her flesh. The monster's power grew as she settled into the place Sabrina's beast should have been. She arched her hips, wishing he'd bite her clit. She wanted to tell him so, but she couldn't when he shoved his ball sac deeper into her mouth. She nicked him just a little with a fang, to see what he would do, and he slapped her between her legs.

Heat gathered in her clit, the stinging slap turning her on like nothing had before. Crazed with lust, she sucked harder, alternating her mouth between each of his tight balls. He pushed his cock between her breasts even faster. He slapped her pussy again and again, grinding into her face and making it hard to breathe.

He suddenly jerked and came in silence, hot jets of seed spattering over her belly. Then he bent over to suck her clit, his fangs teasing with the promise of delicious pain.

Their oddly positioned sixty-nine had her on the verge of climax before he pulled that magical mouth away and knelt over her face, putting distance between them.

She cursed him and pulled harder on her restraints. "*Fuck*. Why did you stop?"

"Because I can." He levered off her and scowled. "What's wrong, *mate*? Did you forget who's in control?" He pulled her head up by her hair, the pain making her eyes water.

"You are," she breathed. "So strong."

Weakness invaded her limbs, and her head spun as Derrick quickly mounted her. He stared into her eyes and rammed hard inside her. Then he put his hands around her throat and began to squeeze.

"You need it rough, don't you?" he asked, taking her without mercy. His invasion stabbed as he slid through the soft flesh toward her womb. "I'll fuck that darkness out of you. *She's mine*," he snarled, staring through a haze of rage into her eyes.

He knows me. He sees me, the monster thought in wonder and fell in love with the Circ on the spot. She'd found a mate, the need to harm Derrick no longer an imperative as she sought fulfillment.

He pounded into her and came again, leaving her without her own orgasm, and she needed it bad. Sabrina roared her displeasure, not caring who heard her.

He squeezed her neck harder.

As her air intake slowly ceased, pleasure swelled inside her. Derrick had yet to stop moving, nor had his erection faded. He deliberately pressed against her clit as he thrust, and ecstasy consumed her.

"That's it. Let it out," he panted. Pushing her. "Let it go, dammit."

The monster thrashed and shook, feeling threatened by the hum of pleasure breaking through. And then it happened. Ecstasy crashed through her being, and Sabrina took charge once more. Her passion exploded, and as the monster roared in denial, Sabrina forced herself to *change* back.

Derrick *changed* with her, as if sensing what she meant to do.

Sabrina shuddered around him, still caught in an inhuman orgasm that wouldn't stop. When she caught her breath, she stared up at him. He shook as he leaned over her, sweat dripping down his chest, matching the perspiration on her own body.

"You okay, princess?" he asked quietly.

She burst into tears.

Derrick panicked. He quickly released her from the restraints. "Damn it. Sabrina, honey, it's okay. You're okay." He dried her eyes, only to see them fill with more tears. "Shit. I'm so fucking sorry. But it was the only way to bring you out of it. I'd never --"

She pulled him down and hugged him tight. Shaking, she seemed so incredibly frail, and not at all like the creature who'd looked out at him from her eyes.

One minute they'd been making love, the next, he'd felt unexplainably threatened. Knowing to trust his instincts, he'd prepared for the worst. Conversations with Doc during the past two weeks had told him to expect something like this once Sabrina *changed*.

Well, she'd finally found her inner beast. And in doing so, she'd found that other creature as well. Doc hadn't wanted to mention his worries to Sabrina, and Derrick agreed. She didn't need to know how bad it might get. He knew, and it scared the shit out of him. But he trusted Doc to find a way to help her.

She hadn't responded to his lovemaking the way she normally did. A clear sign something wasn't right. But it was the red haze in her pupils and the black streaks in her skin that told him to prepare for it. Ace had been attacked a few months ago, and the creature he'd described was one of Pearl's mutant Circs. Since Sabrina had looked like a normal Circ once she'd *changed*, no one had thought she might turn mutant so quickly. But when he'd seen those tar black streaks in her flesh, Derrick had known for sure.

Fuck, he wanted her to be okay. Everything inside him cried out for her to remain with him. To be Sabrina, not that damned freak show that wore her face. While a part of him got off on the pain, most of his arousal had been Sabrina's scent, the feel of her skin against his. He hated that he'd been so brutal, but he'd known instinctively how to help her push the thing away.

"Derrick, I'm so sorry," she mumbled against his chest. "I didn't want to hurt you. I hate that I hurt you." She cried harder.

"Shh. Honey, I'm okay. Look, I'm a tough bastard. No scars." He said jokingly.

She stared at the spot where she'd bitten him. The kiss she placed over the spot was so soft, so tender, it broke something inside him. That barrier holding him apart, the weight of past disappointments, crumbled and disappeared.

"Sabrina," he said on a sigh. He wanted to say so much. To tell her how he felt, that he knew this was love, no matter that he didn't want it to be. He wanted to confess his fears, to show her that they had a future here as soon as she beat the mutation affecting her. But he didn't want to add to her burden when she was already going through so much.

"You knew it wasn't really me?" she asked.

He nodded.

"How? I felt uneasy earlier, but I didn't think it would affect me so much. I lost control. I tried, but I couldn't fight it."

"I had a feeling," Derrick said, not wanting to detail how much he and Doc had discussed of possible solutions to this crisis. Since sex had bonded the Circs before, Doc had reasoned that sex might help him deal with Sabrina if she wiggled out. His beast had told him the same when he'd seen that bloodred glint in her gaze.

"A Circ thing, huh?" She sniffed, looking beautiful despite her red-rimmed eyes and stuffed-up nose.

"Sabrina, you have to let Doc run more tests," he blurted, not able to keep all his fears at bay. "He's close to a solution. I know it. Doc's the best. You can trust him."

"I do. I trust all of you." She paused. "Well, maybe not Ace, and Zack's a little iffy."

Derrick grinned. "Tell me about it. But you know they've only given you a hard time because of what Pearl did to Kelly."

Which made him wonder how he was going to explain Kelly's and Caitlyn's sudden disappearance from the house. After dinner, Roane and Zack planned to take them away.

Caitlyn, Roane, Zack, and Kelly would lodge in another of Doc's properties, one of the many Circ safe houses that existed in the Northeast.

Derrick agreed. He didn't want the females around Sabrina when she lost it again. The guys would be okay, but if anything happened to their women, they might instinctively try to destroy the threat, which would totally fuck things up. Because if Derrick had to choose between the guys and Sabrina -- even as a monster -- he'd side with her, mutant and all.

"But that's just it, Derrick. I can't stay here. Not now. I'm a danger to Caitlyn and Kelly."

Shit.

"What if I accidentally *change* and hurt one of them?" She stared at him, wide-eyed with fear. "What if I end up killing them?"

"Relax, princess. I'm not about to let that happen."

She studied him, and he wondered if she was aware she stroked his chest, petting him like a cat. "Why aren't you more worried about what just happened between us?"

Derrick rolled onto his back, not wanting to face her when he lied outright. "I am. I'm just trying to keep it together for you."

"No. You knew this might happen. What about that bag?" she asked, looking at the bag he kept his toys in.

Derrick grinned and turned to face her. "Princess, that's standard gear. I was saving that for a special surprise. Every now and then, getting tied up can be a ton of fun."

She shook her head. "And the clamps?"

He hardened, despite coming hard enough to blow his head clean off. "I love the way they make your nipples red. And wait until you feel them on your softer skin." He rubbed her breast, pleased when her nipple puckered. "It hurts at first, but it's a soft hurt."

Silence fell between them. "So you like pain with sex?"

"A little. But nothing like what we just did." He cleared his throat, bothered she might be turned off by this quirk. "Hey, I don't have to hurt you or anything. We've made love a ton of times before now, and I was more than fine."

She blinked in surprise, and he wondered what that meant. Did she not believe him? "Oh, yeah, we did." She smiled. "It's okay, Derrick. Some of that was nice." She flushed.

He couldn't believe she could still blush, considering what they'd done. "Like what?"

"The, um, the clamps were okay."

"Really?" So maybe there was a small pain freak buried under Sabrina's brainy exterior after all.

"And I didn't mind being tied up. It was kind of sexy." Her smile faded. "But I hated that I wanted to feel so much pain. Derrick, I enjoyed biting you. Not because I thought you'd like it, but because I thought you wouldn't."

He wondered about that. "You could feel everything that beast felt?"

"Not beast. My inner beast wasn't there. It was a monster. The entities are separate, and I think it's important to note the distinction," she said, sounding like Doc.

"Okay. Your 'inner monster,'" he mocked, pleased that she looked annoyed instead of worried. "Semantics."

"Big word, genius. *Semantics* has three whole syllables."

There she was. His Sabrina. His heart swelled.

"What? Why are you looking at me like that?"

He answered her with a kiss that turned carnal in seconds. Without thinking about it, he put her flat on her back and made slow, sweet love to her. He sucked her nipples, kissed his way down her body, and loved her with his mouth and hands. Entering her before she could come, he made sure they found their bliss together. Joining hands, he found his joy with her, inside of her, and prayed he'd have the strength to stop her the next time her "inner monster" broke free. Because he knew, without knowing how exactly, that she was only going to grow stronger.

Chapter Eleven

Five more days passed without incident. Sabrina and Derrick had filled Doc in on everything, and he'd taken it all in stride. Sabrina wasn't stupid. She knew it was only a matter of time before she lost it again.

She didn't wait for anyone to ask her. She'd confined herself to Doc's basement lab, keenly aware of the differences and similarities between her situation here and at Pearson Labs. Here she was in a clean, respectable scientific laboratory with a doctor -- and a lover -- who wanted only to save her. At Pearson Labs, she'd been in a less than sanitary place for monstrous beasts. She'd turned down several unflattering come-ons from Dunn and a few others and had felt nothing but pity for the mutations Pearl created. But here, in Doc's lab, she didn't pity herself so much as she regretted her situation.

She was, in essence, a victim. Sabrina hadn't volunteered to become a Circ. But to think of herself as a victim took away her power. She'd been strong enough to escape Pearl once. Who was to say she couldn't escape his machinations again? Having Derrick by her side helped.

They made love constantly, which surprised her. She'd have thought Derrick would want to keep his distance after the first time she'd turned crazy, but he hadn't. He treated her with gentleness, so much so that she'd been tempted to ask him to rough it up a little. But afraid that might stir the monster inside, she instead accepted what he gave her.

Dummy that she was, she couldn't stop herself from loving him. Every minute around him she fell harder. His deep voice, large, sexy frame, and beautiful brown eyes remained with her, even when they were physically apart. She could still taste him, that cinnamon spice that was even present in his blood.

Wishing she could forget that part of their history, she dwelled on his blood more than she liked. For some reason, the taste of his blood intrigued her. Circs weren't vampiric. They

didn't drink blood. Even the mutants Pearl had created killed for pleasure, not to find an alternate food source. Yet instinct propelled her to linger on memories of Derrick's taste. To her surprise, she felt calmer when she did.

"Sabrina?" Doc called through the intercom on the wall.

Funny that just a few weeks ago, she'd wanted out of this room. Now she didn't want to be anywhere but inside, safe from harming the others.

"Yeah, Doc?"

"I'm coming in. Ace is with me."

She tensed. "Where's Derrick?"

"He had to see Harry about something for me."

Harry, a homeless man who made a living by gathering and disseminating information for Sabrina, and apparently Circe's Recruits, had been a godsend when Pearson Labs had relocated to that barren area in New Jersey. She wondered how he and Derrick had first met. Then she wondered what Derrick was doing for Doc so near Pearson Labs.

"Doc, what's going on?"

"Nothing you need to concern yourself with."

"Where are the others?" she asked, uncomfortable at the thought of being near Ace. Though Roane had said he doubted she'd need to bond with him, Sabrina didn't like the handsome Circ. Something about him rubbed her the wrong way. Thinking about having sex with him to ease their relationship didn't sit right. *At all.*

Her inner beast growled a warning, but she hurried to stifle it. She'd gone five days without *changing*. She reasoned that if that monstrous Circ inside her had shown the last time she *changed*, she simply wouldn't *change* again until Doc found a way to fix her. *If* he found a way.

"Sabrina? I need access to the lab. I think I might have found something." Doc sounded excited.

Shaking off her misgivings, she said, "Okay, Doc. I was just curious as to where Derrick had gone. You and Ace are more than welcome."

Sabrina refused to consent to be near Doc without another Circ present. Even though he said he could handle her, his trusty syringe in hand, she doubted he could react quickly enough to use that syringe before she *changed*. And if the monster was there, it would kill him in a heartbeat. No question, no hesitation.

She waited a few minutes, working to will away her tension. Her inner beast responded to stress, so she resolved to keep calm.

The door *pinged*, and Doc followed Ace into the room. The Circ shot her a sharp look. He must have noticed Derrick's T-shirt, which fit her like a dress, but he said nothing about

it, or the jeans she wore underneath. She might as well have worn a sign that said DORKS-R-US.

"You look well," Doc said, his eyes warm. "I think you're doing better, in fact. The last series of tests I ran on your blood shows foreign cells building, cells I think might be antibodies to the mutation condensing near your neural pathways. Some of my antiserum is working."

Sabrina nodded. "I feel better." At least, she did when she inhaled Derrick's scent -- hence the T-shirt next to her skin. She jerked when she caught Ace's scent. It was strong, a blend of Zack, Ace, and Kelly -- *a pregnant female*. Her eyes widened.

"Doc, have you considered Kelly's afterbirth?"

"*What?*" Ace growled.

Doc's gaze sharpened. "Sabrina?"

"You know how important fetal tissue can be when dealing with stem-cell research. Why not use the cord blood and placenta to do some real testing? Especially if her pregnancy hormones are as unique as I think they'll be."

"A wonderful idea. That would be ideal for helping you... Well, it won't help right now, of course. But I'm sure we'll come up with something in the meantime." Some of his excitement faded, in direct proportion to the anger building in Ace.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" he demanded, the threat clear in his voice.

Just like that, Sabrina's skin itched with the need to *change*. "Ace, I think you should take Doc out of --"

"Are you threatening my baby? You want to use him like a fucking experiment?" Ace *changed* in seconds and flew at her. He pinned her to the wall, his large hand palming her throat with ease. "God, that feels good," he growled. "Hurry up, Doc."

Sabrina didn't understand what was going on, but she didn't like Ace so near. He smelled like another female, one with young in her womb. Young that might try to supplant Sabrina, the dominant female. With Caitlyn's scent gone, it was as if she no longer existed. But to be reminded of Kelly...

She glared at Ace, wanting to watch him bleed.

"*Fuck*. Now, Doc."

She didn't feel the sting in her neck until Doc pushed the plunger all the way down. Then her body burned like crazy. Shocked and furious that Doc had turned on her, she erupted.

Her inner beast faded in comparison to the monster growing inside her. She grew until her clothes painfully restrained her, but with a flick of her wrist she tore through the fabric. And she continued to grow. She reached Ace's height, her size forcing him to add another hand to encircle her throat.

"I never did like you," she growled and punched him in the solar plexus. Though at a disadvantage in position, too close to land a hard-enough punch, she managed to free herself from his grasp as he stumbled back.

Without waiting, she struck him hard and fast in the neck, severing the flow of oxygen to his brain. Circ or not, he couldn't function if he couldn't breathe. The blow knocked him out long enough to strap him down on the table built to handle a Circ.

He came to minutes later, only to find himself unable to move. "*Motherfucker*. You hurt Doc, I'll kill you."

She ignored Ace and focused on Doc. *He's important. Yes, but how?* the monster wanted to know. She struggled to think, clasp her hands to her head in an attempt to dominate once more.

"Focus, Sabrina. You can do it," she dimly heard Doc say. Ace said something as well, but she couldn't understand him, locked as she was in a battle to control her own body. Oddly enough, she started to bond with her inner beast. Her human half merged fully with her Circ nature to combat the unwelcome mutation surging through her blood.

"Doc, open the door. Please," Sabrina begged him. "I can't control this much longer. Let me out and lock yourself in. Call for help."

"Do it," Ace said. "Now, Doc."

Sabrina didn't question why Ace readily agreed with her. Once Doc unlocked the door and stepped away, she flew through the door and slammed it shut. She punched a hand right through the control box on the other side in order to disable it. Running hard, she made for the open elevator, thankful they hadn't closed it.

As she rode toward the first floor, a sudden thought stopped her. She had control of the monster, but she didn't know for how long. What if Kelly or Caitlyn were upstairs? But they'd have someone with them, surely. Derrick might be gone, but the others would never leave females in the house alone with just one Circ to protect them, not with her in the basement.

Praying she was right in her assessment, Sabrina ran through the house and out the back door, grateful not to encounter anyone. She ran on fleet feet, at one with her inner beast and thrilled that she'd beaten back her mutation. The sedative Doc had given her didn't make her woozy, and she surmised that it had helped her keep the monster in check. She could think clearly now. No thoughts of murdering Ace and drinking up every last bit of his blood. Not the way she'd do it with Derrick. All that lovely red stuff, sliding down her throat with a hint of cinnamon...

She stopped suddenly, frozen at the thought.

It's still there, in me. I'm holding it down, but it won't go away. It'll never go away, she thought with despair.

She remembered biting Derrick all too clearly and wondered how badly she might have savaged Kelly if she'd had the chance. To wipe out an innocent life, an unborn child, would be unthinkable. Her monster liked Derrick, but it wouldn't like Kelly, or Caitlyn, she realized. A chance to take out the alpha female and any other young, not conceived by Sabrina, would work in the monster's favor.

Sabrina had a flash of intuition, a notion of how to make things right. Turning, she headed in the direction of Pearson Labs. Now was the time to get that data disc full of information Doc needed. Derrick would never let her go, and what better time than now? If Pearson Labs caught her, they'd kill her. She wouldn't go down alive. And with her monster in charge, she'd probably take out a few rogues in the process.

A win-win, as Derrick liked to say.

Sabrina ran hard, planning as she moved. She would remain *changed* for as long as she could contain the monster inside her. Her inner beast, surprisingly, remained merged within her. She used its strength yet kept her wits. She truly was *one*, a real Circ, at least for now. Until the monster returned.

Best to keep isolated from others. She had no wish to harm a human, or to draw attention to herself from the authorities, Doc's team, or Pearson Labs. She ran harder, strategizing all the while.

"Did it work?" Ace rasped, *changing* back to loosen the straps at his wrists and ankles. He slid off the table and gathered his torn clothes, shaking his head at his ruined shirt.

"Like a charm." Evan smiled and rubbed his hands together. "I hate that we had to send Derrick away for this, but we both know he'd never allow us to influence her. I didn't want him anywhere near us for this."

"Yeah." Ace sighed. "I feel bad, you know? When she started talking about Kelly, I seriously wanted to hurt her. Took me a minute to remember to *pretend* to be mad."

"Her conversation couldn't have been better planned. Though to be honest, her idea has real merit. Once Kelly gives birth, we'll collect the cord, cord blood, and placenta. I might actually be able to find a cure for the rogue madness if I can isolate a few things." Evan's excitement grew at the prospect. Sabrina would be quite an addition to the team, indeed. He'd needed a lab assistant for years. She was intelligent, eager to learn, and charming, once you got past her gruff exterior. A perfect complement to both Derrick and himself.

"Great." Ace swore and tossed his shirt in the trash. "You can have all that crap *after* we have a healthy baby."

Evan gave Ace a look that caused the large man to flush.

"I'm sorry. I know I sound like an ass. But when it comes to Kelly, I can't help feeling protective."

"We *all* feel protective. Why do you think Kelly and Caitlyn aren't here right now? Despite the fact you and Zack can readily protect your mate, we aren't taking any chances."

"I know," Ace muttered.

With the women safe, what concerned Evan most about this plan was Derrick.

He'd sent Derrick and Hale on a fact-finding mission to Harry. They normally kept abreast of the goings on at Pearson Labs by phone, but it never hurt to get a visual now and then. So Hale kept an eye on Derrick while Derrick stayed out of Evan's way. The Circ had become more and more possessive of his mate, to the extent that he argued against anything she disagreed with. Considering Sabrina's misplaced fear of the *change*, Evan knew she'd never willingly transform. He had no intention of harming Sabrina, but he'd needed her to *change* to help her.

The concoction he'd created using Derrick's blood had tempered the mutation inside her instantly. Pleased, yet not convinced this would work for every rogue out there, Evan needed to run a slew of tests. He had a feeling Derrick's blood worked so well for Sabrina because they had mated. From what he'd learned from the other Circs, once mated, their blood chemistry altered. Just enough to be noticeable, but not more than that. At least, not that Evan had at first thought.

But seeing how in tune Ace and Zack were to Kelly, especially now that she was pregnant, had started him thinking. Caitlyn and Roane had always had an almost psychic sense of one another. Wouldn't Derrick and Sabrina? And if so, might Derrick's hormones help regulate Sabrina's?

Since Sabrina had previously okayed Evan's request to merge her samples with Derrick's, he concluded she would have okayed this experiment. He didn't feel the slightest guilt about tricking her, either. Without his interference, she would lose to the mutation. And from what Evan had learned so far, she didn't have much time left.

"Go get her," he said to Ace, who nodded and tried to leave. Unfortunately, the door didn't budge.

"Shit." Ace got on the phone to Diego and waited. "What's that? Are you kidding me?" Ace swore, hung up, and turned to Doc. "She must have busted the control panel. Diego says it isn't registering in the system. He also isn't reading any heat signatures down here besides you and me."

"What?" Doc didn't believe it. The equipment had to be malfunctioning. "That's not possible. The emergency exit is only accessible through the proper codes. And only we have them."

"All I'm telling you is that he can't see her on the monitors. Maybe that mutation allows her to hide herself? Some way to tamper with the computers or alter her body temperature?"

"Maybe." But Evan had a bad feeling.

Armed with a unique stun gun, Ace was supposed to step outside the door and shoot Sabrina, bringing her right back without harming her. Had the monster reverted control so soon? Did Sabrina have some new type of defense mechanism they would soon discover? Or worse, had she somehow escaped?

Knowing he couldn't chance her safety, Evan called Roane. After explaining the situation, Roane agreed to return, as well as call Derrick and Hale back to the compound.

When he hung up, Evan shared a dismayed glance with Ace.

To their relief, the door clicked open.

"Shit's going to hit the fan on this one," Ace rumbled. He ran his hands through his shoulder-length hair and swore again. "Derrick's going to kill me."

"Not if I kill you first," Diego said as he swung the door open and aimed a gun at Ace. Ace moved lightning fast, but not fast enough to avoid several bullets aimed dead center at his chest. He crumpled to the ground and didn't move again. Diego smiled and turned the gun on Evan. "Evan, I think it's time we talked."

"I have them." McKinley spoke through his handset. "You want me to wait?" He stood in a darkened alley illuminated by a single streetlight, on the outskirts of what was once a profitable industrial area that masqueraded now as the deserted playground for rogue Circes and Pearson Labs' rejects. Surrounding the labs, the industrial park was the perfect place to hide the billion-dollar laboratory while also providing a unique training environment.

McKinley had to hand it to Project Dawn's backers. The assholes knew how to make the most from their investment.

"Don't wait. Do it. Now."

"Will do." He turned the handset off and tucked it into one of the pockets of his cargo pants. He ran a hand over the thin Kevlar vest he wore over a dark-colored shirt. The black fabric blended seamlessly into the night.

He concentrated on his quarry. Two of them, both strong, both warriors. Circes with limitless power, once they learned how to tap into their hidden resources. *If* they had them, he reminded himself. The rogues couldn't do what he did. Maybe Circe's Recruits couldn't either.

He'd grown up with the knowledge. Thanks to modern science, he was one heartbeat away from leading Project Dawn's rejects, what he laughingly referred to as Satan's army. He grinned at the thought, wondering if Pearl would wear white in hell.

Focusing on his mission, he watched Harry distract Derrick Packard and Hale Rogers. Packard was a big fucker. McKinley respected power, and Packard had a ton of it. He made a decent adversary. Rogers confused him. The man was a head shorter than Packard and a lot leaner. Then again, few men would look huge next to Packard. McKinley would, but he was a monster, and he knew it.

Rogers, though, bore close watching. Elliot Pearl liked the male. He had plans for Rogers that didn't make much sense, unless... *Shit*. McKinley needed to follow up on that notion, praying he was wrong about what it meant. Then Harry rubbed his ear. The signal.

He stalked his prey, carefully, so carefully. He needed to get closer for maximum effect. Packard and Rogers immediately turned their attention from Harry and looked around. Packard brought a gun out from a back holster and narrowed his gaze in McKinley's direction. *Not bad*.

A directed thought took Rogers to his knees, but it took some extra energy McKinley hadn't expected to keep him there. Finally, the stubborn bastard passed out.

"Hale? Shit. Harry, hold on. There's something out there." Packard kept his gun at the ready, eyeing the darkened vicinity around McKinley as he dropped to his knees to feel for his friend's pulse. Poor guy would find that Rogers was useless. Out cold. Nullified by a psychic blast that would scramble his neurons for hours.

McKinley glided several feet to his right, amused when Packard cocked his head and slowly shifted his gaze in McKinley's direction once more. Harry didn't wait but took off. Smart man.

The minute McKinley walked under the streetlight, Packard fired.

Rage burned through the male's eyes as he pulled the trigger. A fitting response. McKinley appreciated the Circ's loyalty to his fellow teammate. Packard's eyes widened when McKinley walked through the barrage of bullets, thanks to his special protective vest and enhanced reflexes. Packard had aimed at both his chest and head. Tricky bastard. McKinley stilled after Packard fired his last round.

"Who the fuck are you?" Packard homed in on his eyes, one of the many parts of himself McKinley wished had never altered. "McKinley," he spat and stood, tossing his gun to the side, out of rounds that hadn't worked anyway.

Interesting. Packard knew who he was. Sabrina had mentioned him. What to do about that...?

"Don't move, and I'll make this easy." McKinley wanted to see how fast the Circ was in action. He hadn't had a real challenge, a warrior's challenge, in years.

As he'd expected, Packard ignored him. The man *changed* without blinking. He ripped through his shirt but kept his trousers on. Intrigued, McKinley wondered at the give in the material. Packard jumped him before he could finish the thought.

A solid fist to his midsection surprised him. He returned the blow and locked on the male's intriguing scent. Well, well. Packard had bonded with Sabrina. McKinley grinned, knowing exactly how to push this man's buttons.

"How's the lovely Sabrina? I always loved that full mouth of hers. Beautiful, full lips, am I right? She was one of my favorites." *For so many reasons*.

Packard literally grew, adding inches to his brawn.

Impressed, McKinley wondered if the male knew what he was doing. None of the other Circs could manipulate their growth. Yet Sabrina's mate could.

"Fuck you." Packard feinted left and struck right. He kicked out, aiming for McKinley's knee. Had it been anyone but McKinley, Packard would have landed a crushing blow.

"Nice. Not bad for one of Evan's asshole Circs." McKinley laughed as Packard's eyes narrowed. Rage burned in their depths.

Packard punched him hard in the jaw, and McKinley decided to stop playing around. This one was a lot stronger than he'd anticipated. While pleased, he regretted what he had to do.

"Sorry about this, but it's for the best. Really."

Packard growled but didn't say another word. The psychic blast took him to his knees and gave McKinley a headache. *Good thing there are only the two of them. I'm spent.* He followed his attack by gently touching the pressure points that he'd found could incapacitate a Circ for hours. Packard slumped to the ground next to his friend.

Crouching low, McKinley found Packard's pulse, compared it to Rogers's, and shook his head. Sometimes, he really hated his job. He stood and hefted Rogers over his shoulder, then grabbed Packard by the back of his trousers. Damned Circ weighed a ton.

An hour later, he called his contact. "Done," he said. "Now we sit back and wait for the fallout."

Chapter Twelve

Sabrina used the strength Pearl had given her and combined it with the savvy that had saved her ass time and time again. In her human form once more, she made it to the industrial park surrounding the lab in six hours. She would have been there sooner if she'd been able to find clothes that fit better than the loose sweatpants and tight tank top she'd stolen from an irate jackass and his by-the-hour lady friend at the Gas 'N Go. Then again, a naked woman couldn't be too choosy.

At least the ancient Camaro had made it without breaking down. She parked the thing where she normally met Harry. Seeing no one around, she remembered the map she'd committed to memory. The rarely used underground entrance would work.

To her astonishment, she'd remained in control of her faculties while on the run, even when *changed*. The need to kill and maim hadn't returned. She felt better than she had in days, so maybe there was more to Doc's secret syringe than a mere controlling agent.

Praying he could work the miracles his team bragged about, she hurried toward the underground entrance. But when she stepped into the small alcove hiding the door, she froze. She smelled Derrick. Granted, in her human form her senses were muted, but she'd know that man anywhere. Derrick had been here. Right *here*.

Her instincts told her to ignore Derrick and enter the passage. Which didn't make sense. Wasn't the Circ instinct there to preserve her? It had never steered her away from Derrick before. But if Derrick was here, he must have been here under his own free will, because she didn't sense danger to him or from him.

Totally weird. Her skin crawled, and she had an insane notion she was being watched.

Hurrying her decision, she pushed through the door and raced down the dark corridor in silence. She thanked her night vision, as well as the flickering floor lights every fifteen

feet that provided enough light to see by. Several twists and turns later, she found herself in the subbasement.

One of the major flaws in this asinine plan.

The rogues would smell her, a female Circ. And they'd want. They'd be loud, and though their cages were soundproof, cameras tracked their progress twenty-four hours a day.

With no other recourse but to brave it out, she walked past a storage closet and found a lab coat. Shoving her arms into the overlarge jacket, she thanked its length for hiding her ill-fitting clothes, only exposing her from the knee down. Her bare feet were another issue, but one she'd deal with when she had to. Thank God for thick Circ skin.

"Hey, where've you been, Sabrina?" Ed Hashton asked in surprise. He held a clipboard in one hand, a steaming mug of coffee in another. "Simon didn't mention you'd be in tonight. I thought you were training down in Alexandria?"

So Pearl had appointed Simon Dunn her role. She couldn't imagine Dunn taking blood samples, but he liked working around rogue Circs. Made sense for Pearl to assign him to the monsters down here.

"He stuck me on the midnight detail." She grimaced, and Ed laughed. She couldn't stand the asshole. He was one of the guys who'd asked her out. He leered at the Circ females when they were brought down here, but he didn't have the balls to do more than torture them from behind a thick glass wall. He'd delay their food and force extra drugs into them, and he never failed to watch a performance when Simon made the rounds. She even suspected he got off on watching the male rogues sexually perform. According to rumor, Ed only pretended to like girls.

"What happened to your feet?"

Trust Ed to notice her lack of shoes. She opened her mouth to lie, then noticed his badge. He'd been promoted to green-one-eight. He had *access*.

"Fuck it." She decked him right in the face. He cried out and clutched his bleeding nose. She hit him twice more, and he shut up. She dragged him to the closet, bound him with duct tape, and shoved a dirty rag in his mouth. Then she stole his clipboard, his shoes, and his ID badge.

Sabrina grinned. The shoes fit.

She walked back outside and continued down the hallway. The rogues stopped as she moved, scenting her as only they could. She didn't understand how most of them did anything with such twisted brains. But Pearl had perfected his monster-making serum. The new EP12 for a fucked-up generation. These rogues were the worst of the worst. None of them even remotely resembled a human, a complete wash for infiltrating enemy camps. All of them had pitch-black skin, red eyes, and twisted hands or feet. A few had what looked like cloven hooves, which were in fact twisted talons that had merged and split and looked painful.

Several of the males flashed fangs as she passed, a few others stroked themselves. By the time she'd reached the end of the hallway, one had ejaculated against the glass viewing wall.

While disgusted, she also pitied the creatures. They knew nothing but need and hunger. Killing them would be the merciful thing to do. But that wasn't her goal tonight. She'd leave that for Doc and his men. For Derrick.

She hurried past the elevators and entered a corner stairwell. Not wanting to be caught in the elevators, which had cameras that showed every corner of the space, she knew exactly where the cameras were mounted in here. She kept her head down and fiddled with her clipboard while she moved, hoping to appear like a preoccupied scientist. This particular stairwell led to the ground and secondary levels but wouldn't grant her access to Pearl's private office on the third floor.

Moving quickly, she didn't run into anyone, not that she expected to. Except for the basements, most of the lab worked on regular time: nine-to-five hours, with a few late-night employees -- processors -- who ran testing equipment. So long as she avoided the processing wing and security, she just might make it without incident.

She reached the second floor and quickly walked toward the executive stairwell at the rear. She'd need a password to enter, and thanks to Ed, she had one. She swiped his code along the security box and entered the stairwell. Unable to avoid the camera in here, she smiled into it and walked confidently up the stairs. Anyone seeing it would think she belonged, unless they'd been ordered to kill or capture her on sight. Then she was screwed.

Nice plan, her beast snarled, not liking the smell or the feel of this place. Once more Derrick's scent lingered, and she had the oddest notion he was near.

She hurried up the stairs and tried to use the password on the door to the executive suite. But Ed's card wouldn't allow her entry. She thought a moment, then said to hell with it. She used her enhanced strength and pulled the steel door off its hinges. As expected, an alarm sounded.

She ran down the hallway, right into a security guard's waiting arms.

"Ms. Torrence?" the tall man asked, perplexed. "What happened?"

Not "what are you doing here?" or "you're coming with me." Apparently, Pearl had kept her deception a closely kept secret. She recognized the guard as Foreshine, one of Pearl's reliable men. "A-a rogue Circ ripped the door off the stairwell, and then pushed Ed Hashton down the stairs. He's still in there! I know we aren't supposed to be here, but I've just returned with vital information for Dr. Pearl, and Ed wanted to talk to him about one of the subjects not doing well, and --"

"Wait here," Foreshine said, his no-nonsense tone brisk. He pulled out his walkie-talkie to radio for help and reached for his gun.

The minute he turned away from her, she knocked him out with a swift blow to the back of the head. Her arm felt as solid as lead, and by the way he went down, she imagined it felt like lead to Foreshine too.

She dragged him into the nearest closet and left him there.

Realizing her plan was not only stupid, but growing more hazardous by the minute, she pretended the earsplitting alarm didn't exist and ran to Pearl's office. To her surprise, the door was unlocked. She darted inside and closed the door behind her. What she found when she got there upset her so much she couldn't take another step.

Derrick and Hale lay on the ground, as still as death. Elliot Pearl sat slumped in his chair, his throat cut from ear to ear. His eyes were missing. Blood pooled underneath his rolling chair, creeping closer to Derrick, which meant he'd only recently been killed.

"Had to be a rogue Circ," she mumbled, trying to shake the terror from her limbs. Derrick wasn't dead. She'd feel it if he were. She forced herself to kneel next to him and put her hand on his chest.

The alarm ceased. A bad sign.

But she felt Derrick's heart beating sluggishly beneath her hand and smiled in relief. "Thank you, God."

"How about, thank you, McKinley?" a deep voice rasped from the corner of the room.

She jumped in fright but remained by Derrick, gratified to hear Hale moan softly.

"Yeah, he's okay too. You're welcome."

"What the hell is going on?" She saw Pearl out of the corner of her eye and cringed. Her beast hated the scent of his blood. It smelled wrong, somehow.

"How you feeling, Sabrina?" McKinley drawled and stepped closer. Even in the shadows, his eyes glowed. A hint of a fang showed when he smiled. The fear she'd been holding at bay assailed her, a potent perfume, thanks to the man/beast staring at her like his next meal. She didn't like this. Derrick and Hale so vulnerable. McKinley so near.

"I'm f-fine." He took a step closer, and she called on her inner beast for strength. "Not another step closer, or you'll regret it," she snarled, pleased when he stopped.

"Well, how about that? The she-cat has claws after all." He seemed as if he approved, which confused the hell out of her.

She glanced at her hands and saw them both larger and sharper -- her fingernails had turned into claws. Yet she hadn't summoned her *change*. It simply happened.

McKinley shifted, and she smelled something raw. Something wrong.

"Did you kill him?" She nodded to Pearl.

"No." McKinley's eyes flashed with rage. "I think this did." He leaned down and threw a black carcass at the wall. The rogue crashed into it and slid to the floor, a bundle of broken bones and bloody flesh. It didn't resemble anything human at all.

“But how did it get out?” *Why are you here? What did you do to my mate and my friend?* Even as she thought it, she knew it to be true. She considered the members of Circe’s Recruits to be her friends. Coming back here showed her what life could have been like if she’d stayed, or worse yet, if Doc and Circe’s Recruits had been anything other than the good guys.

“That’s a very good question. One I mean to find out.” One minute, McKinley stood by the wall, the next, he had her in his arms, his face just inches from hers. He held her off the ground, his hands on her shoulders. He acted as if she weighed nothing. “So why are you here, Sabrina?” He breathed her name, and goose bumps danced over her flesh. The urge to *change* was strong, but instinct told her not to.

She didn’t see the point in lying. He’d either kill her, or he wouldn’t. With McKinley, nothing was a sure bet. “I’m here to get the password folder to Pearl’s files. Some of the files I stole won’t work without it.”

McKinley leaned close and sniffed her. She automatically jerked back but stopped when he growled. He gently set her on her feet, surprising her. Then he shoved her lab jacket out of the way and put his mouth to her shoulder, but he didn’t bite. The sensation of having sex while not having sex struck her hard, and she wavered on her feet while he kept his mouth over her. She shuddered in climax, which made no sense, and then McKinley withdrew his mouth and tugged the coat back in place.

“Sorry,” he murmured, pointing to a spot of blood that darkened the white jacket. “It’ll fade.”

“Wh-what?”

“Mmm. Smart man, that Doc.” McKinley drew back a few paces. “You’re swimming in Packard’s blood. You want my advice? Full-body transfusion. But it’s your call.”

He handed her a memory stick and kicked Pearl’s chair to the side. The chair bumped into the dead rogue, and Pearl sat there, nearly on top of his creation. McKinley sneered at the bodies, then swore.

“Hurry the fuck up, Sabrina. Unless you’d like to continue where I left off?” He gazed knowingly at her chest, as if he could see her hardened nipples through the oversize lab coat. Then again, with McKinley, maybe he could. “Just copy everything from the K drive onto that stick. That’s what you need.”

Sabrina shook herself and hurried over to Pearl’s computer, surprised to find it up and running without the normal firewalls intact. She quickly downloaded the information she needed. She didn’t have the time to hunt down Pearl’s password folder, since he renamed it every few days, though he kept the contents the same. She’d have to trust McKinley as to what to download. *Not as if I have any choice.*

“He’s been hacked,” McKinley said. “Probably by whoever let the mutant free.” He narrowed his stare, now fixed on Pearl’s body.

While he did whatever it was he was doing, Sabrina finished copying files, removed the memory stick, and stuffed it into Hale's front pocket. She didn't have one, and Derrick wore ripped trousers. Knowing time was fast running out, she tried to revive Derrick.

He groaned but didn't come to.

"Fuck." McKinley shoved something in his own pocket and turned to face her. "Hold on." He picked up the phone and dialed someone. "This is McKinley. We have a breach." The alarm immediately sounded again. He glared at her but flashed a smile. *What the hell did that mean?* "The cameras are down. I've got two casualties and one priority escapee on the loose. A processor and a security guard, both dead. Put me through. *Now.*"

There was a pause before he continued. "I have proof members of Circe's Recruits broke through our security -- *shit.*" He raised a gun -- where did he get a gun? -- and fired two rounds into Pearl's face, right through his eye sockets. "I've got the rogue on the run, but he's heading upstairs." Upstairs? Sabrina thought this was the top floor. "I can take him out if I hurry. But I can't contain him and find Doc's boys at the same time. What do you want me to do?"

He mouthed *dickhead* while saying, "Roger that, sir. That's right. I'm *your* man, now." Hanging up the phone, he turned his attention to Hale. Sabrina felt a surge of energy come out of nowhere. Hale moaned and stared to rise, and she blinked in shock. Had McKinley done that?

"*Shit.* No time. Use Rogers and take your mate out the way you smuggled the pregnant Circ out of here. You get me?"

She nodded, glued to the wavering expressions on McKinley's face. Anger, frustration, then fury again. But never fear.

Hale stood on shaky legs and rubbed his hand over his face. "Who the fuck are you?" he asked and shoved himself between Sabrina and McKinley before she could blink.

"I still don't see what he wanted," McKinley murmured. He shoved Hale back and held up a hand. "You want to live, you take her and the asshole on the floor taking up too much space. Leave. Use the elevators." He glared at Hale, who glared right back.

"Hale, we don't have time," Sabrina said, pulling at his shirt.

He growled but helped her lift Derrick. Between them, they would be able to move quickly enough.

McKinley followed them, as if strolling through the park. The alarm blared, making Sabrina wish for less sensitive ears. Hale swore up and down, but he moved like lightning. They stopped in front of an elevator.

"This will go to the parking lot. You can take it from there."

"What the hell's going on?" Hale asked, his voice lower and more dangerous than Sabrina had ever heard before.

“Wish I knew, playboy.” McKinley chuckled at the shocked looks on their faces. “Don’t forget, you owe me when I come calling,” he directed to Hale. “Now, get the fuck out of here.”

He punched in a few buttons to access the elevator. They stepped in and waited for the doors to close, but before they could, McKinley added a parting shot. “Oh, and Sabrina? If I see you here again, I’ll kill you. Bet on it,” he promised.

The door closed. Derrick groaned, finally waking, and put a little bit of weight on his feet.

“I’ll kill that son of a bitch,” Hale seethed. He held on to Derrick and kept squinting, as if the meager light from the flickering elevator bothered him.

“Hale, it’s okay.”

“He threatened you in front of your mate, in front of me. A challenge. Son of a bitch is looking to get his ass handed to him. *Motherfucker*. I know he did this.”

“Did what?” She had no idea what had happened to him and Derrick, but she was bothered that Derrick still hadn’t fully revived.

Hale started laughing, scaring her. “Shit. What a day.”

“Are you okay?” Her beast woke, giving her added strength, though she maintained her human form.

“Never better.” His eyelids fluttered and he slumped over.

“Hale.” She shoved Derrick against the wall and held Hale upright with the other hand. She couldn’t leave with both of them like this. “Derrick, *wake up*.” She kissed him hard on the mouth, relieved at the hungry kiss he gave her back. “Thank God.” *No, thank McKinley*, the confused part of her reminded.

“Princess?” Derrick shook his head, and his eyes opened wide. He glanced next to him and gaped like a fish. “Hale? Sabrina?” He stared from her to Hale, then noticed their surroundings. “What the hell is going on?”

“Later. Let’s get out of here first. We’re inside Pearson Labs, by the way.”

“The hell we are.” Derrick looked so strong, so solid standing there, even as he stared at her in disbelief. “What are you doing here? What happened?”

“Long story. Grab Hale before he falls down. Let’s get out of here, and we’ll share information. Okay?”

“Sounds good to me.” He held Hale up and frowned. “You know where you’re going?”

She rolled her eyes. “Look, he-man. While you were snoozing in the executive suite, I was busy making plans.” A total lie, but it made her plan sound a lot less foolhardy. “Besides, this is kind of the way I helped Kelly escape, except I used the service elevators, not the executive ones. I can only be grateful this happened at night.”

“Why?”

"Because during the day, this place is packed with people. Now, come on."

They stole a vehicle, a nice tan SUV that Derrick seemed to like. He drove like a madman while Sabrina watched over Hale, who lay in the backseat with his head in her lap. She still couldn't believe Derrick had tried to fight McKinley.

"Derrick, you could have been killed." She blinked rapidly and focused on Hale, not wanting to cry. If she started, she might not stop.

"Well, I wasn't." He rubbed the back of his neck. "That Circ's not right. Something more to him. And you know, he never *changed*. Just remained as huge as a brick house with those funky, inhuman eyes."

"That's McKinley." She swallowed hard, wondering if he'd believe what she had to tell him. "Pearl's dead."

The truck veered. Hale snapped his eyes open and stared up at Sabrina, lingering on her breasts. She stroked his hair to make him, and herself, feel better.

"Hot damn. This is the way to live." He grinned, and she couldn't help laughing. Derrick joined in, and the three of them laughed so hard, they cried.

"Okay, princess. Say it again," Derrick demanded once they'd calmed down.

"Elliot Pearl is dead."

Hale sat up and clutched his head. "Tell me you said that bastard's dead."

"He is. I saw it with my own eyes. Not his death, his dead body." She described the condition of his corpse.

"Poetic justice," Hale murmured. "Killed by one of the rogues he created."

"Yeah." But if so, why had McKinley shot two holes where Pearl's eyes should have been? She smelled a cover-up. And just who had McKinley been talking to? Pearl's boss? She'd tried for years to figure out who he answered to, only to be told she didn't "need to know."

"There's so much we need to know," Derrick said with a weary sigh.

Nice choice of words. But what I really need to know is where I go from here. Would the files she'd copied give her the answers to solve her problems? Could she stay with Circe's Recruits? And did Derrick know how much she loved him? Would he care?

Only time would tell.

Chapter Thirteen

Hours later, after a short night's sleep, hot showers, and changing into clean, comfortable clothes, the three of them met with the others in the living room. They had returned to a very sober household. Doc was not to be disturbed, sequestered in his office. The others hovered over Ace, who complained that Diego had *shot* him. Mild-mannered Diego, Doc's best friend and lover for the past eight years.

Sitting on the couch with Sabrina tucked by his side, Derrick boomed, "What the fuck happened while we were gone?"

"Chaos," Zack said through clenched teeth. "Diego shot Ace with some kind of super tranq and knocked him on his ass. The bastard and Doc had words, but Doc won't fill us in. Oh, and apparently, Ace and Doc concocted some whacked-out plan to heal Sabrina."

Zack punched Ace in the shoulder hard enough to leave a bruise.

"Zack, don't," Kelly said in a soft voice, sitting next to him. The glint in her eyes spoke volumes. "Save that for when we get home."

"Dammit." Ace winced.

Sabrina rose from the couch and approached Ace. "What's Zack talking about?" She surprised Derrick when she took a good, hard whiff of his friend.

"That's what I'd like to know." Distracted by his mate sniffing his friend, he asked, "What are you doing?" Surprisingly, he felt no jealousy, only curiosity.

"He no longer smells wrong." Sabrina returned to her spot next to him. Where she belonged.

"Hey." Ace glared. "I smell just fine."

"Like a rat," Kelly added with heat.

"Come on, baby, don't be like that."

He said it with such a plaintive voice that Derrick and the others couldn't help laughing. The humor of the moment helped ease the tension, until Ace explained what had happened up to his getting shot.

Derrick stood, prepared to pound him into next week for putting Sabrina in danger, when Roane intervened.

"Hold on. Doc would never have endangered her. And Ace, despite being a total asshole at times, wouldn't hurt her, when we know how much she means to you."

Derrick felt Sabrina's keen stare like a laser between his eyes. "Yeah, well, why the fuck did he do it then?"

"To save her life, dumbass." Ace glared, then sank back into the couch when Derrick promised payback with an upraised fist. "Look, Doc and I came up with the perfect plan. Sabrina needed to *change* to heal, but she refused to. And you're so messed up in love with her, you wouldn't do what was best for her. Instead you agreed with whatever dumb shit -- ah, stuff -- she wanted," he corrected when Kelly turned a disapproving glare his way.

Derrick met Sabrina's startled gaze, then looked back at Ace. So what? Derrick loved her. It was the truth. He saw no point in denying it. She could accept it. She *would* accept it. Damn, but Ace had a big mouth.

"So Doc needed me to *change*?" she asked softly.

"He only told you so every day. But you wouldn't." Ace shrugged.

"I didn't want to hurt anyone." She looked at Kelly's belly.

"They weren't here." Roane spoke up. "Zack and I took Kelly and Caitlyn away for a few days. On vacation."

"Vacation, my ass." Caitlyn glared at her husband. "You planned this all out. Keeping us away for our own good, hmm?"

"Look." Roane raised his voice. "We wanted you safe. You're safe. You have no idea how strong Sabrina is when *changed*. Doc was worried. I had no idea Ace and he were planning an elaborate strategy to save her, though." He frowned at Ace. "What? You were going to chase her all the way to Pearson Labs? Then what?"

"No, no." Ace sighed. "She was supposed to *change* and break out of the room. The elevator wasn't supposed to be there. Diego interfered." Ace shook his head. "He shot me with something. Hell, I thought they were real bullets. Instead he sedated me. I woke up, Sabrina was long gone, Doc was crying, and Diego had packed up and left. Doc won't talk about it."

Silence filled the room. The thought of Doc crying hurt Derrick deeply. He liked the older man. Doc was a decent -- hell, a loving -- friend. Diego's defection must have really hurt him.

"So you want us to hunt Diego down and gut him?" Derrick offered Roane.

"Not a bad idea." Roane rubbed his chin and ignored Caitlyn when she rolled her eyes.

"No." Doc spoke from the kitchen. He'd finally left his study. "The situation with Diego is over. He's not PPA, and he doesn't work for Pearson Labs."

"Then who is he?" Roane asked what they all wanted to know.

"No one." Doc shook his head and wiped his glasses with shaky hands. At the sight, the room went quiet. "Now, tell me exactly what happened with you three," he said to Derrick, Hale, and Sabrina.

Eager to change the subject, Derrick told his and Hale's version of events, then Sabrina told hers. No one could believe it when they heard that Elliot Pearl was dead. Doc took his second big blow of the evening, or was that this morning?

Though he was exhausted, Derrick was too keyed up to sleep. So much had happened over the past twenty-four hours. He hugged Sabrina closer.

"So Elliot's dead. A rogue Circ killed him, but this McKinley made it look as if Elliot had been shot and not mauled?" Doc asked.

Sabrina nodded. "McKinley is really, um, strange."

"No shit," Hale muttered, rubbing his head.

"He sniffed me, then he bit me, I think." Sabrina flushed, and Derrick felt a definite threat to his mate.

"Where? What did he do?" He pulled her sweatshirt to the side but saw nothing there, not a mark, not even the scent of the bastard lingered, which was odd.

"Derrick." Sabrina blushed again and tugged her sweatshirt back over her shoulder. "McKinley told me what files to copy. He even gave me the memory stick, so you might want to download the files onto a computer not connected to anything, Doc," she said softly. "He also seemed to understand what you were doing with Derrick's blood. McKinley said he recommended a full-body transfusion."

Doc blinked, a sure sign he was lost in science land, which was probably for the best. The poor guy had been through his own hell with Diego. God, Derrick couldn't imagine losing Sabrina, let alone after eight years. She meant too much to him.

She squeezed his hand, as if sensing his turmoil.

"That might just work. Not a special formula, but Derrick's actual blood. I have enough of it, and you're both the same blood type."

Doc had found a process to store Circ blood through artificial means. Though red blood cells only lasted forty-two hours, plasma for five days, Doc stored their blood in special bags in tanks filled with a preservative agent. The blood lasted for months, not days. With the Circs' regenerative powers, they could donate blood every other week without any ill effect should the need arise.

"The fact that you were so fixated on Derrick's blood seemed key to me," Doc explained to Sabrina. "Your inner beast knew what you needed, even if we didn't. Something in Derrick's blood is working like an antibody to rid you of the mutated toxins that cause you

to feel so out of sorts." *A nice way of calling her a mutant killing machine.* "That syringe I injected you with in the lab was a shot of Derrick's blood mixed with some of Caitlyn's, who, as you may or may not know, was the first Circ ever born."

"Not the first," Caitlyn murmured, and Derrick recalled she'd had an older brother who died a long time ago. Roane rubbed her shoulder, and she leaned back into him.

"Well, the only one we have here now," Doc corrected gently. "But how would McKinley know to use Derrick's blood?" He looked at Sabrina, who shrugged.

"I have no idea. But I don't plan on asking him." She shivered and explained their entire encounter again, but her vague mention of the creep sucking her blood bothered Derrick. "He told me if he catches me at Pearson Labs again, he'll kill me."

"The hell he will." Derrick seethed. "But it's just as well. I don't want you anywhere near that place ever again."

"Good. Because *I* don't want to be near it, either. So *I've* made up *my* mind not to go back."

The stubborn woman. "We'll argue about it later," he promised.

She shrugged, as if he were of little consequence. His beast rose and took the challenge, and by the heady scent of her lust, she knew what she'd done.

Hale coughed, discreetly reminding him that they sat in a room full of Circes with keen senses. The men glanced away, but Caitlyn and Kelly had the nerve to grin at him and Sabrina. Kelly even hummed the song "Here Comes the Bride."

Sabrina hurriedly broke into more detail about Pearson Labs, the fourth floor that she'd never known existed, and questions about who was pulling Pearl's, and now McKinley's, strings. Because with Pearl dead, she had no idea who'd step in as the creative consultant behind Project Dawn.

"Maybe McKinley?" Doc said aloud.

"No. He's the muscle, not the brains." She glanced at Derrick, as if also reminding him of his place.

"Okay, that's it." Derrick stood and pulled Sabrina to her feet. He swung her over his shoulder, ignoring her embarrassed protests. "We'll see you all in a bit. Time to teach my mate how a real man manages his woman." He slapped her ass, smiling at the words coming out of her mouth. "You don't need chocolates and flowers. Take a lesson, Roane."

"Dickhead," Roane growled.

Caitlyn stared. "Wow. And I thought Ace had a temper. Sabrina's is worse."

Kelly chuckled.

"Put me down," Sabrina yelled, slapping any part of him she could reach. Considering she was as strong as an ox when she wanted to be, Derrick knew she fought on principle alone. Because the scent of her need was hell on his cock.

Sabrina allowed herself to be carried away from the others by her inhumanly strong mate. All that talk about love had made her giddy, especially since Derrick didn't deny any of it. He wasn't the most charming or polite of men, so she didn't think he'd refrained from rejecting her to save her feelings.

He carried her to his room on the third floor of the Circs' wing that he shared with Hale. Though Caitlyn and Roane, and now Kelly, Ace, and Zack, lived in the new houses built behind the main house, they spent so much time here they still maintained their old rooms. Derrick and Hale maintained residences here all the time.

Derrick threw Sabrina down on his large bed. She had a brief moment to look around and found his room still neat as a pin. He'd shown her his room once, a week ago, but they had yet to christen the bed.

"Don't move," he growled as he went over and locked the door. He turned back to her. She waited for him to pounce, anticipating his body inside hers once more. She needed the closeness, still scared after finding him unconscious in Pearson Labs.

"Okay, Sabrina, this is the way it is." He started pacing, and she realized there was more to this small talk than sex. "My mother couldn't accept me. My ex-fiancée didn't want me. The women I've fucked up until you didn't matter worth a damn."

He looked fierce as he stalked around the room. She felt his tension but was too fascinated by his words to try to soothe him.

"You're a pain in my ass," he said, stopping in front of her to glare. "You don't listen half the time. You make fun of me. I'm as much brain as I'm brawn, you little witch." His gaze wandered over her body, and to her surprise, he sported a raging hard-on as he yelled at her. "And I love you so fucking much, it hurts," he added hoarsely. "When I realized what could have happened to you, that McKinley touched you..." He started to *change*.

"No, come back." She knelt on the bed and scooted to his side. Standing up, she towered over him. "Be Derrick -- the man, the beast, my Circ. Tell me you love me again." Her eyes welled.

"I love you, princess. I don't know how it happened, but I'm nothing without you." He pulled her close and hugged her tight. After a minute, he looked up at her and frowned.

"What?"

He growled and pushed her flat on the bed. He tore his clothes off, then mutilated hers. Naked, they rubbed against one another until Sabrina couldn't hold back another moan.

"I'm still waiting to hear you say it back, princess," he muttered before clamping his mouth over her nipple.

"Oh, God. Derrick, I love you. I love you so much, despite your bossiness, your arrogance, and your lack of charm." She sucked in a breath when he turned his attention to

her other breast and nudged her thighs wide. "You're handsome. You're strong. And you love me," she said with wonder, moaning when he pushed inside her.

"Oh, yeah. Princess, you were made for me." He fucked her long and hard, taking her to her peak over and over again. Her orgasms came one right after the other. She clenched around him, needing to feel him release. But Derrick held out.

"Please, Derrick. Come in me."

"You want it?" he asked as he pushed deeper. "How much, mate?"

"Derrick, don't be an ass," she growled and locked her ankles around his back. "I want you to come hard. In. Side. Me."

He chuckled and groaned, "I know what you want. You want a bun in the oven like Kelly, right?" He intentionally pushed harder against her clit and latched his mouth onto the side of her neck, sucking hard.

"Oh, no," she gasped as she came around him. "No babies, not yet. Soon though."

"Okay," he said on a sigh. "Whatever you want is fine with me." A vision of his children clinging to Sabrina filled him with awe. "God, I love you."

She breathed his name, awash in emotion. "I can't believe this is real. Derrick, I'd ask you to pinch me, but I'm afraid you would."

They laughed together, then snuggled and made love again. Sabrina promised herself never to take anyone for granted. Not her new friends or her mate -- the man she loved more than anything. A family would come in time. Derrick would make an excellent father. And she'd prove to him that he could trust her. Words wouldn't mean as much as actions. Sabrina knew without a doubt that he was "it" for her.

"*When you find the one you'll walk through fire for, he's the one you keep,*" she'd heard her best friend say over and over again.

I found him, Anita. He's mine now. And I'm not giving him up.

Derrick hugged her tighter, then whispered in her ear, "So princess, now that I've shown you that I'm hell on wheels, what say you give me what you promised? I earned it, right?" He wrapped her hand around his cock and licked his lips, staring at her mouth.

Sabrina giggled, actually heard herself *giggle*, and slithered down his belly. "I don't know, Derrick. The guys call you hard-ass, but from what I've seen, you're more a 'hard dick' kind of guy."

"Very fun -- *oh, baby.*" He sighed as she closed her mouth over him.

So easy to please, she thought as she loved him, reveling in the pleasure of enjoying her mate. *And so very mine.*

Chapter Fourteen

Hale and Doc watched the other couples leave. Knowing Derrick was upstairs fucking the shit out of Sabrina didn't ease his stress, so Hale stayed with Doc. He worried about the older man, who now seemed so fragile. Being screwed over by Diego had to hurt. Hale had never been in love, and seeing Doc going through so much pain, he wasn't sure he wanted it. It was fine for the others, but Hale had no problem staying single.

He had no angst, no hidden secrets preventing him from loving or trusting a woman. His mother and father had loved him before they'd passed away. He'd come to terms with their deaths a long time ago. He accepted that his buddies now had mates. Hell, he often appreciated sharing Caitlyn, when the mood hit her and Roane. And with Kelly's pregnancy, the mood seemed to hit a damned lot. Thank the Lord.

At least he had an option. Poor Doc seemed all alone.

"I'm sorry about Diego, Doc," he said softly.

Doc didn't answer, and thinking he needed some space, Hale stood to leave.

"He wasn't PPA," Doc whispered. "He was a government mole. He was sent all those years ago, just to keep an eye on me." Doc lifted his glasses off his face and cleaned the lenses with sure, soft strokes of his shirt. "All that time spent together, all the laughter and the love. And none of it was real."

"Aw, Doc." Hale sat and put his arm around him, wishing the guarded man would let it out. Doc needed to hit something or cry. Unlike the others, Hale had no problem expressing emotion.

"Come on, Doc. Let it out. You're angry, you're pissed. Say so."

Doc gave him a wan smile and patted his knee, then stood. "I'm too tired, too shell-shocked yet, to comprehend it all. Trust me, tomorrow will come soon enough." He sighed and trudged out the door. "And my brother's dead. Forgot about that."

Hale didn't know what to do. Since he'd want some time alone were he in Doc's situation, he let Doc be. A glance at his watch showed him he'd missed the breakfast special at the diner, but maybe Leonard's Coffee Nook would fix him his favorite bacon and egg sandwich anyway.

He stood and clutched his head, the pain taking him down. He sank onto the couch. *That fucking McKinley.* How the hell did he know they called him "playboy"? A sudden thought occurred, that maybe Diego and McKinley had something in common. Government ties? It would make sense.

McKinley had helped Sabrina despite having no logical reason to do so. He hadn't killed Pearl, but he didn't seem too upset over Pearl's passing. Personally, Hale wanted to dance on the asshole's grave. Out of respect for Doc, however, he'd reel in his enjoyment. He did intend to revisit McKinley, however, and show that fuckhead just where to shove it.

He couldn't explain how, but he knew McKinley was working some psychic mojo on him. He'd struck hard, before Hale had built up any barriers. The others never talked about it, but Hale felt a power beneath his beast all the time. He had yet to set it free. Instinct told him to wait, so he had. But McKinley had been a shock.

Then the damned man knew things. And what did he mean by "I still don't see what he wanted." What *who* wanted? And why would Hale owe McKinley anything?

At least the male hadn't put out any pheromones. Nothing sexual about McKinley. And despite Hale's actions with Roane and some of the Circs, he preferred women. His beast wasn't as particular, and from time to time, Hale let him have his fill. But Hale liked curves, the scent of a woman's sweet perfume, a nice ass to pull tight while he fucked her.

Smiling, Hale drifted into the most pleasant dream.

Doc shook him awake, his mouth firm as he shook his head. "I can't believe this. What are we going to do?"

"Huh? What?"

"Hale, you've slept the day away. The others are occupied." Doc fumbled with his glasses, and Hale understood what he meant. The others were still getting it on, while he and single Doc had no one demanding they stay in bed.

"Sure, what do you need?" Hale stretched. "And what time is it?" Hell, he needed a shower. He ran his tongue over his teeth. And some toothpaste.

"Hale, it's eleven."

"At night? I slept for fourteen hours?" Hale whistled. "I must have been more tired than I thought."

Doc gave him a look. "It's eleven in the morning. Fourteen hours?" Doc paused. "Hale, what day do you think this is?"

"It's Monday, Doc," Hale said slowly, then shook his head, copying Doc. "Okay, no," he said slowly. "I'll bite. What day is it?"

"Thursday. You've been out since Monday morning. You said you needed some time to yourself. What have you been doing?"

Hale shrugged. "Just hanging out. Must have been too much booze." He smiled, apologizing. But inside he freaked.

Just a few hours ago, he'd closed his eyes and dreamed about a woman.

Long blonde hair, a slender waist, full breasts that shook while she sank over him. And then that large, foreign hand, cupping her ass, pushing her over Hale again and again, forcing her to ride him harder while the other male slowly took her ass. Then he palmed Hale's flank, pulling him closer, as if fucking him along with the woman. So close, the trio worked as one...

"Hale?" Doc asked.

"I'm fine. Let me get dressed, and I'm with you. What is it you wanted me to do?"

Shit. Please tell me that hand was Roane's and the blonde was Caitlyn.

But a part of him knew it wasn't. The blonde was leaner, her eyes a hard whiskey brown. Gorgeous, guarded, and trouble. And the male... Hale had a feeling that he knew him. Not that well, but he was definitely familiar, which made no sense. Hale didn't do guys, not in his human form, unless he was horsing around with Roane to please Caitlyn. Familiar pleasure that was sex for sex's sake.

In that hazy recollection, he'd been fucking the woman. But the man had been a definite part of it. *What the fuck?*

A portent of things to come? A harmless fantasy? Or something worse? Something he'd done and didn't remember doing?

"I need you to pick up Paige."

"Right. Paige." *Who the hell's Paige?*

"Hale, stop playing around. Get my niece and sit on her if you have to. With General Kohl putting her under house arrest, there's only so much she can do. You believe her, don't you?"

"Ah, right. Yes. I'll get her." Hale's mind buzzed with fatigue. Doc had a niece? More importantly, where had he been since Monday?

"You know it can't be true. But you tell me. You married her. Does she *change* or doesn't she? Because if she isn't fully Circ, then there's no way she killed her father."

"I -- *what?*"

Then McKinley walked in, all smiles. "Hey, lover. You okay?"

Hale shot up off the couch, breathing hard.

"Dude, you okay?" Derrick asked as he passed by, a full plate of chicken and leftovers in his hands. "You look like shit. We're done messing around, if that's why you're still down here."

Hale wiped a hand over his face. "What time is it?"

"Ah, eleven, I think."

"Morning or evening?"

"Morning."

"What day is it?"

"Hale, man. I think you need to rest up. You don't look so good." Derrick gave Hale a cautious once-over.

"Fuck that. What *day* is it?"

"Monday. Jeez, Hale. We just got back from that hellhole. Have you been drinking already?"

"Shit. No. Just...shit. I had a terrible dream."

Doc raced into the room, his hair on end, his cheeks flushed.

"Derrick, grab the others. We've got a situation."

Derrick didn't ask questions. He put his plate down, raced to the phone, and started dialing.

"Doc?"

Hale wasn't the only one with problems.

"Hale, you're not going to believe this."

"What's wrong, Doc? You okay?"

"My niece is alive. She's Subject 31! I never knew."

Hale stared blankly, suddenly in no mood to hear any more.

"Elliot had a baby girl who supposedly died in childbirth. Apparently, he gave her to another couple to raise but kept in secret touch with her. Look!" Doc shoved a piece of paper at him, and Hale reluctantly stared down at a beautiful blonde with whiskey brown eyes.

"Fuck me," he moaned, covering his face with his forearm. "If you tell me her name is Paige, I'm gonna be sick." He meant it. He felt terrible all of a sudden.

"How did you know?" Doc asked, bewildered.

Hale lost the contents of his stomach just as the others rejoined them.

“Honestly, Hale. It’s too early to be drinking,” Caitlyn said, shaking her head.

Hale said nothing, hoping against hope he could stop whatever was coming before McKinley’s shit-eating grin popped through the front door.

 THE END 

Marie Harte

Marie Harte is an avid reader who loves all things paranormal and futuristic, but especially all things romance. Reading romances since she was twelve, she fell in love with the warmth of first passion and knew writing was her calling. Twenty-three years later, the Marine Corps, a foray through Information Technology, a husband and four kids, and her dream has finally come true. Marie lives in Georgia with her family and loves hearing from readers. To read more about Marie, visit www.marieharte.com and check out her blog at <http://www.marieharte.blogspot.com>.